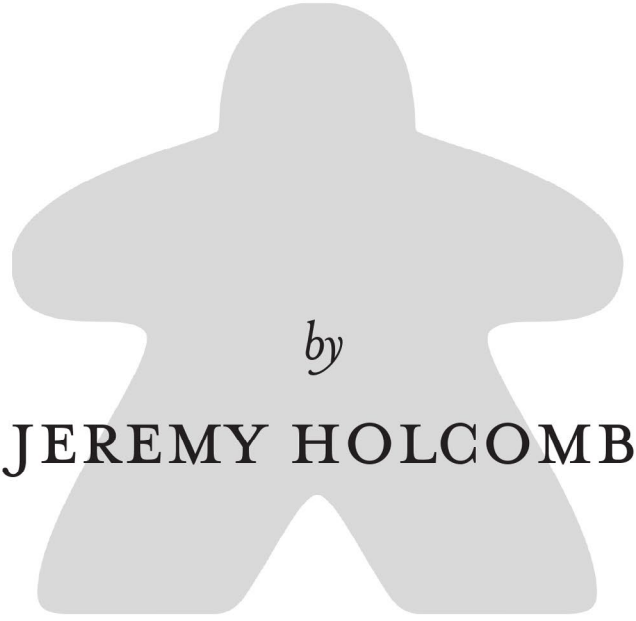
THE WHITE BOX *ESSAYS*



by

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The White Box Essays

Jeremy Holcomb

In its printed edition, *The White Box Essays* is distributed inside *The White Box*, a game design workshop-in-a-box that also includes components for game prototyping like cubes, meeples, and dice. References to *"The White Box"* in this book refer to that larger kit.



GAMEPLAYWRIGHT

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Foreword

Game design is one of those odd fields that somehow inspires everyone. It is similar to writing in this respect. Everyone thinks they can be a writer. You just put down some words on paper and abracadabra, you are a writer. However, very few people can write like J.K. Rowling or Stephen King right out of the gate. For most, the just-getting-started level of writing is closer to *Fun with Dick and Jane* than it is to *The Catcher in the Rye*. For game design the situation is similar. While everyone has the potential to be a great game designer, the quality level of most first-time designs is relatively low. Which is expected, and as it should be. You'll grow, and your designs will improve, through study and practice. (And playtesting.)

One thing game design is not like is sculpting. There is a saying in sculpture that the finished work is already there and you just have to remove the excess rock to get to it. If you try to do that with a game design idea, you will end up with nothing, because game design is not sculpting, and the idea has to be supported and built up, not pulled out from a larger context. You can, however, pull pieces of a game design from various sources, doing what I call the "chocolate and peanut butter method" since I don't want to get sued by a candy maker. You take one element from one game and combine it with a different element from another game, and often this creates a new game with a different play pattern. I often get started with this approach at game conventions. I wander around without any particular aim and look at various games that are being promoted by the various booths. The path I take results in an association pattern where I link mechanics from one game I see with other mechanics I see later. This has worked for me on over a dozen games. I frequently go back to this method when I get a creative block.

There are two types of design. Top down, where you work on a game based on an existing intellectual property, and spec design, where you build a game from scratch based on your own ideas. It is known as spec design (from "speculative," as in, "involving a high risk of loss") for a very good reason: most spec designs never see publication. I have had over 50 games published, but for every one of those, I have two designs sitting in boxes in either my garage or my office. Most of these will never be published and I should probably just throw

them out, which is what my wife tells me when she is trying to reclaim space in the garage. But the point, other than to make sure you live in a house with a big garage, is that you should expect a large number of misses when working in the game design field.

But clearly this has not scared you off and you are ready to throw your hat into the ring. (Note, the throwing-a-hat-into-a-ring game has already been done so don't use that concept.) *The White Box* contains components you can use to create games, but many times the key to creating a game is a random inspiration. This inspiration starts the design process. The design process is usually a multiple-step process and everyone has their own method. I often start by imagining how the game idea would translate to interpretive dance. This doesn't often yield anything useful, but it reminds me of all the steps I have to take to get a game from my head to a game box. My early steps involve research to see if anything similar has been published already. There are a lot of games out there; don't be surprised if you find out early (or sometimes after quite a bit of work) that someone else has published or is publishing a game similar to your idea. When this happens, you must usually adapt your game to find points of differentiation, or shelve the project and start over.

So how can you increase your odds of producing the next masterpiece instead of the next flop? Like painting, writing, and every other creative skill, you get better the more you do it. Your first game may have problems like too much downtime or a first-player advantage. Probably the most common problem is excessive complexity. With some exceptions, most games are improved by reducing complexity, and the ability to preserve fun while eliminating complication is an area where experience helps out a lot.

If you'd like to take a shortcut to game design mastery, focus on learning from past mistakes. Not just your mistakes, of course. It would take you forever to make the thousands of mistakes that have already been made by designers over the years. Rather, learn the lessons from years of game design *by other designers*. Analyze published games created by previous designers, and apply Jeremy's analysis and conclusions as presented here to learn those lessons even more quickly.

I taught alongside Jeremy at DigiPen for a semester, and at one point I asked him for help on how to grade what I considered subjective assignments. Jeremy developed several grading charts that broke down many of the elements to a very basic level. I was completely blown away by the level of detail. I kept grading subjectively, but the experience showed me that there could be a method in the madness, and that some of the things I thought were subjective

could actually be broken down into definable blocks, where they could be evaluated and improved in a methodical way. It also taught me that I should stick to game design and that teaching is not one of my core skill sets.

You should constantly look at other games and try to identify the strengths and weaknesses. Study the designs of legendary designers like Reiner Knizia, Stefan Feld, and Antoine Bauza. Identify the fun elements in every game you play and add that knowledge to your design skill set. Many people start the path to game design by tinkering with published games and making house rules before moving on to making their own game designs.

While playing games is fun, game design is a more meticulous task like shaping a bonsai tree. You start with something rough and slowly shape it into a breathtaking masterpiece! (Or it dies because you cut the wrong branch.) You have these essays to augment your design knowledge, and in front of you is a box of components just waiting to be molded into the next award-winning game. Let's see what you got!

— Mike Elliott

Chapter 1

Welcome to *The White Box*

Playing games is fun, but you want to do more. You can't stop thinking about how games could be different, be better — maybe you even have some ideas for a few new games you want to bring into the world. You want to be … *a game designer!*

You are about to start on a lengthy path. That path is longer than it looks and has more dark corners, twists, and dead ends than you may expect. The end of that path could be a great game, or even a career in game design. *The White Box* hopes to provide some guideposts, to highlight some of the scarier pits and traps, and to help you get yourself to where you want to go.

But where *do* you want to go? The first step is the most important: to learn about yourself.

People design games for many different reasons. Maybe you have a golden idea inside you burning to come out. Maybe you want to design a game to tell a particular story or explore a thorny problem. Perhaps you dream of seeing your name on a box at your local game store. Or perhaps you like money and see game design as a path to a satisfying career, fame, and fortune.

Let's explore why you are here. As you read the following sections, think about which one best describes you. These are broad categories and you may fall into more than one, or even change goals as you develop your game, but they should provide some guidance on how to use this book and how to start making your game a reality.

The Golden Idea

You have a golden, shining game inside you. You want to polish it to a mirror shine and bring it forth to share with the world as a work of art. This will be your first — and possibly only — game. You want to get this game into the world but don't plan on making game design a career or long-term hobby. You value

creative control and are willing to put in the extra work (or money) to craft your game exactly as you want it.

You are more likely to self-publish than other designers. The cost of self-publishing (both in cash and in reduced access to production, sales, and marketing support) is, for you, better than the loss of creative control that comes from letting a publisher redesign your baby. You can skip the essays on dealing with publishers and focus on the essays on self-publishing. Try to be open to help from others (editors, artists, graphic designers) whom you may need to hire. Even if you want to control everything about your game, don't try to do everything yourself. Remember, you don't know what you don't know!

You are better off with smaller print runs than if you have another motivation. You might want to give games away to your friends, family, and playgroups; sell a few to your local stores; or hand out games at conventions, but you want to avoid having thousands of games filling up your garage. You probably won't mind giving games away, selling them at a loss, or only breaking even if it helps get your game out into the world. You likely want to work with a domestic printer or a print-on-demand service, and print only as many games as you have immediate need for, perhaps as few as 1–250 copies. If you run out, you can always reprint, with the added bonus of getting to say, "My game is on its second print run!"

You may be tempted to crowdfund, but be careful — that's a lot of work and even if you're successful, it doesn't make the polish of your game any better. If you are in it for your own enjoyment, embrace that. Making a few copies for you and your friends lets you play your game and enjoy it at much lower cost than if you print thousands.

Beware of resisting playtest feedback. There can be a natural resistance to these horrible people telling you bad things about your baby. Be aware of that, read the essays on playtesting, and be open to new ideas. Get lots of feedback, get lots of ideas, and then do what you think is best for your game.

The Game as Self-Empowerment

You want your name on a box, and you want that box in the hands of as many people as possible. Making sure your game is a great design is a fine way to garner that crucial word of mouth, but you are also open to other ideas that will increase exposure: finding a publisher to provide marketing support,

re-theming the game to increase sales, changing components to keep costs down — anything that helps get more people playing.

If you self-publish, you could benefit from print runs of around 500. You will want to keep sending out copies to review sites and game giveaways to increase exposure. You might give away 5–25% of your print run. This does mean you are unlikely to make any money (or even break even), but that's OK! Your name is out there and people are playing your game.

Remember that most game conventions have a game library. Donate copies of your game and include a sticker promoting your website, or some way for players who like your game to buy a copy. This works well for small local conventions as well as big ones. You will have fewer possible players at smaller cons, but you also won't be competing with as many other games for their attention.

Since your core goal is exposure, consider cutting almost all of your costs by making your game a free print-and-play production, distributed online as a PDF. Make this downloadable on your website, post it at BoardGameGeek and other gaming websites, and get your game in front of as many people as possible. Remember to include your email address and some way to take donations. ("Like my game? Help me make more games! Send $5 to designer@example.com.")

In It for the Money

You want to be a working meeple, dreaming of being a game designer for a living, with your name on lots of boxes and a steady stream of royalty checks keeping the lights on. This sounds like a good idea to many people and keeps sounding like a good idea right up until you actually try it.

Game designers are rock stars.

Or sports professionals. Or authors. Or any of a number of creative professions where only very few are able to become super successes, while many more have a hit and then fade out, or, like the vast majority, never get out there at all. For every game designer so famous you can name them, there are hundreds who made one or two great games, made a few bucks, and went back to doing something else for a living. There are thousands more who never got their idea out of their garage.

Many factors impact a game's rise to evergreen status (selling thousands of copies every year). A great design helps, but targeting the right market, getting

the timing right, making the most of your contacts, and finding good people to work with help too. Unfortunately, it never works to sit down and say, "I'm going to design a game that will sell a million copies!"

You overcome these hurdles via "luck" — and luck means working, working, working! If your goal is to make games for a living, you need to make *lots* of games. The more games you can put into the world, the more likely you are to have something stick. In addition, game design is like any other skill: the best way to get better at it is to do it a lot, by making lots and lots of games. You get better with practice.

When pitching games to publishers, it can help to have several games to show. If you can pick three or four games for any given meeting, you can use your pitch time more effectively and increase your odds of getting more games published.

You are perhaps the least likely type of designer to want to self-publish. The time you spend on production, sales, and customer service would probably be better spent making your next few games. In addition, you should be the most open to feedback and modifications from publishers. They want to modify your perfect game? Rip things out? Change the whole theme? Ask yourself one question — did the check clear? If the answer is yes, say thank you and go make your next game.

The other hurdle to overcome if you want to design for a living is the reality of how little you can expect to make off any given game. No single design is likely to consistently generate enough royalties to live on, even if it does keep selling copies every year. Having many games published means many games delivering income, and those add up.

Chapter 2

Protecting Your Ideas & Why You Don't Need To

or, Why No One Will Steal Your Game Idea

A common concern in any creative field is the fear that, when you let others see your brilliant game, you run the risk of someone stealing it. They might take your ideas, designs, story, or mechanics and put out their own game.

Regardless of whether you are designing games for the fame or the money, it would be very frustrating to watch someone else put your idea out into the world and be successful with it. In order to prevent that, you want to protect your idea and keep it safe, right?

Wrong.

There are two things designers feel the need to protect: the "idea" for their game — the concept — and the "finished" game they have ready to print. Let's look at these in order.

An Idea Isn't Worth Stealing

Your idea could be worthless or it could be the decade's greatest idea in board gaming, but in neither case is it in anyone's interest to steal it. Any idea has to be tested, developed, tested more, and made into an actual game before you can be sure it is any good.

Even if another designer were to take your core idea and develop it, the end result would be very different. If both are good, both could be published and everyone wins. The quality of the idea is a tiny fraction of the overall game design process.

The other fear is, "If I tell my idea to a publisher, they might steal it!" No one buys ideas — they buy games. You can't do anything but help yourself by telling

your idea to anyone who will listen. Best-case scenario: they say, "That sounds interesting, go make that," and you get to bring them a game when it's ready. Worst-case scenario: everyone tells you, "That's a bad idea and here's why." Your goal is to develop your idea into a game. You can't improve a game that you don't get people to play. You can't sell a game you don't show anyone.

If your idea isn't a fully fleshed-out game yet, publishers likely don't even want to see it, and they are certainly not going to steal it. They would just have to make it into a game themselves. That's why they pay designers (like you). And once you do have a fully developed game…

It Is Easier to Give You Money Than Steal Your Game

In the vast majority of cases, when a publisher looks at a game, they are not going to want it. Most games get rejected many times before seeing print and even if they do want your game, it is much easier for a publisher to pay you for it than to steal it.

Here are some reasons why stealing your game is never cost-effective for a publisher:

They Want You to Keep Working for Them

As the designer, you are useful to a publisher because you can design expansions, help with marketing and promotion, attend events, answer fan questions with authority, and more. Designers are often very excited to do more design and promote their work. Why would a publisher sacrifice that energy?

Every time you speak on a podcast to promote your game, go to a convention to play your game, blog about it, shows your passion and love for your work. No one has the same energy to pitch your game as you do.

In addition, all that energy can be focused on your own game. A publisher may have dozens of games to promote, and many more in the works. As the designer you can focus your time on promoting your own game. The publisher "buys" that time and energy when they sign a contract with you — that's a big chunk of what they want out of the deal, more than just what is in the box.

Reputation Matters

The game publishing industry is not that big. It would be very hard to steal a finished game and not have word get around. Everyone in the industry sells to

the same retailers and distributors, goes to the same shows and conventions, and competes for the same awards. No game is worth stealing because word will get out and the consequences will be far worse than the cost of just buying the design in the first place.

It's Cheaper to Pay You

As a designer, your cut is a small fraction of the overall expenses of publishing a game, even one that sells hundreds of thousands of copies. Given how little publishers have to pay you and how useful you can be to them promoting your game, it is actually more expensive to steal a game than to buy it.

In general, you can be sure that your idea is safe and show your game to anyone you can get to hold still.

Simple Safeguards

While you don't need to worry about theft in general, many designers choose to take simple steps to protect their game ideas. However, it is easy to go overboard, even spending more money than you are likely to make on a game, using tools that don't actually give you much protection. The three ways to safeguard ownership of intellectual property are to apply copyright, trademarks, or patents. Let's look at what each of those things actually means as applied to games and explore which you should use.

Copyright

Copyright law prevents anyone else from using, printing, or selling your work without getting your permission. It protects creative works with the goal of encouraging creative people to make more creative works. You don't have to do anything to "apply copyright" to your work. Copyright applies automatically as soon as the work is "fixed in final form," once you write a rulebook, for example, or do a board layout, even as a work in progress or draft. When people talk about having copyrighted a work, they usually mean that they have registered that work or that they have done something to make it easier to prove the copyright that was already there. You can put the copyright symbol (©) and year on your game, both at the prototype and self-published stage, for free. This shows that you own the expression of the idea of your game.

Most countries (including the United States) have a government office or system for registering copyright. In the United States, you can get the required form and more information from www.copyright.gov. You'll need to pay a fee and send in a copy of the game. If you feel the need to protect a game you are self-publishing, this would be how you do that.

One piece of popular lore related to copyright is that you can somehow gain copyright protections by mailing yourself a copy of your work via registered mail, then leaving the package sealed. This is simply wrong. You don't have to do anything like this to copyright your work. As described above, your work is copyright automatically when you create it. (The idea is to show that you had the idea before an infringer did by referring to the stamp on the envelope, but this has never been reliably used in actual court cases.) This trick does provide one useful thing: if someone tells you that you need to mail a copy of your game to yourself to protect your copyright, you know you should stop taking legal advice from them.

Copyright is not without its limitations. While your copyright protection covers your entire game as a creative work it does not protect individual elements of your game, such as a mechanic or a theme. You can make a game with custom dice that is about dinosaurs running hot dog stands, and someone else could come along and make another game with custom dice that is about dinosaurs running hot dog stands. Where does the line get crossed into copyright infringement? That's a question for a copyright lawyer. Just understand that copyright protects less than you may think.

Trademark

A trademark is used to show that a mark represents a specific company or product. For example, a trademark could cover the name of your game. Other trademarkable parts might be the subtitle, a game logo, or any other identifying marks or symbols.

Trademarks ensure consumers can identify the origin of a product. The overall goal of trademark law is to avoid confusing customers. There is often a great deal of value in a well-established trademark because customers know what they are buying when they see that mark. Many symbols for popular games are deeply imbedded in the gaming subconscious. Trademarks protect both the exact wording or images, and any similar works that might cause confusion. This is why you can't call your game "Dragons & Dungeons" without

having a legion of lawyers in plate mail materialize behind you. The confusion for customers would hurt their brand, annoy customers, and make it harder for people to buy the games they want.

In U.S. law, there are two "levels" of trademark — trademark (™) and registered trademark (®). The trademark symbol can be used freely to show your intended protection of a title, subhead, logo, or other identifying mark. You do not need to pay anyone or register this usage of trademark. This does not mean that you own that title free and clear. If you call your game something generic (like "The Cave") and you try to trademark that title, you may find that there are existing works with that title that predate yours and the trademark will not protect you from the confusion and hassle that will ensue. In addition, the term "cave" might be too broad for the trademark to be enforceable. Trademark might protect your specific logo or title image, but may not protect the words themselves.

Registering your trademark provides some advantages in the unlikely event that you need to protect your intellectual property. Having the trademark registered makes it easier to prove ownership of the trademark and to verify the date when you began using the trademarked word, image, sound, or other content. However, registering a trademark is not cheap. You can get current fee structures for U.S. trademarks at www.uspto.gov. The price to register a trademark in other countries will vary. Registering multiple trademarks related to a game could easily cost as much as you might stand to make. Especially as a newer creator, stick to the free option.

Unlike copyright, you can only claim a trademark for something that is "in the stream of commerce" — that is, for something that is actually available for sale. So while you're free to place a trademark symbol prior to that, it doesn't help you, because it only becomes effective when your game goes on sale to actual gamers. You *can*, however, register a trademark prior to your game's availability with a "notice of intent to use," which gives you a specific period of time in which to actually start using the mark.

Patents

Patents protect inventions or discoveries. In the example of a dinosaur hot dog game with custom dice, if you designed a new type of die or way of using it, that might be something you could protect with a patent. That was done with the "Pop-O-Matic" die roller in the game *Trouble*. Another example: Wizkids

patented the idea of displaying information on a base that you can rotate ("click") to change stats as the game progresses. They own the patent on the HeroClix bases, and they also have trademarks on the term "HeroClix" and other Clix terms. You can't patent the idea of units having different stats, but this way of displaying information is interesting and new enough to have a (very valuable) patent.

Most game designs don't have anything in them you can patent. Unless your game has a unique, new invention, you have nothing that needs protecting. Simple variants of existing mechanics are not patentable. Just because your custom d6 goes 1, 1, 3, 4, 5, 5 or your deck has 50 cards instead of 52, doesn't mean you can patent those ideas.

There are different types of patents. For the most part, if you do have a game-related invention to patent, you'll be interested in utility patents, which cover what an invention does. There are also design patents, which cover what an invention looks like, which you might need as well as (not instead of) utility patents. Don't let the term fool you. "Design" here doesn't mean game design, and design patents do not cover a game's design. Both types of patent have their own forms and application processes, and you can find those forms at www.uspto.gov.

Like registered trademarks, there is a fee for applying for a patent. This fee varies, but there are substantial discounts for applying for a U.S. patent as a "micro entity." If you have never applied for a patent before, you almost certainly qualify for this discount. You will still have to pay a small fee with your application and another maintenance fee every few years to maintain your patent.

The actual process of applying for a patent is extremely complicated. The takeaway is that 999 times out of 1,000, a new game has nothing that can (or should) be patented. If you do have something to patent, is it worth working with a lawyer to help you with the process. But *be careful*. Many of the services out there to help new designers patent things are, if not outright scams, excessively aggressive about what you should patent and why. A good rule of thumb: if you tell them that you have designed a new game and ask, "Should I patent my game?" and they say, "Absolutely" or, "It's very likely" without asking for more information, go somewhere else.



Overall, you should understand how these tools work, and what they do and do not protect. To summarize, your work is copyrighted automatically and at no cost when you create it, you can designate any trademarks you wish for free, and that should be enough for all but the oddest cases.

The key thing to remember is that although these tools allow you to protect your intellectual property, nobody in the game publishing industry has any incentive to steal your ideas. And much, much more importantly, every person you show your idea to can give you feedback, which you absolutely must have to improve it. Every person who plays your game is another opportunity for you to try to make it better. Focus on how to get your ideas out there and make them better. If you hide them away in the dark and "protect" them, they'll never improve.

Chapter 3

Danger! Danger!

Or, Types of Games That You Should (Likely) Not be Working On

If you have not already started work on a game, there are many wonderful paths you can take. There are no hard and fast rules about whether you should or should not make a particular game, but many game types can make the already-difficult task of making a great game even harder. These game types have all the difficulties of other games plus added design challenges, costs, or barriers to publication. You can certainly choose to make these types of games, but understand how much extra work they entail.

Here are some game types that present unique challenges and are very hard first games for a new designer.

Cooperative and Semi-Cooperative Games

Cooperative games pit the players as a team against the game itself, where they play "together" and win or lose as a group. This has a number of advantages: these games may be more appropriate for families or groups who don't want to fight each other, and they can deliver more camaraderie and teamwork than more traditional games. But from a design standpoint, they create some extra hurdles.

One reason many players play games is to be challenged — to find ways to solve the puzzle of a game and overcome the other players. Since the players here are on the same team, all of the challenge must come from the game itself. The window of appropriate difficulty for cooperative games is very narrow: too challenging and the players give up, but too easy and they see no reason to play again, having "beaten" the game. Depending on the target audience, you may expect players of a co-op game to lose anywhere from 50% to as much as 90%

of the time! Keeping your players in this very tight difficulty range is a challenge you may want to put off until you have designed a few more traditional games.

Another difficulty of co-op: since all of the players are on the same team and either win or lose as a group, it can be easy for a player who knows the game better (or just thinks they do) to dictate what other players should do on their turns. Indeed, this type of game encourages this behavior. We win or lose as a team, and if I think I know what you should do on your turn, I benefit the team by telling you what to do. For the new player being told what to do, this can be very frustrating. They may feel they need to go along with advice they don't fully understand (and may not even agree with), and they lose the agency that helps them feel like they are really playing. They are reduced to watching a game, even one they are nominally in.

In addition, co-op games lose access to design tools that often help competitive games stay balanced, like auctions and resource drafting. These kinds of mechanics are very valuable and not having them makes your life difficult.

Some co-op games deal with the overbearing player problem by mandating hidden information, so that one player cannot just divine the optimal play. This often strikes players as cheap and unsatisfying. Why would players not want to tell allies what cards they are holding (for example) if they are on the same team? "Because the rulebook says we can't" chafes as an answer to that question. Other co-op games try to solve the overbearing player problem by being "semi-co-op," introducing the possibility that one (or more!) players are not on the same team after all, but rather, are secretly subverting the cooperative victory. This approach eliminates the risk of a single player saying to another, "Do X," since they might not really be on the same team, which also makes the game harder to play, teach, and playtest! Most games that use this design strategy feature hidden information to give the "traitor" room to obfuscate. This can work well, but leads to very complex designs, and for a new designer, it's a difficult additional skill to learn.

Highly Asymmetric Games

In asymmetric games, different players have radically different abilities (e.g., different units, buildings, resources, or victory conditions). In asymmetric games minor rules changes are not unambiguously balanced. In a game where all players have the same options, tinkering with those options makes the game

different, but probably does not benefit one player over another. As the designer of a symmetric design, you can try lots of different rules changes quickly without having to determine their effects on many different positions. If players have very different situations, though, the true impact of each change will be harder to predict and test, making your design process longer, harder, and more laborious.

For example, when all players have the same pieces, a design change from four actions each turn to five might mean that neither side gains an advantage relative to the other. If each side has a different number of units, varying powers, or unequal positions this change might be more meaningful for one player than another. This makes all changes, and certainly maintaining the perception of balance, very difficult.

Another cost of asymmetric games is that players have to learn not only how their own side plays and what their own options are, but what their opponents can do. This means that the time it takes to learn to play goes up based on the number of players. The more players or factions there are, the more someone has to learn before they can play your game well. From a design standpoint, this means that your game will take longer to playtest, and your pool of useful playtesters will go down. The more work it is to test, the fewer people will cheerfully do that work. In particular, playtests at conventions become very difficult if your game takes a long time just to teach.

Variants on Existing Games

Tinkering with existing games is in the blood of almost every designer and there is nothing wrong with making house rules or modifications to games you play with your friends. You can sometimes even give those modifications to the publisher or put them up on sites like BoardGameGeek as a fun variant for people to try. However, building a game variant instead of your own game introduces a number of problems.

If you are designing to develop skills, designing variants of existing games is a bad idea. By tinkering with an existing game instead of working on your own design, you never get to see the elements that got cut out of the final game. Every game that is successful is the result of many iterations of work — and many bad ideas. Having those bad ideas and exploring how they work is a critical part of development as a game designer. In trying to expand a finished game, you only see the good parts. Looking at other designers' games can be great for learning what worked, but it can't show you what didn't work.

If you are in this for the money, designing variants of existing games is also a bad idea. A key problem with game variants is that you don't have the rights to publish them. A publisher is unlikely to purchase a game expansion from anyone but the original designer. In some cases, the original designer may be opposed to others modifying the design and would be unhappy if a publisher were to allow it. Although you could approach the designer and suggest your modification, even if the designer were willing to pay for such a modification (unlikely in the extreme) you would get a paltry sum at best. Even if you were to get the rights, your market would be limited to players who already own the core game, restricting your possible sales even more. You are far better off working on and promoting your own design if your goal is profit.

If you are in this for the fame, designing variants of existing games is still a bad idea. While having a modification out there with your name on it is better than nothing, you are still tacking your name below the original designer's. The same effort to put up a free variation to someone else's game could be put into your own print-and-play game, with the added bonus that you get to say, "I made this!"

Collectible Games

Many designers are drawn to the design space, challenge, and profits of collectible games (usually card games, but also collectible dice or token games). These types of games have all of the usual difficulties for a designer, plus a bunch of extra challenges. However, unlike most of this list, some of the challenges for collectible games could bankrupt a small country. Designers working on collectible games fall into one of two camps:

"I Want to Self-publish this Collectible Game!"

The core problem here is bankroll. Costs can easily exceed a million dollars. In addition, you make a game much harder to market if you make it collectible. Asking someone to try out your new game and give you 40 bucks is one thing. Asking them to spend 40 bucks with the knowledge that they'll need to spend even more — maybe a *lot* more — if they like it is a very different marketing challenge. Furthermore, the existing resources that help you self-publish don't work for collectible games (there is no "on demand" CCG maker), most review sites don't deal in collectible games, and getting interest (and shelf space) from distributors and stores becomes a nightmare.

"I Want to Sell this Collectible Game to a Company!"

Collectible games are such a huge investment that only the largest publishers can afford to make them, and those companies can afford to hire experienced game designers with track records of making successful games. Usually, large teams of people build these games. These companies are unlikely to even be interested in seeing, let alone buying, a collectible design from an unknown designer. If you want to make collectible games, make non-collectible games first, and build a reputation and relationship with these larger companies.

Licensed Games

It is tempting to start making games based on existing worlds you already enjoy. This can help you with the theme and story of your game, and would certainly draw in fans of those worlds that might not otherwise look at your game. However, designing a game based on an existing property that you do not have the license for is a recipe for disaster, in two different ways.

First, you might make a game that really feels like the property and delivers on the promise of that world. Congratulations, you have made a game that you can sell to exactly one publisher: the existing licensee for that world! You can't self-publish without permission from the publisher or their licensor, and getting that permission is likely to be next to impossible.

The exception for a new designer is to find and self-license a relatively small property with a limited, but growing, fan base. If you can reach out to a webcomic, podcast, or online show, you may be able to find people interested in having you design a game around their property. If you want to go this route, talk to these people first, before you make the game! Nothing is more frustrating than designing a game and then finding out the people you made it for aren't interested.

Second, you might make a game based on an existing world and just want to superficially overlay it with the property in question. As a designer, you may go this route thinking, "If they buy my game, great; if not, I can re-skin it with something generic and pitch it somewhere else, or self-publish." This is worse than making a game you can't sell; here, there is no way for you to win. If you get the license, you annoy the fans of the property, who'll see right away that the game doesn't feel like the show, comic, or whatever. If you don't get the license, you have lost time and energy that could have been spent making your game better, or pitching it to publishers who are interested in non-licensed games.



In the end, none of these cautions are absolute prohibitions, but as a new designer, they *are* very good reasons not to tackle these types of games early in your career. Even if you are in love with some of these, think about making other, easier games first. Get some experience, make a few interesting mistakes, and then come back to these big swings.

Chapter 4

Story or Mechanics?

Or, Where Should I Start Designing?
Or, Why the Designers on Design Panels Drink

Two questions that come up over and over when discussing game design are, "Which is more important, the story or the mechanics?" and, "Which comes first, story or mechanics?"

All designers start their projects in different ways. Whether you find that your ideas start from a story, or you start out wanting to explore a particular mechanic, great! Regardless of how you start, you should strive to get past the idea that story and mechanics can be developed separately sooner rather than later. Your mechanics should feel like your story and your story should help teach your mechanics. Treating story and mechanics as if they are somehow distinct and unrelated parts of your design that can be modified or swapped independently of each other is missing the point if you want to create great games.

Perhaps as a designer you feel drawn to story and theme. You might start with ideas like:

"What if we make a race game about racing dragons? Dragons are cool!"

Or you could be interested in a mechanic:

"We need a good 3D racing board game! We can use stacks of dice to show height and it's harder to move up, but you can get bonus movement going down, and…"

As your game develops, your theme and your mechanics should start merging to create the experience of your game. The story of your game should help teach rules. It feels right for us to be moving in three dimensions, because dragons fly. The mechanics should work to enhance your story. If we want our race to have a combat element, the dragons could have breath weapons, or be able to bite other racers near them, since that's how people imagine dragons.

Theme and mechanics can serve as complementary tools for when you run into design problems. If you find a mechanic isn't working and you're stuck about what to do, go to your theme for a solution. If your game doesn't feel like your story, see if there are mechanics that can be modified to help. In our evolving dragon-racing design, maybe we have a mechanics problem: we want to reward players for being "higher" than other racers (the 3D aspect of our race is a key feature and we want to highlight it) but playtesters don't feel like they gain enough of an advantage by gaining altitude. We can go to our story for a solution. Dragons are just really big animals. Like all animals, they need to… excrete. Perhaps one ability you gain for being higher than other racers is the ability to take a dump on the competition. This could slow them down and speed you up, slow them down until they do something to clean up, or have other mechanical effects. It's also not hard to explain that rule in a way that makes players understand that they don't want it to happen to them.

The real fight between story and mechanics doesn't come at the initial concept stage. It comes during development if your design starts to break down. When you discover parts of your game that don't work and you need to make changes, you have to decide which is more important: the story you have been telling, or the mechanics of play.

Suppose in our race game we have a lot of very tight turns. The playtesters tell us that this doesn't feel very much like dragons, since these big lizards are not usually thought of as being able to turn on a dime. So what do we change? Do we alter the track (a mechanics change) to smooth out the turns? Or do we change the story? (Maybe we are racing on flying carpets. We keep the 3D element and fantasy feel, but now it makes more sense that we can turn swiftly.) You have to answer for yourself, each time it comes up, whether you want to use your theme or your mechanics to solve a problem.

You may be locked into theme if you are designing your game for a client, or by other circumstances beyond your control. If someone is paying you for a game about dragons, then theme wins out and you deliver a game about dragons. If your game is coming out in a year that has a lot of dragon movies and you think dragons will be hot, it may be well worth sticking to dragons. If you've already spent a lot of time or money on dragon art, you may be stuck with dragons. (Which illustrates why you ought to avoid spending money on art until late in the process.)

You are less likely to be locked into a mechanic than a story element, unless you are working on an expansion or game in a series. For example, if you want to make a train game in the 18xx series (*1830*, *1856*, *1870*, and so on) you are

locked into using tiles for train movement, having a stock market, the ownership of companies, and so on.

But on the other hand, you may simply find yourself in love with a particular mechanic, a whirlwind romance common to game designers. There is nothing wrong with keeping a mechanic you want and tossing theme after theme at it until you can find one that fits. And a few types of games allow you to bypass the conflict between story and mechanics entirely.

Abstract games draw that title from being primarily a set of mechanics with little to no story driving game play. Checkers has a rudimentary story (one of conflict and striving for control of territory), but few players will stop to describe the tale told by a particular capture or crowning. Most traditional card games, such as rummy or pinochle, are games with little inherent story. The enjoyment comes from the social interactions and from solving the puzzle of each hand.

You can also find games that are almost entirely story. Many roleplaying games provide just enough system for players to create collaborative stories. Other games have a system for no other purpose than to provide the story players want. Games like *Apples to Apples* do have rules for scoring points and winning, but most players enjoy the game for the experience they have with their friends. Games like this are often played until players choose to stop, rather than to the point where someone has won.

Think of theme and mechanics as tools in your toolbox. No one tool solves every problem and you should use both when they work for you. Start wherever you like, but get your story and your mechanics feeding into each other as quickly as you can.

Chapter 5

The Roll of the Die

Advantages and Costs of Randomness in Games

The luck of the draw. The roll of the dice. Many games have at least one random element and some leave the outcome of the game almost entirely to chance. What do games gain from having random elements and what do they lose? How can you make games with random elements players enjoy? Let's explore what randomness gives to games.

Random elements provide a less predictable game with more possible outcomes. Without random effects, players can often accurately foresee the results of each possible action in your game, and depending on how complicated the game and how skilled the player, some players can use this insight to "solve" the game, learning the strategies that are always optimal. Once a game has been solved, it is no longer a game. This is why you stop playing tic-tac-toe after you figure out how it works.

