

GAME DESIGN TOOLKIT

By Jason Slingerland

WHAT MAKES A GAME?

- **Theme** – Most tabletop games have a theme, however some games are abstract, such as checkers and most classic card games. Many designs start with a theme that is interesting to the designer. This allows for the designer to create mechanics that support the theme. Some designers do the opposite and create mechanics and then find a theme that aligns with them.
- **Mechanics** – These are the rules, or mechanisms that make the game work. These will be the core of the game that determine how players accomplish things within the game structure. As a general rule, mechanics that are unique and creative while still being somewhat familiar are the most enjoyable.
- **Goal** – The goal explains what the players are working towards and how will they win the game. When explaining your game, this should be one of the first things that you tell players about.
- **Conflict to Overcome** – This is the struggle or challenge that is working against the players and attempting to stop them from achieving their goals. Sometimes this can be a mechanism within the game. Other times, the other players can be the source of the conflict.
- **Gameplay** – This determines how turns work and creates the flow of the game and explains what will trigger the end of the game. It can also help create the tone of the game and the feelings that you want players to experience while playing the game, which may also be represented in the theme and mechanics. Gameplay also determines the playstyle, i.e. is the game competitive or cooperative.
- **Components** – Just about anything can be used as a component in a game. Many games include cards, gameboards, dice, cubes, and player pawns. Some games even use toy cars as components. Don't feel the need to limit yourself to "standard" components when making your own game.

PROTOTYPING

Once you have answered the basic questions of how your game will work, it is time to start making a prototype. Your first version of a game doesn't need to be fancy. Many professional designers use handwritten cards for the first draft. The purpose of this version of the game is simply to get something made that can be tested. Subsequent versions of the game can be made to be more professional looking if needed.

As part of this process you will also need to document the rules in writing; that will make playtesting easier.

PLAYTESTING

Testing your game with others is essential to making your game be the best it can be. The key to good testing is running the game as close to actual play as possible. It can also be helpful for the designer to watch the gameplay instead of actually playing the game during a test.

Questions to ask players after the game:

- What was your favorite part of the game?
- What was one thing that you didn't enjoy?
- Would you play this game again?
- What was something you wished you could have done in the game?
- What is one suggestion to make the game better from your perspective?

ITERATIVE DESIGN

Once you have received feedback on your game, it's time to focus on making the next version of your game. This can involve changing the rules as needed and will likely require creating a new prototype.

It's important to not make too many changes at once. Otherwise, it can be hard to determine how well the changes are working in the new version.

Once the new version is ready, it is time begin the process of playtesting once again. It's very common for games to go through several iterations before the game is shown to a publisher.

Note: It's important to remember what your vision for the game is and what you want players to get from it. While it's important to make changes to help the game grow and be the best it can be, the game should still be, at its core, in line with your original vision.

PRINTING & PUBLISHING

www.thegamecrafter.com – A great website for creating, printing, and even selling real copies of your own game. They have a very supportive community that is helpful in walking you through the process.

www.pnparcade.com – A cool website where you can publish your own games and people can buy them and print the games on their home printers. This works best for smaller games with minimal components.

Traditional Publishing – This involves finding an actual publisher to pitch your game to in an effort to have them buy the game at publish it under their name. This can be a long and tough process but can be very rewarding in the end.

REFERENCES

www.boardgamegeek.com – A website that catalogues almost every board game ever made. They have lists of games, designers, mechanics, and publishers.

www.buildingthegamepodcast.com – A podcast with nearly 400 episodes, that is produced weekly and covers all topics related to game design. It is made in a documentary style through the lens of two new game designers.

www.cardboardedison.com – A website that gives tips for game designers and also houses a repository of hundreds of publishers, what type of games they publish, and how to pitch to them.

Building Blocks in Tabletop Game Design – A thorough encyclopedia of game design mechanics and information. The library will be getting a copy of this book for their collection.