Adding random elements theoretically prevents players from knowing the exact effects of an action. This can reduce the strategic space that a player feels like they need to analyze. There isn't (usually) much point in trying to plan for the results of a long series of random elements.

Random elements also reduce the impact of skill. Since random outcomes cannot be predicted perfectly, there is less value in being able to play "perfectly."

That said, it's important to understand that "skill" is not the opposite of "randomness," and the ways players apply their skill to the random elements of your game matters. Consider these three examples of ways randomness might be used (or not) in a design:

- **Skill without randomness (e.g., chess).** With no random elements, skill is critical. The more skilled a player is, the greater their odds to win. The most skilled player will beat a new player close to 100% of the time.

- **Both skill and randomness (e.g., poker).** Poker has many random elements, but a skilled player is better at choosing how to deal with those random elements than an unskilled one. The best poker player can play with new players and win most of the time, but the new players are almost certain to win a few big hands. (This is why there is a larger World Series of Poker than World Chess Championship — new players feel like they have a chance against the pros at poker. Since more players feel they have a shot at winning, more of them play, and the game is more popular.)
- **Randomness without skill (e.g., coin-flipping).** There is no way to apply skill to coin-flipping and even the "best" coin flipper in the world can't do better than 50/50, even against a new player.

The amount of randomness in a design influences how many people are likely to want to play it. Reducing the skill required to play increases the pool of people who can play and still have fun. Think about it: people play games to have fun and games are only fun if players think they have a chance to win. Without random elements (or other mitigating factors) players need to be close to each other in skill to hit that sweet spot. If a new player plays chess with a grandmaster, neither player is likely to have fun, because the result is so deterministic. Accounting for skill can be critical for games intended for a wide audience, like mass-market games for families. If nothing mitigates skill, adults (or experts) nearly always beat kids (or casual players) to the point that no one has fun. That said, you can go too far in the other direction. If your game is so random that skill doesn't matter at all, it may feel like a game to the kids, but will often feel like a chore to the adults. With the right mix, everyone gets to have fun. Think again about poker and consider Las Vegas. Less skilled players think they have a shot while more experienced players also know they'll win more in the long run, thanks for poker's excellent use of randomness.

This brings us to the next benefit of randomness: blame and credit. Games that are all or mostly skill let winners bask in their wise choices, but provide losers no shelter from blame. Often, players want to be able to take credit for their victories, but lay the blame for losses elsewhere, and randomness can provide that target. Watch people play *Yahtzee* and you'll notice winners taking credit for skilled play and losers blaming bad rolls.

This "blame and credit" is true even during the game. A player who falls behind in a skill-based game may have nothing to cling to for hope. A game with random elements gives losing players hope and ensures winning players still

feel they are at risk. Random events in a game increase replayability. Random elements allow a game's loser to more easily imagine how they might win next time. If they can blame the random elements, they can also tell a story about how those random elements might go their way next time. The poker player who busted out can go back the next night with visions of aces in their head, eager to try again. The kid who loses at *Yahtzee* can feel excited to try again because they could get five-of-a-kind on any roll.

Two Types of Randomness

Not all random elements in games are created equal. How and when you use randomness, and what the results of that randomness are, impacts the design quite a bit. Let's group random elements into two types: biased and unbiased randomness.

Biased Randomness

Biased randomness is a random element that benefits some players more than others. Rolling 2d6 to move in a race game is an example of biased randomness — rolling higher (moving farther) is better than rolling lower. Another example is resource generation in *Catan*. On some numbers you get resources, while on other numbers you get nothing.

In general, biased randomness works best when used in conjunction with skill-based decision-making. When players can choose how and when to participate in the randomness (for example, to bet or fold in poker) it creates a space where players can learn and play with greater skill over time.

Unbiased Randomness

Unbiased randomness has various outcomes, but all of the outcomes have similar worth, at least in the abstract. That is, no matter what the result, you get something. Although what you get may not be what you want, that's a tactical issue. To see unbiased randomness in action, look at *Ticket to Ride*. All of the cards do the same thing — let you place one train on that color. Thus, drawing off the deck will always get you the same value — one train-place. (Yes, the wild cards are just plain better than other cards, creating a little biased randomness in *Ticket to Ride*'s primarily unbiased random card-drawing.)

Unbiased randomness is good for generating random effects without much worry that they will put one player in a far better position than the other players.



Neither type of randomness is better or worse — they just create different experiences for your players. Biased randomness can create interesting strategic options. Do you want to be on lots of different numbers in *Catan*? Or only on the 6s and 8s? The answer depends on whether the player prizes diversity of resources or raw production.

Catan also has unbiased randomness, in that the board is set up randomly and that randomness does not favor any particular player, nor produce better or worse boards, just different ones. However, this unbiased randomness lacks the exciting swingyness of biased randomness. It is rare to look at a starting *Catan* board and go, "Wow, that's amazing!"

Randomness, when divorced from skill, tends to work better when it's unbiased. For example, the coin flip at the start of a football game is acceptable skill-free randomness, since each team receives a kick off at the start of one of the game's halves, and neither half is arbitrarily better than the other. Imagine, instead, if a coin flip occurred after a touchdown and on tails the team was not allowed to attempt an extra point. Still random, still skill-free, but very biased and thus less acceptable to players (and fans).

While you can never be certain of the result of a random event until it happens, players shouldn't be completely in the dark about the possible outcomes. If you let them roll a six-sided die, they expect the result to range from one to six. If the possible results are instead one, two, green, and hippopotamus, the player will be justifiably confused. Some methods of expressing randomness are easier for a player to intuitively understand than others. If you do give players dice, even non-standard ones, they can easily pick them up, look at the sides, and get a general idea of what the results can be. If instead you give them a custom deck of cards, it becomes harder to quickly understand the possible outcomes.

The key question to ask is: for each random event in your game, can players easily understand the range of possible results? The less they know of the possible outcomes, the harder it will be for them to make meaningful choices. If your playtesters say things like, "I didn't know that could happen," consider doing more to show them the possible outcomes of your game's random effects.

Players can make choices about a random element either *before* or *after* it's determined, and this has a substantial effect on the impact of the randomness. If players are making choices *before* the random element happens, they need

to have some idea of what the possible outcomes are and what options they have. For example, in blackjack, players choose to hit or stand based on their existing cards and a general understanding of what cards exist — and in what proportions — in a standard deck. Counting cards is just an attempt to be more accurate at predicting the values of the random cards to come.

Another example: in *Catan*, players make choices about how to place settlements before the random events (that is, before the die rolls that generate resources). In order to make those choices, they need to understand that 6 and 8 should show more often than 2 and 12. *Catan* does a good job of color-coding the more likely numbers, and adding pips, to help players understand how the random events are likely to affect them.

If players make choices *after* a random event occurs, they don't need to understand the range of the randomness, just how they can respond to the result. If a deck provides resources to each player each turn, and at the start of some turn a player happens to receive five resources, that player can choose how to spend those resources even without having any idea how many resources, or how few, they might have gotten. (Although, of course, they want to understand that range to make long-term choices about what they'll do over many turns.)

Choice-after-randomness can be helpful for players who are new, or want a more casual and less "thinky" game. Since they only need to process what to do after the random element has been determined, large chunks of game space don't need to be explored. For example, in *Kingsburg*, players roll dice and then choose which advisor to put their dice on and get resources from. There are 18 advisors but players don't need to think about all of those options, because on any given turn, only two to five are available to them. Simple, fast, fun.

The impact of a particular random event changes based on how many random events exist in the game overall. Oddly, one solution to tester complaints of too much randomness may be to add *more* randomness. For example, if you draw from an event deck four times in a game, each card is 25% of the total random effects in the game. If, instead, your draw 40 times over the course of a game, each card has less total impact.

Finally, when considering tester feedback on randomness, think about who you are getting this feedback from. Who your game is for impacts how you should use randomness. Games like *Fluxx* are sometimes derided as too random, but for the target audience, that randomness is an asset. It's part of why the game works. Complain about it if you like, but recognize that different

types of players like different types of games, and keep in mind that we should all aspire to have a game that sells like *Fluxx*.

Chapter 6

Writing Effective Rules

One of the most valuable game design skills is the ability to write clear, useable rulebooks. The ideas in your head may be brilliant, but if you can't write your rules in a way that lets players understand how your game works, none of the rest of your wonderful, fun, creative thoughts matter. Players can't enjoy games they can't understand!

So, what is a rulebook for, and perhaps as importantly, what is it *not* for?

Your Rulebook Teaches New Players

You are not going to be put in the box and shipped with each copy of your game. Someone has to open your game box, take it out, and use your rules to learn how to play your game. The primary goal of your rulebook is to give that person everything they need to do that.

Your Rulebook Reminds Previous Players How to Play

Even once players know how to play your game, there will be times they want to remind themselves how a particular rule works, or make sure they are playing the game correctly. Layout and design are two key aspects of your rulebook that will allow players to locate a specific rule or answer a question without needing to re-read the entire document.

Let's consider some of the things your rulebook is not — tasks your rulebook is poorly suited to deliver upon.

Your Rulebook is Not a Story Book

The theme and flavor of your game are important (they may be the primary selling point) and there is nothing wrong with having the story influence the rules. However, players should not have to read paragraphs of narrative to figure out which parts are rules and which are flavor. You can have pure story sections, but make sure players can easily tell which parts are story, and which are rules. If your story runs more than a page, think about including it as a separate document so that it doesn't get in the way of the rules.

An example from the board game *Rush n' Crush* (emphasis added):

> Objective: In a post-apocalypse future (à la Mad Max), with scarce resources and few individuals, the survivor clans resolve disputes through ritualised *racing* instead of open warfare. You are one of these mad drivers. *Only the first place counts*, and no holds are barred … so it is high time to Rush'n'Crush.

Here we see the story getting in the way of the rules. The objectives section is one of the most important parts of the rulebook — everyone needs to know how to win! Out of that entire paragraph, only the italicized words communicate any rules and sadly, they even manage to teach those rules wrong. A better objective might read:

> Objective: Be the first over the finish line, or the last racer with a drivable vehicle.

This is simple, easy to understand, and teaches the rules more completely than the paragraph above. Interestingly, the name of the game itself (*Rush n' Crush*) does more to teach the objective than either paragraph. If you pick up a game with that title, you have a pretty good idea what the objective is.

Your Rulebook is Not a Strategy Guide

You want to teach your players how to play your game. You are not trying to teach your players how to play well. Part of the joy of games for many players is exploring your game's space, playing around with different things they can do in that space.

Take the card game *Guildhall*. In *Guildhall*, you play a small number of character cards and each card lets you do something simple when you play it. The fun comes from playing different character cards and seeing how they work together. One card is the Historian, which lets you take the top card of the discard pile. Not that useful, since the top card of the discard pile is unlikely to help you. There is also an Assassin, which can kill another player's card, placing it on top of the discard pile. And you get to play two cards in a turn. *Hmm…*

A ha! Each new player of *Guildhall* has the opportunity to discover this interaction and have their own "I feel smart" moment. Those moments are golden treasures — don't spoil them by telling your players the strategies of your game.

Some games are complicated and need an extended example of play. Simple examples can be included as sidebars in the rules themselves, and sample turns can be their own section towards the end of the rules. The examples inside the rules should only show what the example players are doing — let readers discover the strategy for themselves.

Some players do like some guidance in strategy, and in some cases restating a rule, calling out strategy or otherwise guiding your players may help. As with everything, your best bet is usually to playtest. Draw up rulebooks with and without strategy guides and try them out. Do players need guidance? Keep it. Can they play and have fun without it? Stick to the rules.



Rulebooks are read by people. You are writing a tool that will be used by people to learn how to play. Understanding who those people are and knowing more about them can help you make tools better suited to their needs.

What Do the Players Already Know?

One question to ask yourself as you write a rulebook is how experienced you think your players are, both with games in general and with other games like yours. Do you need to explain things in great detail? Or can you assume they know what certain relatively common terms mean?

For example, if you are creating a deck-building game like *Dominion* or *Thunderstone*, do you need to teach your players what a deck-builder is? If you

expect your audience to have played a lot of deck-builders, you can skip that section of your rules. (Or you might have a separate, "What is a deckbuilder?" section at the start of your rules that most players will skip.) On the other hand, if you are making a game for an audience that you don't expect to have a lot of experience with games like yours, you need to go into more detail about its core principles.

Playtest Your Rulebook

It is important to understand that your rulebook needs as much (if not more) playtesting as any other aspect of your game. For early playtests you may not yet have a rulebook, but you should write the rules down sooner rather than later. This will help you keep track of changes and make it easier for playtesters to identify problems. In some cases, you may even want to revert back to an earlier version. Written rules with version numbers make this easy.

Keep it Simple

Here's an odd truth about games: rules are bad! The rules of your game are an obstacle. An enemy, not an ally.

Your goal is to deliver a great experience to your players. Your rules help define how that experience works, but they also ask the players to work for it — they have to put effort into learning and understanding your rules before they can enjoy your experience. Think of it this way: if you can deliver the same experience in one rule or two, it is better to do it in one. Your goal is elegance. Each rule has a cost to learn, and you want to make your players pay only the costs that are such a good deal in fun that it's worth it. Indeed, in some cases it can be better to deliver experiences with zero rules!

The good news is that it's possible not only to combine rules, but also to disguise them, in order to make them easy to learn. Consider the following common challenge, and the clever solution found in the masterful design of *Bohnanza*.

Many games have things that happen in phases. One difficulty lies in teaching what you do in each phase and what order the phases go in.

Imagine you have phases called "Phase 1" and "Phase 2." It's pretty easy to tell which you do first, but you still have to teach players what you do in each phase.

Perhaps instead you have phases called “Combat” and “Gather Resources.” Now it’s clearer what you do in each phase, but it can be hard to remember which happens first.

If only there was a way to teach players both what to do, and in what order, without any rules. It can be done!

Bohnanza is a game about farming beans (yes, you can make a great game about anything). It teaches players everything they need to know with the names of the phases. *Bohnanza* has a “Planting” phase and a “Harvesting” phase. Not only do these terms enhance the theme, they also teach players what happens in those phases and what order to do them in. No one in the history of gaming has had to ask, “Which do I do first: plant, or harvest?” Because the phase names work so well, players learn at least two critical game rules without needing to read anything but the phase names.

Using Implicit and Explicit Rules

A natural tendency when writing rules is to try to make your rulebook ultra-complete, to deliver everything players could possibly need to play your game. While this is a noble idea, it is impossible even in theory. It’s not just that a complete rulebook is not an efficient use of your time; it is actually impossible.

Your game has two types of rules — implicit and explicit rules. The explicit rules are the ones you put into the rulebook. These might include things like:

- Players put their victory point token on the zero space of the score track.
- Each time a player gains wheat, their victory point token advances forward one space on the track.
- When a player reaches ten on the victory track, they win.

This game has a number of implicit (or implied) rules, one of which is:

- Players can’t pick up their victory point token, place it on ten, and declare victory.

This example might seem obvious, but other, less obvious, implicit rules are still critical to the proper play of games. Other common implicit rules include things like:

- Players can't look at cards in other players' hands.
- Decks of cards are placed with all the cards face-down.
- Players cannot move each other's pieces.

Knowing that your players will assume these kinds of rules lets you avoid trying to write down every possible rule. Imagine a rulebook that *did* try to write out all the rules: "The room should be lit well enough for everyone to see the game board." That rulebook would be 1,000 pages long, impossible to use, and still incomplete!

In addition to knowing what rules your players take for granted, you also have to know what those rules are so you can be very clear about it when you break them. If your game rules go against an implicit rule, you have to do more than just state your rule as you would any other. You have to really call attention to the difference, and explain very clearly how your game works differently. For example, if you want a deck of cards to be placed face-up , you can't write, "Shuffle the deck and place it on the table," because players will put the cards face-down because of the power of that implicit rule. You could try, "Shuffle the deck and place it face-up on the table." However, because implicit rules are so powerful you'll find most players — even with the rule as written there — will still place the deck face-down. You need to write something like, "Shuffle the deck and place it ***face-up*** on the table."

The fact that boldface and italics are both necessary to overcome your players' preconceived implied rules suggest a key rule of game design: if you don't have to contradict an implied rule, don't! These pre-built rules are like free money — your players already know them before they open your box. Contradicting them is expensive. Unlearning one rule to learn another is harder than just learning a new rule on its own.

Another "free" set of rules comes from your game's theme. Imagine that you are making a race game. A game about races implies:

- Players want to go fast.
- You win by crossing the finish line first.
- The relative positions of the players matter.

To illustrate another key issue at the intersection of theme and implicit rules, let's add a rule that forces players to deal with fuel as a resource.

If we want the race to be long, players may need to buy fuel during the race. For example, you could have this rule: "Players can spend $50 at the start of their turn to gain one gallon of racing fuel."

This rule may work mechanically — it could be balanced, a fair price for fuel, and not too complicated to implement — but it also has a problem: *fuel doesn't work that way!*

In your game world, you are telling the story of cars racing fast. Fuel does not just appear in their tanks. Trying to teach your players rules that contradict the story is wasted effort. To implement a fuel-buying system, you may need to add a pit stop mechanic where players can stop to pick up more fuel. Now the system is more complicated. Players are "spending" speed as well as money on fuel. You may have to assign specific places for pit stops, which may be different for each player. Even with more complexity, it will be an easier concept to learn because it fits the game's narrative.

Games are Played by People (Or, More Rules You Don't Need)

Another way game designers often overcomplicate rules is by trying to deal with unusual scenarios where a player follows the rules, but in a way that breaks the game so no one has fun. For example, a player might be able to destroy an important shared resource, or choose not to contest territory in a way that makes it too easy for other players to claim it.

If a player can gain an advantage by behaving weirdly, you may need to prevent that behavior. If, however, the dual effects of odd behavior are to annoy the other players and make the offending player less likely to win, the players already have all the tools they need to prevent this behavior — they can stop playing with that person! Put another way, your rulebook does not need to be the tool players use to curb antisocial behavior that's also stupid strategy.

Games are played by people and those people play games to have fun. If someone stops them from having fun, that person will stop getting invited to play. Don't use your limited rulebook space to fix a problem that players can fix for themselves.

So What's In a Rulebook?

While there is no universal template for a game rulebook, certain elements are likely to appear. This serves as a good working list and sequence:

- Non-rules (parts list, flavor, story)
- Objective
- Setup
- Rules (how to play)
- Victory (when to stop playing)
- Optional elements (strategy guides, examples of play, variants)

You don't need to have all of these things, you don't have to have them in that order, and you may want to add sections that are not listed. But it's a good start. Each is discussed in more detail in the sections that follow.

Non-rules

Non-rules include anything that is important to have in your rulebook, but isn't rules. Players could skip past this whole section and still learn how to play your game.

Parts lists are important so that players can check to make sure they haven't lost pieces.

A very short story about your game world, or the theme of your game, can help players who enjoy the story of games get into the mood.

For a game prototype, this section is a good place to include a version number, your name, and contact information. Include at least an email address, so that if your prototype gets lost or you wind up handing it to someone else to test, they know how to find you to give you feedback and get your prototype back to you. Indeed, it is good to get into the habit of slapping your name and contact information all over anything you produce.

Since this section could be skipped, some prefer to put it at the end of the rules, although that works better for parts lists and contact information than narrative introduction.

Objective

This is the goal of your game — how players win. You need to open with this because until they know the objective, players can't evaluate the value of

any other element of your game. This should be clear, simple, and short. For example:

- The winner is the player with the most points.
- Players win by having the most pieces in the castle at the end of the game.
- The first player to bake all of their pies wins.

The objective section might include game end conditions, since things like points often only matter when the game stops. The end may be implied by the objective as in the example above about pies, but otherwise you should state the end condition. To better indicate when the game ends, the example above about pieces in the castle might be better written as:

- The game ends when the castle is fully built. The player with the most pieces in the castle wins.

Remember that at this point in the rules, players have no idea how to play. They don't know how to score points, or build castle parts, or bake pies. That's OK, you just want to open with the goal so that when they reach the body of the rules they can connect "How to do X" with this goal and start forming strategies.

Setup

This section should walk the players through setting up the game by putting the pieces in the correct places. How much you have to teach about what the pieces do depends on how many choices players have to make during setup. A player should ideally not be asked to make a choice if they have not been given the information they need to properly evaluate the options that choice presents them.

If your game has no choices during setup, this section should just be a list of instructions. If your game does have choices in setup, you'll need to teach enough for the players to make those choices intelligently. If they want to refer forward in the rules to find more information, it should be easy for them to do so, but in general, your goal should be to empower them to make good choices using only the rules in your setup section. For example, imagine a game with three resources: wood, stone, and clowns. If your game starts each player with two of each, setup is simple: "Give each player two wood, two stone, and two clowns." If, instead, they get to choose six of these in any combination, you

might say, “Each player chooses six resources to start with. They may select wood (used to build bridges and houses), stone (used to build the castle), and clowns (used to terrorize children).”

You’ll have to test this section to see if players are getting enough information to make informed choices. Ask your testers why they made the choices that they did and see if anyone winds up just saying, “Well, I didn’t know what I was doing, so I tried X.” If you can, design your game so that you don’t need complicated player choices during setup. Players won’t miss a choice that wasn’t fun to make.

Rules/How to Play

This is the meat of your rulebook. The best structure tends to vary a lot based on your individual game, but here are two key guidelines:

- **Present rules in the order players will use them.** Many players learning a new game play as they go, reading the rules and playing the game in the order you present it.
- **Break your rules into discrete sections.** Use a subhead to label every section or new rule. Headings make it easy for someone who needs to look up a specific rule during play to find that section or rule.

So how long should the rules section be? It depends on how many rules the game has. How many rules should a game have? *However many carry their weight!*

Your game could have just a few rules, or hundreds. In general, you want to have as few rules as possible. Remember that every rule “costs” your players — they have to learn how that rule works to play and enjoy your game. But as long as every rule generates more enjoyment than it costs in complexity, there is no wrong number of rules. If a rule or mechanic is more complicated than the fun it generates, cut it.

It’s easy to see that you should cut rules (or other parts of your game) that are not fun. But the guidelines above communicate something less obvious, too — you may want to cut rules even if they *do* make the game more fun! If a rule adds fun, but also adds complexity disproportionate with that fun, cutting it can improve your game.

This is another area of game design where you cannot plug things into a calculator and get an answer. You have to go test your game and observe players’ reactions. Every, “Wow, neat!” and, “I want to try X strategy” is a mark

for fun. Every "How does that work, again?" and "Oh yeah, I forgot that" is a mark for complexity. Cut away everything you can and get down to a great game.

Ask "Can This Rule Go Away?"

The act of writing your rules down can help you identify what you can cut or combine. Each time you commit a rule to paper, ask yourself, "Can I make this rule go away?" Each time a playtester has to read a rule twice or ask for clarification, highlight that rule and see what you can do to make it clear.

Victory (Or, When to Stop Playing)

Wrap up your rules with the thing that wraps up your game — how someone wins. This should be a recap. Players should not learn new rules here, the victory rules summarize what they already know. This is the objective section plus enough math and system explanation to determine the winner. For some games, this step is so simple as to be obvious. Our race game example will both end and have a winner when the first car crosses the finish line. A more complex game might need something like this:

> The game ends when the castle is complete. Each player earns one point for each piece of the castle they built, and the player with the most castle pieces earns three bonus points. Finally, players reveal their Terrorized Children tokens, scoring one point for every three terrorized children (round down). Whoever has the most points wins."[1]

Optional Sections

Your game may need additional sections outside the main rules of your game — things players do not have to read to learn how to play your game, but are helpful or desirable for some other reason. Make very clear that these are different from the main rules. Here are three possibilities; there may be others:

- **Examples of play.** If you want to have complex examples of play (sample turns, sample endgame scoring) separating them at the end makes it clear that they are examples, not rules. Players can refer to

[1] Please go make this game.

them as needed to get more information about rules they are confused by.

- **Strategy guides.** If you feel the need to provide strategies for your players, make sure to separate those guides from the main rules. Players who want that guidance can look for it and players who want to explore your game for themselves can do so without spoilers. Strategy guides are particularly helpful in asymmetric games where players have very different abilities and goals, since they can talk about just one player's options and goals without confusing other players.
- **Game variants.** If you have different ways to play your game (alternate setups, optional rules, or rules changes), put them at the back of the rulebook. Segregating these sections helps avoid the potential problem of players referencing a rule and accidentally referencing a variant.



As your game develops, expect to test the rulebook itself. Plan playtest sessions where you ask players who have never played your game before to set up, play, and critique your game entirely from the rules — without your input. See Chapter 10: Playtesting (and particularly, its section on blind playtesting) for more information.

Chapter 7

Bits Matter

How Components Make Your Game

All board games have bits — the meeples, tokens, counters, cards, or other components that make up the physical parts of the game. However, components should do more than allow a game to have a physical presence. They should also enhance the game experience. Well-selected components can improve a game in many ways. Let's look at a few.

Bits Teach Rules

Components represent your game world and everything in it. Good bits help players understand at a glance what they represent and how they function within the game. Indeed, it's important to remember that your pieces *can't help but teach rules*, because people are hardwired to interpret symbols and make assumptions. There are two upshots: players can learn things about your game from carefully considered bits, and you can lead them astray with poorly chosen ones. Objectives, ownership, value, power — your rules might give details, but the bits themselves must reinforce the rules to fulfill their potential. The more rules players can learn passively from the bits that make up your game, the less time and effort they have to put into learning the full rules.

Again, *you can't avoid this.* People come to your game wired with preconceived ideas, and just like implied rules, you fight them at your own peril. Use the awesome power of bits well and you can make better games, faster.

- **Identity.** Meeples look like people, so they do a good job of representing humans. Gold chips say "coin" well. And so on.
- **Ownership.** Players need to be able to easily see which bits they control, which belong to their opponents, and which are uncontrolled or

neutral. Unified color schemes are an obvious method, but shape and size also work. All of the figures that look like Space Marines obviously belong to the Space Marine player, for instance.

- **Function.** As suggested above, meeples look like people, so it's a natural assumption that meeples can do the kinds of things in your game that people can do in real life, like work, fight, or occupy a field or building. Tokens that clearly represent money would be most obviously used to buy other things, and would be less obvious if used for some other function. You *could* try telling people that they want to collect brown cubes to get money and must avoid the gold disks because they cost money each time you land on them… but explain that rule as many times as you like, and players will *still* link gold disks to coins to money.

Bits can also work together with printed elements of your game to make clear their intended uses and functions. If a meeple represents one unit of work in your game, and there are different kinds of work that can be done, but each type of work can be done a limited number of times, then showing a corresponding number of meeple shapes on the board effectively teaches your rules about how many times each type of work can be done.

Bits Teach Strategy

Your components do a critical job helping players see what is going on in the game and how they (and their opponents) are doing at any given point. Being able to establish short-term and long-term goals is critical for player engagement and enjoyment, and components help them establish goals by making the game easier to understand.

- **Am I good or bad?** The color, shape, and look of pieces should teach players if they want more of or less of that bit. Players are likely to want more of bits that say "money" (gold disks, green cubes) and fewer that represent damage or hardship (red cubes, black marks).
- **How powerful am I?** Components' sizes should communicate their relative power or worth. Bigger is better: large cubes should be stronger, more capable, and/or more expensive than smaller ones. Another presumption is that taller, higher, or on top is more powerful. A larger stack of chips is clearly preferable to a smaller stack, and the chip on

the top of a mixed-color stack has a strong association with advantage or control.

- **How is the game going?** The number and position of components should help players keep track of how they are doing — and help them figure out which of their opponents is the biggest threat. The player with cubes in the most spaces, or having the largest pile of tokens, or controlling a meeple farthest on the victory track is obviously in the lead. Even in games where absolute scores remain hidden (behind a screen, say), games whose components don't communicate at least something about the players' standings are very rare.
- **How am I supposed to feel?** Accumulating things feels good, and losing things feels worse than not gaining things, so even the way you track resources with bits (as just one example) affects your players' emotional reactions to your game. Collecting victory cubes feels different than moving a victory point marker along a printed track, and giving back victory cubes *definitely* feels different than moving a marker backward. Losing your human-shaped meeples after a deadly battle has more emotional impact than losing your cubes or dice.
- **How much longer is the game?** Bits are a great way to help players track how long it will be until the end of the game. Players need this information in order to plan — there's no reason to start a long, strategic play if there are only a few turns left! Players might have colored cubes as pieces. When a player has all of their cubes on the board, the game ends. There could be a central bank of gold and silver disks and when the bank is empty, the game ends. Or a player could be trying to collect one of each colored cube and when one player has a full set, it's over. Any of these lets a player estimate at a glance how long the game has left.

Bits Define (and Possibly Expand) Where a Game Can be Played

The durability of a game's components feeds a customer's perception of the game's value. A game that will stand up to abuse is often better-received than a game with flimsy parts that won't last as many play sessions or survive in a household with gamer children. A small, lightweight game might be sought out for travel. A great example of a game like this is *Hive*. *Hive* has large plastic hex

tiles which are easy to see, hard to lose, and almost impossible to damage. In addition to being a great two-player game for home play, it also fits well into a backpack and survives play at almost any location.

Some Things You Might Do With the Bits in *The White Box*

If you bought the boxed version of *The White Box*, it came with a bunch of bits. Here are some ideas about what some of them might be especially good for.

Cubes can be collected. You can collect cubes with a basic "more is better" objective in mind, or incentivize collection of sets of cubes of the same color, or one each of the different colors. You could even encourage diversity of collection — collect them all and your score is equal to the color you have the least of.

Cubes can be hidden. Cubes can be put in a bag or cup to hide how many of what colors are in there. Perhaps players are assigned colors and this hides what territory they are fighting for, or cubes are resources and a random pull out of the bag decides what resources will be available, open for bidding, or given out for a turn.

Cubes can be stacked. Cubes can be put on top of other cubes. Perhaps the larger cubes are transports that carry a few smaller cubes around, or players can stack their own cubes on top of other players' cubes and whoever is on top controls the space. Stacking might be based on pyramids rather than straight stacks, for more stability.

Dice can be rolled, of course. Rolling lots of dice feels very satisfying, and players can easily understand the possible outcomes. Dice can be rolled all at once, or in sequence. Rolling at once is easier and more fun, choosing and rolling in order gives players more choices and may be more strategic.

Dice can be set to values. Dice have sides and some (or all) of your game might consist of just setting certain dice to particular sides. Remember that players are conditioned to think bigger numbers are good and smaller numbers are bad, so effects that make a player's dice values go up will be perceived as good.

Dice can be used to compare or display values. You can add up all the dice that are rolled, but for large numbers of dice this is time-consuming and not very fun. Instead, you could compare each die to a target value — for example,

every die that has a 5 or higher is a success. You could create a rule where only each unique value counts, or where you only use the value displayed on the most dice. Dice can be compared to other players' dice values, which gives a good "I beat you" feeling, and rolling dice to defend against or respond to the active player can keep other players involved even if it is not their turn.

Dice can be placed with, beside, or on other dice. Dice are not just floating values. They exist as physical pieces on the table and can be used as components where their location and orientation matter. Dice could beat or change dice around them, or create chains by value or color, or even be stacked on top of each other. Stacked dice suggest the interesting idea that dice values only matter when they are visible.

Meeples can be placed. Meeples look like people and placing them on the map can show who controls an area or what actions a player is taking. Alternatively meeples could have effects based on color and players might gather multiple colors to use. For example, meeples might produce different fruit based on their color, with players selecting colors based on what fruit they want to produce.

Meeples can be used to track actions or options. Meeples are an easy way to track a player's possible actions. For example, perhaps a player can do three things because they have three meeples to use. This can make collecting more meeples a powerful strategy.

Meeples can be randomized. Meeples could be placed into a bag (or several bags) so that when players place a meeple they are getting a chance at an effect instead of a guaranteed effect. This is also a good way to let players change the values of certain actions. If only one meeple is drawn from each bag each turn, putting a meeple into a bag with lots of others is less valuable than putting it into one with fewer competing meeples.

Meeples can be stacked. Meeples could stand on top of cubes, tokens, or even other meeples. The top meeple controls the stack, but the contents and value of the stack remain easy to see.

Chapter 8

What to Do When You are Worried About Your Game Being Balanced

Game balance comes up often when designing games. We all want to make games that are "balanced," right? When we talk about game balance, we are usually talking about whether "the game is fair," or whether "all sides (or factions, or play options) generally have the same opportunity to win." What we are usually trying to avoid are situations where one player feels like they did poorly not because they made poor choices, but because the other side had built-in advantages.

Designers frequently run into problems here. It is very easy to get distracted by the question, "Is my game balanced?" at the cost of the question, "Are the players having fun?" Consider: no one ever goes into a game store and says "I want to buy a game that's very balanced!" Let's look at some of the ways balance impacts game play and what that does to the design process.

Terms: Underpowered and Overpowered

When people talk about balance and describe parts of a game as unbalanced, sometimes what they mean is that some aspect is either underpowered or overpowered. It's important to understand what these terms mean, so let's look at some examples.

Overpowered means one of two things. In one case, a game element is so much better than the other options that the other choices players make become meaningless. If there is only one sensible choice, why make the players choose?

A game element could also be overpowered if at least one player stops having fun because of it — if something hits the table and other players think, "Oh, I'm doomed, that's unstoppable," or "Of course I won, I got to pick units first and got the uberunit."

The second definition relies on the question, "Are all players having fun?" not to define what is balanced, but to provide a check for you as a designer to know when you do or do not need to worry about balance. If players are not having fun, balance is one of many possible problems you might need to fix. If everyone is having fun, then you are likely better off focusing on other elements of the design rather than "fixing" balance problems that don't exist.

Playtesters are usually enthusiastic to point out things they think are overpowered, but you can draw more information out of them by asking why they won or lost a game. Players who win often attribute it to skill, but players who lose often look for something to blame. If some element of your design comes up as the excuse for a loss over and over, from multiple playtesters, that's an element to think about changing or cutting.

Underpowered means that some game element is less fun than other options — using that game element doesn't create enough enjoyment to justify the cost of making players learn about it (not to mention the cost of buying it as part of your component roster).

If a playtester tells you that something is underpowered, try to figure out why they're saying that. Does it not fit their play style? Is it not as good in a particular play mode or game type? This might not be a problem. But if they can't see any reason they would *ever* use it, and if you get that feedback from lots of playtesters, then you may need to change that element — or even cut it out of the game entirely!

Note that playtesters are often bad at finding underpowered elements. Looking for those is not as fun as seeking out overpowered effects, nor does it serve an emotional goal in explaining a win or loss. You may need to dig for this sort of feedback by making players rank every option, or draft every possible unit in a game where you would normally only select a few. Do most players wind up picking different options? Good. Do some game elements wind up at the bottom of everyone's lists? Fix (or cut) them.

Examples of Balance

Let's look at some examples of how the concept of balance is often applied to games, and what happens to the play experience when you make those choices. Remember that the overall goal is to make sure players are having fun with the toys you let them play with. Here are some ways to think about game balance in a way that creates enjoyment.

"Balanced" = The Same Amount of Value (Or, "Five Dollars is the Same as Five Dollars")

This is a common idea of balance. If all sides get the same stuff, then the game is balanced. It might be true if every side is exactly the same, but if different players have different options then the value — what a player can do with those five dollars — may be very different. This is the difference between mirrored and asymmetric positions, which we'll look at in more detail in a moment.

Time can also screw up this idea of balance. Five dollars now may have a different value from five dollars later. Many games offer the option to take loans, and figuring out how to balance those costs is tricky. Look at a game like *Le Havre*. In *Le Havre* you can take loans, getting some money early. You then pay interest every few turns, and either pay off the loans later at a higher cost or lose quite a few points at the end of the game. However, skillful use of that early money can create such a powerful board position that a player who takes loans and knows how to use the money gains a large advantage over a player who does not.

If players who take loans and players who don't both have fun, then that mechanic is balanced. If players who don't take loans stop having fun before the game is over, then there's a problem.

"Balanced" = The Same Power Level (Or, "50 Points of Tanks is the Same as 50 Points of Helicopters")

This idea of balance tries to assign a cost to game elements, with the message that if costs are balance, the game elements are balanced. This seductive idea masks a large number of outside factors.

Even if 50 points of tanks and 50 points of helicopters are "balanced," helicopters might be far better on a map with lots of hills and mountains that they can just fly over, or tanks might be better for scenarios with long durations or where players must hold territory.

In a separate but related problem, "balanced" units might support very different play styles unequally. Someone who enjoys and excels at fast, aggressive play might want more helicopters — and might have more fun or success than their point value would imply. You can give a sniper rifle and a machine gun the same point cost, but a player who is very skilled with a sniper rifle may get a greater return on those points than other players can for the same "balanced" cost.

If your playtesters tend to say, "Ah, sniper rifles, I'll have to play smart to beat those," you're probably fine. If they go, "Good grief, sniper rifles, I'm doomed," you may have a problem with the design.

"Balanced" = Fair (Or, "Each Side Has the Same Chance to Win," Or "Each Side Has the Same Chance to Win, Relative to Their Skill")

"Fair" is another idea (like "balance") where two designers can be using the same words and meaning very different things. Is chess balanced? Is it fair? Both sides have exactly the same pieces… but a player with higher skill has an advantage, and if there is a large enough skill difference neither side is likely to have fun. Is craps balanced? Each player has exactly the same odds, only choosing how and when to bet. In both cases the players know what they are in for and are happy to be there — they have fun at the chessboard, or at the craps table.

Something that's important to keep in mind as you design games is that players may not even want to have the same chance to win. Fun can come from feeling like each side has different odds. Many war games simulate battles where one side was at a large disadvantage. Seeing if you can hold out longer than a historical commander appeals to a lot of players.

Games with factions sometimes have one or more sides that are deliberately underpowered — look at *Blood Bowl*. In this fantasy football game you have Orcs (durable), Elves (good at passing the ball), Humans (versatile), and… Halflings. The Halflings are simply *less good* than the other teams. They don't move the ball as well, they don't hit as hard, they pop like popcorn… and for some players they are fun to play. Players might use such "imbalance" to handicap player skill, with the more skilled player playing the underpowered team. A player might deliberately take on a disadvantage so they can talk trash — "Man, if I can beat you with Halflings, you really do suck!" — or to avoid damage to their ego if they should happen to lose a more "balanced" game. The message for game designers is this: if both players are having fun, isn't it actually *better* that the teams are not, strictly speaking, "balanced," if that's where the fun arises?

That said, this is crucial: part of the reason Halflings work in *Blood Bowl* is that they advertise their imbalance. Players would be disappointed if they selected Halflings thinking they were on the same power level as the other teams, or if they were assigned a faction at random. However, the descriptions,

abilities, and game text for Halfings does a good job of telling players what they are in for.

Zoom Level

When we talk about balance it's important to think about how much of your game you are looking at. Are you zoomed in and considering a few individual pieces, a single turn, or one simple player choice? Are you zoomed out and looking at everything each player has on their side, including all of their units and options? Or are you zoomed even further out, outside a single game, where a player can select different units or customize their side before the game even starts? Each of these has its own issues.

Zoomed In

Let's use chess as an example. At the closest zoom level, we might discuss the balance of a few chess pieces, or a small section of the chess board. We can make a few blanket statements. A rook is more powerful than a knight, which is more powerful than a pawn. Thus, if one player has captured more high-value pieces they are usually described as having an advantage, or that the game state is unbalanced in their favor.

A shortcoming of this way of thinking is that blanket statements about one piece's superiority to another ignores the importance of board position. A player may well want to sacrifice high value pieces to get an advantageous position, and being able to tell who really has the better position is a key skill in chess.

If you think your game may have balance issues at this zoom level, think instead about how the game got to this position, about what players did to bring about the imbalance. If one player has an unbalanced position because they have been playing well and making good choices, while the other player has played less skillfully, that imbalance is good!

In the same way, if the imbalance comes from players making tactical choices, there may be no problem that needs solving. In a war game, if I am drastically underpowered in one area of the board because I've chosen to move powerful pieces elsewhere, that imbalance is my own creation. If I could have prepared for an attack by building defensive units, but chose not to (perhaps because I bought infrastructure, hoping my opponents would not attack me) then the system does not need to "fix" the imbalance that arises when I do get attacked.

Game-Level Zoom

At this zoom level we can see the whole game, and everything in it. Most players assume that every side has more or less the same balance — that players with equal skill and equal luck have about the same chance of winning. There are a number of ways to help ensure that players get that experience:

Balance Option: Mirrored Positions

Chess provides game-level balance by giving the same pieces in the same configuration to each side. Even attempts to improve chess, such as *Chess 960*, that change the game by altering the starting placement of pieces, often mirror the placement for both sides to retain balance.

Mirrored postions are common in multiplayer games as well. *Imperial* has players playing world powers with different starting locations and countries. However, the overall size of each country (in game spaces), their starting units, and their starting cash are basically the same for all positions.

One advantage of this type of balance is that it is relatively easy to design — just make every side the same! However, mirrored positions aren't the only way to create a balanced design.

Balance Option: Asymmetric Positions

"Asymmetric" means "not symmetric," a system in which the sides are not the same. They might have different units, board placement, starting resources, or other differences.

For example, *Dune* has six different factions, each with several pages of custom rules. Some factions start with cities, each begins with a different quantity of spice (currency), and they all have radically different special abilities. However, at game-level zoom, each side is balanced — the overall power level of their options are (roughly) the same.

Another asymmetric example is *Battlestar Galactica*. Each player has different abilities, and while there are two factions, those factions are deliberately not balanced.

Balancing games with very large differences like this is much harder, since even simple changes are no longer unambiguously the same for each side. If the Fremen in *Dune* started with more spice, how much of an advantage would they have? If the armory in *Battlestar Galactica* hit on a lower number, that would be better for the humans — but how much better? How would that change if they have or don't have rerolls? Far more complex. Games like this can be very complicated to design.

It can be hard to balance this sort of game in your head, or even on paper. Plugging values into a spreadsheet can't tell you if things add up to "balance." You are not balancing an equation, you are balancing an experience.

So it comes down to playtesting, and lots of it. If you have a problem with balance, your playtesters will tell you. If they say, "Oh, they are playing Faction X, I can't beat that!" or, "Well of course I want to play Faction Y, they are unstoppable!" or if you watch multiple players always select the same faction, then you may begin to suspect that you have a balance issue. Playtesting is more important than theory.

Balance Option: Multiplayer Games and Ganging Up

One monkey wrench in the works of any attempt at game balance arises when you have more than two players, where each one can attack or influence any of the others and everyone is trying to beat everyone else. In a three-player game, balance might be meaningless. Even if each side starts with exactly the same position, if two of the players team up against the third, that third player may be doomed.

One way to work around this issue is by moving the choices about the relative power of a given side from the designer to the players. In a game like *Diplomacy*, even if one starting position is unambiguously better than the others (more territory, or a larger starting army, or some other advantage), if the players know that side has that advantage, they can account for that when they form alliances. If everyone gangs up on the mechanically advantaged player, they may even start out at a practical disadvantage!

Another way you can deal with this issue is by assigning players more explicit targets. Perhaps you only get points for killing the player on your left, or each player has a hidden target. You might also fix this problem by … ignoring it! Many players like this kind of open-ended rumble. If your target audience loves your game, what other people think of it is irrelevant.

Metagame Zoom

In some cases the balance issues in a game may arise before the gameplay even starts. If players can build different forces by selecting different units, different powers, or different collectible cards, then the number of possible starting positions can become very large, and making sure that each of those possible builds is balanced becomes almost impossible. Even so, there are strategies for attacking the problem:

Balance Option: Points

One common way to keep multitudinous options under control is to assign point values to individual player options. For example, if we were to apply this to chess and let players build their own sides, you might be able to trade in five points of pawns to start with an extra rook.

If a system like this exists for your game, players will expect point-equal builds of equivalent value to be balanced, assuming players of equal skill. (Chess would likely be horrible if played this way, as it is unlikely to satisfy this requirement.)

One non-obvious downfall of point-balancing systems arises where some factors at play in a given game fall outside the domain of the point system. In a miniatures game, perhaps a unit of archers costs 50 points, but the system of point assignment is silent about what terrain is allowed, or how it's supposed to be set up. Your archer army might be worthless in a dense forest environment, or dominating on an open steppe.

On the other hand, selecting units and building a force that can deal with a variety of possible situations becomes a skill every bit as important as the tactical play of any given game. The players get to choose units and try to be as "unbalanced" as they can — a large source of the fun in games like this.

Balance Options: Auctions and Drafting

One problem with trying to balance a game is that it's hard to account for one very important factor — the players! Designers generally assume players who have about the same skill levels and tastes, but of course that is rarely the case. What if one player is much more skilled with, or prefers the play style of, a particular unit or power?

Auctions and drafting can help solve this problem by allowing players to assign for themselves the relative costs of units, pieces, or capabilities. If one player is really good with a sniper rifle, other players can bid them up and make them pay more for it, or pay enough to take it for themselves just so their opponent doesn't get it. In a draft, players may want to take things that are good for them, or nab toys they won't use just to keep them away from other players.

One advantage of these options is that they're far simpler than a point system, but they come with a new cost. To auction or draft well players must have a relatively high knowledge of the overall game to do well. Is an archer worth a bid of 50 points? It's hard to know without at least an understanding of what other units do and how the game works. It is easy for players to hurt their

chances by paying too much for some options, or perhaps hurt everyone by allowing opponents to pick up powerful effects too cheaply. This is one reason that auctions and drafts are often presented as advanced options to expand a simpler core game.

Balance Option: Slots

This option seeks to make balance easier to achieve, by making player choice less granular than with points, auctions, or drafts. The basic idea is to let players pick things freely until they all have the same number of slots filled. For example, *Smash Up* gives each player two slots for mini-decks they combine to make a single play deck. Each player has the same number of slots, and while each possible combination creates very different effects and is better or worse for different play styles, the basic idea is that every possible combination has a similar overall chance to win.

A slot system can be as granular as you like, although with too much granularity, it accumulates all the problems point systems have. If your game allows each player to pick five units, you should make sure every combination of five units results in all players feeling engaged. You can help guide players by specifying details or restrictions about some slots (e.g., "Choose at least two infantry units, no more than one tank unit, and no more than one air unit."). Remember that limitations can help keep the space small enough for players to understand it and make interesting choices. Without those limitations, players can become overwhelmed.

(Not a) Balance Option: Collectible Components

One way some designers try to craft balance is with collectible components. Mechanically these systems are usually the same as the point or slot systems discussed above, with added monetary costs. Where they aren't, they generally allow players to substitute as much real-world money (or, perhaps, time) as they want for skill at gameplay.

This highlights the key issue with collectability — it's a marketing and sales tactic, not a game design element. While it may well sell more product, from a design perspective, the sides still need to be balanced apart from rarity, because if you use rarity as a measure of power, someone can always go buy or collect as much of a given game element as they can afford, and if this gives them an unstoppable advantage in play, your game breaks. In collectible games, having more components should give you more options, not a better chance to win.

Regardless, adding collectible components makes producing your game a nightmare. Best to skip it.



When you make a game your goal is to create a great experience, to empower your players to have fun. Listen to your playtesters, scrutinize each playthrough, and pay more attention to people than numbers. If players are not having fun because of something consistent that happens during play, recognize the problem and work to balance it. When your players are all challenged, excited to play again even when they lose, and thrilled when they come out on top, then you can stop worrying about balance.

Chapter 9

Bang for the Buck

How Much Fun Do Players Get Out of Your Game?

"Wow, that game was fun to play, I want to play it again!"
"Wow, that game was awesome, I want to buy it!"

These statements encourage replay, drive sales, and mark an elegant game. Elegant games are more than just fun, they are fun in proportion to the effort they ask from players. They give the players as much as possible and make the effort of playing the game worth it.

As designers, it's easy for us to zoom in so far on our work that we miss the big picture. When you spend all your time thinking about whether a resource should cost one point or two points, it can be easy to stop asking, "Is my game any good? Are the players having fun?"

Continuing to ask these big-picture questions throughout the design process is critical. And it's not enough to think only about whether the elements produce something fun individually, or even overall but rather, whether the game is a "good deal" in terms of its fun. Does it produce enough "net fun?"

Consider: your players have to work to play your game. They must learn the rules, set up the pieces, take their turns, form strategies, and so on. Players want their games to be fun, yes, but they also care about how much fun they have *relative to the effort it takes.*

Imagine you could represent everything that is fun about your game as a single value. Let's call it "Gross Fun." This is everything that makes your game engaging — interesting choices, compelling story, bits that are fun to play with. Most of the time, when a new designer is thinking about things to change or add to a game, they ask some variant of the question, "Does this increase the total fun of my game?" As is turns out, this is an incomplete question. To see why, we need another piece of information.

Let's represent everything that is complicated about your game with a value called "Total Complexity." This is everything that players have to do, understand,

or deal with in order to get the fun you have promised them. This includes things like how long the game takes to learn, how many rules there are, how many bits and pieces players have to manipulate, and how complex the players' choices are. Designers can also get hung up on asking, "Is my game too complex?" which is also, on its own, an incomplete question.

Neither of these values alone tells us very much that is useful about a game. However, we can combine both values to produce something useful — the game's "Effective Fun."

Gross Fun / Total Complexity = Effective Fun

This describes how much fun players are having for the effort — how much reward they get out of the work they put into learning and playing your game.

Now you can think about the aspects of your game in terms of this relationship of elements and make more intelligent changes. Want to add something fun? Well, is it also complicated to learn? Hard to implement? Even if the Gross Fun is high, if the Total Complexity is higher, it is a bad deal. In the same way, anything you can do to lower your game's Total Complexity (for example, making it shorter) can make your Effective Fun go way up. If I get the same amount of fun out of a 30-minute game as out of a two-hour game, I get better value from (and am more likely to play and buy) the shorter game.

With this equation in mind, let's look at parts of your game where you can increase Gross Fun and decrease Total Complexity to create more Effective Fun.

Opening the Box and Setting Up

The moment your game hits the table is your first opportunity to excite your players. Setup is often a one-person job, so what are the other players doing? What does your game do at this stage to make them excited?

The first thing new players notice about your game are the bits, and particularly the bits they get right away — any meeples, resources, cubes, dice, or other objects that are "theirs." Are those bits pretty? Fun to hold? Even at the playtesting and prototyping stage, you can set the tone with fun bits. Give players lots of cubes, tokens, and dice and they'll start out feeling like, *"I have stuff!"*

Another way to engage your players is by providing information about how your game works from the bits themselves. Players should be able to start out

with a basic strategy. If they are not actively setting up the game, they can be thinking of what they want their early game to look like. Player aid cards or player boards can give each player something to engage with during setup.

To ensure players stay engaged during setup, make it short! The less time setup takes, the less you risk players checking out. There is no golden length for setup. The time players will accept is related to the length of the game itself. *Fluxx* lasts five to ten minutes — the entire setup rules are one sentence long. *Catan* is more complicated and setup could take as long as a whole game of *Fluxx*, while a game like *Android* could take more than 20 minutes to set up. With *Android*, however, each player has high-quality custom components unique to their position. Since players have their own bits and things to do, a longer setup isn't as painful.

But don't look just at the time it takes to set up, look at the ratio of that time to the game's overall length. Is five minutes OK? Too long? Well, five minutes to set up a game that takes 30–45 minutes to play is probably fine. Five minutes to set up a game that takes ten minutes to play is a disaster. Players want to play, not get ready to play!

Learning the Rules

One important difference between tabletop games and other forms of entertainment is that tabletop gamers have to learn new rules each time they play a new game. Even if you use genre and type of game as shorthand (i.e., "This is a deckbuilder," "This is a worker-placement game") players still need to learn specific rules to play new games. Learning new rules takes effort and the more effort you ask for, the more likely you'll get glazed eyes. Here are some ways to keep players engaged as they learn the rules.

One of the most important things is to be honest with players about what they are in for. They should have a basic understanding of how complex your game is before they play (or buy) it. This expectation goes both ways: if someone who expected a light, simple game is asked to process ten minutes of rules, they are going to check out. Someone expecting a crunchy game and gets just a few rules instead might give up early. Be honest; you can't make someone like your game by being dishonest about how it plays, because they'll find out eventually.

You can talk about complexity on the box, but your components also need to do a good job of telling the story of how complex your game is. Games like

Blokus and *Rorschach* are simple, easy-to-learn games. One way you know that is because the rulebook is a single page. (Indeed, in both cases all of the rules are written on the back of the box.) Another clue that these games are simple? There are a very small number of component types. Simple, elegant, easy to learn.

On the other hand, games like *Agricola* also help clue players in and set appropriate expectations. Even picking up the box, the weight of the game says, "There's a lot going on here." When you open the box, you find a thick rulebook, lots of decks of cards, and many different wooden pieces. If you lay this on the table and say to a new player, "Hey, do you want to learn how to play *Agricola*?" they can see at a glance what they are getting into.

Having established the overall complexity, the next question is how many rules the players have to learn entirely and how many they just need a framework for. How many rules are reiterated by player aid cards or by the components themselves?

For example, in *Puerto Rico*, a new player has to learn that on their turn, they pick a role, and further, that each role has different abilities. However, they also quickly learn that they don't have to remember all of the abilities of each role — what the roles do is listed on the role cards and on the player boards. That skillful use of components takes the rules from, "Learn these seven things, each with its own modifier," to, "Learn this one thing, then look here for the rest of the information when you want it."

When you are designing and testing, the rules can be a great tool to help you find things to cut and ways to make your game less complex (and thus, provide more Effective Fun). If players have to constantly look up some particular rule, or if they forget it entirely, ask yourself if you need the components to do a better job of teaching that rule, if you need to add player aids or reminders, or if you can even find a way to cut that rule entirely.

Fun Choices — Neither Boring nor Overwhelming

In most games, players want to make choices. The decisions they make and what follows from those choices are a big part of the game experience they will remember. How to build out and gain more territory in *Catan*, what role to take on your turn in *Puerto Rico*, or what card to play in *Fluxx* are all interesting

choices. The difficulty in coaxing fun from choices comes from how much information players need to be able to make these choices.

The game space where choices happen should be complicated enough to be interesting without being so large that players get lost. If a choice is too simple, that choice isn't fun to make. If enough of the choices players are asked to make are too simple, the whole game is too easily solved and stops being fun. Think about tic-tac-toe. The choices in tic-tac-toe are trivial, quickly reduced to "do this or be wrong."

The reverse isn't any better. If the game space is too large, players have a hard time knowing how to choose. This can lead to analysis paralysis, where a player feels like they could make the right choice if only they process information for a half-hour. This kills fun for the other players even if it doesn't for the choosing player. At the extreme, it can also lead to players acting randomly: "Well, I have no idea how to make this choice, so I'll just do *something,* so I don't hold up the game."

An example is the Japanese board game go. New players often play go on a small board. This very direct limiting of the game space helps them process their options. There are fewer possible moves, so they can make meaningful choices more easily. As they get better at playing the game and understanding the options, they can play on a progressively larger board without becoming overloaded.

If a choice is either trivial or too large, you need to find a way to make it more interesting or you need to take it out of your game. All choices increase your game's Total Complexity — making a choice is more complicated than not making a choice — so every choice you ask your players to make has to generate enough fun to justify its existence. Players will love making any number of choices if those choices are fun to make. If choices are dull, cut them.

Downtime

Players want to play your game, not wait to play it. One risk to Total Fun is how often and how long you ask your players to wait before they get to do something. This is why many games do not scale well when more players are added. Taking a game from four players to six means players individually play less often. When they play less in a game that takes longer, Total Fun goes down. Many players find that this takes a game from "fun" to "not worth it."

There are two aspects to downtime cost: how much total downtime there is, and how it is structured. Total downtime can be thought of as a percentage of total playtime. Five minutes of downtime in a ten-minute game is bad, five minutes of downtime in a 30-minute game is less painful. (This is very much like the "cost" of setup time discussed above.)

In addition, how downtime is structured matters a great deal. Players want to be engaged more often. A game with small chunks of downtime and more frequent play is better than big chunks of downtime and long turns. Look again at *Fluxx* — in a six-player game, I only act 17% of the time. However, the turns are so fast that as soon as I do something, I know I'll get to do something else very soon. I stay engaged. On the other hand, late in a game of *Dominion*, turns take longer without being very interactive and I am more likely to have a large block of downtime between my turns.

This creates the clearest example of losing engagement — the "go make a sandwich" moment. If players have blocks of downtime long enough for them to go make a sandwich, engagement falls through the floor and you lose players. This is why *Dominion* added expansions with more cards that force players to make choices even when it is not their turn, thus keeping them involved and engaged.

Of course, the best way to deal with downtime is to eliminate it by giving players things to watch or interact with even if it is not their turn. When a player is not actively playing, if they are interested in what's going on in the game — if they can watch interesting developments as other players act, fruitfully plan strategies for upcoming turns, and so on — they are still having fun.

As an example, I want to watch other players attack each other on their turns in *Risk*. I want to see the results so I can think about how I'm going to play my turn, consider where I'm going to attack, or even negotiate with the player whose turn it is. I might also want to watch just because the game changes quickly in ways I can follow. This "non-downtime" downtime is engaging.

On the other hand, if I'm playing chess, I may want think about the game while it is the other player's turn, but if they think about the game for longer than I can focus, nothing changes and I stop "playing" the game until it becomes my turn again. That's unfun downtime.

Overall, this isn't an exact science. Cutting things that are not fun is easy. The art of game design comes in where you must address the non-obvious edge cases. When a part of your game adds both fun and complexity, is it worth it? That's up to you.

Chapter 10

Playtesting

Or, Hitting Your Game With a Brick Until it Bleeds Awesome

Playtesting is one of the most important, informative, and frustrating parts of game design. When you have your game sketched out enough to play all or part of it, it's time to put it on the table and start testing.

When Do You Start Playtesting?

As soon as possible! You cannot sit alone and design perfect games in your head — you need to put your ideas in front of other people and test them. Even the simple act of explaining your game to other people will often highlight holes or flaws that you didn't notice on your own.

Your game doesn't need to be polished to be ready for playtesting. It doesn't even need to be a complete game! You may just have an idea for a mechanic or a theme that you want to work with. Grab some bits and put them in front of people. Write down ideas you have as you go, test them with other people, and explore where testing takes you. Indeed, if you wait too long to start playtesting you risk becoming too attached to your idea to be open to improvements.

The Difference Between Playtesting and Playing

Playtesting a game is not the same as playing that game. Playing a game means setting up, playing the entire game, and seeing who wins. Playtesting looks instead to "win" by making the game better. For some games, playing the entire game from start to finish to test each new rules tweak and edge-case takes too much time. Playtesting lets you test parts of games. If you want to

tweak a rule that mainly impacts the mid-game, start the playtest at the mid-game. If you are worried about an edge-case (a condition that you don't think will come up often, but that can nevertheless arise), then set up the specific conditions to test that. What happens when one player wins every auction? What happens when someone loses the first three fights? Find out.

Playtesters are not trying to win. While good playtesters should be doing as well as they can in the game, the real objective for playtesters is to make the game better.

Embrace Change

You can change rules on the fly. If something comes up during a playtest session that you feel must be fixed, you can change rules during the test session. In some cases, you may want to keep playing with what you think is a bad rule to further test it, but in other cases you'll want to fix something right away. Your goal should be to get the most out of your limited playtest time.

Playtesting is often most productive when some rules of play are suspended in order to expose more of what's happening, and why. For example, you might playtest with normally hidden information in the open, encourage players to share their plans with each other, and generally promote open conversation about anything and everything. This will help you identify places where players need more information or feel unable to plan.

Playtesting is About Asking Questions

Every time you playtest, you want to learn more about your game, about how it works, and about how you can make it better. You'll get more out of your playtest sessions if you go into them with a clear idea of what you want to learn. You'll ask different questions based on where you are with your design.

Examples of good questions include:

- Does the game function as a series of instructions that can actually be carried out, in the real world, by real humans? Are there rules that contradict each other or simply don't work?
- Do the rules become unplayable at any point?
- Can players form strategies early on?
- Do they have enough information?

- What parts of the game are confusing or hard to learn?
- Does some specific rule that you're not sure about carry its weight? Is the amount of fun players are getting out of that rule justify the cost to learn and use it?
- Could some specific rule or mechanic that you suspect is marginal be taken out? Does removing it make the game more fun for the effort?
- Does a specific game mechanic or component feel like the theme?

Examples of bad questions include:

- Does the game take too long? (That's too vague. Better would be, "Does the game take more than 15 minutes, on average?" or, "Is the game consistently engaging?" or even, "Are there dry sections that could be cut?")
- Does the game feel like the theme? (Too broad. If you instead test specific parts' fit with the theme, you'll be better able to find specific areas that are off-theme. Looking at the whole game when asking a question like this can make it hard to identify problems.)

A Note on Notes

Always take notes during your playtests. Record things like who you played with, how to contact them later if you have questions, how to spell their names for your playtest credits, the question(s) you tested, how long the test lasted, whether you finished, who won, and what happened during the game. Note the questions testers asked, even if you were able to answer them right away. If you see the same questions in test after test, maybe you need more clarity in your rules, player aids, or other tools. Finally, put a version number on all of your prototypes, and write down which version you were testing in each set of playtest notes.

You don't need to write an essay for each playtest session, but record enough detail that you'll know what you were talking about. It's frustrating to look back at your own notes and wonder, "What the heck does this note mean?" Which leads to perhaps the most obvious piece of advice about playtest notes: review them afterwards. Use them when you iterate your prototype. The act of writing down your thoughts can help you achieve clarity about the problems you're facing, and possible solutions.

Regular Playtesting vs. Blind Playtesting

Most of your playtesting will probably be done in your presence, so you can teach the game, observe the players, clarify rules, and answer questions. This mode of playtesting is easier to arrange, requires less of the testers, and is the only practical option for early prototypes.

Blind playtesting, on the other hand, doesn't involve your presence. The prototype can be played without you because it includes all the bits, all the player aids, and a full rulebook that the blind testers will read in order to learn how to play. Blind testers can sometimes be harder to find because blind testing is more work, but since you don't have to be in the room you can enlist playtesting groups from around the world, and conduct a large number of playtesting sessions in a smaller amount of time.

Blind playtesting is crucial to test the rulebook. It's essential to identify rules that need more clarification or examples.

In theory, you can be in the room during blind playtesting. In practice, if you want to do this, you must steel yourself in advance to point people at the rulebook when they ask you questions, even if they play the game wrong. Most designers can't do this because the temptation to comment is so strong, but watching people try to play your game as written can provide useful insights if you can manage. Your presence will also color the players' reactions to the game, if they know you're the designer. Few players want to brutalize a design, element, or mechanic in front of its creator, even if it's warranted.

As a halfway measure, you might try to phone in, or watch via webcam. You'll be able to see and hear what the playtesters are doing, but it will be easier for them to forget you're there.

What Your Playtesters Can't Tell You

Playtesters are an important asset for testing your game, but there are some parts of game design that playtesters can't tell you about. But never fear! If you watch them carefully, they'll show you!

Playtesters are often good at finding overpowered mechanics, but bad at identifying underpowered mechanics. If you have a game where playtesters can customize things (e.g., buy different types of units or select different powers), they will usually choose the most powerful or useful ones. This will help you locate parts of your game that are too strong, but usually won't expose any information about the choices they didn't make. You can get that

kind of information by asking direct questions (e.g., "I know you only get to pick one, but rank your choices. Why is that one last?") or by watching several playtesters choose from the same options. If you have a choice that no one ever makes, think about why. You may want to try some playtest games where you choose for the playtesters and see what happens.

Playtesters are good at adding rules, but bad at finding rules you can take out. When a playtester identifies a problem, they tend to suggest adding a rule to fix it, even without talking explicitly about the problem they're "solving." When testers suggest new rules, try to find out why. What is the problem they are trying to fix? Is it really a problem and if so, can you fix it by removing or changing rules rather than adding new ones?

Playtesters will show you which rules need clarification, if you watch them. As the designer, it can be hard for you to identify when a rule is confusing or overly complicated. It makes perfect sense to you — you made it! Playtesters may be hesitant to outright tell you, "This is confusing." Everyone wants to sound smart and helpful. However, if you watch your playtesters, you can see which rules they forget, misinterpret, or have to look up several times. You can use this to decide where you need more tools (player aids, better icons) and, most importantly, what rules that you should remove or simplify.

Levels of Prototype

Your prototypes translate the idea in your mind to a box on the shelf. What should your prototypes look like? How pretty should they be? Do they need art, graphics, layout, and polish? How finished must they be before you expose them to the harsh light of the public? The answer to these questions depends on how far along you are in the process. Let's look at the levels of prototypes.

First-pass Playtesting Prototype

This is the first playable version of your game, a way to test out your initial concepts and ideas. Your goal here is to put something in front of other people as soon as possible, to test your ideas and find the rough patches quickly. You want to fail quickly, to get to a solid game and make meaningful changes sooner. Your prototype should only be pretty enough to promote accurate use. Playtesters can't test games they can't understand, but every moment that you spend making it prettier than it needs to be is effort you should be spending somewhere else at this stage.

Say you have two pieces — one tank and one cavalry unit. You might represent these with a small toy tank and a chess knight, or a pair of cards with the first images of a tank and horse you find online, or even a pair of chits that say "tank" and "cavalry." This is all fine for testing. Expect to throw away your first several prototypes in their entirety as your game evolves. If you use images from the web, it doesn't matter that they won't be your final images, nor that you don't own the rights to publish these images You aren't publishing them, just using them to test.

If you try to represent your tank and cavalry with different colored blocks or scraps of paper, it's easy to get confused as to which is which and lose track of what's going on in your game, which can hurt the utility of your test. At the other end of the spectrum, there is also a cost to making your prototype too pretty. You will be asking your playtesters to tell you what's wrong with your game, what you might change, and what you can take out. If you have a polished prototype that you have clearly put a lot of time and money into, people become hesitant to tell you bad things about that part of your game. (And worse, you become hesitant to hear it.) You want honest feedback, so put just enough work into the prototype to test your game, and then rebuild things as you go.

Your first prototypes won't have fully written rulebooks. Indeed, at this stage the rules may still have large holes in them. Write out enough of the rules to prevent you from forgetting any (which is especially easy among related prototypes where many rules bounce back and forth among several similar options), then test your game and record any changes you make. As your rules solidify, add player aids and the kind of art, icons, and game components that will help teach your rules. (Don't commission or pay for art at this stage. You're still using googled images to create private works.)

Plan a few playtest sessions just to test your rulebook. Get people who have never played your game to read your rules and teach you how to play. You'll learn a great deal about where your rules are unclear or you've made assumptions.

Blind Playtesting Prototype

This is a prototype you can hand off to external playtesters to get feedback even if you are not there to teach them how to play. The components — including the player aids and rules — should be as close to finished as you can get without spending very much time and money.

One upside of blind playtesting is that you can send out a large number of playtest copies to different groups, since you don't have to be present

yourself. Depending on what bits your game needs, you may be able to enlist blind testing group who're willing to print and assemble a copy of your game from PDFs. Other playtest groups will want to be able to open a box and have everything ready for them. Know what the testing group you are working with needs and give it to them.

Include version numbers and contact information on blind prototypes so players can get you useful data. Include enough printed feedback forms for multiple tests.

Once you have collected several waves of blind playtest feedback and feel like your game is done, either because you don't think it needs more changes or because you find yourself making only very minor polishes per iteration, you are ready to proceed.

Pitch Prototype

This is the prototype you'll use to pitch your game to publishers. This looks very much like your blind playtest prototype. It should have everything you need to play, including rules that teach the game, even if you think you'll be meeting companies in person. If you plan to self-publish this is a prototype you can send to a factory for quotes. You'll have to do final art and production later, but you should be able to get an initial price quote.

Invest some time in an attractive, durable game box. This prototype may be mailed, bounced around a convention, or passed from office to office. Make sure it can stand up to some abuse and still be identified. Publishers often have stacks of games to review — be more than just another blank box.

Every publisher will have different requirements for the prototypes they review. This will usually include some paperwork they need you to complete. Learn what these requirements are and follow them. Publishers don't want to work with people who can't follow basic directions. Include any paperwork you have to sign — release forms, for example — right on the top of the pile so it's easy to find.

You should have already put your name, email, and phone number on your blind playtesting prototypes — double check your pitch prototype to make sure a publisher can find it.

You *still* don't need finished art or graphic elements. Unless you are trying to sell the art as part of the game, you can still be using sample art. The publisher will have artists and graphic designers they prefer to use if they buy your game. Indeed, in some cases, publishers will want to rework or totally redesign the theme for a game they buy, so any existing art would be wasted.

How to Find Playtesters

Insightful, reliable playtesters are often the difference between a game getting published and remaining a concept. Luckily, there are lots of places you can find playtesters.

- **Your friendly local game store.** This is a wonderful place to find casual playtesters for an early test. Many game stores have a flyer board or a scheduled open game night where you can drop in and test your game. If you want to make board games, your friendly local game store should be somewhere you want to hang out anyway!
- **Online forums.** Look for local game or design forums and see if there are game nights or events you can attend. If not, start some! This is another great way to find casual playtesters.
- **BoardGameGeek.** This is a fantastic site for information about the gaming industry and has a great deal of resources for new designers, including boards where you can find local and blind playtest groups from around the world.
- **Small conventions.** There are a ton of small gaming conventions all over the world. These are a good place to find lots of different groups to test your games. They also tend to be much less expensive to attend than larger gaming conventions, and you are competing with fewer big attractions for attention.
- **Design circles.** Many designers join groups of game designers and playtest each other's games. Your fellow designers can often give you a very different, focused look at your prototype in a way that casual players cannot.

Remember that your playtesters are a valuable asset — thank them, buy them pizza, collect their names to credit them in your rules, then thank them again!

Chapter 11

How To More Than Double Your Game's Sales

As game designers, it is easy to focus on the game — to be so close to the components, the system, and the play that we don't pay much attention to *who is playing*. However, games are played by people, and different people can have very specific wants and needs that affect how they engage with your game. If you are not aware of them, you can (inadvertently, perhaps) create barriers to gamers' enjoyment of your games. The great news is that a relatively minor amount of effort can open up your game to wider audiences. If more people can play your games, more people can buy them and have fun playing them. Everyone wins!

Sometimes people think the tactics for avoiding these barriers — and let's be clear, we're going to talk about gender and race, among other things — is an attack on what they think, how they live, or who they are. You'll think what you think; a book of essays about game design is unlikely to sway anyone's moral compass. I happen to think that inclusion, acceptance, and respect are pretty decent ways to live, and what I'm suggesting in this essay would be worthwhile to me even if it didn't impact my games' commercial success. But even if you think inclusion is a buzzword that masks a nefarious agenda, I'd like to suggest that you could double your game's sales by paying attention to it.

Accommodating the Color-blind

Let's start with something non-controversial.

Color is a basic tool for design, and we use it often to communicate information about ownership, location, and lots of other things.

Color-blindness is a common condition that makes it hard or impossible for some people to differentiate between certain colors. In one form or another, color-blindness impacts roughly 8% of men and 1% of women. Some people

are unable to distinguish colors at all (a very rare form), while most people with the condition can't distinguish certain colors or shades. The most common types are difficulty seeing red and difficulty seeing green (which affects other colors too, making blue and purple hard to distinguish), and a less common type that mostly affects the ability to see yellow. There are other rarer conditions as well.

If we use *only* color to indicate ownership, communicate about location, or do anything else that's important to gameplay, the color-blind have difficulty playing, or in some cases are unable to play at all. Fortunately, it's very easy to backstop color with other techniques that give the color-blind what they need to enjoy games on equal footing.

Avoiding Differentiation by Color

One option is to avoid color entirely, or make it unimportant for play. Chess essentially does this. Most chess sets are white and black — extremes that even the most severely color-blind can tell apart. Furthermore, the rules of chess never reference color. The alternating colors of the board's squares are a useful aid for movement, but their color is never a mechanic (i.e., no rule of chess says, "move to a white space").

Dual Coding

In games that use color mechanically, additional cues can give the color-blind something parallel to perceive. A good example of this is *Ticket to Ride*, a game which is more or less entirely about color matching. Each color in *Ticket to Ride* also has an associated shape icon. White has a plus sign, blue has a water drop, and so on. These icons show up on both the train cards and the board spaces that use each color. Match the shapes and you can play even if all the colors look the same to you.

Graphic design changes are not always enough to backstop color — not everything has printing on it, for example. Sometimes pieces without printing can be better distinguished by shape. If all else fails, a variety of online tools can simulate the way different color palettes appear to people with different types of color-blindness. These let you experiment to find the palette that works the best for the most people.

Do you have to accommodate the color-blind with your production? You don't. It's up to you. A better question, though, is this: why would you want to throw away not only the money of color-blind players, but the money of everyone else they play games with?

If all of these people seem like they're worth a little design thought to include in your game's audience, let's look at some larger pools of players.

Women

Women play games. They represent half the population, and about half of the audience for tabletop games. They also have specific needs, both as women and as people, that designers can either be aware of or ignore. Just as with color-blindness, being aware of how our design choices impact women is a matter of choosing to devote a little energy to thinking about their experience.

The Need to Exist

One of the most basic ways to invite women players to your game is to make sure women are represented *inside* your game — in its fictional world. All games have a story, and all games in some way represent the player within that game world. Whether the players in your game pretend to be rulers of kingdoms, managers of factories, or bean-farmers, your design can help players of all genders exist in that space by reflecting them there.

Apart from what you put in your game's story, even more simple choices like the pronouns you use in rulebook examples expand your game's reach, and at no cost. For example, you can alternate "he" and "she," or use a singular "they," instead of using only masculine pronouns.

Invisibility is Exclusion

A common objection is this one: "My game has nothing to do with gender. Gender doesn't impact the ability to farm beans. I'll avoid this issue by not displaying gender." On one level this is true. The number of things that can be done by only one gender basically rounds to zero. However, failing to address the issue perpetuates the problem. Why? Because culture is male-centric, so to say "gender doesn't exist here" is to say "everything is the default." Since the default is male, women thus don't exist.

Representing women in games is not difficult. Many games have illustrated player boards, or similar spaces where players store their pieces. Presenting different genders on these illustrations lets players choose how they will be represented in the game. *Kill Doctor Lucky* has character cards with men illustrated on one side and women illustrated on the other, so each player has

two options. If you select your art well you can even include characters whose gender is ambiguous, and players can project as they like.

Representation is possible even in simple games with few components. For example, *Love Letter* has only eight card types, all depicting people. It would be easy to show most of these characters as male, but by having a 50/50 gender split, and by making the Guard card female (against the common gender stereotype), the publisher welcomes more women to play with a simple choice that took minimal effort to make and added zero cost to production. *Vast: The Crystal Caverns* does something similar with the art for its Knight character.

The Cheesecake Problem

It is also important to think about *how* women are portrayed in your game. The board game industry — like movies, video games, and other popular entertainment — often falls into a trap of showing women as sex objects.

There is nothing wrong with sex and sexiness for game players of appropriate age, but if that trait is only applied to one gender it communicates a disconnect. It gets worse when the only women in a game world become "items" to be "won" in contests or battle. People want to be "in" the game world, to be an active participant in the play. Being reduced to a prop is not welcoming.

There's a deep and legitimate discussion to be had about whether it's best to equalize representations (if you want sexy woman barbarians, then add sexy male barbarians, too) or take even more active steps. That discussion is as far beyond our scope in this book as the intricacies of tax accounting in each nation of the European Union are. If it's a subject that interests you, read about it and get involved. If it's not, make informed choices based on what real women tell you. For a little design effort and negligible production cost, you can expand your audience and sell more games.

Race

The world has a big mix of people from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Lots of them play (and buy) games, and it is in your best interest as a designer to include them in your game world. As with gender, a small amount of work to think about how people from different backgrounds are (or are not) invited to play expands your audience.

Invisibility is Exclusion

I sometimes hear, "My game isn't about race." Indeed, your game might not even be about *people*, but just as gender defaults to "man," race often defaults to "white," at least in North America and most of Europe. Because of that, not including options for other races and backgrounds makes them invisible and does nothing to invite them to play your game. As with gender, varied imagery is your key tool to provide balance.

Past componentry, do your examples refer to "Player 1" and "Player 2?" That's not very engaging. But if you call everyone Jim and Dan, you perpetuate invisibility. Call a player in an example Sarah and you include women. Call them Jamal or Amrita and you help open your game up to non-whites. You teach the same information, in the same way, with the same cost, and include more people.

This Isn't a Checklist

Once you start thinking more inclusively it's easy to inadvertently treat race like a bingo card to fill in: "OK, I've got a black guy, and a Mexican, and an Asian. Bingo, I'm good." This process ultimately falls down because there are so many different types of people. Your representations should ultimately send the message that no one is being excluded, not that everyone is (literally) included.

Race as Profession

Race can be a trait without being the defining characteristic of a character. That is, it's not welcoming for your game to have a nerd, a jock, a rock star, and a black guy. If race is just one of many traits each character has, you can get much more value out of your limited design space.

In the same way, you can represent race without resorting to the shorthand of stereotypes. In the same way that it doesn't "include" women to depict busty half-naked sex objects, it doesn't "include" black people to add a faction of inner-city gangbangers. If your whole game is about street gangs, then a black character is fine. If your game is about city building and the only black character is also the only gang member, not great.

Even More Diverse Diversity

Inclusion is a practice and mindset that isn't limited to gender and race. (Or the ability to see color.) Does your game inadvertently exclude queer players?

Players who are hard of hearing? Players who have a hard time reading lots of small text? Transgender players?

Because people contain multitudes, there are almost countless ways to include more people, even if for no other reason than the selfish desire to expand the universe of people who might want to buy your game. If your game excludes some group of people, at the very least, ask yourself … *why?* And then, "Is there anything I can do to change that?"

Haters Gonna Hate

Yes, there are people who argue that games are not the place to have these conversations. That the status quo is fine, that they are being "pushed out," that offering the option to play a non-white or non-male invalidates their experience or takes away from their ability to play the game.

Those people might even boycott *The White Box*. Angry Internet trolls probably have already used the phrase, "takes away from the focus on game design."

I'm happy to see those people — and the tiny fraction of the population they represent — go away so we can more effectively welcome women (nearly half the population) and non-whites (collectively *way more* than half the population). To the offended I say, take your ball and go home. We are choosing to play on a bigger, better field, without you.

Chapter 12

Self-Publishing

Where Do You Get Your Game Printed?

You've designed your game, tested it, and finalized what you want in the box — now how do you get that box manufactured on put it in the hands of gamers? Let's look at how you find a printer, where you should have your game produced (and why), and the other steps needed to take your game from an idea in your mind to a box on the table.

The questions you need to ask yourself before you can choose where to print your game are:

- How complicated are the components?
- How large a print run do I need?
- How time-sensitive is the production?

How Complicated Are The Components?

Unless your game has very simple, very generic components, you'll do best to work with a printer or manufacturer that specializes in producing games. While many commercial printers around the world can produce books, boxes, packaging, posters, postcards, and business cards, the needs of your board or card game will almost certainly diverge enough from the capabilities of a non-game printer that even if they swear up and down that they can print what you need, you'll save yourself headaches by finding a production partner who already knows what it takes to produce games. The good news is that there are plenty of factories that fit the bill.

Within the universe of board and card game components, components vary in complexity. Let's break game bits down into three categories.

Simple

- Playing cards
- Most game boards
- Rulebooks
- Reference sheets
- Standard dice (even polyhedrals, as long as they don't have custom symbols or non-standard result spreads)
- Stock (non-customized) cubes, disks, and meeples (any of the non-token components in *The White Box* would fit this category)
- Setup (telescoping, two-part) boxes and tuckboxes (one-piece, fold-up boxes)
- Cardstock trays for holding components

Complex

- Punchboard tokens
- Custom dice
- Custom plastic components with relatively simple molds
- Anything made out of odd materials (i.e., anything other than cardboard, paper, or wood — e.g., cloth strips, stone tiles)
- Vacuum trays (molded plastic) for holding components
- Unusual boxes and packaging (e.g., tins, cloth sacks, cardboard boxes that aren't rectangular)

Very Complex

- Anything requiring random collation (e.g., random booster packs)
- Custom plastic (or metal) components with complex shapes (e.g., miniature figures)

As your component list becomes more and more specific, you'll need to create a document called a "request for quote," or "RFQ." It describes each component of your game in detail, specifying things like quantities, dimensions, paper stocks, finishing, and assembly. It also lists a few of the total quantities you're thinking about producing — three options is typical — so you can get a sense of how the price per unit changes as the overall print run increases or decreases. Ideally, you'll also request quotes for shipping the finished games to wherever you're intending to warehouse them. (Although you'd also be wise to quote shipping with a few shipping brokers independent of your printer, just

to make sure you're getting a good deal, but that can wait until you've actually chosen a printer from among your variety of quotes.)

You'll send your RFQ by email to the factories you identify as possible matches for your game. The more accurate your RFQ, the more you'll be able to rely on the printing quotes that factories return to you. As it does elsewhere in life, the garbage-in/garbage-out rule applies here, too.

How does your component roster impact where you print? The more complex your components, the more narrow your printing options. Even factories willing to quote your complex or very complex components will be (quietly) outsourcing their production to subcontractors, which drives up your price. Your process of requesting and receiving quotes is iterative. That is, you'll usually go back and revisit your design and component list once you find out how much it all costs to make. This is a normal part of the process — most games will have several revisions based on increasingly sober evaluations of production costs. If your game relies on complex bits, that's fine, but are they bits that make the game more valuable? If your simple card game needs a token to pass between the players, you might want a custom-molded figure for that token. That would be awesome, but will the ultimate purchaser really want to pay the extra $15 of retail price required for that figure's sculpting, molding, and production? Could you use a thick cardboard token instead of a figure? Is that trade-off a good deal? The only way to find out is to get quotes and iterate.

How Large a Print Run Do I Need?

In general, the more copies you print at once, the less you will pay per copy. However, larger print runs cost more in absolute dollars, and leave you at a much higher risk of having product lying around that you'll have to warehouse until you can sell it. (And what if you're *never* able to sell it?)

A good thing to remember is that you can always print more later but you can't go back and print less. In addition, smaller print runs give you an opportunity to get feedback on the game, packaging, and components that you may be able to use to make changes to future print runs.

Let's think about print runs in three bands:

- Micro: fewer than 100 copies
- Small: 1,000–2,000 copies
- Standard: 3,000–5,000 copies

- Large: 5,000+ copies

You've probably already noticed the hole between 100 copies and 1,000 copies. That's a rough place to be. Micro print runs are the domain of print-on-demand (POD) outfits, and when printing in those quantities, your cost per unit will be a relatively high proportion of your game's retail cost. Non-POD commercial printers will often be unwilling to produce a run of less than 1,000 units because it just doesn't make financial sense on their machinery. If you're thinking that you might like to print 500 units, you're probably going to be looking at POD vendors, and at those places, your cost per unit at 100 copies or 500 copies will be about the same … in which case, you might as well only be out of pocket for 100. You can always buy your second 100 next week, if you sell out of your first 100.

This suggests the most sensible focus for a new publisher: selling through print runs early, and often. It feels great to sell out, it keeps your cash free for new investments, and it gives you the opportunity to make changes as you get a better feel for the market.

This isn't to say that there's no peril in short print runs. Sometimes you'll sell a large lump of games early, and discover that re-orders are much slower. If you print 2,000 copies, sell them all in three months, but then discover that you only have ongoing demand for 12–24 copies a month, you're in a situation where printing another 2,000 copies will give you an eight- to ten-year supply, which is way more than you'll want to warehouse for that long. You might be able to print fewer the second time around, but some factories have minimums that might prevent you from going lower. It's also not uncommon for a hot game that sells out quickly to lose the marketplace's attention during the months-long process of reprinting. All that said, unless you're sitting on a trust fund, it's much better to have too few games than way too many.

Crowdfunding presents a boon to new publishers in that a successful campaign is a great source of information about the marketplace's interest in a new game. Did your campaign have 500 backers? It's obviously safe to print 500, and probably some more on top of that. Only a few dozen? Probably don't print 2,000 units, in that case.

If you plan to sell your game yourself, in person at conventions (which is more work than you think), stick to small print runs. As a new publisher, you simply will not sell 1,000 copies of anything at even a year's worth of conventions, even large ones like Gen Con and Essen.

If your goal is to get into distribution and you do not already have those relationships in place, stick to micro print runs that you'll use as proof-of-concept sales tools. Sell out, get feedback, build relationships, and use those assets to build up to larger print runs that you might eventually convince distributors to represent.

Absolutely do not do large print runs intending to get into mass-market retail (e.g., Target, Walmart). Building the relationships that get you into those chains is complicated, and if they do want your games, they will often require custom packaging and content modifications that will necessitate a reprint anyway. The best way into these chains is to develop a track record and sales figures in the hobby market first.

So how does this impact your choice of printer? Simple: the smaller your print run, the closer you want to be to the printer.

For micro print runs, you need a print-on-demand service, almost certainly one that's in the same country you are. The big downside of print-on-demand is that the unit price can be quite high. You won't make as much money selling them yourself and probably won't be able to sell them to distributors without losing money on each sale (given the traditional discount to distribution of 50–60% off the retail price).

What if your game uses complicated components (such as custom plastic figures), but you want a micro or small print run? In this case, the sad truth is that you should likely not print that game in that quantity at all. Games with custom-molded figures, custom dice, and other complex pieces have large upfront costs. Sometimes you can get creative and make it work — could you make custom dice by putting inexpensive stickers on all six faces of a stock, blank six-sider? — but other times you're simply trying to push a boulder up a cliff face and the better plan is to find an existing publisher to work with, work on another design first, or get rich in the financial services business first and spend your ill-gotten gains buying $10,000 molds and then only producing a few dozen figures with each one.

How Time-Sensitive is the Production?

First things first: take a deep breath and let that "Gimme my game now!" desire leave your body. Publishers are often especially in a hurry to have product for a particular event — Gen Con, say. The fact of the matter is that there are very few things you can do to get your game produced faster, and nearly all

of them are bad ideas. The best way to understand why is to learn about all of the steps that are necessary to produce a game. Nearly all of these steps are necessary for both domestic and international printing; exceptions will be noted.

The process below describes working with a traditional factory to produce print runs in the small to large categories described above. If you're doing micro print runs with a print-on-demand partner, the timelines are much, much shorter, but can vary substantially from vendor to vendor. Most print-on-demand printers have accurate and explicit timelines on their websites; you can generally refer to those with confidence.

Identify factories (days to months). You do legwork to identify factories that might be able to produce your game. You can start with our list at the end of this chapter, but vendors change all the time and it may be hopelessly out of date by the time you read this. You'll get good leads from other publishers, from forums where publishers gather, from panels at conventions where publishing is discussed, and even from web searches.

Request quotes (days to weeks). Here, you'll email your RFQ document (or perhaps submit it by web form) to the factories that seem like a good match.

Factories produce and send quotes (1–4 weeks). The first quotes you receive may be close, or may be way off the mark. This is a good way to find out if your ideas are workable, who you want to work with to print your game, and if there are any design changes you can make to lower unit cost. You may wind up repeating the request quote / receive quote steps a half-dozen times as you narrow down on your final configuration and get a sense of which factory you like best. When you're ready to move ahead with a particular quote, the factory will usually ask you to choose a size for your print run, sign off in writing on the costs, and send a down payment in the neighborhood of 30–50% of the final bill.

Send files (1–2 weeks). If your production files are ready to go already, getting the files to the factory by email, FTP, or some proprietary tool will be a relatively simple matter. Your factory may have specific requirements that necessitate retooling your files to a greater or lesser extent. A good factory will be able to provide detailed specifications about color profiles, file requirements, and so forth. (If they can't, reconsider!) Be prepared to resubmit files if you learn that something's gone wrong. It's much better to make corrections at this stage than later down the line.

Prepress (4–6 weeks). At this point, the factory prepares your files for print production. First, they'll provide "soft proofs," which are computer files — usually jpegs or PDFs — that show, on screen, what they think your files will broadly look like. This is your chance to make sure they didn't get a font

wrong, miss an image, blow a color, or drastically misunderstand something. Review the soft proof carefully, even if you're dreadfully sick of looking at the files for your game. Failing to do so is one of the things that goes wrong when publishers are in a hurry, and leads to tragic mistakes. After soft proofs, the factory will send "hard proofs." These are printed files that are (usually — ask if you're not sure) color accurate, and printed on the same, or very similar, stock to the final product. Sometimes these files will be trimmed and/or assembled to final form (e.g., cards will be cut to size and their corners rounded, and boxes assembled). Review these carefully, again. The printer may want you to sign the proofs as evidence that you reviewed them. When you sign hard proofs, you're agreeing that if what they produce is identical to what's on the proof, that you'll pay for it. If there are errors, they'll be on you. This is another step that rushing publishers often do poorly, again, with tragic results. If you request changes after reviewing either the soft or hard proofs, expect to add additional weeks to this step. (The solution is to provide solid files in the first place, not to review carelessly, or let errors slide.)

White box sample (2–4 weeks). A white box sample shows you how the physical components will be provided and assembled but with no printing. For many factories this may be a sample from existing stock, such as cards they have printed for another game to show you the type of cardstock and finish they would use. They'll build and send a prototype of your box, a deck of blank cards, a properly sized board, all of the cubes you've specified, or whatever else your game needs. This is your chance to check all of those details. As with the hard proof, you may be asked to physically sign off on the copy. This step may run concurrently with prepress, depending on how the factory works. Some factories send printed samples, rather than white samples. It doesn't matter very much as long as you see a sample of every single thing before production begins so you can verify every printed component, every material sample, every cut size, and so on.

Mold-making and prototyping (4–8 weeks). If your game includes any custom plastic pieces, the factory will take your computer files or physical sculpts and create a mold. They may send you physical samples before, during, and/or after the mold-making process. Again, you'll need to sign off on these, or request changes. Making changes will add weeks to this process. As with white box prototyping, this process usually runs concurrently with prepress.

Production (4–6 weeks). The factory makes your game. This may involve more proofing loops, with more finished components. Those extra steps add

time, but are almost always worth it to avoid errors. Once the factory is done (before they ship), they'll want the balance of your payment.

Materials testing (1–2 weeks). Depending on what's inside your game, what ages it's appropriate for, and where you intend to sell it, you may want — or be required — to test its materials to ensure that they comply with the law. For example, there are restrictions on what chemicals are allowed in plastics and inks, what component shapes constitute choking hazards, and so forth. Testing is carried out by third-party laboratories. Your factory is likely to have one or more such relationships, and can facilitate this testing. You'll pay for it, of course, and this will be a charge that probably didn't appear on your quote.

Shipping (2 days–3 months). The time it takes to ship your games from the factory to your warehouse or fulfillment partner(s) will vary wildly (as you can see from the time range) depending on how far they are from you. Games printed on another continent must generally be shipped by boat to a port in your country, which usually takes three to six weeks. However, those games must also be shipped to the port in their country of origin, and from the port in your country to your warehouse or fulfillment partner(s). These legs, usually using truck or rail, also add time. Domestic shipping is much faster; it may take as little as 24 hours (but a week is more likely) for your games to be trucked from the printer to wherever it is that you want to send them.

For international print jobs, you can air-ship your game instead of shipping by boat, but this is much, *much* more expensive — so much so, that it wipes out the cost benefit of printing overseas at all. If you are in that much of a hurry you should not be printing overseas in the first place. (One balance that some publishers strike, in order to have some small quantity of units on hand for a major event, is to air-ship only the units needed for the show. This is still wildly expensive per unit, but keeps the overall cost down, and can help build word of mouth for a new game by exposing it to alpha gamers in advance of the main shipment's arrival in your country.)

Customs (1–3 weeks). If your game was printed in a foreign country, it will wait for a time to be processed — and perhaps inspected — by customs in your home country. Don't forget to account for this time. There is almost no way to speed this up.



As you can see, all this means that, even optimistically, it can take over a year to go from "I want this" to "I have this." Yes, it can take less time under ideal conditions, but you should plan for a timeline like this, just in case. Note also when payment is due. Even if you sell your games the moment they are in your hands, you'll still need to make a substantial down payment many months before that (and pay the balance in between), so that money is tied up for quite a while. If you are making games as a business, this can be an expensive delay. This is why many companies make lots of games. The money they are collecting for one game can fund the printing of the next, evening out their cash flow.

While you are working with printers, you may stumble across people who are willing to do some of the work for you. They are called agents and they work as middlemen between you and the printers. They have existing relationships with printers, shippers, and other parties, and, for a fee, they will do this work for you. Agents are uncommon in the hobby game industry, and if you are making games in the hopes of making money, it's wise to learn the skills you need to work directly with these crucial vendors.

However, if money isn't a huge factor for you, there are "super agents" — people who take care of not just working with printers, but also handle shipping, marketing, distribution, and sales in exchange for most of the money. You get a much smaller check, but don't do any of the non-design work. These super agents are called … publishers! If this sounds like a good deal to you, stop trying to self-publish at all and stick to pitching your games to publishers. Let them do this work and you can start making your next game instead!

Printers and Factories

While the market always changes, with new printers arising, old printers going out of business, and once-reliable printers sinking into disreputability, here are some printers where you can start your legwork:

Print on Demand

- DriveThruCards — drivethrucards.com
- The Game Crafter — thegamecrafter.com
- Print & Play — printplaygames.com

USA

- Cartamundi USA — cartamundiusa.com
- DeLano Service — delanoservice.com

Europe

- Cartamundi — cartamundi.com
- Ludo Fact — ludofact.de

Asia and Hybrid (Asia + Elsewhere)

- Ad Magic — admagic.com
- Grand Prix International — grandprixintl.com
- LongPack — longpackgames.com
- Panda Game Manufacturing — pandagm.com

Chapter 13

The (Semi-)Magical New Age of Crowdfunding

Once upon a time the prospects for a new game designer to get their designs into print were bleak. They could go, game in hand, to publishers, or they could invest their own hard-earned money, often going into debt, to fund the production of their games.

But no more! In this enlightened age of the 21st century a bright new way has appeared: crowdfunding! A magic tool for getting your game into the world and bringing you the fame and fortune you deserve.

Well, sorta.

The idea behind crowdfunding is for a creator (in our case, a game designer) to show the public the core of their idea. If people like the idea, they front the funds, basically buying a product that doesn't exist yet with the expectation of receiving it when it does. With that money in hand, creators can make more and different types of work than would be possible otherwise.

While there are many crowdfunding platforms, there are two basic models.

- **Take what you can get.** This model lets you set up a campaign, raise funds toward your project, and then collect however much was pledged. If you set a goal and don't reach it, you still get whatever was collected. Say you set your goal at $30,000. If you raise $15,000 in pledges, that's how much you get (minus their fees, of course). Indiegogo is currently the most prominent platform for this kind of funding.
- **All-or-nothing.** This model lets you set up a campaign and raise funds in the same way, but if you fail to meet or exceed your goal you get nothing. For example, if you set a goal of $30,000 and only manage to secure $15,000 in pledges, you get nothing. Kickstarter is currently the most prominent platform for this kind of funding, and has such a dominant position that its brand is often synonymous with the general idea of crowdfunding.

Which Model is Right for You?

The crowdfunding model you choose should be based on your finances and needs. The "take what you can get" model looks enticing. At least you get something, right? However, in the case of board games something is often worse than nothing. If you have set your goals correctly, you are asking for the amount of money you need to make your game. If you only get $15,000 of the $30,000 you need, not only do you not have enough to make your game, now you have a community of paying backers expecting you to deliver a product you don't have the money to make. Some creative projects that underfund can be modified, but it is hard to make half a game.

Falling short may be fine if you are willing and able to cover the difference to ensure the game is produced. But if you have the funds yourself and are willing to use them (without mortgaging your house), consider simply publishing the game traditionally. The process of crowdfunding takes a lot of effort and attention, all of which is energy you could be spending actually making your game.

The "all or nothing" model avoids the underfunding problem. Either you get the money you need to make your game or you don't, but if you don't, you avoid the problem of having eager backers waiting for a game you can't afford to make. There's also the benefit that if you don't fund it might be valuable intelligence about whether the market for your game is as strong as you think. Better to retool and try again instead of spending a lot of money making a game you can't find buyers for.

As of this writing, Kickstarter is orders of magnitude larger than any other crowdfunding platform. There is value in swimming in the ocean people are already throwing their coin into. The rest of this chapter is written assuming you are using Kickstarter.

Do Your Homework

There are a lot of websites, seminars, panels, books, and other sources of information on how to run a successful crowdfunding campaign. Review as many of them as you can lay eyes on. Crowdfunding is a specialized skill, and a campaign can be a full-time job while it's active.

Here, we discuss crowdfunding board games, but you can learn a lot by looking at prior campaigns — successful and unsuccessful alike — for everything from dance performances to the renovations of historic buildings.

Should You Crowdfund At All?

It is easy to get starry-eyed seeing games fund for 200%, 500%, or more of what they asked for and feel like crowdfunding must be the greatest gravy train ever. Not so fast. Let's look at the upsides and downsides of Kickstarter and its cousins.

Advantages of Crowdfunding

Flexibility and Creative Control

Perhaps the most valuable effect of crowdfunding for a designer is the freedom that comes with financial independence from a company or investor. Unlike working with a publisher, who might want to modify your game, you have the creative control to do as you like, releasing your game exactly as you envision it.

Allows for Nicer Bits

The traditional distribution model makes games which are sold to distributors, who sell to retailers, who sell to the public, and each part of that chain demands its own share of the profit. With crowdfunding, you can give away as much profit as you want. If you're more interested in seeing your game come out the way you want than in making a profit, crowdfunding lets you invest in nicer game components and higher production values for the same consumer price than would be possible with other production models — since distributors and retailers aren't likely to let you give away *their* share of the profit on your game!

Customer Buy-in

One of the first concerns you should have when you self-publish is, "How am I going to sell all these games?" Crowdfunding is great because you can pre-sell most of your print run and know that those games will be going to actual players, instead of onto pallets in your garage.

Crowdfunding Raises Money

This is the biggest (and most obvious) benefit. Most of us don't have $30,000 laying about to make our games! The coin of the realm is, well, coin, and crowdfunding gives you access to the money you need to manufacture your game.

Disadvantages of Crowdfunding

Having sung the praises of crowdfunding we should look at the dark corners, the places where the coin of crowdfunding turns into poison. Done wrong, crowdfunding can be worse than not making a game at all.

Money Isn't Everything

Money is great. The problem is that when a successful campaign is over, you have money and obligations… and that's all. Crowdfunding won't supply the graphic design or layout skills to make your rulebook player-friendly. It won't supply artists for the game art or box. It won't supply playtesting feedback and design polish to put the final touches on your game design.

Yes, money can buy many of these things, but buying things also takes time and effort, and if you're new to this, you might not even know what skills you need to buy. Going with a publisher gives you a pool of dedicated professionals who already have contacts with artists, printers, editors, and other people who are critical for getting a game ready for production. Knowing you need art is one thing, and having money to pay for it is nice, but finding the right artist for your project is just one example of a critical step crowdfunding can't help with.

Crowdfunding Doesn't Tell You if Your Game Isn't Ready

One useful feature of the traditional publishing model is the feedback you get. If lots of publishers, including the ones who make games like yours, all say that your game doesn't have a market, that is useful information. Customers on a crowdfunding platform may read your rules, or try a print-and-play version, but they are often bad sources of information about whether your game needs more polish, or even more drastic changes, before being ready for prime time. Once you print your game it is pretty well set in stone. If you only get to "Eh, that was OK," then that's as good as your game gets.

Crowdfunding Requires More Up Front Work

To successfully crowdfund, you need to do a great deal of work up front — you need to show a *game*, not an idea. Not only does the design need to be largely finished before you start, you need something to show people. You need a rulebook (probably already laid out and edited), you need at least some concept art, you need images for banners, you need one (or maybe several) videos to show off your game and to communicate your crowdfunding plan.

You can fold those costs into the crowdfunding goal, but this is a cashflow issue, not a profit-and-loss question: you won't have that money when you need to pay those costs. You'll need to use your own funds to pay up front for many

of these services, and that's money you'll never recover if the project doesn't fund. Don't mortgage your house to raise money you can't afford not to get back.

The Bonus Pothole of Taxes

It's easy to think of crowdfunding as "bypassing publishers," but in many ways you should instead think of it as "becoming the publisher," with all the headaches that entails. You are a game designer, but once you self-publish you are also a business. The choice about whether and how to best incorporate is beyond the scope of this work, but one often-unexpected hurdle is that you are on the hook for the tax burden of your campaign's revenues and profits. You may want to hire a professional accountant who has experience with crowdfunding projects to help with your budgeting. Failing to pay your taxes correctly can be very easy and very expensive.

Shipping Hassles and Expenses

It's not enough to make your game, you also have to get it to your backers. It's easy to overlook and very expensive to screw up shipping. Shipping costs add up, particularly for large games, heavy games, oddly shaped games, and games with lots of add-ons. This cost is such a large part of the overall campaign expense that you might even make production changes based on it. If your box fits into an existing priority mail shipping box, for example, that alone may drastically reduce your expenses. You should also think about shipping when planning stretch goals and add-ons. Anything you have to ship along with your game is an extra logistical hassle, and anything you have to ship separately from your game is a *huge* cost and hassle (and thus almost certainly a bad idea).

Note also that the magnitude of international shipping charges tend to surprise people. Estimate the weight for your game by building a same-weight prototype from parts on your shelf, then look up the cost to ship it to a variety of global destinations on different continents. A cottage industry of third-party re-shippers in various countries is springing up to help creators deal with these tasks and reduce these expenses, but they bring their own hassles, raise new ones, and can't eliminate all of your work (e.g., paying taxes).

So You Want to Crowdfund

Not scared off yet? OK, let's look at what's necessary to get your game ready for a crowdfunding campaign and then run the campaign itself. We'll

cover things in the broad order you're likely to want to tackle them, but these are guidelines, not prescriptions.

Three to Six Months (or More) Before the Campaign

"Finish" Designing and Playtesting Your Game

People buy games, not ideas, so your first job is to make sure you have the former and not the latter. You want to be largely finished with the design of your game before you start up a crowdfunding campaign. You should have quite a few playtest sessions — including lots of blind tests — behind you and be largely happy with the overall structure of your game. There is nothing wrong with making changes during the campaign, and soliciting backer feedback is a great way to get people invested in your project, but backers should be able to see the meat of your game when they're considering a pledge, and should get what you promised if they sign on.

Finishing your game is harder than it sounds, and that's why it's in scare quotes in the header. Da Vinci once said, "Art is never finished, only abandoned," and the same is true of games. I know few designers who don't look at their boxes on the shelf and have something they want to change. If you are still making big changes after each playtest, keep testing. When your changes address polish rather than substance, you might be ready for a crowdfunding campaign.

Collect Playtester Contact Info

Use your playtest sessions to build your core base of possible backers by asking testers — as you collect their names for the credits — whether they would like to be contacted when you start your campaign. Playtesters who have played and like your game will help build word of mouth and momentum early in your campaign.

Grow Your Social Media (and IRL) Network

Join communities of designers, groups of players, and other congregations of folks who might be interested in your game. Help playtest other people's games, follow other designers and publishers, and actively participate in the larger gaming community. Of utmost importance: be genuine. Get on BoardGameGeek not to sell your game, but to add something of value. Then, when it comes time to mention that you are running a crowdfunding campaign, you'll speak as a member of the community, not as a carpetbagging shill.

Set Up a Notification Harvest Page

Create a web page with (only) a one-paragraph pitch and a single-field form to collect email addresses from anyone who wants to be notified when your campaign launches. This is where you'll point anyone who expresses even the slightest interest in your project. If you're diligent, you'll have a list of dozens or hundreds of people you can point at your campaign the moment it launches to create crucial, early momentum.

Watch Kickstarter

Back projects you like so your first public interactions on Kickstarter aren't you asking for money. Backers will trust you more if you look like (and actually are) a member of their community instead of parasites on something they love. Get experience with the backer's side of the crowdfunding interaction, so you can better speak to your own backers when the time comes.

Track projects like yours, and reach out to their designers so you can learn from those who came before you. In particular, consider reaching out to designers who are running or have run campaigns. They are very busy (as this chapter should show), but may be willing to speak with you about what went well and what went badly. In particular, anyone who didn't fund can be a great source of information. What they'll do next time can become things you do right away.

Fun with Budgets

Start estimating costs and calculating how much you'll need to raise to make your game. This includes not only the cost of printing the game itself, but also art, editing, graphic design, shipping, handling, taxes, and marketing. Your budget should also include the cost of your time. Feel free to write your effort down as zero if you want to, but if you do, as a reality check, there should be a line on your budget that shows how you're subsidizing an effort that would otherwise have to be paid with cash.

Your budget should include the costs for the campaign itself, including video work, art for banners, and the fees taken by Kickstarter and its payment processor.

This is a very complicated step, and will vary significantly from project to project. Go into budgeting expecting to do many iterations of your budget, and to slowly convert wild guesses into researched figures.

Start Planning Pledge Levels and Stretch Goals

You are not locking these in yet, but if you plan out your pledge levels you can design with them in mind — a game component like a first player token might get a nicer piece, or some additional content (extra cards, or tiles, or even enough for a fifth player) might either get added or be available for an additional cost. This could be a bonus just for the crowdfunding customers, but often should be an upgrade to the core game. The backers get the game first, and everyone gets a better product.

One to Three Months Before the Campaign

You Are Who You Know

Start collecting lists of interested parties — podcasts, websites, other designers, anyone who might help you promote your campaign. Reach out to them. Play your game with them. It is hard to overestimate how much you want to have people already interested and willing to buy (and promote) your game *before* your first day of the campaign. You know all those Kickstarters you hear about that fund in an hour? That happens because they did this. It *never* happens without this.

You may want to draw up a press release or information sheet about your game to send out. This is very much like your elevator pitch — don't try to teach the game! Include just enough information to get people going, "Yes, I / my readers / my Twitter followers / whoever would be interested in learning more about this game." The crowdfunding page itself should do the heavy lifting of selling the game, so don't try to also do that here.

Book Artists and Designers, and Videographers

Your need for art will vary based on how you plan your stretch goals and funding milestones. Everywhere you can, repurpose art you already have, or commission promotional art you can use in the actual production. Your game logo should feature prominently.

Don't skimp on video. Nothing sells your game better than showing it off, and it's hard to show it off better than in motion, with you right there in the frame. Consider planning for two videos, one that promotes the Kickstarter and one that shows how to play. You can shoot all of the footage at once, to save time and money. A high-quality how-to-play video is also useful as a promotional tool. Your promotional video will also last long after the campaign is over, so as you edit it, try to use it to market your game generally, not just your campaign.

Choose a Printer, Firm Up Costs, and Double-check the Timeline

At this point you should have a clear idea of your game's components list. If you are still making large changes to your roster, you're probably one to three months away from your campaign. Get quotes from a few factories. Make sure to mention you'll be crowdfunding your game and see if they have the capacity to handle success. What if you find yourself needing twice as many games as you expect? Ten times as many? What will that do to the printing time?

Choose a printer who has made games before, and plan to mention them by name in your crowdfunding campaign. Demonstrating that you have a plan helps show you have the professionalism needed to actually deliver.

Figure Out Shipping

Once you have your game you will still need to get it to your backers, and that is a more involved enterprise than many people expect. You can do it yourself (plan to lose a few rooms of your house to cases of games for a few weeks) or use a shipping service. Make sure to account for any add-ons that need to be shipped with your game. The more of these there are the more complicated shipping will be. Shipping services usually charge the actual cost of shipping, plus a base fee, plus a "pick fee" per item that must be placed into the box (sometimes including the first item, sometimes not).

Do not stop after you figure out the costs of shipping in your country or region and then handwave the costs of shipping further afield. Depending on where you are, your costs will vary quite a bit, and will almost always be higher than you expect, sometimes horrifyingly so. Underestimating shipping is one of the best ways to lose money on your game, because it's a loss that compounds with every single package you send.

A note about taxes, duties, and customs charges: many countries charge a fee on incoming international shipments, and this can massively increase your customers' costs. You (or your shipper) are responsible for labeling your games correctly, usually as merchandise with a value equal to either your game's retail price, or the amount the purchaser actually paid. Some customers are likely to ask you to list the game as a "gift," or mark it with an artificially low value to help them evade this charge. This is illegal — don't do it. Some shipping services offer to handle shipments internationally, particularly in the UK, to evade the VAT. In general, anything that says, "This lets us get away with not paying our taxes" is probably illegal and you should avoid it.

One Month Before Launch

Determine Your Funding Goal

You should already have a budget, with a bit of padding, that tells you how much money you need to raise. Unless you are willing to pay the difference out of pocket, don't set your funding goal at less than you actually need.

Determine Your Pledge Levels

Part of the art of Kickstarter is correctly setting pledge levels and add-on prices, which together, offer backers enough different ways to give you money so that everyone who's interested in your project can contribute exactly as much as they're willing to.

You can think of your Kickstarter as having two phases: before you fund ("Will I get to make my game?") and after you fund ("How can I make my game more amazing?"). On a separate axis, there are two types of rewards: ones that let a single customer get more or better stuff, and universal upgrades that improve the core offering that everyone (or most everyone) gets. You'll consider both when crafting your backer tiers and add-on pricing.

It's wise to start thinking about the basic funding level for people who want a single copy of the physical edition of your game. Set this level close to the retail price you envision, or at a price that's supported by games with similar value and componentry. If you discount from the retail price you envision, don't go deeper than 10–15%.

Ideally, the price you arrive at will be close to one of the amounts that Kickstarter data indicates are the most common, and/or the most revenue-generating, pledges. As of this writing, those levels are $25, $50, and $100. Google can point you to current data as crowdfunding evolves.

Be sure to account for shipping here, decide whether to collect shipping charges through Kickstarter itself or via an after-the-campaign pledge manager, and (most importantly) make plans to *communicate to your backers* how much extra shipping will cost.

Next, work backward to create tiers for people who don't have that much money, for whom shipping is an intolerable expense, or who want to support you but not spend that much. Digital tiers, print-and-play tiers, and supporter tiers are common examples.

After you've done that, sanity check backer scenarios based on those two levels. What happens if your campaign funds with 90% digital backers and 10% physical game backers? Can you still afford the lowest print run your factory has quoted? It can be far worse to fund, and then find out that you don't actually

have the ability to afford your game, than to not fund at all. Mitigate disastrous scenarios as best you can.

Next, work on premium tiers and "angel" tiers. Anything can make a good higher level purchase. The issue is cost to you, both in money and time. Don't underestimate people's willingness to spend lots of money on things they value, given the proper incentives.

Some of these levels can require a great deal of work. An "upgraded game" level with metal tokens might require you to find a whole new vendor and produce a whole new set of production files, effectively doubling your time investment in sending the game to press. Is that worth it if only ten backers come on board at that level?

Some upgrades are much simpler. Some backers will be willing to pay five or ten dollars extra for a copy signed by the designer, which theoretically only costs you a Sharpie and some time. (Although beware! If the shipment is going directly from the factory to a third-party shipper to your backers, you've accidentally created a giant logistical headache.) You might even sell yourself as an extra. With a webcam you can "join in" and teach players how to play, and "play a session with the designer" is an easy extra.

For each level, ask yourself: what does this require me to do? Do I have to ship more things? Produce more things? Account for those costs in terms of both time and money. Be pessimistic. It's wildly better to underpromise and overdeliver than do it the other way around.

If your game isn't finished yet you can work some of the final steps into rewards. Perhaps backers can pay extra to describe one of the characters for your artist to draw, or name territories on the map, or otherwise get "into the game." Don't sell the value of these tiers short. Most people won't want them, but the ones who do might be willing to pay far more for that extra than they do for the game itself!

These levels should almost always be limited. Sometimes these limits are forced; you can only sell five character images in a game with five characters. For others, like "signed by the designer," where you could in theory offer any number, a limit makes them more appealing.

Collectors are often willing to pay quite a bit for things that you might not think of as valuable. Why not have $500 level where a backer gets the factory proof of your game, a one-of-a-kind unique item? Or one of the final playtest versions? If you'll be going to a large convention like Gen Con, why not offer a "play with the designer" session there?

Once you see the fund level roll over the magic number you have the opportunity to do even more work by adding stretch goals to make your game that much more amazing. This is where the power of crowdfunding really shows itself. The basic "my game funded and now I get to make it" level of funding is not that much different from making a game with a publisher, or being a traditional self-publisher, you just collect and spend the money in different ways. However, the stretch goals and extras possible in a crowdfunding campaign really let you take your game in directions that would be impossible if made through traditional means.

The very first thing you should do when you fund is — tell everyone! Tell your existing backers so they know they will get your game, send another email to your media list, plug it on Facebook and Twitter. The moment you fund your game becomes even more appealing to new backers. The "risk" of not getting the game is largely removed, and a large number of people who might not have backed you before will be more willing to do so now.

At this point you may want to add (or increase the quantity of) your pledge levels, but the main new tool you get access to after you fund is stretch goals.

A stretch goal is something that gets added to the game once you reach certain funding levels above and beyond your basic funding goal. The important thing is that these upgrades will apply to all (or some large percentage) of the games you manufacture — including the ones that people have already paid for. This means people who have already pledged become newly energized advocates to spread word-of-mouth and promote your game. If you get more backers, the game they get will be better, at no extra cost to them.

Stretch goal upgrades could be anything that makes your game better — wooden tokens instead of plastic ones, nicer art, custom figures or miniatures. They could also be expanded content for the game — adding enough components for a fifth or sixth player, expanding to larger player boards, or including other similar content.

The important thing is that you *do not* want to make promises that will torpedo your carefully crafted and painstakingly reviewed budget. It's crucial to remember that *stretch goals indicate that you have raised more money overall, but not (necessarily) that you have raised more money per unit.* If your upgrades cause you to hemorrhage money on each game, you can't make it up in volume! That's why you're at least considering these options a month before the campaign — so you can build your budget (or variants on it) while reason has a chance to prevail.

This belies a common dirty little secret — that many "stretch" goals are things crowdfunders expect to include in their games from the very beginning! You don't want to try to sell half a game and add the rest when you fund, but something like "add a fifth player" is exactly the sort of goal you might plan for all along. If you playtested the game and it works with five, and you priced out the game with components for five players, you can start the campaign with the game listed as allowing four players, and "add" the fifth in as a stretch goal. For *The White Box*'s campaign, nearly all of the stretch goal essays (including most of this one) had already been written before the campaign began, and would likely have been included in the package even if we hadn't achieved those funding levels.

There is no correct number of stretch goals. Some advocate the idea that you always want to have one active goal that is "almost there." If you need $15,000 to make your game, perhaps your first stretch goal should be at $17,000, or $17,500, or $20,000. But it probably shouldn't be $50,000. If it feels too far off people aren't as excited to get you there, because the task seems daunting. On the other hand, in the campaign for *The White Box*, pledges came in at about the same rate whether we had an active stretch goal that people thought was achievable or not.

Create and Submit Your Project to Kickstarter

Now that you have all of this planning done, it's time to actually get the campaign loaded. You'll need to write the description, describe the tiers, craft images, upload your video, provide banking details, and so on. Remember to *show* as much as you can in your descriptions and graphics.

Each crowdfunding platform has its own requirements. Follow their directions, and budget a week more than they ask for to account for delays.

One Week Before Launch

Build Excitement

Once you have a confirmed date for your campaign, use that media list you built. Let everyone know about your campaign and when you'll be starting. Encourage them to be among the first to order your game.

Kickstarter allows you to share a preview version of your campaign page privately. Do that as widely as you're comfortable, both to solicit valuable feedback on how you can tweak it, as well as to make the influencers in your circles viscerally aware that you're about to launch, so they can work their networking magic.

Budget Your Time

You should expect to be involved in your campaign full-time for the duration. Plan to post something every day, respond to questions quickly, and never stop promoting. The quickest way to kill a crowdfunding campaign is to give the impression of "going dark" — of not being there to help keep your campaign moving forward.

You don't need to do all this work yourself — if you plan ahead, some of your updates can be from artists talking about their vision for the art, or strategy tips from the playtesters, or other content you can get others to write ahead of time. Some content will need to be created as you go. Most questions from backers will be easy to answer, but others will require carefully thought-out replies.

Launch to Week Two

Mass Information Blast and Call to Action

This is where your media list, network of contacts, and "notify me" list pay off. Reach out with a call to action that says, "You can finally buy my game, follow this link and do it *right now!*"

The best measure of success is early momentum. If you're not at least 25–33% funded in the first two to three days, you may be in trouble. (And even then, you're in for a hard campaign.) Getting to that point in just a few days is only possible if you made the effort to build excitement for your game in advance, so make that a priority, and when in doubt, hold your launch and do more advance work!

Your Backers are Your Allies

Reach out to existing backers as you hit important milestones — half funded, 75%, fully funded, when each stretch goal is added or crossed, etc. Emphasize any additional loot or upgrades they get. Your call to action shifts: you're no longer asking them to back your campaign, now you're requesting that they contact their friends and bring you more backers.

Make sure that each time you contact your backers, you *give* something, rather than only *asking* for something. Show off new art as it gets made, mention that you've gotten a "final" quote from a printer, share an exciting playtest or convention report, or anything to keep them feeling like they are part of the process, not just a bucket of money.

Keep Talking

It was listed above, but this is where you have to do it. Post something and respond to questions every day — don't go dark. You might try to check questions and post every twelve hours or so, to catch buyers overseas and make everyone feel heard.

Week Two to Finish

Follow Your Plan

Post new content, promote your game. Update funding levels and stretch goals as they happen. You can change your tone once you get funded. Instead of, "Here is my plan, I hope to do…," it's now, "We are making this awesome game, get in on this!"

Down to the Wire?

We all hope to fund early and raise way more money than we need, but some campaigns come right down to the wire. If you are close to but have not quite reached your funding goal as your campaign winds to a close, you should be thinking about what you might need to do to push it over the finish line. I once watched a campaign trying to raise $50,000 fail by less than $50. Surely the creator had one more uncle, cousin, or old high school friend they could have prevailed on to help the campaign make it over the finish line!

After the Campaign

What If You Don't Fund?

All that work, all the sweat and pressure, and you don't make it. What do you do if you don't fund? It can be tempting to throw up your hands and give up, but there is a lot of useful information in a campaign that doesn't fund.

The most important thing you can do is to reach out to your backers, thank them for their interest, and let them know you are still committed to your game. Ask them if you can save their information, and maybe you'll be able to come back in a few months and try again — this time with all those backers as a prebuilt contact list.

Alternatively, you might rethink your production model entirely. If you got some interest but not enough to fund production, maybe you should put your game out as a print-and-play, or use a print-on-demand service. You won't make a lot of money this way, but if you just want to get your game into players'

hands this lets you turn even a "failed" crowdfunding campaign into happy players.

What If You Fund, Just Barely?

This is where you hope that you did a good job earlier, and that your budget was correct. With very little wiggle room, any surprises can be very expensive. It will feel like you did a lot of work getting to this point, but the real work of producing your game is now ahead of you.

Bless Us With Such Problems: What if You Super-overfund?

You might be one of the lucky ones who see their crowdfunding campaign bring in more money than you thought possible — but with that extra money comes greater risks. The more money you bring in, the more magnified any mistakes or errors become, and the more expensive they can be to fix. If you have the luxury of extra funds, think strongly about using those funds to hire professionals. Don't scrimp on an accountant, taxes can really bite you at higher funding levels.

Getting the Money

Once your campaign finishes it will take two weeks or so for the funds to be ready. Open a dedicated bank account — *don't* put your crowdfunding money into a personal bank account. Having a separate account for your game will help you keep your bookkeeping straight and ensure you can do things like pay your taxes easily.

Keep Your Backers Informed

If you have been realistic with your campaign your backers should have realistic expectations of when they will get their rewards — but delays happen! The longest delays in a campaign I've personally backed were two years from the time the campaign finished to the time I had the game in my hands (a delay of about 18 months from the promised date). That was frustrating, but less frustrating because the designer was up front about the situation and explained each step of the way what was going on and what was being done to keep the game moving forward. Don't stop communicating.

Push the Print Button

Once you have the money in hand, anything that has been waiting on that money can move forward. Finish your art, complete your layout, send your files to the printer, and get the game made. This always takes longer than you expect,

but things like printer proofs make for great updates to show your backers how things are going.

Send Out Games and Stretch Goals

The biggest logistical nightmare is going from cases of games in a shipping container to individual shipped games. If you are using a delivery service, work with them to make sure everything (including stretch goals and add-ons) goes out correctly. If you are doing shipping yourself, find someone to double-check your work. You won't make anyone happy shipping games to the wrong address.

Print Extras, But Not Too Many

Errors in shipping, damaged games, and all kinds of other issues will require you to print more than exactly the number of games you sold in your crowdfunding campaign. That said, any extra games need to be stored somewhere, and many a designer has found themself with cartons of games overflowing their houses.

A good rule of thumb is to overprint by about 10%, or a bit more if you plan to sell them yourself at conventions, or want copies to give away. It is almost certainly a bad idea to overprint expecting to get the extras into distribution unless you already have a relationship with a distributor lined up. You can always do another print run if someone wants to pick up your game for distribution, but you can't unprint 1,000 games no one wants. Check your factory's policies, but also be aware that many contracts specify that the printer may deliver ±10% of the number of games you order (an "overrun / underrun allowance"). Ordering extras also helps protect you from an underrun that leaves you without enough games to deliver on your obligations.

An Example: *The White Box* Itself

To look into the logic behind a Kickstarter campaign, let's talk about this product — *The White Box*. While it is not a game in the traditional sense, the steps we took to fund it look very much like what you'll be doing as you crowdfund your own game.

The Planning Stages

When I first thought of the idea for *The White Box* it seemed like something that would lend itself well to Kickstarter. Early discussion with fellow designers

showed a lot of enthusiasm for a product like this, and it was easy to expand with more bits and more essays.

I wasn't locked into crowdfunding, partially because I wasn't sure that I wanted to make it myself. I'm very firmly in the "designer" camp (as opposed to the "publisher" camp), where I would rather spend my time designing, testing, and refining games, rather than dealing with art, layout, production, and shipping. I've self-published games and sold games to publishers, so it was certainly possible I would sell this idea off to a publisher and let them deal with the logistics.

That said, from the beginning I've been very passionate about this particular project, so I was more willing to "do it myself" than I might be with a more traditional game product. Once I had a working prototype (which took about a year) I showed *The White Box* to large companies (Mayfair), midsize companies (Alderac), smaller publishers (Kobold Press) — basically anyone I could buy drinks for at the GAMA Trade Show in Las Vegas. (Pro tip: you can easily buy a lot of people drinks in Las Vegas). In each case I was interested in seeing if they wanted to publish the product, but I was also looking to learn more about what the product should do. The essay list and layout evolved as different people gave me ideas for content to include, or suggested different ways of presenting information. I pitched *The White Box* for almost two years before finding a publisher.

During this time I showed off the idea at local game conventions like GameStorm (in Portland, Oregon) and got feedback from new designers. Watching real people read my essays and use my bits to develop game ideas was very satisfying, and several of these testers suggested ideas that were added to *The White Box Essays*. I had started out thinking I was writing a few pages that would comprise a pamphlet. It gradually grew into the book you now hold, and playtesters helped immeasurably.

I also invested some of my own money in things that would be foolish if I did sell the game to a publisher — editing, layout, and art that the publisher might not use. Since I was planning on Kickstarting it myself I decided it was worth it, but I realized that if I sold it to a publisher that might be money I was just not going to recoup. (This turned out to be true. I paid for a UPC code and box art when I was certain I was going to do this myself. Both got scrapped when Gameplaywright wanted to use a different cover that better matched their existing brand, and of course, their own barcode. Oh well, the old art looks nice on my wall.)

The logistics of running a Kickstarter and getting a product made are a great deal of work and I very much wanted to share that work with other skilled, passionate designers. After four or five meeting with the wonderful team at Gameplaywright it was clear to me that they were the people I wanted to work with. I hadn't worked with them before, but they saw the need and use for a product like this, and some of their other products (like *Hamlet's Hit Points*) are already quite useful for people making games. In a way they were an even better fit as a publisher than a more traditional game publisher might have been because of their experience with books, and *The White Box Essays*, especially, are more book than game.

The team there agreed that Kickstarter was an ideal way to get the product into the world, since it let us expand the contents and create the best overall product. It also solved the issue of capital for Gameplaywright. Their previous titles are digital and print-on-demand books. Even though these sell steadily, these kinds of projects do not create the kind of war chest of cash that allows for an up front payment to a printer for thousands of physical boxes full of components. Finally — but far from inconsequentially — Kickstarter also let me exploit my contacts with other designers to promote *The White Box*.

We originally shot to crowdfund in 2015. Naturally, there were delays. Some were related to bandwidth. Gameplaywright is a side business for its principals, so their other work often came first. Rounds of manufacturing quotes and budgeting also took time, as we refined the component list not only to make the box more affordable generally, but more attractive in retail stores. This process involved creating visual mock-ups of the box and components, and polling retailers about the best retail price for such a thing — which, after all, had no existing comparable product to which its price could be pegged.

The Gameplaywright team's biggest fear was marginal success. They've had great success with digital books, and worried about what would happen if the campaign funded, but with a mix of backers that skewed heavily away from physical editions and toward PDF readers. After all, aren't all of the contents of *The White Box* other than the book essentially already available elsewhere? Such a success would necessitate a physical print run, but create lots of excess inventory that they didn't have a warehouse for.

Expanding the team to include Atlas Games was the solution, giving us better infrastructure to print more games, warehouse them, get them into distribution, and leverage their relationships with distributors and retailers. More work I didn't have to do! Of course, this also required a re-write of the contract, which, of course, meant more delays.

Working with professional partners made the planning stages easier. I got some early quotes from factories, but Gameplaywright and Atlas Games had more contacts with more factories, and did a great job finding ways to add more useful components at a lower cost than I could have found on my own.

As others worked on all of that, I gathered a collection of contacts who might help me promote the Kickstarter, including designers, publishers, and other people I have worked with. I also collected the names and emails of people who playtested *The White Box* at conventions — people who read over the essays, looked over the bits, and talked about how they would use them to make games.

Eventually, we got to the point of nailing down the pledge levels. Having decided on a $30 retail price, that became the core tier. A tier with a digital copy of *The White Box Essays* was set at $8, to match the digital pricing on all of Gameplaywright's comparable ebooks. Two "plus" tiers were crafted to include, respectively, physical and digital editions of the two of those books most interesting to game designers. Finally, a retail tier was added to entice stores to back the project, given that Atlas Games would give us a way to continually provide the traditional channel with copies for years to come.

When the campaign launched, any pessimistic projections were quickly demolished. The campaign funded in about 12 hours, and had tripled its goal in about three days. We mostly stuck to the plan, doing interviews, writing updates, and answering messages and comments as quickly as possible.

The biggest challenges were the frequent requests that we lower our shipping and handling charges. These had been set such that campaign was actually subsidizing — by a small amount — shipping outside the United States. We made some headway on this, but in many cases, being able to reduce shipping prices by moving to a local third party shipper increased other costs, such as the need for additional drop-shipments from the factory, or the need to pay EU VAT ourselves, rather than pass it along to backers.

The campaign ended just shy of 3,000 backers and $120,000. As of this writing, *The White Box Essays* is about to go into layout, so we can get files to our printer in time for them to be printed and delivered by the date we promised. If anyone reading this should happen to have a time machine, do send us a sign to let us know if we made our date!

Chapter 14

Designing an Effective Game Box

Designing a great game is the first step, but to self-publish you also have to package it. The game box is the first (and in some cases, the only) thing the gaming public will see as they decide whether to buy your game. It has to show off your game, tell gamers what it is about, and give a compelling reason to buy. A good box can help sell a bad game, but a bad box can doom an otherwise good game.

The first thing to ask yourself is: do you want to do this yourself? Even if you do want to self-publish, and even if you decide to learn enough graphic design to lay out the rulebook and printed components, you may want to hire a professional to design the packaging. The look and feel of your box is so important that this may be the single best value for your dollar in the entire design and production process.

Regardless of whether you want to design the box yourself or hire someone, it helps to understand what your box is for. Some people think of game boxes as a way to protect and ship a game, or as a way to store a game (particularly a game with expansions,) or, in some cases, as part of game play. The box also carries some government-mandated information (see Chapter 16: Box Details). These are all important, but they pale in comparison to the most crucial job of your game's package:

Your game box exists to sell your game.

It may also do everything else listed above, but it should focus on this one all-important goal.

How does your game box drive sales? Think of it as having three different areas, with different roles in selling the game. These sections are the front, the sides, and the back.

The Front of Your Box

Customers in a game store are walking around looking for games they will enjoy, for games that fit their play style, play group, the time they have to play, and more. In some cases, they will be looking for something specific, but often they are wandering about the game store wondering, "What's here for me?"

The front of your game box has to catch their attention and deliver one key idea: *pick me up.* That's it. The front of the box needs to get it into the customer's hand.

In order to do that, the box front should answer some basic questions about the game. These questions include:

- What is this game about? What is the game's story?
- What, in general, do players do? Combat? Diplomacy? Resource manipulation?
- How many players can it accommodate?
- How complex is it to play?

You have a number of tools to answer these questions.

The Name of the Game

A game's name is a critical tool for communicating with gamers, to tell them what your game is about. A good name answers as many of the above questions as possible. Some good examples include *Diplomacy* (guess what you'll do for most of this game…), *Settlers of Catan* (sounds like I build a village or farm or something…), *Container* (sounds like a dry, Euro-style cube-pushing game…), and *Rush n' Crush* (racing + combat, perhaps…).

The Subhead

The title gets backup from the next critical part: the subhead. These are a few words about the game, which are called the "subhead" (as in sub-headline) because they usually sit just under the game title (the "headline" of the game).

A good subhead works with the title to complete the message, "This is what this game is about and what you do." This is important because some games have titles that on their own are catchy and memorable, but don't convey the gameplay on their own. Some examples:

Munchkin. "Kill the monster, steal the treasure, stab your buddy." This is a great subhead. That "stab your buddy" part tells you very clearly what happens,

and if this is your sort of game, it puts the box in your hands. If not, it helps you pass on this game and find one that is for you.

Cards Against Humanity. "A party game for horrible people." Yep. This tells me not just what I'm going to do, but helps me know who I'm going to do it with. I might be looking for a light game ("party" — check) to play with my family … oops, maybe not. But something light to play with my drinking buddies? Bingo, let's see what is in this box.

The Box Art

Your box art will be the first part of your game that gamers see. It should stand out and draw people's eye to the box. Once you have their attention, the art should then help answer the same questions, working with and reinforcing the title and subhead.

Good art tells you about the style of the game. Is it more American (direct conflict, aggression, more random elements) or more Euro-style (resource manipulation, indirect conflict, fewer random elements)?

One key thing to remember in your box art is that if there is something awesome about the bits in the box, *show them!* If you've invested the time and money in custom figures or great art for the components, don't hide them under your box art: show them off! Some examples:

Blokus. Part of the draw of *Blokus* is the attractive components. Nothing sells the game as well as a clean picture of the game itself.

Dogfight. Dogfight has custom-painted metal plane figures and those bits are part of the fun of playing the game. It could have put an image of the figures on the cover, but instead — it shows the actual figures! The *Dogfight* box has a cut-out window to display the figures. If that's your type of game, you can see at a glance. Compare this to *Shadows Over Camelot*, a great game with wonderful custom figures. Why can't you see the figures on the cover?



These three things — title, subheader, and box art —are pretty much all you need on the front of the box. Anything else that lives on the front of the box gets in the way of at least one of these elements and thus needs to be a very effective hook for getting gamers to pick up your games. Some possible choices are:

The name of the designer. We tend to think of this as mandatory. Game designers have egos, after all. You can include this, but until you have quite a few games out or one big hit, most gamers are not seeking out games by designer.

Any awards the game has won. These establish credibility for a game's quality. Most awards will have an icon you can use for exactly this purpose.

Any unusual, must-know information. If this is an expansion and you need the base game to play, say so. If the game has any key features (like "Travel Edition") that would help a particular class of buyers identify your game as what they want, list them.

The Side of Your Box

While we all hope our games are displayed facing out, the reality is that there are a lot of games in the world. Many retailers display board games sideways ("spine-out"), so that they can fit more games in a smaller space. This is particularly true for stores that carry some games as part of a larger non-game inventory.

In this case, your game will sit with the side facing out and the side of the box has one job: to say, "Pick me up!" so that the rest of the box can do its job.

Here you want to duplicate some of the key features from the front of the box. All four sides should have the title of the game, the subhead (if you have enough space to make it readable), and a single piece of iconic art — something that tells the story of the game and draws people's eye. Many games only have titles on their sides, and art on the side of your box will really stand out.

The sides often also show the game's information icons. These include the amount of time needed to play, number of players, and age range. See Chapter 15: The Lies Game Boxes Tell for how all three of these icons lie, and for ideas about additional icons you might use as well. If you are going to put icons on the side of your box, make sure they stand out and can be read by someone glancing at your box in a pile of other boxes. Consider, also, players who've already bought your game, searching among their collection for a game that meets their current criteria of friends present and time available. Help them choose *your* game to play on game night! If this information is a key selling point for your game, make it impossible to miss.

As an example, *7 Wonders* supports seven players while still being easy to teach and quick to play. This large number of players with a short playtime

is unusual. They show this right on the side of the box. If these characteristics appeal to you, you can tell at a glance that you should pick this box up.

In some cases, your game box will be so small that you have almost no space to work with on the sides. Even then, try to use a color scheme, title, and logo that let people easily pick your game out of a pile of games of the same size. Some publishers use multi-game displays ("POP" displays, for "point-of-purchase") to increase the visual footprint of their small games. The variants of *Fluxx* do a particularly good job at this, but there are many examples at your local game store.

The Back of Your Box

The front and sides of your box have been working hard to get your game into the hands of interested gamers. The back of the box now has to close the deal and get the gamer to buy it.

Your goal with the back of your box is to answer the questions gamers will have about your game in enough detail to get them interested. Questions to think about include:

"What is in this Box?"

If you can, show off the actual bits themselves. An image of a game in progress does more to teach people if a game is right for them than any drawing. As with the cover, if there are any particularly cool or unique features to the components, make sure a browsing gamer can tell that at a glance.

"What, Exactly, Do You Do in this Game?" (Or, "Why is this Fun?")

This question wants for a more detailed answer than was delivered by the title and cover. A gamer should know the genre at this point, so now you need to teach them what they get to do when they play. In some cases, you can put the whole rules on the box — look at games like *Blokus* or *Rorschach*. For more complex games, you might summarize a turn and talk about the overall goal. The images and text you include should show someone how to play the game (at least in a general sense). This helps retailers walk a customer through your game without opening it, and improves sales.

It is very easy to get block-of-text heavy here. A short, gripping few lines — or better yet, bullet points — will sell your game better than ten

paragraphs of even the most detailed and compelling copy. Try getting some of your more enthusiastic playtesters to suggest a few lines that they might use. Test these by using them to explain your game to people who have never played. Listen closely for which parts of your descriptions make them go, "Oh, that sounds neat." Invest time to figure out the very best text for the game yourself, or hire a professional to help.

The back of the box should also include the standard icons for age, time, and number of players, even if you have also included that on the sides. You'll need a number of other icons — see Chapter 16: Box Details and double-check to make sure you have everything you need. Missing an important label can be an expensive hassle.

What Should Not Be on the Box At All

There are some things that you should almost never put on a game box. For the most part, these won't kill a game, but it's important to understand how they are problematic.

Price. You shouldn't include the MSRP on the game box itself. Retailers generally dislike having it there and it ties your hands if you want to make changes to the price down the road.

Designer information. Other than the designer's name, there should be nothing about the designer on the box. People are buying your game, not you. Use your limited space to show off how awesome the game is, not on how awesome you are.

Size Matters

What size should the box be? It might seem like this is simple: just big enough to hold all the bits. Indeed, you have probably heard people complain about buying "a box of air" if they felt the game box was larger than needed. The reality is more complicated. Let's look at factors that impact the correct game box size.

Box Size vs. Price

It might be nice to think that a game can be priced entirely on how awesome the gameplay is, but in reality gamers (like any other consumers) have

built-in biases. One of these biases is for size and the perception is that a larger box will cost more and is worth more.

A smaller box fits into a $25-or-less price point well. Examples: *Rorschach*, *Fluxx*, *Citadels*.

A price point of $30–$40 wants a larger box. The size says, "There are more bits in here, so you get more game." Again, this might not be true. You can have great, fun, playable games with very few bits as well as clunky, poor-value games with lots of bits, but even so, people resist paying more for smaller boxes. This does mean that if you need an MSRP of $40 to make any money, you need an appropriately sized box, regardless of what you are putting in it. Examples: *Dungeon Lords*, *Tikal*.

A price point of $50–$100 or higher wants a very large box. These are some of the more expensive games in the hobby market and should look substantial. You want customers to go, "Wow, that looks awesome!" before they pick it up and go, "Oh, and it's expensive." Boxes this large also have the advantage of a large amount of visual real estate to show off your game and drive sales. Examples: *Cthulhu Wars*, *Scythe.*

All of this feeds our assumptions about what is in the box. A larger box promises more game and here "more" means "more bits." You need to deliver on that promise. If you have a very large box with a $50 price and the components are a deck of cards and some dice, customers will feel misled regardless of how cool the game is. However, even if your game has lots of cool bits, you need your box size to reflect that and help command the price you want. You may be able to design all of the bits to fit into a much smaller box, but it is more important that the box size match the price than that you played a killer game of *Tetris* when packing your box for sale.

Box Size vs. Game Length

In the same way that people equate the size of a box with the price, they also tend to feel that larger boxes hold longer games. Very small boxes like *Fluxx* or *Love Letter* suggest fast games, larger boxes like *Catan* or *Puerto Rico* run 30–45 minutes, and the biggest boxes (*Twilight Imperium* or *Gloomhaven*) can run ages. The perceived correlation between box size and game length is less hard-and-fast than the one between box size and price (*Agricola* is in a medium-sized box, but runs an hour and up, up, up) but if you are very far from the expected time you'll want to highlight that or change box sizes.

Retailer Issues

Retailers have a number of special considerations that impact how they sell games, and influence whether they want to carry your game at all. Your game could be amazing, but if the box makes it hard to sell, retailers will pass and your sales will suffer. Here are two issues retailers face when dealing with game boxes:

- **Theft.** "Shrinkage" is the term for product that is stolen or otherwise lost. The smaller and easier to pocket your game is, the easier it is for someone to steal it. Retailers can deal with this in lots of ways — keeping small games in visible spaces, putting employees out in customer areas and not behind a counter, and more. However, the more small boxes they stock, the harder this effort is. This means that even if your game is just a deck of cards (and could thus fit into a box the size of a pack of playing cards) you might think about using a larger box to be more retailer-friendly.
- **Uniformity.** Retailers carry a lot of games and want to display them in a way that is visually appealing. This is easier if all of the games fit on the shelf in the same way. You may think that if your box is a very odd shape it will stand out (and you'd be right) but the hassle for the retailer may mean they just won't stock your box in the first place, or it will languish somewhere odd for years where no one can find it.

There are no completely standard sizes in the hobby game market, but below are the measurements of some existing successful games that have spawned many similarly sized games to use as a guide.

- *Citadels (FFG Silver Line)* — 1.5 x 4 x 7.8 in. (3.8 x 10.16 x 19.8 cm)
- *Codenames* — 2.8 x 6.3 x 9 in. (7.1 x 16 x 22.86 cm)
- *Catan* — 3.1 x 11.6 x 9.4 in. (7.9 x 29.5 x 23.88 cm)
- *Pandemic Legacy* — 3 x 10.6 x 14.6 in. (7.62 x 26.92 x 37.08 cm)

Chapter 15

The Lies Game Boxes Tell

While there is no industry standard for what must go on game boxes, more or less every game box has three pieces of pseudo-statistical information on the side of the box: game length, number of players, and age range.

Every single one of these is inaccurate.

As a designer, it can be helpful to know about some of the perennial misinformation associated with these statistics, and what you can do to help them communicate useful information about your games. Communicating accurately to your (potential) audience should be your goal, after all. Fooling someone into buying your game under false pretenses is short-term gain for a much larger, longer-term loss.

The Standard Statistics

There are three standard statistics most publisher use to describe their games. Let's look at them in order.

Game Length

This sounds simple enough. How long does it take to play the game? Unfortunately, there are a number of issues that make the game length number printed on most game boxes a poor measure of the actual time you'll spend at the table when playing.

It tries to serve as a measure of complexity and falls short. Many gamers, particularly more casual gamers, are looking for a lighter gaming experience. They will often try to use game length as a measure of how complicated the game is. "Oh, this game is 90 minutes? That will be too complicated. Oh, this other game is 30 minutes? I'll enjoy that more."

This fails because, while length is certainly a factor in complexity — particularly for people with short attention spans — length isn't the primary factor in determining a game's complexity. A cutthroat six-player

game of *Munchkin* could easily go for longer than an hour and few would call that game complex. On the other hand, a game of *Titan* could be over in 20 minutes and that game is far from simple.

Game length also sometimes fails to account for the effect a varying number of players can have on a game. In most games, adding more players adds to the time it takes to play. Some games try to take this into account by listing a time like, "30 minutes per player," while others list a range that takes into account the full range of players. For example, a game that supports 2–6 players that takes about 30 minutes per player might list "60–180 minutes" as its length.

The first problem with this system is that these values don't account for non-scaling time costs. For example, setting up a very complex game could take 15 minutes, but it usually won't vary that much if you add more players, particularly if each player can set up their own bits. We might try to fix this by listing setup time and play time separately.

The second problem with these values is that they assume that the players already know how to play the game. While everyone expects it to take longer to play when you have to teach new players, this value does nothing to help explain how much longer it will take. Does it take three minutes to teach the game, as with *Fluxx*? Does it take 30 minutes, as with *Twilight Imperium*? The base game length is a hint, but not a guarantee.

As a designer, you want to teach as much about how your game works with the "time" information as you can. By including "play," "setup," and maybe "teaching" time information your players know what they are getting into. If you record these times as part of your playtesting sessions you can be pretty sure that your numbers are correct.

There is no industry standard icon for game length. Most companies use a clock or hourglass icon. If your game lasts less than an hour, you might benefit from using a clock icon with the time to play colored in. There is also no standard for units: a game could be listed as 60–90 minutes or 1–1½ hours. In the hopes of making the industry more streamlined, let's just agree to use minutes expressed as a range unless there is a compelling reason to do something else.

Number of Players

This is another statistic that sounds like it should be the simplest thing in the world. How many people can you play the game with? It doesn't change based on who is playing — it's simple, right?

Sadly, no.

What this statistics often fails to reflect is that there is a difference between the number of players that a game *can* be played with and the number of players a game *is actually fun* with.

This is a frequent issue, but is perhaps most common in games that say they support "two or more" players. Many games, particularly games with trading or diplomacy as core elements, lose the point of the game with fewer players. You may be able to play the game (that is, execute all of the rules) but you can't really *play the game* (that is, have fun). The easiest way to verify that the industry has this problem is to walk into any hobby game store and ask the employees how often customers bring them games to ask, "This says it works with two players, but does it really?" As a bonus, ask them how often they respond, "No."

For examples, the excellent space exploration and combat game *Eclipse* and the iconic train/economic game *1870* both list "2–6 players." While these are both great games, both break down with only two players. Once one player gets a very small edge, there is little the remaining player can do to recover without the ability to form alliances or factions to beat on the player in the lead.

The most extreme example might be *Diplomacy*, a game listed as "2–7 players." While the game works great with seven players, it's not hard to see how the entire point of the game breaks with two players. (Hint: the game is called "Diplomacy.") Listing this as playable by "2" — or even "3–4" — players does a disservice to the gamer.

This issue can arise in less obvious ways than the breakdown of player interaction, as well. *Battlestar Galactica* lists itself as "3–6 players," but at three the "sneaky hidden faction" part of the game — a core part of its fun — is lost. Many other games that balance player position based on board location may be good with four or six, but not five, since that leaves a dead space on the map that favors certain players. Games can sometimes add rules or variants to account for odd numbers of players, but it is hardly fair to sell a game as "For 2–6 players" when the real truth is, "You can play the game we told you about with 3–6 players, or this odd variant with two."

What can you do? Commit to listing your number of players as the number with which your game is fun! If your game is awesome with 4–6 players but only OK with three, list "4–6." If your game is amazing with five and only five players, then sell it as a five-player game. No one wins if you sell your game to people who are going to play it and not have fun.

There are no industry standards for how to list the number of players. Your goal should be to make sure that the icon you use can't be easily confused with the one for age range, which happens surprisingly often.

Age Range

Here is another statistic that often fails to communicate the information that game players actually want. You could be forgiven for thinking that the age icon is intended to help consumers find games appropriate to their kids' developmental milestones. Alternately, you might think that the age icon is really trying to communicate about the game's complexity: the more complex it is, the older a player needs to be to really understand what's going on.

Sadly, neither of these is where this number usually comes from. Rather, publishers often print an age to comply more readily with consumer product testing laws. In the United States, they are often trying to avoid the need for third-party materials testing under the standards enforced by the Consumer Product Safety Commission. (For more details, search for "toy safety" at cpsc.gov.) Other jurisdictions have different rules. For example, the European Union has issued a Toy Safety Directive for EU member states.

Third-party testing is both time-consuming and expensive, which is why relatively few hobby games list an age range younger than 13+. Are there plenty of games that are well-suited to younger children? Sure. Can they understand and have fun with these games? Sure, particularly the ones growing up in gamer households with gamer parents. However, the packaging can't list the game as being for children that young without added testing costs.

Most board games will be classified as "general use products." They are as or more likely to be played by adults as by children 12 or under. This means that they may be able to avoid the kind product testing discussed above. However, this is a case of, "It doesn't matter until it does." You should also be aware that listing an age above the legal testing threshold may not even be a legal defense in the event that a consumer-protection authority decides that while your game doesn't say it's for younger kids, it's clearly intended to appeal to them. When in doubt, hire an attorney or other expert and follow their advice.

Many games list age as a range, but with an upper end that's arbitrary and meaningless. There isn't a meaningful difference between "for ages 13–99," "for ages 13 to adult," and "for ages 13 and up." If you are designing games for younger audiences, noting the skills they need to be able to play is helpful. Does a young player need to be able to tell colors apart? Do simple addition? Manipulate small parts? If you make your box clear people can more easily know if it is appropriate for their family.

To see what you can do to make the age range on your game actually mean something, see "Complexity," below.

A Better Way

Just because games have always listed length, player count, and age range doesn't mean we can't do better. Let's add three new pieces of information: strategy, complexity, and luck.

These are intended to tell customers about the game at a glance and give them enough information to compare it to games they already know and love (or know and hate). This empowers them to make informed purchases and lowers the risk associated with buying a game.

Each icon displays a number on a five-point scale that includes zero (e.g., "Luck: 2 of 5").

Strategy

"Strategy" measures the depth of planning required to be good at the game. It reflects how much long-term planning is required, how many decision trees exist, and how hard it is to identify and avoid poor decisions.

Games need not be complex to have a high strategic demands. Go is very low in complexity, but very high in strategy. Some mechanics have an inherently high strategy requirement. For example, auction games can require a lot of strategy to evaluate costs and values, both to the player and their opponents, for different items in an auction. An auction itself is easily understood (low complexity), but the resulting interaction require substantial strategy.

Complexity

"Complexity" measures the density of the rules of the game, the number of different options and actions available to players, and the amount of information a player must learn in order to be able to play the game correctly. The number of rules, the number of exceptions or variants of those rules, and the intricacy of each rule determines the overall game complexity.

Knowing how complex a game is helps players determine how much longer a game will take with new players. It can also help players who're all new to a game determine how they should learn it. Can they open it up and learn as a group, or does someone really need to study and digest the game alone, and then teach the rest?

Again, complexity is different from and not tied to strategy. A game can be very complex, but not very strategic. (Although such a game might suck.)

Luck

"Luck" measures both the number of random elements in a game and how much control players have over those elements. Some gamers prefer games with no random elements at all and some enjoy games with lots of randomness, but everyone benefits from understanding what a game offers and that can be difficult to tell from the outside of the box.

Games with no luck would have no random elements. Games with high luck would be like the traditional card game, war — that is, entirely dependent on luck.



The overall goal, with all of these icons, is to provide as much useful information on the outside of your game box as you can, so the right players to find (and buy) your game. Anything that improves accurate understanding serves you. Anything that stymies it hurts.

Chapter 16

Box Details

What You Need to Put on Your Box If You Self-Publish

There is a great deal of information that winds up on game boxes, even past the information you must communicate about the game and how it plays, as described in the previous chapter. If you are self-publishing your game, you will need to include some or all of this information. (If you sell your game to a publisher you can skip this chapter. They will do this for you.) What are these things, how do you deal with them, and can you get by without them?

Universal Product Code

A UPC (Universal Product Code) — more commonly called a barcode — is a unique product identifier. These codes are used by retailers. Not having a barcode denies you access to any sales avenue other than selling your games yourself. If you want your game to be picked up by distributors and sold in retail game stores, you generally have to have a UPC.

UPCs are issued by a company called GS1 (gs1.org) that manages international barcode standards. You can purchase blocks of codes from them that can be used almost anywhere. You will need one code for each different item you want to sell. If you are just selling one game, you may only need one code. If you want to sell expansions, add-on products, or different versions of your game, you will need a code for each.

There are two ways to get a UPC for your game: the expensive and annoying way or the slightly less expensive but potentially more annoying way.

- **Direct registration (more expensive, less annoying).** You can purchase codes directly from GS1, paying an upfront fee and an annual renewal fee based on the number of codes you need. Check their

website for current rates, but expect to pay around $250 for up to ten barcodes and another $50/year to keep the codes active. If you need more codes, you pay far less per code. This fee gets you a unique identifier number (a "company prefix") that is exclusive to your company. You'll need to apply at the GS1 website and should expect it to take a few weeks to get your codes. Don't wait until the last minute.

- **Third-party registration (less expensive, potentially more annoying).** See that bit where if you buy lots of codes, you can get them for far less? Some businesses buy up large blocks of codes then resell them singly to companies that only need one or two codes and don't want to pay full price for them. This can let you get a single code for as little as $35 and it still works worldwide. However, this discount comes with a potential added cost: you won't get a unique company prefix. If you buy a resold code, your UPC will have that company's identifier number, not your own. Some sales outlets won't care, but some large retailers won't take products from companies without their own company prefixes.

A different type of barcode is one that encodes an ISBN ("International Standard Book Number") in the EAN-13 format. For maximum confusion, this format is only different from the UPC format in very obscure ways. (Google the difference if you're curious, but take a Tylenol first.)

An ISBN barcode serves much the same function as a UPC barcode, and is often used for books, or book-like products. *The White Box* has an ISBN instead of a UPC, for example, because that's the practice at Atlas Games a company with roots in roleplaying game book publishing. If you are publishing a book, an ISBN might serve you better, and be a little cheaper. The core functionality of allowing a retailer to easily identify and sell your product work much the same.



Overall, if your first print run is small enough that you plan to sell it (or give it away) yourself, you may be able to do without a centrally registered code. But if your print run is 500+ copies and you want to get your game into stores, get a UPC. If the cost breaks your budget, reconsider whether you should be self-publishing at all.

There are a wide variety of alternate code styles, largely intended to communicate more information than is possible with a regular UPC barcode. For

example, ISBN barcodes can be extended to include an encoded price and its associated currency. However, these have not (yet) replaced the barcode in retail and unless your game is very weird, you won't need one.

CE Mark

The CE mark indicates that a product complies with European Economic Area safety, health, and environmental standards. This mark is required in order for your game to be sold anywhere in the European Union and the symbol is recognized all around the world. Not all products need a CE code, but board and card games fall (loosely) under the "Toy Safety" directives designed to protect children under the age of 14 and thus should have the code.

By putting the CE mark on your game you are indicating that you have carried out a conformity assessment (or a third party has), that you maintain a technical file documenting this, that you have a signed declaration of conformity, and that you are prepared to provide that documentation on request. Current standards can be found online: ec.europa.eu/growth/single-market/ce-marking. When in doubt, consult a testing laboratory, attorney, or other expert.

There is no regulatory body that hands out CE marks, so unlike barcode registries, you are permitted to print the mark — which you can download at the web address above — on your game to indicate that you've met the standards without additional hassles. You do have to use the logo — the letters "CE" do not suffice.

In short, this code shows that you are complying with the rules, lets you sell your game in the EU, and costs you nothing to use. This should be on everything you publish.

The "Not For Young Children" Symbol



This symbol also comes from the European standards and means that your game is inappropriate for children under the age of three. This usually means it contains small parts. While there are a variety of age-related issues with games' developmental appropriateness for children of various ages (see Chapter 15: The Lies Game Boxes Tell) this warning label is about physical

safety. You are almost certainly not designing board games for children under three, so this warning symbol is nearly always appropriate, and since there's no reason *not* to put it on your game's packaging, you should. You can download a copy of the image from Wikipedia: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Age_warning_symbol.svg.

When in doubt, consult an attorney or testing laboratory to help make sure your game is appropriately labeled.

Country of Origin Labeling

If your game will be shipped across international borders, it should be labeled with the country of origin — the country where it was manufactured. This is required by U.S. customs and is often required or helpful for clearing customs in other countries.

This is not so much an issue for shipping single games (for example, when mailing copies to buyers in other countries) but it is a big deal when shipping an entire print run of your game from one country to another (for example, if you have your game manufactured in China and then shipped to a warehouse in Europe or the United States).

While there are a lot of arcane laws and restrictions that apply to country-of-origin labeling, few are likely to apply to your game. The basic rule is that you should list the country that manufactures 50% or more of your game as the country of origin. Thus, if your game is made in China, list "Made in China." If your game is mostly made in the United States, but you have dice shipped in from Germany and tokens made in China, you can list it as "Made in the USA" as long as the dice and tokens represent less than 50% of your game.

You, as the game publisher, are responsible for ensuring that the origin label you assign is accurate, but you don't have to pay anyone or get permission to do so. This is the sort of thing that doesn't matter until it's a big deal, mostly when passing customs. It costs you nothing to use properly. There are no restrictions on what font, color, or size you use as long as the end result is legible. As always, if in doubt, consult an attorney or customs broker to make sure your game is labeled properly for your particular circumstances.

Copyright Statement

Copyright protection applies automatically to your game (see Chapter 2: Protecting Your Ideas & Why You Don't Need To) and including a statement that shows your ownership on the box, rules, and other game documents can be helpful in the (highly unlikely) situation where you need to show ownership of your design. It costs you nothing, doesn't take up much space, and can be important in the very few cases that it matters at all.

Use the "©" symbol. It can be helpful to note the first year of publication, and you should name the owner of the copyright, whether a person (such as a designer) or legal entity (like a publishing company).

Chapter 17

How to Promote Your Game at a Convention Without Losing Your Shirt

Including, Especially: How to Demo Your Game

Conventions have long been one of the best places to show off games, both new designs that you want to pitch to publishers, as well as new self-published games you want to sell to an audience eager to see the newest games. Done well, conventions can give you access to more eyes and money than you can get in any other venue. Done badly they can cost you more than you will ever make from selling your game and leave you in a deep financial hole. Let's look at how to get the most out of your convention experience to help your game get out into the world.

There are two core goals for going to a convention with your game — either to promote your game (to the public or to publishers) or to sell your game directly to the public. You should tailor how you approach a convention based on what you want out of it.

Promoting Your Game

Conventions can be one of the best places to show off your game. If you've self-published this is a great way to let more players know your game exists. If you are still looking for a publisher, doing large demos and attracting an audience can draw their attention.

One of the biggest advantages of attending a convention solely to promote your game is that you don't need to buy a booth! Buying a booth gets you a place to sell your game, but if what you want is to show it off, then depending

on the culture and rules of the convention, you are better off running games in the play areas and saving the money you would spend on a booth space.

Most conventions have two types of play space, scheduled event space and open gaming areas. You ideally want to use both. Contact the convention well before the show to get some events listed in the show's schedule. Scheduled events can be as simple as "Learn to Play X," or as elaborate as tournaments with desirable but simple prizes (e.g., a good first place prize might be a badge to the next year's convention) to draw players. Having scheduled events makes it easier for people to plan to play your game, in two ways. First, some con-goers simply like to plan their shows in advance. With your game in the convention schedule, they can learn about your game in advance and create time for it. Second, when someone at the convention is watching others play your game, or asks about it, scheduled games give you a specific time and place they can come to try it themselves. (Create a cheap handout that lists all of the times and places you're scheduled to run games at each convention and remember to include your website and contact information.) That's much better than leaving them with a vague, floating sense of, "That's cool, I should remember to check that out again." They likely won't.

In addition to scheduled events, you also want to play your game in the open gaming areas. Nothing promotes a game like playing it, and nothing gets people playing like seeing it played. Bring several copies of your game, and while you are playing you can offer another copy to anyone who starts watching. If you're playing a "seed" game with friends you brought along to the convention, you should immediately break up to add another game as people express an interest to join in. But there should never be time where at least one copy of your game isn't being played.

If you are looking to pitch your game to publishers don't forget to have a stack of sell sheets and business cards. Try to have enough prototype copies that a publisher could take one on the spot if they are interested. Seeing your game played by the public, especially if you have several games going at once, or are obviously getting a lot of attention over the course of the convention, is a great way to show that your game is worth a publisher's time.

If you have published your game, gift a copy to the convention's lending library. Many conventions have a check-out area where people can borrow games and try them out. You might even bribe the library volunteers with some donuts to suggest your game if people are asking what to play! An increasingly popular cousin of the convention library is the "play and win" area, where con-goers check out copies of games that will then be raffled off to one of

those players at the end of the convention. Look for play-and-win formats that encourage lots and lots of people to play your game, as opposed to those that provide relatively limited exposure, and then give away your free copy to the most enthusiastic new player.

All of this play sounds like a lot of work — and it is! I'm already assuming that you are willing to spend the entire convention playing, promoting, and plugging your game, but you can multiply your effectiveness even further by bringing a team of friends along to the con to help you. Exploiting your friends is a tradition of all creatives, but unless someone's name is on the box, you should be compensating them somehow for their help. As a general rule, you should not expect anyone, even (especially) your friends, to work more than six to eight hours a day playing your game, running events, or doing anything else. In exchange, you should be providing a badge to the convention, plus food and/or cash to eat with. If they don't already have one, a copy of your game is also good compensation, particularly if it's one of the unsalable copies you opened to play with at the show. Very nice compensation includes travel and lodging. These costs are much easier to cover at local or regional conventions where the proposition is to ride with you in your car and share your own hotel room, as opposed to the need to book additional airfare and hotel rooms. You can also look for gamers who live local to a national convention and recruit them, but that puts you in competition with everyone else who's trying the same tactic.

It may be worth it to bring in experienced demo people. There are a few organizations that provide them as a paid service, and the time it saves you might be worth it. Just make sure to vet them in advance to make sure they'll be the high-class professionals you'd want representing your game.

One final, non-obvious way to promote your game at a con is to reach out to convention staff about being on (or hosting) a panel to discuss your advice to designers, your experience with publishers or Kickstarter, or other topics that might be of interest to con-goers. Don't use these opportunities to nakedly pitch your game or you'll look like a self-serving jerk. Getting your name and a mention of your game out there is good enough, and the convention may even be willing to comp your badge as thanks, which ain't nothing if you're operating on a shoestring. Panels are also a great place to network with other panelists and learn what's working for them!

Going to a Con to Sell

You may want to go to a show to sell games — to try to make some money off of a product you've created. The wisdom of this is based directly on the size of the convention you are going to. If you are going to a smaller regional convention you can usually get a booth for a relatively low price, and it will be easier to sell enough copies of your game to break even. For a larger convention (Origins, Gen Con, Essen) booth space is much more expensive and it will be far harder to break even.

Note that in both cases the goal is to break even and to "profit" from the marketing and exposure the convention generates for your game. Even when you are selling games at the full retail price, the cost of going to a show will absolutely eat up any extra profit, and you are lucky to break even. This is pretty much true all the way up the chain. Larger companies may sell tons (literally) of product, but they also have much more expensive booths and very large, expensive teams.

Having your own booth at a smaller convention can be a good idea. But the simple advice on getting your own booth at a convention like Gen Con is:

Don't.

Booth space at big shows can be hard to get at all. Though some cons reserve space for new publishers, this "reserved" space is still expensive, not to mention relegated to low-traffic areas in the back of the exhibit hall.

Another drawback of booth space is that it's limited. If only one table of players will fill your 10' × 10' space, a game takes X long and accommodates Y players, and you make Z dollars or profit per sale, a purely mathematical proof will often show that even if you fill your booth with players at maximum efficiency (hint: you won't) and every single visitor buys a copy (hint: they won't) you'll still lose money.

This doesn't mean that you don't want to be in the exhibit hall. It just means that you need to be both realistic and creative. As a single-game company, consider splitting booth space with another small publisher, particularly one in the same genre. If you're working with a consolidator, distributor, or aggregator, they may have a larger booth space that you can use a small sliver of. Since they are at conventions year after year, they usually have better locations and lower costs per square foot, and you can pay for just the small wedge of their booth that you actually need. In exchange, you'll probably give up the chance to sell directly and capture the full retail price of your sales. As with all other

convention considerations, think about what you're getting, at what price, and what you're giving up.

Regardless of how you get booth space, make sure it's focused on one thing — selling product. If you have enough space to play games and do demonstrations you should, but they should be focused on selling product. Cut games off before they're finished, leave out advanced rules, and if it's practical, keep players standing at cocktail tables so they don't get too comfortable at your booth. Create a special offer to make players who do a demo more likely to buy on the spot. Premiums (e.g., promo cards or bonus pieces) are better than discounts. Both motivate in the same way, but the latter creates the perception that your game isn't worth its price. If you've been around long enough to have multiple products in your line, deals that promote multi-game purchases are a good idea.

Keep in mind that booth space isn't a replacement for running events and playing games in the public space. You should still be doing everything under "Promoting Your Game," above, but also handing out coupons or flyers in the play space directing people to your booth. Don't just say "ask at the booth." Give them something physical to take with them so they remember. And if they forget, make sure your literature has your website on it, so they can still do something useful with it when they find it at the bottom of their backpack a week after the show's over.

A Quick Warning About Taxes

While this book isn't intended as either legal advice or a toolkit to form a company or structure a business, it is worth pointing out one thing almost everyone screws up the first time they do direct sales at a convention. Regardless of how you are structured, as soon as you make a single sale, you probably owe someone a tax. State sales tax is the most likely one in the U.S., but you may also owe local (city or county) tax, or GST or VAT in other countries. You are not "too small" to owe taxes, and the convention will not help you structure this nor are they somehow paying these taxes for you. The rules will vary wildly by location, but do your research and pay your taxes.

Doing a Demo

Whether you have your own booth or are playing your game in open play space, one of the best tools you have to promote your game is a demo — a

quick display that shows off what your game is like and gives people a feel of whether it's a good game for them.

The most important thing to understand about a demo is the goal. Players want to know, "Do I like this game enough to play more now, check it out in more detail later, or flat-out buy it?"

The most important part of your demo is the first ten seconds of interaction, before anyone has even agreed to play. You need to communicate what your game is about and let people opt in to getting more information. This is basically a "player-focused" version of your elevator pitch — one or two lines designed to draw attention and invite players who like that sort of game say, "Tell me more!"

A note on sales, energy, and the "hand-off": doing demos is a social, extroverted act. Many game designers are not good at being outgoing, and find doing demos to be overly "salesy." Although promoting your own game is a critical part of designing games, you may find it easier to partner with a friend who is more outgoing to set the hook in that first engagement, and draw people into your demo area so you (or others) can run the main part of the demo. This hand-off is common in any industry, and is used by many designers and publishers. Some companies even employ "booth babes" — scantily clad women whose whole purpose is to draw attention and move people into a booth — to drive the first part of the interaction. I'm pleased to say that the tabletop gaming industry as a whole takes a dim view of booth babes, and a short skirt is more likely to offend than sell.

Once people are interested, the two things you are tight on are space and time. Some players will want to sit down and play a full game, others are just interested in playing a few turns to get a feel for the game. It's a gross generalization, but players at conventions in Europe tend to be more interested in playing full games, while American players are more likely to play a few rounds, get the idea, and move on.

Regardless of how long they'll stay, you want to get new players playing your game quickly. If your game requires choices at setup or has any variable content, make those choices yourself. You can describe those choices and discuss them in depth if someone asks, but for most players, skip to the play.

For example, *Anachronism* is played with four face-down cards on each side. Selecting those cards and the order to play them in is a big part of that game's strategy. We did lots of convention demos of *Anachronism*, and when we did, we skipped past that. We chose the cards and order that created the best demo (i.e., that showed off most of what the game can do) and got right

into the game. At the end we went back to discuss those early-game strategy decisions, tailoring the depth of that talk based on each player's interest.

Once you have people playing, what comes next is based on how long and complex your game is. If your game is fast, stay there and watch or help them finish it. *Anachronism* takes five to seven minutes, so the demo version was just a semi-scripted full game. If your game is longer you can leave the players at the table to keep playing on their own, and move on to set up other tables of demos. By being nearby to answer questions you can keep the game moving, and by being "one step away" players can explore the game at their own pace. An added benefit of this approach is that you can use ongoing games as a starting point for other people walking by — they can see the game in progress, which is usually more engaging than looking at a box.

A crucial thing to understand about demos is that the goal isn't to forge an expert player right out of the gate. A common mistake — especially for enthusiastic new designers who know their own games inside and out — is to spew great volumes of unnecessary information right up front. Don't. Players need enough information to start playing, to start making choices. They want to be *doing* something (not listening, *playing*) quickly, and that's more important than "correct" play, or winning. (Although be aware that a small percentage of competitive players tend to become agitated when it later becomes clear that there was some advantage they might have claimed earlier. Generally speaking, there's nothing you can do to avoid this situation. It's about their priorities, not your ability to teach. Do your best to assuage their ego — which is what the agitation is about — and keep the game moving.)

As an example, think of *Catan*. For a demo you might start players with more than the starting settlements built, and some resource cards already in hand. (You might even leave all of the resource cards face-up, so each player can more readily understand everyone's strategy by being privy to otherwise hidden information). You are basically cutting out setup and the first few turns. Those are important turns, but by skipping to the interesting middle you can help a player complete just a few turns and really understand if the game is right for them. You would talk about resource generation right away, and tell players about trading and building, perhaps with the goal of showing how one player could trade with you to get a resource they need to make a road. You might let the robber come up when it comes up, or discuss it after a few rounds (ideally when it blows up your hand). You'd discuss things like the longest road and special cards last. Topics like the ratios of cards in the deck would never come up at all, unless people ask.

It's wise to outline your demo framework before the convention and practice (or, better yet, playtest) it. Each player will have their own questions, but if you get the core of your demo down ahead of time you'll do a much smoother demo. An outline like this will be indispensable if you have others helping run your demos.

One common question about demos is whether you should aim to lose your own demo. It depends. Try to read your player. Some people like the win, but others want to see what the game can really do, and don't mind losing if they get to see the system work. Ultimately, your goal is to help the player have fun. If letting them win achieves that goal for them, try to make it happen, as long as it's not obvious that you're throwing the game.

Always Be Closing

Regardless of the length of the demo, demoing isn't playing. Stay focused on what you want the players' next step to be. This will usually be a sale. Some players will already be eager to buy. If that's the case, don't make them wait. Sell them a copy before the demo's even over, ideally via a dedicated "sales" person whose only job is to take money so that there is never a wait to purchase. Other players may need to be guided to a sale. The most obvious but maddeningly overlooked route from the end of a demo to a sale is a simple verbal request or offer that's some variation of, "Would you like to buy a copy?" A premium, special, or show discount ("10% off if you buy it here") can help lubricate the transition. Many players will want to think about it more, or put off buying until later, particularly early in a show where they want to see more of what is on offer. In these cases, you benefit greatly by having a coupon, flyer, or other takeaway that reminds and entices them to return. If they walk away from your booth without your game, and without a physical reminder, odds are excellent that you will never see them again. The best handout may be some extra content for your game — an extra character, card, or piece they can use in the game. Even just a "signed by the designer" promo is a fun add for people.

For longer games or tighter demo space, you might consider letting people "check out" copies of your game to play in open play areas of the con. This lets people play the game without feeling rushed, uses free space instead of space you're paying for, and can be great promotion for you as others see your game being played in the wild. Send you check-out copies with a stack of your flyers or coupons that players can hand out if anyone asks, "What's this?"

If you don't have a booth (or even if you do!) you may also want to do demos in the main play space of the convention, where the feeling is more "sit

and play a game" than "rush to see the whole exhibit hall." This can also be a better way to show off a large game, engage more passersby, and keep showing off your game after the exhibit floor closes. A downside of a convention's open gaming space is that you usually cannot take sales there, so again, be sure to have a flyer or takeaway to direct people to your booth. Don't have a booth? Partner with a retail exhibitor with whom you've coordinated in advance. Some people try to push online sales instead, which can work, but most people at conventions like the physicality of having the game immediately, which has the added bonus for you that they'll likely be playing it in public, where other con-goers can see them having a great time with your design. Con-specific coupon codes for online sales can work if you can't find a partner. You'll get data about the sale's origin, and expiring coupons lend some urgecy to the purchase.



You might be starting to add up some numbers as you come to the end of this chapter. Someone to do demos in a booth, someone in the main hall, a sales person, maybe an extra one or two (or many more) people to do demos and cover breaks, and you're just getting started. All those people need to be fed, housed, and transported. That's on top of the cost of the booth space itself.

As was mentioned earlier, the reality is that sales at a big con almost never cover all of the costs. Again, convention attendance is mostly marketing — a way to get the word out, get new eyes on your game, and maybe give you something to talk about with distributors or publishers — with the bonus that you can collect a little revenue, too.

To reiterate: if you self-publish, or are just getting started, you may have better results at smaller local conventions. They are excited to have designers attend, you can get booths more cheaply, you may have more flexibility on where you are allowed to sell, and more folks from your own personal networks are likely to be around to bolster your spirits and spread the word. With the lower costs and higher margins, you are also more likely to break even.

Chapter 18

What a Sell Sheet Is

And, Why You Need One

Publishers review dozens to hundreds of game designs each year, and at a convention or event, could easily look over dozens in a few hours. How do they filter these games to identify the ones they want to know more about, and how can you reach out and get the attention of the publishers who want to make games like yours? Sell sheets!

A sell sheet is a single-page document that communicates some basic, focused information about your game. Sell sheets target publishers (not gamers!) with the goal of getting them to ask for a pitch meeting or a prototype. Sell sheets are used widely in the tabletop game industry as a tool to promote game designs to publishers.

Think of your sell sheet as a written version of your elevator pitch — a document that shows what the core concept of your game is, what sets it apart, and who it is for. Your sell sheet should let a publisher quickly — and accurately — evaluate whether they want to see more. Present your design in its best light, but be accurate. A publisher that makes light party games doesn't want to hear a pitch for a lengthy Eurogame, and it's a waste of your time and goodwill to pitch one to them under false pretenses.

Sell sheets can be particularly useful if you have more than one game design to pitch. By showing sell sheets for all of your games, publishers can more quickly winnow the ones they want to know more about from the others, and you won't burn them out pitching games they don't want. The low-risk acceptance of a sell sheet allows publishers you didn't know were in the market for a particular type of game to surprise you. They may be expanding their line or have interest in game types you didn't expect, and would never have pitched to them otherwise.

Sell sheets also provide a critical aid to memory. If you hand a publisher a sell sheet at the beginning of a pitch, they'll have something to take notes on

and walk off with, so they can remember your game more readily, and follow up to request a prototype. Again, they may see dozens of games in quick succession — a good sell sheet can help make sure they remember yours.

What Sell Sheets Aren't

It is worth discussing what sell sheets are *not* — the things they aren't intended for or good at.

Sell sheets are not rulebooks. A sell sheet should describe the core mechanics and type of game, but it's not intended to teach gameplay, even for very simple games. A publisher who wants to play the game will set up a meeting with you or request a prototype, and get the rules that way.

Sell sheets are not customer promotions. Sell sheets are not intended for gamers — no player will buy your game from (or likely ever see) the sell sheet. These are for a savvy audience of publishers, so you defeat yourself if your sell sheet is hyperbolic, inaccurate, or makes you come off as clueless about where your proposal currently lies on the road to being published. Your design is not yet a "sure-fire hit," is definitely not a "*Catan*-killer," and the publisher will be the one to decide if they think "its success in big box retail stores is assured."

Sell sheets are not your entire pitch. You sell sheet just wants to get you a meeting, or to hand off a prototype. Don't think of it as your entire pitch. No one will buy your design based solely off your sell sheet, so don't overload it with everything you can think of. Describe the concept, cover your bases, establish your credibility, and then stop. (But, something that never works: the cliffhanger sell sheet. That's a sell sheet that promises a mind-blowing concept so unique you won't even write it down. These go straight into the bin, unless you are already such a famous designer that you don't need to distribute sell sheets to get pitch meetings, in which case the rule stands anyway.)

What Goes On a Sell Sheet

So what should be in a sell sheet? Each sheet (like each game) will be different, but there is some basic information that should be on nearly every sell sheet so it can do its job.

The game's logo and name. This is pretty easy — a nice big logo or name of your game, probably covering a big patch of the top of the sheet. Like all game art, don't pay for this or go crazy with detail. The publisher may well want

to rename the design, so money here is wasted. A nice font that matches the theme of your game is plenty.

Subhead. Refer back to Chapter 14: Designing an Effective Game Box for information on how to build a solid subhead. This is another good tool for very quickly showing what your game is about.

Your name and contact details. This should be obvious, but it is surprising how many people overlook it. Make it easy for publishers to contact you. Ideally, include both an email address you check regularly, and a phone number. If you are co-designing the game, list all designers' names.

Basic data. Your design's player count, estimated game length, and strategy, complexity, and luck levels. See Chapter 15: The Lies Game Boxes Tell for more information. Since this isn't for publication you can leave age range off entirely unless it is somehow relevant for your game.

A brief description. This is one or two paragraphs that describe your game's mechanics, theme, high-level concept, and illuminates what sets your game apart. You are not teaching the rules, but showing why your game is different than the other thousands of designs out there. Strive to be more than "yet another Euro cube-pusher," for example.

Additional notes. Another one to two paragraphs, carefully selected to build your credibility and put your design's best foot forward. Ideas for expansions, thoughts about components, relevant awards, and the like could all go here.

Optionally, sample art. Again, this is not finished art that you've paid for. Rather, this is existing art — credited to its creator(s) and clearly labeled as inspirational or not-final — intended to quickly give an idea of the theme and mood of your game. A game about vampires might be more *Mind's Eye Theater*, or more *Nightfall*, or more *Scooby-Doo*, and sample art can help explain which bucket your design fits into.



You generally don't need to list anything about you as the designer, unless you have some background that is relevant or builds your credibility. Existing credits might be OK; expertise in the game's subject matter might also be wise (e.g., your game is about astrophysics, and you're an astrophysicist). Don't plug your willingness to promote or market your game — that's assumed, and different publishers will want to use your enthusiasm in different ways.

Don't describe how long you have been developing or playtesting the game. It is assumed you've put the work into making the game good, and publishers don't correlate length of development to quality.

Print your sell sheets on one side of non-glossy white or light-colored paper. Publishers often want to take notes on sell sheets, and they can't if you cover everything in dark ink and background images.

Chapter 19

Six Things You Can Say to End Your Game Pitch

And Three More Things Not To Say, Either

So, you've contacted a publisher and scheduled a meeting to show off your game. Now what? How can you get the most out of this meeting? What mistakes will turn the publisher off to your game? Let's look a few mistakes that can take a publisher from, "I'm willing to look at this game" to, "I want to leave this room as quickly as possible."

"I Have a Great *Star Wars* Game!" (Or Any Other Existing, Well-known Intellectual Property)

You might, but it doesn't matter. Popular properties increase the market for a game by several orders of magnitude, but they come with very hefty price tags. Something like *Star Wars* costs millions to license. Even smaller properties like *Firefly* create a cost in time and money that means the license itself — not your design — will lead the publisher's decision-making.

Your idea or design for a game based on an existing property falls into one of two categories:

- The mechanics are intricately tied to the property. In order to make your game, the publisher needs to pay for the license. Unless you already have the license and are allowed to sublicense those rights, this is money and time the publisher can better spend making other projects. Even if they were in the market for a game related to a license they have access to, for high-value properties they will have already reached out

to existing designers they have a relationship with, and probably have specific ideas about what kind of game they want.

- The mechanics are lightly tied to the property and your game could be re-skinned as something else. If this is the case, there are two possible issues. The first: why does your game merit an expensive license if it could be published without it? The second: even if your design were attached to the license in question, if your design isn't tightly tied to the property, why would its fans be excited? In the long run, no one wins by disappointing fans.

"I Have a Great New Collectible Game!"

The success of *Magic: The Gathering*, *HeroClix*, and other collectible games makes game designers excited to try making them — after all, haven't these successful games made millions?

Yes, they did. They also *cost* millions. A non-collectible game is hard enough to make. Adding collectability creates huge additional costs:

- Manufacturing random packs is complicated.
- With a non-collectible game, only one person in a play group needs to buy it. With a collectible game, everyone needs to buy it, making it hard to make that first sale.
- Customers, retailers, and distributors hate new collectible games. They have been burned too many times.
- Running organized play and tournament support (critical marketing for collectible games) is multiple full-time jobs.

As with licenses, if a publisher wants to put out a collectible game they will have a very specific goal and are likely to hire designers they already know to deliver that. They are unlikely to bet several million dollars on a designer they don't know.

There is one even greater reason not to pitch a collectible game: collectibility is a marketing mechanic, not a game mechanic. Collectibility is more about how a game is sold than how it is played. You are far better off designing a customizable game that delivers a lot of replayability and large game space while still being sold in a single box. Look at *Dominion*, *Small World*, or *Smash Up* for examples of how to do this well.

"I've Got a Great New Miniatures Game!" (Or Any Other Design With Lots of Custom, Non-printed Components)

You might, but publishers are in the business of making money, and components such as miniatures and custom dice are very expensive to make. Multiply that by the number of custom objects in your game and you get an idea of the costs involved.

It is true that a few figures can add good toy value and fun to a game. Games like *Shadows over Camelot* (13 unique figures), *Battlestar Galactica* (4), and *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* (17, plus custom dice) all benefit from the play value of cool miniatures. *Santorini was* sold as an abstract game for years before custom figures were added as a marketing tool to reach a larger audience. But these games would all work equally well as games without the figures, so choosing to add them is a product design or marketing choice, not a game design choice. All of these games were designed and tested with cardboard placeholders, and work fine that way. If your game *needs* large numbers of custom components, publishers are likely to pass. If it *benefits* from them, you can certainly suggest that after the publisher has indicated interest.

"My Game is a Better Deal for You Because I've Already Paid for All This Art!"

Publishers almost always want to modify designs before publishing them. This can range from small mechanical changes, to larger system changes, to major changes to theme and mechanics. Any of these can render existing art unusable.

Even if a publisher takes your game as-is, they are likely to want to hire their own artists. Unless you are an art director or graphic design professional, a publisher will almost certainly have a better ability to commission art that will help the product than you will (a consideration your artist is likely not in a position to make) and even in the event that you are exactly as expert as they, they may still want an art style that fits their marketing plans or product line.

On top of all that, when you sell a game with art included, either you expect to be paid for that art to recoup your art costs, or you do not. If you do, you are asking the publisher to give you money for an asset they likely don't want. (Even

if it is cheap, why pay for something you won't use?) If you don't, you're giving away money for no earthly reason, which is a horrible deal for you.

Even if you are an artist and can do the work for no additional cost to the publisher (please value your time more than that!) try doing just a few reference images and samples to include in the pitch. You can offer your services as an artist, and if they want to go down that path, they can pay you. If they don't, you've saved a lot of time and heartache.

"My Game Will Sell Great, It's Just Like *Dominion!* (Or Any Other Wildly Successful Game)

There is nothing wrong with drawing on other games for inspiration, and you can use existing systems, mechanics — even themes and stories, in some cases — without legal or ethical peril. However, you need to start with those existing ideas and take them somewhere new, combine them or play with them in a way that has not been done before. Why? Because if your game is exactly like some existing game, there's no reason a gamer would buy it instead of the popular-and-equivalent they already know about.

You *can*, however, use existing games to help define the genre of your game. ("My game is a deckbuilder like *Dominion*." "My game is a word game like *Bananagrams*.") These are good shorthand introductions that help a publisher understand your starting point. If a publisher doesn't want a new deckbuilder, you gain nothing from showing them your awesome "deckbuilder like *Dominion*," *so you might as well find that out as soon as possible.*

Even better, if you can say, "My game is like *Dominion*, but <thing that is different>" or, "People who play *Bananagrams* like my game because <thing you do differently>," then you have powerful, informative content for your pitch.

"I Want to Show You My Awesome Game, But First, Sign This NDA!"

No thank you. See Chapter 2: Protecting Your Ideas & Why You Don't Need To, but understand that for the most part, no one in the gaming industry will sign anything in order to look at your game.

Publishers work with dozens of games at once and see a dozen pitches a day at shows. The odds that they have something vaguely like your game somewhere in development is higher than you expect. By asking them to sign an NDA (or pretty much anything else) you are asking them to open themselves up to possible trouble with very little gain. You mark yourself as someone who might be willing to sue them over a perceived slight down the road, and as someone who doesn't understand how business is typically done.

Remember, at the end of the day it is far more cost effective for a publisher to pay you than to steal your ideas.



The preceding tactics can kill your pitch outright, but there are still more ways to do yourself harm. Let's look at some ways you can hurt yourself without knowing it. These are things that won't end the pitch, but are likely bump you down a publisher's interest list.

"My Game Will Kill *Monopoly.*" (Or Any Other Evergreen Game)

When you say this, publishers hear, "I have no idea how marketing works."

No, it won't. That's not even a good goal. Games like *Monopoly* have become iconic representations of our industry. *Catan*, *Apples to Apples* … these are games we should support and promote (and sit next to on the shelf), not try to dethrone.

Remember, your job is to design and pitch your game. It's the publisher's job to market and sell it.

"Everyone Who Has Played My Game Loves It!"

When you say this, publishers hear, "I have no idea how playtesting works."

Read Chapter 10: Playtesting for details, but you should want playtesters who will help make your game great, and since no game starts out great, what you're telling your publisher is that your design hasn't yet improved from its first prototype. You need to test, change, improve, rebuild, and test again. If you

don't have people who can find fault with your game, you need to be looking for more playtesters, not a publisher.

"I Really Want to Find Someone to Partner With to Make This Game!"

When you say this, publishers hear, "I have no idea how this business relationship works."

You might be looking for a partner, but they are not. If you have never published a game before and are not pitching games to a publisher at their request, they are, at best, looking to find good game ideas, to sign a designer to a royalty contract, and to move on with the rest of their business. You are not a partner. You are not even an employee.

If what you mean is that you are excited about your game, willing to help (at their request and with their guidance) with marketing and promotions, and willing to go to conventions or do interviews or otherwise help out, that's great. That enthusiasm may well be useful to the publisher and hopefully create sales and make everyone money. Understand that you are offering these services as a designer, an outside entity, not a "partner."

Chapter 20

How to Network at Conventions

Or, Getting Started in the Game Industry

As the saying goes, you are who you know. In any industry, landing a job can be all about getting recommended by friends, getting the inside scoop from people at the company, and meeting people socially long before you want them to help your job search or promote your game. The games industry is no exception to this rule. This chapter provides tools for networking at gaming industry conventions.

Conventions are a people- and information-rich environment. You can find designers, publishers, artists, editors — almost everyone is at these shows promoting their work and networking. Given how much is going on, conventions can be a great place to meet people, if you do it right.

The first part of networking at conventions is to plan ahead. The advice here gives you tools for how to network, but you should plan out who you want to talk to, what you want to cover, what you want to learn, what (if anything) of yours you want to show off, and how you plan to approach the convention months in advance. Even something as simple as having a floor map of the exhibition hall with the companies you are interested in flagged will save you much wandering around.

Everyone is very busy, particularly while the exhibit floor is open. Your focus when walking the exhibit hall should be on identifying people you want to network with, not on making game pitches (or whatever else) in the moment. Find the booths of publishers you might want to pitch to, the booths of people making games like yours — anyone you think might be a useful contact. The first person you talk to at any given booth will likely be a volunteer or staff member. They are useful (and friendly!) people to talk to, but you probably want to get past them to talk to people higher up the food chain. Your approach should be, “I’m a new designer looking to learn more about your company and the industry. Who should I talk to?” Let them point you to the person in charge.

You may need to come back to a booth several times to find this person. They are often booked in meetings all day and will be in and out of their booths. Always ask if there is a specific time to try back and expect to walk the floor more than once doing follow-ups.

Once you find the person you want to talk to, understand that you get very little of their time at this stage. All you want to do is set up time for later. Your approach here should be, "I'm a new designer looking to learn more about your company and the industry. Can I buy you a drink later and ask you about <what you do>?" Ideally, ask them about something specific that they have done or worked on, and that you want to learn more about. This will be different for each person. Again, you want to plan this out ahead of time, and be really honest about what you are interested in. Don't use this to get a seat at the table, use this to really show your passion and learn more about the craft of design, the industry, or whatever are you exploring.

Don't pitch anything on the show floor (unless specifically invited to). Don't promote yourself and don't plan on more than 30 seconds of interaction. If they say yes, get a number to contact them at and ask when to call or text them. Once you have that, thank them for their time and go away. Contact them when you were asked to and expect that the time you were given will vary. You can show your professionalism by being both prompt and flexible.

Your actual conversations will vary, but go into them with the goal of learning about that person and what they do, not with the goal of promoting yourself or your game(s). You will likely get to talk a little about what you are trying to do, but remember that this is networking, not a pitch meeting. Learn as much as you can, and try to walk away with two key takeaways:

- The email address of the person you are talking to so you can follow up and thank them.
- Any recommendations they have for what your next step should be: who else you should contact, who makes games like yours that you should talk to, artists you might want to work with — anything that might be helpful to you.

Many conventions are starting to make networking easier by setting up "game designer speed dating" events, where they bring a bunch of publishers to you, and give those publishers the opportunity to look over a very high number of games very quickly, seeking out the ones they want to get more information

about. These are well worth it if you can get involved; *The White Box* originally came to its publisher's attention this way at the GAMA Trade Show in 2015.

In addition to a copy of your game to show off (they are highly unlikely to sit down and play), you should bring a stack of business cards, a pile of single-page information sheets, and enough copies of your pitch prototype to hand out. How many copies you should bring is hard to predict, but try to have four to eight copies with you in case publishers want to take one. You are far better off bringing a few extras back home than turning down someone who wants one.

Again, if you are specifically interested in pitching a game idea to publishers, try to contact them via email months before a convention. Having a scheduled time to meet helps ensure you get face time at the show.

A Sneaky Way In

If your long-term goal is to find employment in the game industry, there is another way to get the attention of industry professionals. The frontline staff mentioned above? You could be that person!

Companies are always looking for good people to help them at conventions. You want to set this up six to twelve months before a convention by contacting the company and finding the person or team responsible for the convention you want to volunteer at. Your foot in the door is enthusiasm, knowledge of the company's games and products, and willingness to work for free or close to free.

Most companies provide volunteers with badges, food (or money for food), and other perks, but remember — you are not here for the perks, you are here for the contacts. Being professional, enthusiastic, and effective as a booth helper gets you more than just a gold star with that company. If you can ask the person running the booth to recommend you to owners of other companies, you can be almost guaranteed at least a 30-second handshake and a favorable nod.

Which Conventions Should You Go To?

You should be able to find small, local conventions near you. Those are prime places to look for playtesters and new people to play games with. But most smaller conventions do not draw larger game publishers and big-name designers. If you want to show off your game to lots of publishers, think about going to these conventions (in calendar order):

- **Origins Game Fair** (originsgamefair.com)
  Mid-June • Columbus, Ohio, USA
- **Dice Tower Con** (dicetowercon.com)
  Early July • Orlando, Florida, USA
- **Gen Con** (www.gencon.com)
  Mid-August • Indianapolis, Indiana, USA
- **Spiel** (also called Essen) (www.merz-verlag-en.com)
  Mid-October • Essen, Germany
- **Lucca** (www.luccacomicsandgames.com/it/lcg/home/)
  Late October • Lucca, Italy
- **BGG.CON** (boardgamegeek.com/bggcon)
  Mid-November • Dallas, Texas, USA



These two conventions are each actually a collection of different events under the same brand:

- **Protospiel** (protospiel.org)
  There are several Protospiel conventions, which are specifically oriented toward game deigners, in locations across the USA. Check the website for more details.
- **PAX** (paxsite.com)
  There are several PAX conventions, all around the world. Check the website for the one near you. Of particular interest may be PAX Unplugged, launching later this year (as this book goes to press), which promises a focus on tabletop — rather than digital — games.

Chapter 21

How to Get Your Game Into the Marketplace

Or, "I Have Games, So Now What?"

After all the fun work of designing and crafting your lovely game, and after the less-fun work of getting the game printed… then what do you do with them? You aren't manufacturing all these games just to have them sit in your garage. How are you going to get them to the public so people can play your masterpiece? Let's discusss a number of possible "what next" options to get your games into players' hands.

The Hard Way: Do It Yourself

The most direct way to get your game into a gamer's hands is to put it there yourself. You can sell your game directly, either in person at conventions and events, or online via your own website.

Upsides:

- **Passionate sales.** You will never find someone more passionate about your game than yourself. That passion can help to drive sales by getting people excited about your game. In addition, lots of gamers like supporting small publishers, and game collectors may be especially interested in having acquired a game that's otherwise hard to get. After all, they can't get it in stores — only direct from you.
- **Higher margins.** When selling directly you don't need to give someone else a cut of the price. This does not mean that anything over the cost of printing is profit. If you sell at a convention, think of the cost of going to the con as an expense. If you invest time in selling it, that

time is worth something. If you ship to your customers, that's an expense — sometimes a substantial one. But if your game is very expensive to print in comparison to its retail price, direct sales may be the only way to sell it and make any profit.

Downsides:

- **Effort.** Doing everything yourself is a lot of work. Sales is a skill like any other and many people are good at game design, but not good at sales. Time you spend selling your game is time you are not spending making another game.

Selling direct is good for your situation in these circumstances:

- You have a relatively small print run.
- You are very outgoing and interested in promoting your game.
- You like selling things.

The "Sounds Like a Good Idea But Doesn't Work" Way: Selling Directly to Brick-and-Mortar Retailers

We all know and love our local retail stores — why not let them do the selling? They get your great game, you get some (but not all) of the money, and everyone wins, right?

Not exactly. The problem with this plan is the retailers' bandwidth. Your game is one of the thousands of games that come out in a given year. The retailer can either devote time and energy in finding out about all of these games, or they can maintain relationships with a small handful of distributors whose staffs do that reviewing for them. Since retailers already have those relationships (that's usually how they get their product from all the big-name publishers), they have little incentive to work with small publishers directly.

There's a further logistical hurdle. A single retail store won't be able to sell enough copies of your game to make the one- or two-game shipping costs from you to them make sense. The distributor's service in aggregating the goods of many small publishers together into a single box is a further factor that makes carrying those games sensible.

You might be able to work this angle with a single retailer near you, or someone you already have a relationship with, but you don't want to try to move an entire print run, even a small one, this way.

The Hybrid-Online Way: Amazon and Friends

Third-party online sales outlets like Amazon and eBay are a way to partially circumvent the difficulty of cultivating dozens or hundreds of retail accounts by yourself. Most have online, self-service tools for onboarding your game to their listings, which gets around the issue discussed above, where retail managers and buyers just don't have the time to deal with you.

You'll give away some portion of the price the consumer pays to the site(s) you work with, which may be relatively small (eBay) or more or less the same discount a retailer would get (Amazon).

One thing to be aware of is that other people can sell your game on most of these sites as easily as you can. If you're pursuing distribution (see below) in parallel with online efforts like these, you should steel yourself against (or take steps to avoid) waking up one morning to discover that someone else is selling your game on Amazon more cheaply than you're offering it for.

The Expensive and Hard Way With Lots of Upside: Distribution

Putting your game in distribution is the way that costs you the most money (in that you get paid less for each game you sell this way), but may make you the most money overall (in that it may be the best way to sell a lot of copies of your game for the least amount of your work).

Distributors work with publishers, from tiny, single-game independents to big publishers like Wizards of the Coast, Portal Games, and Fantasy Flight Games. Distributors resell games to retailers, who sell them to the public. This is how most games get to your friendly local game store.

As a first step toward understanding distribution, let's look at the who-gets-what of a game with an MSRP of $40.

A gamer (theoretically) pays $40 for the game.

A retailer (usually) pays about $20 to the distributor. Yes, the retailer expects to sell the product for about twice what they paid for it. That (barely) lets them pay their employees, cover the rent, keep the lights on, fund marketing and organized play efforts, and do all the other things that allow them to stay open. Having such a theoretically large portion of the game's retail price at their disposal, some online discounters sell for much less than MSRP in the hopes of making more money overall by moving a higher volume of games. Discounting across the board as standard practice isn't usually in a retailer's best interests, and it can have a dangerous impact on the perceived value of your game, too. It's a complicated topic.

A distributor generally pays about $16 to the publisher of our $40 game. This may vary a bit and they might pay less to a new account, but 40% of MSRP is a good target.

If you are going to self-publish, that $16/unit has to cover everything — printing, shipping, art, marketing… and, hopefully, yourself!

So why give away well over half the sticker price of your game? You give this money away because… it makes you more money! Distributors already have relationships with retailers. A single salesperson at a big distributor might have 100 retailers who trust them to bring their attention to new products they should be carrying. You can work your meeples to the bone[2] trying to get your game out into the world yourself or you can tap into the large, powerful system that is already in place.

How Do You Get Into Distribution?

Getting your game into distribution is one of the most difficult things for a new publisher to do. The first thing to understand is that distributors are not going to help you develop your game. Hundreds of finished games are offered to them every month; they are not interested in the game you have not yet made.

The second thing to understand is that distributors really are offered hundreds of games every month. Many of them are from well-established publishers who do a great job of marketing, or are from newer companies that already established marketplace demand with huge Kickstarter successes. You can get into distribution without those things, but you need a solid strategy to make a great argument that your product is something retailers will clamor to get, and will move off retail shelves once it's there. "This is a superior game design!" is not that argument, at least not without a ton of backup in the form of huge amounts of existing sales, wonderful reviews from the most trusted

[2] Do meeples have bones?

sources, personal recommendations from other trusted publisher-clients, or similar. If you can go to a distributor with existing purchase orders from retailers in hand, that can be one way to get attention.

Even once you get a distributor's attention, they will place orders for the number of games they think they can move, to test out your game. It is possible to see orders as low as a dozen games (not cases, games), and you'll be stuck with the rest of your print run to store elsewhere — all the more reason not to print thousands of copies.

When you contact distributors, you need to supply information about your game. Each distributor is different, but in general, you should have a single-page sell sheet for your game that makes it easy for them to see the following information:

- The name of the game
- The name of the designer (if the designer is a known quantity)
- The name of the publisher
- The expected release date
- The MSRP and stock number
- Sample art and/or images of interesting components
- A very brief (ideally, one sentence or sentence-fragment) summary of the game's style, type, and theme (e.g., "A resource-management board game set on Mars")
- Bullet points describing why the game will stand out and sell (rookie mistakes: presenting information about how to play, and proposing that the game's great design will make it a sure-fire seller)

You should have a production-quality prototype or printed sample to send on request. They want to see the game as it will look in retail, so you need a finished game, not a prototype, and definitely not just an idea.

What Happens If a Distributor Agrees to Carry Your Game?

The first step is to get your game to them. If you already have your games, you'll need to ship them to the distributors at your expense. If you've gotten distributors lined up while you are printing the game, you can have them sent directly if the orders are large enough for it to make sense.

You'll need to decide whether to extend credit to your distributors. Are you willing to send them games in advance of them paying for them? Are you willing to wait 30 days for payment? Ninety days? Is it worth offering an extra discount

for rapid payment? These are all points of negotiation for which you should be prepared by knowing the absolute worst deal you're willing to accept. Negotiate for better, but be prepared to walk away from a deal that doesn't meet your bottom-line needs.

Once the games are at the distributor, they sit in warehouses. They're sold to retailers and shipped out. The amount of effort the distributors' sales reps will expend talking about your game is often directly proportional to how much excitement you've already created in the marketplace.

If you're lucky, your distributors will sell out and order more games from you. The cycle continues!

Consolidators, Flooring, and More

There are other companies and arrangements you can pursue that are similar to traditional distribution, but are somewhat different. New kinds of intermediaries and deal templates pop up all the time, so ask around to find out what's new.

Consolidators are like distributors, except that their customers are other distributors, or sometimes, chain stores. One consolidator will typically work with many smaller publishers — some with as few as one title — in order to provide a single point of contact and shipping for distributors that would otherwise become overwhelmed dealing with so many small publishers.

Most consolidators keep your product on hand in their warehouse on a consignment basis. That is, you own it, but they have it, and they pay you as it sells, either monthly or quarterly. You might be charged storage fees for unsold units, or that might be considered part of the consolidator's fee. A consolidator is usually compensated with a percentage of your game's retail or wholesale price, sometimes with an additional fee per game or carton shipped. Some consolidators provide additional services, such as co-op advertising, or access to co-op convention booths at the larger conventions.

Some distributors offer "flooring" arrangements to certain publishers. That means they warehouse your product on consignment, and pay you as it sells. This isn't typically offered to smaller publishers, but does solve certain problems where it makes sense, such as persistent failure to keep hot games in stock.

Some Distributors by Region

There are many distributors worldwide. Here are some of the largest by region. Check their websites for current contact and submission information, and research to find what new distribution options have arisen since this list was

assembled. One good way to do research is to look over the lists of distributors maintained by publishers you like, or publishers who make games similar to yours. Atlas Games maintains a list of their distributors at atlas-games.com/pdf_storage/Distributors.pdf, for example.

Australia

- Good Games — goodgames.com.au
- Ventura — www.ventura.com.au

Canada

- Everest Wholesale — everestwholesale.com
- Lion Rampant — lionrampantimports.com
- Universal Distribution — universaldist.com

Europe

- Enigma Distribution — bergsalaenigma.com
- Esdevium Games — esdeviumgames.com
- Heidelberger Spieleverlag — heidelbaer.de

USA

- ACD — acdd.com
- Alliance — alliance-games.com
- E-figures — e-figures.com
- Golden Distribution — goldendist.com
- GTS Distribution — gtsdistribution.com
- Mad Al — madal.com
- Peachstate Hobby Distribution — phdgames.com
- Southern Hobby Supply — southernhobby.com

Chapter 22

On the Dotted Line

So the time has come — you've polished your game, shipped it off to a publisher — and they want it! Congratulations! Now it's time to revel in the fame and money due all published designers, right?

Well, no. The next step is to enter into a contract, a legal document defining the roles you and your publisher will play in getting your game into the marketplace.

Each company will have slightly different contracts and processes, and each designer will have different requirements and modifications they would like to suggest.

This chapter cannot cover every possible situation, and yours may be very different. This is not intended as legal advice, and (as with all contracts) you should feel free to have any contracts presented to you looked over (at your expense) by a lawyer. No game publisher should object to you taking a reasonable amount of time to review contracts.

There are two overall types of contracts:

Sales Contracts

Under these contracts you agree to sell the full rights to your game to the publisher, they cut you a check, and you both walk away from each other. These can be useful for designers who want to move on to the next project and not deal with royalties or deal with the publisher long-term, and you get money up front. Money now is worth more than money later!

Outright sales are good for publishers who want to to know exactly what their costs are on a game. However, as a designer you give up any long-term interest in the game — if it becomes a smash hit you won't see any more money, and if it goes out of print the rights won't revert back to you, as they often do in a license contract (see below).

Outright sales are a rarity in the hobby game market, except in the case of publisher-directed work (e.g., you're hired to develop a particular idea that the publisher has specified) and work related to licensed properties (where the

licensor may require that the rights flow permanently back to them). You are more likely to get a license contract from publishers, especially for your first few games.

License Contracts

Under a license contract you grant the rights to publish your game to the publisher, for a fixed duration, and perhaps a limited number of languages and/or regions of the world. The publisher agrees to certain conditions, including the timing and amount of payments, the latter usually based on the game's sales. These types of contracts are more common than sales contracts.



It can be difficult to study and discuss contracts, even between designers, because some contracts define their terms as confidential information, and even where that's not the case, many designers and publishers are simply reticent to share the financial details of their agreements. However, in the interest of showing new designers what contracts look like, let's look over one contract we can freely talk about — the second draft of the contract for the product you are now holding! (Full disclosure: this was the near-to-final text of the original contract between myself and Gameplaywright to publish *The White Box*. As publishing plans developed and Atlas Games joined the effort, this contract was later replaced — at everyone's agreement — by a more complex three-party contract that's a much less useful educational tool.)

It is worth saying that you should feel enabled to ask questions or request modifications of any contract before you sign it. Both sides must be satisfied, and the worst that can happen is that your counterpart will say no. If you can't agree on a contract the publisher can't make your game, but don't treat their initial contract draft as a "sign this as written or walk away" proposition.

You should also always feel free to bring any contract to your own lawyer for review or modification. Although this can be expensive, nothing you read in a book of general advice — including what you'll find below — can possibly address all of your own unique circumstances. Which is to say, as you might expect, I am not a lawyer, and this is not legal advice.

The White Box Publishing Agreement (Draft 2)

> This is an agreement (hereinafter called the "Agreement") between Jeremy Holcomb, whose business address is {…} (hereinafter "Author"); and Gameplaywright LLP, whose principal place of business is {…} (hereinafter "Publisher"), considered to be in effect as of the later date recorded with the signatures below.

This is pretty standard opening text, identifying the parties involved. This is a legal document, do make sure to use your full legal name. Some designers incorporate business entities for tax or liability purposes. If you do that, your publication contract would be with that legal entity, instead of with you personally.

> Author agrees to provide a manuscript, and suggested parts list (hereinafter called the Work) for use in publishing the game-creation kit with the working title White Box (hereinafter "Game"). The manuscript will comprise practical instructions for creating and publishing board games. It will be roughly 40,000 words, and written as a complete logical work.

This section details the deliverables to be provided by you, the designer. This should include the name of your game, as well as a brief description of what it is. Again, fairly basic, particularly since you won't get to this point before the publisher has seen, played, and evaluated the game already. In this case 40,000 words was overshot rather quickly.

> Publisher agrees to print, publish, and offer for public sale physical and electronic editions of the Game.

This is what the publisher is agreeing to do — make the game. Note the reference to electronic editions. That's not standard for board games and should be included only if that is within the scope of the publisher's traditional operations, or if the publisher has relationships with other digital partners and you want to allow them to sublicense digital editions of your design. In any case,

it's worth making sure that your contract is explicit in whether it is granting or reserving digital rights to the publisher

> The Author warrants and represents that he is sole author, creator, and proprietor of the Work, that the Work is original, and that the Work does not violate or infringe any copyright, trademark, right of privacy, or any other personal or proprietary right of any third party. The Author further warrants and represents that he has the full power and right to enter into this Agreement and to grant the rights conveyed to the Publisher in this Agreement. The Author further warrants and represents that he has not and will not, during the term of this Agreement, enter into any agreement or understanding which would conflict with the rights herein granted the Publisher. The Author further agrees to indemnify and hold harmless the Publisher from any loss resulting from any breach of the provisions in this paragraph.

More standard legal text. This section reduces to, "You agree that you actually own this thing you are licensing to us," and is intended to protect them if anyone comes out of the woods saying, "No, that was my idea!" The "don't conflict" text says that you won't try to do anything like license the same game to a different publisher. I've seen proposed terms in other agreements along the lines of, "The Author/Creator will not do anything to conflict or compete with <Product>," which was removed from that contract as overly vague.

> In return for the right to publish, or license for publication, the Work within the Game, including all subsequent reprintings, versions, and editions of the Game in all languages, including but not limited to electronic editions of the Game, the Author will receive periodic payments from Publisher, made in United States dollars, mailed to the Author's business address above in the form of checks drawn on a U.S. bank account.

The contract should specify which languages and regions of the world it applies to. Note that there is no reference to regions above. I asked Gameplaywright to specify the region — worldwide — in the next draft.

> If the Game's publication is crowdfunded, Author and Publisher will agree in writing on a Materials and Fulfillment Cost for each backing tier and add-on offered to the public, which will be a reasonable approximation of the actual cost to print, produce, ship, and fulfill that tier or add-on. For each tier or add-on that includes an existing Publisher work other than the Game, that existing work's actual cost will be set at 25% of its prevailing retail value. Within 60 days of the conclusion of the crowdfunding campaign, Publisher will pay Author 25% of the campaign's net profits, defined as the total funds raised reduced by the total Materials and Fulfillment Costs of all the backers of each tier. If Publisher and Author cannot agree on Materials and Fulfillment Costs, crowdfunding of the Game may not be undertaken.

This is somewhat unique section, becoming more common as more and more games are crowdfunded. Many companies that do crowdfunding may want to do the pricing internally, with no feedback from the designer. Here I am given input, and indeed could derail the whole campaign, although it is of course in my best interest to ensure the project funds.

The 25% cut of the profits specified is instead of the normal royalties (see below). As written the profit on a successful campaign (and thus the 25% cut) could be zero, so in for the next draft, I requested an amendment stating "… will pay the Author 25% of the campaign's net profits or 3% of the campaign's total closing value, whichever is greater."

Note that there is nothing in this contract about the author being involved in the promotion or running of the crowdfunding campaign (or any other promotions or marketing, for that matter). Designers are often (wisely) eager to talk about their work, but any promotions the publisher *requires* should be spelled out in the contract.

> For copies of the Game sold outside a crowdfunding campaign, the Author will receive 5% of the Publisher's gross revenue from physical sales of the Game, 50% of the Publisher's gross revenue from electronic sales of the Game, and 50% of the publisher's gross revenue from license fees paid by foreign translators of the Game. Payments to the Author for copies of the Game sold outside a crowdfunding campaign will be made

> within 45 days of the end of March, June, September, and December of each year while this Agreement remains in force.

Here is the meat of the money you make as a designer. This section specifies the royalty payments owed to the designer, and the dates they're payable. Royalties are nearly always specified as a percentage of something, given that the goal of royalties is to allow the partners to a project to share in its success in an agreed proportion. The above rates are relatively standard, and I was happy to agree to them. A big-name designer might have been able to bump these up a point or three, but almost never to two digits for a board game's printed version.

Worth noting is that the 5% is not based on the game's *retail value* — rather, it's based on the the publisher's revenues. For a $30 game, a hobby game store likely paid $15 to a distributor, who paid $12 to the publisher. I make my 5% of that $12 - about $0.60 out of your $30 went into my pocket. Get five of your friends to buy a copy and I can get a cup of coffee! Different publishers make royalty offers based on different starting amounts, from retail price to "net profits," the latter of which are the publisher's revenues, further reduced by some set of allowable expenses, such as shipping (to distribution) or marketing expenses. A royalty rate is meaningless without an in-depth and well-documented understanding of the amount to which is applies.

It's worth noting something that you don't see in the contract paragraph above — an advance. Some companies and contracts offer an advance against royalties, which is money paid up front to the designer. This isn't in addition to the royalty percentage, though.If you get an advance for $500, the first $500 in royalties has already been paid to you, so you won't get more money until after that $500 "credit" is exhausted. The upside for you is that you get money now, and in the event anything goes wrong (e.g., the game isn't published, or sales tank) you still keep it. A new designer should expect a relatively small advance. In this case, I asked for an advance of $500.

> The Publisher agrees to prominently credit the Author in physical and electronic editions of the Game.

You should want this for your ego and self-promotion — you made it, you should get credit! Having your name on the box is one of the few perks of being a hobby designer, so there is not much reason for a publisher to object.

If you are working with a mass market publisher or licensed property then the publisher or licensor may not want your name on the box, which is probably OK.

> The Publisher will set the suggested retail price of the Game in consultation with the Author.

Note the word "consultation." I have no say over the final sales price, and this is probably fine. The publisher wants to make money, and often knows how to do so better than you would. However, since your royalty is based on the retail price, it seems equitable that the designer should have a say.

> The Author will be identified as the copyright holder for the Work; the Game as a whole and its graphic design will be copyright to the Publisher. The Author and Publisher will be identified as joint owners of the trademark under which the Game is released. For the avoidance of doubt, "Gameplaywright" remains a sole trademark of the Publisher.

Again, what you are licensing to them is the game: it's concepts and mechanics. The publisher will likely bring in art assets, graphic design, and other production elements. They own the work they do, you own (and are licensing) the work you did. This means that if I decide to change publishers down the road I can't take the work of this publisher and reprint it directly — at least not without their permission.

> Any material changes, additions, deletions, abridgments, or condensations in the text of the Work will be made by the Publisher only with the written consent of the Author.

This is somewhat unusual, and comes likely from Gameplaywright's background in publishing books. Most publishers, when they license a game, specify that they have the right to change anything they like — mechanics, theme, rules, anything. This is basically a bonus for me, and I'll certainly not object!

> This Agreement will last for a period of five years from the first publication of the Game. At that time, it will automatically renew for additional two-year terms unless either party notifies the

> other in writing at least 45 days in advance of the end of the current term that it wishes to end the Agreement, in which case it will terminate at the end of the current term.

This is important — all licensing contracts should specify an end date. This gives you as a content creator the ability to take back your work if you find any reason you no longer wish to work with this publisher, and it gives the publisher a window in which they know they have the rights so they can make sensible printing, sales, and distribution plans. Any window is better than no window. If there isn't something like this in your contract you should add it.

> If the Publisher fails to pay Author at least $50 under this Agreement for four consecutive quarters, the Author may terminate this Agreement by notifying the Publisher in writing of his intention to do so.

This is another "protect the creator" clause. If sales are so low for a year that you don't make any money, the rights revert back and you can go do something else with it. Since this protects only the designer and not the publisher this might not always be included, and if it's not, you should want it added. Note also that this conflicts with an advance. Thus, if you get an advance, any language like this might have a clause that says it doesn't kick in until after the first two years, or otherwise covers the advance.

> On termination of this Agreement, Publisher will have a period of 30 days to cease sales of electronic copies of the Game, and 180 days to liquidate all remaining physical inventory of the Game. After 180 days, Publisher's remaining physical inventory must be destroyed.

This lets the publisher unload excess inventory even if the contract terminates, so they don't get caught with product they can't sell. It also protects the designer and avoids having "old," competing copies of your game on the market if you change publishers or reprint yourself.

> On publication, the Publisher will provide the Author twelve copies of the physical edition of the published Game. Further physical copies of the physical edition of the Game, and copies

> of subsequent versions and editions of the Game, may be purchased at 50% of the retail price from the Publisher.

This gives me a small number of free copies of my own work to archive, give away, or do with as I please, and lets me get more at a discount if I want. The quantity will vary, but is usually around this number. Note that this is the product they are required to give you. If you are at a convention and want a copy to show off, or want to send out more for any reason, publishers often comp those as well. This clause just shows the number they *must* give you. Make sure there is something like this in the contract if you want a few free copies for your use.

> On publication, the Publisher will provide the Author one copy of the electronic edition of the Game, which the Author may not distribute or resell without the Publisher's consent.

As above, this is your freebie copy. This will only be present in contracts that include electronic rights.

> This Agreement shall be binding upon and inure to the benefit of the heirs, executors, administrators, and assigns of the Author, and upon and to the successors and assigns of the Publisher.
>
> Any action brought to enforce the terms of this agreement must be brought in the state of Minnesota and shall be governed by Minnesota law. The right to trial by jury is waived by Author and Publisher. The prevailing party in any litigation arising from this Agreement will be entitled to all costs of collection including reasonable attorneys' fees.
>
> This Agreement contains the entire agreement between the Author and Publisher. No prior communications between them shall be deemed a part of this Agreement. This Agreement may only be modified or amended in writing, signed by both Author and Publisher.

This is standard contract text, specifying how to resolve issues if there is a dispute or conflict down the road. Publishers are unlikely to be willing to change this text, and although it's to your legal advantage to specify a legal

venue — the region whose laws will govern the contract — that's where you live rather than where the publisher is located, it's rarely a big deal, and almost never worth wrangling about.

Chapter 23

Six Board Game Accessibility Fails, and How to Hack Them

by Erin Hawley

I've always needed help playing board games, as I don't have the range-of-motion, strength, or dexterity to do it on my own. There are actions I can do, like roll dice or pick up a card, and others I can't, like shuffling or reaching to move pieces across the board. Gaming has always been an act of interdependence, much like all my activities of daily living, and something I've adapted to over the years with personal hacks.

House rules and small-scale solutions can work, but what if these adjustments were baked into the game? Thoughtful and inclusive design doesn't just mean more disabled people can play, it can improve the quality of the game for everyone.

This essay identifies six access barriers I've encountered in tabletop gaming, and offers potential solutions that can work right out of the box. These access issues are from my perspective as a physically disabled individual, and the ideas below may not apply or work for everyone, but I hope my words can be a resource and starting point for designers and players alike.

Hidden Information

The Problem: Imagine this — I'm playing a deck-builder and have five cards in front of me, each with unique abilities and paragraphs of text, that I can't physically hold up to read in private. I must put the cards face-up on the table and ask my opponent to look away. Secrecy becomes even more difficult when I shuffle through an entire deck to find a specific card. Hidden info, especially coupled with lots of text on each card, negatively affects my experience — even if the game is otherwise stunning.

The Hack: Hidden information can be fun when it's done with accessibility in mind. For example, in *7 Wonders*, each card's purpose is in the upper left corner in vibrant, big icons. Since there's no text involved, I can glance at my

hand in under a minute. The pertinent info is in the top half of the card, making them perfect for card holders. Cooperative board games, like *Harry Potter: Hogwarts Battle* and *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*, eliminate the need to hide your info, so I display the cards in a way that's accessible to me. If a game isn't cooperative, designers can include a single-sheet player aid that describes the abilities of each card. If the above options don't work, consider adding a small player screen so folks can look at their components freely. *Roll For the Galaxy* and *Keyflower* use player screens effectively; *Roll*'s screen doubles as a player aid (bonus accessibility!), while *Keyflower*'s is designed to look like a cute house for your meeples.

Dexterity Mechanics

The Problem: This may seem impossible to solve, as dexterity is never going to work for me. Games like *Flick 'em Up* and *Captain Sonar* are appealing — the former for its theme and design, and the latter for its tense atmosphere culminating in high-fives and an exhilarating accomplishment. While *Captain Sonar* is engaging to watch, I still want to join in. It's the equivalent of sitting on the sidelines in school, watching your friends have fun but not being able to play alongside them.

The Hack: Fortunately, I grew up with friends who understood my limitations. While I couldn't play kickball in the traditional way, my pals included me in the sport, either throwing the ball toward my wheelchair tires so I could "kick" it, or having me carry the ball on my lap as I drove around the field. Thinking this way can apply to gaming; while I can't do the flicking in *Flick 'em Up*, or draw quickly within the lines in *Sonar*, there are opportunities to create modified roles for those with physical disabilities. For example, instead of tracing lines or using a pen at all, give alternate rules that work around this — like having folks communicate through blinking, tapping, pressing a button, etc. App integration would be perfect here if it's in the budget. Thinking outside the box is crucial when it comes to accessibility and dexterity mechanics.

Real-time Games

The Problem: In these games, players take their turns simultaneously, and often use a timer app complete with tense music to further stress you out in a fun way. Some titles are completely real-time, like *Escape: Zombie*

City, while others, like *XCOM: The Board Game*, have both real-time and turn-based phases. Since I need help reaching components, and generally can't do anything fast enough to beat the timer, these games lock me out accessibility-wise — but I love the exciting atmosphere surrounding these games.

The Hack: *XCOM*, from what I've seen (I haven't played any real-time games because of the above reasons), is moving in the right direction. My hack is to offer a turn-based variant — complete this task in X amount of turns, rather than X number of minutes. Some games do this already, like *Captain Sonar*, but it's not standard. Another possible hack is to add another role option in-game that doesn't require quick dice rolls or other wide-range movements. Like dexterity games, accessibility is about making sure everyone can contribute to the gaming experience beyond watching others play.

Component-heavy Games

The Problem: While component-heavy games could be appealing, especially when it comes to miniatures, they present an access barrier. Some games require different tokens to track a plethora of stats, points, and movements; add in multiple card decks and 20 robot miniatures, and you're inundated with cardboard and plastic. I have trouble extending my arms, and my table space is limited, making it hard to keep all the components separate and organized. For someone with shaky hands, stackable tokens and exact component placement render many component-heavy games difficult or entirely inaccessible.

The Hack: For players, I suggest investing in silicone cupcake holders or Plano boxes to keep parts separated and organized; this also makes setup and clean-up time easier. Card holders are ideal for displaying info (like player aids) and take up little space. Designers, see if there's a way to streamline the design to limit cardboard bits. For example, instead of using tokens to keep track of the score or in-game character abilities, try a dial. Or figure out multiple uses for the same card or token. Each game has its unique set of challenges, but I appreciate a less-is-more approach to component use; determine what you can cut while maintaining your game's unique style.

Sprawling Games

The Problem: Similar to component-heavy games, board games that take up too much table space are frustrating for folks who can't stand, have limited arm dexterity, and have sight-related disabilities. As an example, *Ticket to Ride: 10th Anniversary Edition* comes with an over-sized board, which is both gorgeous and slightly absurd. But I have to ask my gaming partners to tell me which routes are available on the opposite end of the board — and forget about being able to reach anything. Similarly, *Star Trek: Frontiers*' table requirement gets bigger as you explore new areas with your ship; there's also an area to display cards, and space needed for your hand and player components. It was hard to strategize with so much information spread outside of my visual range — and I can't stand or lean over to get a better vantage point.

The Hack: Luckily, there are a few solutions for designers here. One option is to make your board portable with various setups. Games like *Alhambra*, *7 Wonders*, and the recent *Arcane Academy* do this quite well. Instead of one big board, the game is broken up into manageable, individual player boards and other areas that can be repositioned as needed. Another hack is to offer player aids on cards, in the rulebook, in PDFs, or in apps — the aids can list any information that's hard to see on a big board. Gamers, for a quick fix, try taking pictures on your phone for portions of the board or card area that you can't see. My local gaming group helped me do that the last time we played *Codenames*, and it was a good enough solution. If you have the resources, you could also set up a webcam and tablet or phone when gameplay continuously modifies the board.

Visual Mechanics

The Problem: This is a broad topic, as there are a lot of barriers in tabletop gaming when it comes to vision-related disabilities. The most obvious issue is the necessity of vision to play most games in the first place. While 64 Oz. Games offers several Braille kits for popular titles like *Cards Against Humanity*, they cost almost as much as the game itself. Additionally, for players with low vision, text in rulebooks or on cards can be tragically small; *Star Trek: Frontiers* is a recent example of this problem, as I point out in my co-review with Rahdo. Color-blind players also have access concerns, even though simple solutions are easy and inexpensive to implement.

The Hack: To make games color-blind friendly, provide an alternate symbol or tangible difference on components. You can still have red and green tokens, but give them another signifier like a star and swirl shape; basically, don't rely on color alone to convey important information. The website Meeple Like Us (meeplelikeus.co.uk) does excellent accessibility teardowns that document how color-blindness affects gameplay. As for overall sight accessibility, there are ways to ensure your game limits the need for visual cues as much as possible. These methods include, but are not limited to: using unique shapes on cardboard components, making text or icons large and distinguishable, offering an audio or PDF rulebook that's screen-reader friendly, and including Braille when possible.



Abled and disabled designers should talk to folks with a wide spectrum of disabilities to understand our needs, and/or hire disabled playtesters and consultants. Don't hesitate to get involved in our gaming community, and start following disabled gamers on social media.

Continuous work toward full inclusion applies to every access barrier discussed here. I don't have all the answers (who does?), but see sharing these ideas as part of opening a dialogue to see if we can come up with even more viable solutions. I want us to work together — let's do this!

Erin Hawley writes about the intersection of disability and geeky media on her blog, The Geeky Gimp (geekygimp.com). She lives in New Jersey with her boyfriend, and is obsessed with board games, **Star Trek***,* **Overwatch***, hockey, and Mariah Carey.*

Chapter 24

Pacing Gameplay: Three-act Structure Just Like God and Aristotle Intended

by Jeff Tidball

You May Have Heard of Aristotle

A while ago, Aristotle wrote a treatise called *Poetics* about how drama works. One of the most important things he wrote in it is how a decent plot for anything dramatic has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Aristotle was on to something. Thinking about stories in terms of their beginnings, middles, and ends helps shine a light on how stories function, especially in terms of their pacing. It helps explain why some stories are compelling and other stories are more like *X-Men 3*.

As a separate matter our minds store, recall, and understand the happenings of life as stories whether they're events of total inconsequence or critical importance. A phone call distracted me and my toast burned. Rome expanded to encompass too diverse a territory and so it declined and fell. We remember things about the world in the form of dramas writ small, writ large, or writ in-between. That's part of the reason we find anecdotal evidence so compelling even though it's the worst kind of data there is. An anecdote is a story, and our brains love stories.

The playing of a game — like the making of toast or the collapsing of the Roman Empire — is also experienced by players as a story about what happened. You cornered the market on sheep, you built a sheep port, you connected all that with the longest road, and you proceeded to steamroll all who opposed you.

The point is this: it's fruitful to consider the experience of playing games in terms of the story of the player's gameplay. To come at it from a slightly different angle, the best way to understand a game's pacing is to think about how the player experiences gameplay as the story of what they did.

What's more, it's extremely fruitful to examine players' stories of gameplay in terms of those stories' beginnings, middles, and ends — which is to say, their three-act structure. If you use those insights to build and fine-tune gameplay that exploits folks' hardwired expectations about what's in a good story's beginning, its middle, and its end, your game will be made of win.

Dividing Stories Into Acts is Primarily an Analytical Exercise

This is theory we're talking about, here. As such, it is useful to creators to the extent that it helps them analyze their works-in-progress and improve them. An analytic, theoretical framework helps us talk about what is common, what it unusual, what is successful, and what is a godforsaken disaster.

A theory does not, however, help creators do the raw act of creation. A theory about hammers is different from hammering. If that doesn't make sense to you, go build a house real quick using nothing but your theory about hammers. I'll be here when you get—

—oh, back already? Very good. Moving on…

Everyone Has a Different Idea About What Each Act is For

The realm of Platonic ideals does not contain examples of the consummate first act, the flawless second act, and the ideal third act. Aristotle defined them in a way that made sense for Greek tragedies because he thought *Oedipus Rex* was a pretty swell play. Syd Field took a different approach and made a lot of money selling his book to would-be moviemakers.

Playwrights, novelists, and screenwriters; their critics; and countless academics have proposed myriad variations on what makes a good first act, what belongs in a second act, and what constitutes a third act. Others don't even agree that there are three acts. Some propose five, or six. Teleplays have functional act breaks for commercials as well as dramatic act breaks. (Sometimes they even fall in the same place.)

Aristotle. Syd Field. *Pfft.* Let me tell you what I think:

A Story's First Act Sets the Stage

It introduces the characters. It brings their situation to the point where a dramatic question is posed that the audience cares about enough to endure the rest of the story.

A Story's Second Act Answers the Dramatic Question

Through twists and turns, the audience is made to wonder what the dramatic question's answer will be. Ultimately, the second act of a well-formed story answers the dramatic question once and for all, for happy or sad.

A Story's Third Act Tells the Audience What Happens as a Result

Maybe it's about what happens in the world, maybe it's about what happens to the hero, or maybe it's about what happens to some framing narrator who didn't have a personal stake in the dramatic question at all. The story's third act's real point is to put what the audience just experienced in a context that gives it meaning for them in the real world.

Put Your Hand Down in the Back Row

It doesn't matter whether my pet idea of how a story's beginning, middle, and end function is Good, Right, and True because we're going to talk about gameplay now.[3] The important thing to understand before we move on is that a story has a beginning, a middle, and an end, and that each part serves a different function, and that the transitions between them are Important +5 because they establish the story's pacing, whether the viewer or reader is consciously aware of it or not. We're constantly and instinctively on the lookout for these transitions. We anticipate them. We look forward to them. We get kinda pissed off when they're missing.

The changes in a story's tone and tenor as its acts unfold clue us in to when we're supposed to put our popcorn down and pay attention, whether we can hold off going to the bathroom until the thing's over, if we'd better call the babysitter because we're going to be here a while. There's little that makes an

[3] If the way acts are defined for dramatic stories interests you I suggest *The Tools of Screenwriting*, by David Howard and Edward Mabley. Lots of people like Robert McKee's *Story* instead; that dude is loaded. And *Poetics* is, of course, still in print, and available for free all around the web.

audience crankier than when their expectations about the kinds of things that are supposed to be happening at this point in the story aren't being met.

The "Story" of Gameplay Can Be Thought Of in an Act-based Way

Gameplay's first act — its beginning — is when the stage is set for conflict among the players. Battle lines are drawn and the players understand the dimensions of the conflict.

Gameplay's second act — its middle — is the meat of the struggle for victory. Each player constantly strives to establish a compelling and enduring edge over the others, so he can make a final push for victory.

Gameplay's third act — its end — is the push for victory. One player, or several players in succession, either try and fail or try and ultimately succeed in sealing the deal and ending the game with their own victory.

Hopefully these different descriptions of gameplay states resonate naturally with your experience of playing games. If this mode of analysis has any merit for you, you're already nodding your head, recognizing these as ways you've felt at various points in many games you've played in your life.

Hopefully, also, you see almost immediately how this approach to gameplay pacing can explain why some games are no damn fun. In some games, no stage is set. In others, the game ends before anyone realizes they should be pushing for victory. At times, the endgame drags interminably because no one can win.

Let's talk more about each of those acts.

The First Act Draws Battle Lines

Many games have a game-space that's larger — sometimes much larger — than the scope of the real meat of the struggle. This can be literal, as in a wargame where victory in World War II will be decided in Poland, never mind that the map covers the extent of Europe. Or, it can be conceptual, or mechanical. In a given play or a particular game, the real meat of the conflict might be bounded by an initiative mechanic that establishes which player will have a critical advantage of timing (never mind that the game has many other mechanics), or defined by resource acquisition (never mind that the victory condition involves winning battles).

The first act ends when it becomes clear to savvy players that the boundaries of the conflict have been pretty well established, and when they

therefore get a concrete grasp on what they'll be trying to accomplish for the main portion of the game's remaining length.[4] The victory conditions have moved beyond the way the rulebook expresses them ("win by holding three capitals") to instead relate each player's specific plan for victory ("I'll probably win by taking over Foo, Bar, and the Vatican City State").

Ideally, the first act helps new players understand how the rules of the game work, so they can approach the second act with confidence that they're on an even footing with the other players, at least in their mechanical understanding of play. Games where understanding key rules takes longer are especially punishing to pick up.

No player should feel like they are — or should actually be — eliminated from consideration for victory in the game's first act. A game where something can go that drastically wrong for anyone in the first act is deeply flawed. *Dune*, for example.

Though the phrase "set up" is used ubiquitously in methods of story analysis to describe first acts in general, a game's setup — taking it out of the box and assembling it on the table — is not part of its gameplay's first act. Nice try, though, *Arkham Horror*.

The Second Act is the Meat of Gameplay

In the second act, the players struggle against one another to get to the point where they can make a credible stab at victory.

Only players who are not remotely paying attention should be confused about what they should be trying to do in the second act of gameplay. Players may be horribly, terribly *tempted* to do other things, either by devious mechanics or by the clever strategery of the other players. But the battle lines having been drawn, the players will have the most fun pressing the battle rather than meandering confusedly from game mechanic to game mechanic.

In good games, the players will directly oppose each other in their second act struggles. Cooperative games seem like an exception but aren't; they simply require the understanding that the players constitute a bloc allied together on one side of a battle line drawn against the game itself. Ditto for solitaire games.

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[4] An interesting area of inquiry past the scope of this essay might revolve around the question of whether players can set in motion "additional" second acts by struggling to redefine the act's frame to favor their own victory. Strategically, this is probably very sensible. But most players will only have so much patience for constant redefinition of the game's core. If the chief struggle is shifting sand, the gameplay's story becomes one of frustration and groundlessness.

In the very best games, there will be many opportunities for different players to trade what looks to all of them like the leading position. A game that at any point looks like a foregone conclusion isn't fun. Even the leader in a runaway game only has fun when said leader has that odious personality defect that allows someone to be entertained by mercilessly crushing their opponents. Which isn't to say that you've got to give away points when you're winning or else you're an ass. It's to point out that all of the players should want an exciting game as well as want to win, and it's to point out that excitement arises primarily from not knowing whether you're going to win. You keep playing to find out.

The Third Act is the Push for Victory — the Endgame

We had a saying in my game group when I was in college: "If Joe's not stopped, he's going to win the game!" Inevitably, at some point, as we neared a given game's close, it became clear that Joe was going to win the game. Again. It was at this point that everyone else banded together to try to stop him from winning. Which usually didn't work.[5]

The second act transitions to the third act at the point where it becomes clear to the savvy player that one of the players has achieved a clear upper hand, and that barring a reversal of some kind, that player is going to win.

The accompanying emotional alarm (or euphoria, depending) is the key to the third act. All of the players know that the end is near, and that they've either got to take one last stab at unseating the leader or they've just got to hang in there for a little while longer to secure their triumph.

A player's successes and failures in the second act should obviously be the massive determining factor in whether they're the third act's frontrunner for victory. If that's not the case then the game is probably … um … what's the opposite of good, again?

A key feature of an emotionally satisfying third act, though, is that the frontrunner's victory must not be inevitable. If it's inevitable, the whole third act is an unnecessary mechanical exercise. And that's bad, because remember, we consciously or subconsciously really, really want the story to have a satisfying end. So, in the third act, it should still be possible — though perhaps very, very difficult — for others players, and ideally *any* other player, to still snatch victory from the jaws of defeat. As soon as a player realizes they can't possibly win, the game stops being fun because the emotional tension drains away. This can go

[5] I hereby enlist you — yes, you — in the sacred fraternity of those allied to prevent Joe from winning the game. But I digress.

truly sideways if functionally eliminated players can still exert influence on which other player does win. You know this as "kingmaking." It's the opposite of good.

At some point in the third act, one player must make a stab at victory *that actually results in victory*. For a designer or publisher, a seemingly endless endgame is even more terrible than it might appear, because its actual tedium is magnified in the players' minds because their experience of the game ended on that note. Ever played a game where you didn't care who won as long as the bloody thing was over? Yeah, that.

Three Additional Thoughts

I

In films, the places where acts meet each other are often quite clear. A particular event transpires and is clearly a bright line of transition. Terrorists take over at Nakatomi Plaza, say. Analyzing gameplay is more difficult, in part because each play of the game must be separately considered. It seems likely to me that act transitions in gameplay are more gradual than they are in plays, stories, and films. That players ease more slowly from one act into another in games. When thinking about your own work, it's fruitful to consider whether gradual or sudden transitions are more fun, and tailor your design accordingly. It's also fruitful to consider whether mechanics that change over the game's unfolding acts could help, or hurt, the game's pacing as the players experience it. That is, do you want to highlight those transitions, or conceal them?

II

An act-based framework for analyzing roleplaying games, or even board and card games that tell stories, would look different from this framework. Such analyses would have to take the those games' narrative into account, as opposed to the players' experience of their gameplay. This model is entirely divorced from whatever veneer of setting that's coupled to the game mechanics. An RPG scenario, or Ameritrash board game, might even have three acts to describe its story that are entirely divorced from the three acts that delineate its gameplay. I leave it to someone else to decide whether a correspondence between the two would be desirable, irrelevant, or something else.

III

It seems to me that Eurogames often go wrong by only having a second act.

I See That You're Headed for your Computer, to Rant on Your Blog

No, not because of what I said about Eurogames.[6] You're headed to your blog to point out that this analytical method has no merit because no designer has ever designed a game with this three-act structure in mind.

And, yes: I don't believe a structural division into acts has been proposed for gameplay before. I've never seen one, anyway.[7] People have written about the stories in story-based games and talked about act divisions, but when they have, they've been talking about dividing the game's story up, not the game's gameplay.

So let me reiterate this crucial point: the whole question of division into acts is a theoretical and analytical tool, not a builder's tool. It is a method of evaluating a blueprint or improving a first draft, not a method of pounding nails. The theoretical blog post or forum rant rebutting the very idea of an act-based analysis of gameplay because no designer has ever designed a board or card game with act breaks in mind falls down because grown-ups are allowed to interpret creative works outside their designers' intentions. In point of fact, smart designers proactively seek such points of broader perspective on their own work because it allows them to make such intention-free interpretations, and thereby improve their material.

The Point is Analytical, But the *Point* is to Make Better Games

The idea behind a three-act framework for considering the pacing of gameplay is not to provide three boxes into which different mechanics should be put, or to divide a 120-minute playing time into arbitrary segments and then argue about whether we've put the signposts in the right places. Rather, I hope that understanding the pacing of gameplay in terms of a three-act structure can help designers understand players' unconscious expectations, and as a

[6] On that point rant away, though it's fair to warn you that I can't hear you, having, as I do, my fingers in my ears.

[7] Half-exception: *Betrayal at House on the Hill*.

reflection of that understanding, make better games without resorting to blind, hit-or-miss guesswork.

My guess is that this set of ideas will be especially helpful to designers and developers troubleshooting designs where playtesting has revealed that the mechanics are working as intended but no one is having fun, or enough fun. In fact, since I wrote the first outline for this essay, this approach has already improved the design for one of the games I'm working on at the moment. By that standard, the idea is successful already.

Jeff Tidball is the Chief Operating Officer at Atlas Games and co-founder of Gameplaywright. He co-wrote **Eternal Lies** *for* **Trail of Cthulhu***, designed the Origins Award–winning pirate coin game* **Pieces of Eight***, produced and designed the Fantasy Flight Games edition of* **Horus Heresy***, and most recently, designed* **Doctor Who Time Clash** *for Cubicle 7. On Twitter, he's @jefftidball.*

Chapter 25

The Economics of Game Design and Design of Game Economics

By Jay Little

First things first: I am neither an economic theorist nor a mathematician. Yes, I've taken college classes on economics, worked with a company that manages macro-economic projections, and read my fair share about economics during my time as a professional game designer. Basically, I've learned enough to be dangerous — and to know when I'm out of my depth.

Out of my depth or not, one area of economics that I have always found intriguing are the factors that inform our decision-making. That is, how people evaluate choices. Tabletop gaming is an excellent way to study these factors firsthand.

In many ways, when people play a board game, that game session creates its own little economic microcosm. A board game's mini-economy has its own version of buyers and sellers of goods and services. The buyers and sellers are the players. The goods and services may be literal goods (like wood, sheep, or property) or more abstract ones (like action points, turns, promises, or cooperation).

What's more, games feature a lot of the same things we expect to see in an economy. There is a marketplace consisting of players, and those players want value for their investments. Instead of investing money, they're investing game resources, actions, and time. The laws of supply and demand may come into play in a number of games featuring resource management, investments, trading, and other business-styled or -themed action.

Let's look at board gaming as a miniature model for studying economics, and vice versa.

The Pillars of Economic Theory

Goods and services, and supply and demand, are two pairs of foundations upon which economic models are built. These concepts have been around

for centuries; the Renaissance inspired a lot of modern economic thought as well as artistic expression. However, it is important to understand that much of economics is based on theory. And that requires suppositions and assumptions to help set some ground rules or support whatever it is the theory is, well … theorizing.

While individual economists or textbooks may find the following assumptions too simplistic, it's a perfect place to start for studying games. I've adopted the argument that economist and professor Dan Ariely outlines in *Predictably Irrational*, a fabulous book that provides numerous examples of how people don't always follow the rules that math and theory predict.

In the book, Ariely asserts there are two assumptions that are essential for economic models and theories to "function" properly. Without them, the models and theories fall apart. So what are these assumptions?

- People act rationally
- People act in their own best self-interest

If you have ever played a game or met a gamer, you can probably see where this is headed.

Gamers Like to Break Things

These rock-solid, fundamental pillars of theoretical assumption don't stand a chance against gamers. While gamers can be rational and may often look out for their own interests, we also tend to be curious, capricious, and sometimes downright malicious.

These pillars start to crumble when you simply look around and observe the broad range of motivations that fuel player decisions. What seems completely rational to one player may be viewed quite differently by another. And if the individual definitions of "rational" vary, so do the actions that best serve different players' self-interest.

In other words, not everyone makes decisions for the same reasons. And gamers act irrationally under a huge number of different circumstances.

You might be thinking, "Why would anyone deliberately act irrationally in a game if we're all trying to just have fun?"

That's a good question, and underscores why games are unlike other mini-economies. First, not every irrational act is deliberate. Second, not everyone has

the same goal or sees "best self-interest" in the same way. Third, some gamers have fun rocking the boat or sabotaging the system.

Why We Do What We Do

Gamers may make decisions for a wider range of reasons than just about any other group of people in any other sort of situation. As a designer, it's important to know this. When we design a game, we usually have in mind the sort of way we think the game will be played based on how we think the game *should* be played.

Players, on the other hand, don't have that mindset. True, if you have a solid design, the vast majority of players are likely to follow along and play the game as you envisioned. But invariably, some players will do the unthinkable: *they won't play how you want them to play*.

There will be players who are ultra-conservative, ultra-aggressive, ultra-intimidated, ultra-alpha, ultra-engaged, and ultra-disinterested. There will be players who play completely differently in a two- or three-player game than they would in a four- or five-player game, or differently depending on who else is playing.

You can probably think of people you game with who have made decisions based on the factors below. You've probably done some of these yourself, perhaps without even realizing it.

- The golden motivation — rational thought
- In response to gameplay imbalance
- To test a theory
- To better teach the game to others
- To play devil's advocate
- Out of spite or pity
- To end a game they cannot win
- To lead the game toward or away from a particular player
- In response to metagame events.
- When quickly pressured
- The first time playing that game
- When playing competitively
- When playing with children
- When introducing non-gamers to hobby gaming

This list was trivially easy to build, and I'm sure you can think of more situations and factors with ease.

It's All Relative

As you can see, there are myriad reasons players make the decisions they do. When they're not made for purely selfish or base motivations — like whimsy, spite, or revenge — they're often based on the player making some sort of value judgement. That is, players compare a number of different options (like which action to perform or which opponent to target) by measuring various values relative to the current situation.

Assigning value to something is a tricky process. When we compare concrete things, it's relatively easy to make specific, accurate comparisons because we have consistent, established units of measurement. To determine which path is longer, we can use kilometers. To determine which bag of gold weighs more, we can use pounds. To determine how long it takes to cross the finish line, we can use minutes and seconds. We get the same measurements of concrete things regardless of who is doing the measuring.

In gaming, however, decisions are fuzzier because the values they're based on are hard to measure, and change not only from player to player but also from situation to situation. One hundred dollars is the same amount of money for any game featuring that denomination, but its buying power and impact is different in *Monopoly* than in *Age of Steam*.

Value measurements are subjective. And mutable. Fickle. Capricious. Not to mention: *personal.* Unlike inches, pounds, liters, or seconds, measurements of "value" are less concrete. Instead of being objective and absolute, value is subjective and relative.

In economics, value and satisfaction are measured by a hypothetical increment called the "util." Giving the subjective, abstract, fluctuating state of value and satisfaction an objective unit of measurement is helpful, because once you assign something metrics — or numbers — you can start using the comparisons and equations we're more comfortable with when measuring more tangible things.

The value of water is a great example. We can easily see how we measure water by volume every time we pick up a plastic bottle of water at the supermarket. A twelve-ounce water bottle is a pretty common unit of measuring water. Most people will recognize one right away. But what is that bottle of water

actually *worth?* The water is measured in ounces. It may also be measured by a price in dollars or euros. But the supermarket or vending machine can't apply utils to the water bottle, because it doesn't know the situation. That water bottle has far more value to someone parched and stranded in the middle of the desert than it does to someone who works in a water bottling factory.

Once we begin to see the difference between the absolute and relative ways we measure things, it becomes easier to see how this can apply to gaming. Different game actions vary in value based on the situation, even if they are measured in absolute terms. This is where the discussion turns to the differences between cost, price, and value.

The Price We Pay

Understanding the difference between cost, price, and value helps make it clear what utils measure and what value really is. For some people, it's the light bulb realization that makes things click. But we also already know the difference between cost, price, and value subconsciously because we see it almost every day.

I can't think of a better way to show how these three concepts differ than talking about Coca-Cola. When you purchase a two-liter bottle of Coke, you're paying a set price for a fixed amount of soda. But the price you pay isn't how much it costs Coca-Cola to manufacture, produce, and market that bottle.

Let's say that two-liter bottle of Coke's price $1.75. It may have cost Coca-Cola $0.25 to actually manufacture. But $1.75 is the price the consumer pays, because general economics has shown that is the price the marketplace is willing to spend on that quantity of Coke.

Or is it?

Do You Really Get What You Pay For?

When you walk to the front of the store to the cashier to pay for your two-liter bottle of Coke, there's probably a mini-refrigerator right by the checkout lane. In that mini-fridge are 20-ounce bottles of Coke — for the same price of $1.75. It's a much, much smaller amount, so that may only have cost Coca-Cola $0.10 to produce.

Why on earth would someone pay the same $1.75 for 20 ounces of Coke when they could get 330% more soda for the same price at the back of the

store? Because that 20-ounce bottle of Coke has more *utils* than the two-liter bottle. Remember, utils measures value (which you could also think of as satisfaction). The smaller Coke for the same price has added value in terms of its convenience (right there at the checkout) and the fact that it's already cold and primed for immediate thirst-quenching.

By adding value — convenience and cold — Coca-Cola is able to get consumers to pay the same price for *substantially* less product.

This roundabout example illustrates that objective measurements like dollars, liters, and ounces can have different subjective value based on the situation and the individual consumer. Here's a quick summary of these ideas in a way that best applies to game design:

- **Price** is an absolute, objective amount assigned to a product or service, measured in some established unit. In gaming, price is often assigned to an action (two action points to build a hut) or game asset ($25 to purchase an upgrade). Price is often calculated through a formal or informal formula or equation, or arrived at organically based on what the marketplace will reasonably pay.
- **Value** is a relative and subjective amount that can be measured (or, perhaps, "described") in utils. Value changes based on the situation and the perceived usefulness or satisfaction something will provide. A player may think two action points to build a hut is a steal at the beginning of the game, but way too much toward the end of the game.
- **Cost** often sits between price and value, the "actual" or behind-the-scenes amount a good or service has. Cost is based on objective, absolute measurements like dollars, but also influenced by subjective factors such as opportunity cost (if I spend my action points on *this*, it means I can't spend my action points on *that*).

Diminishing Marginal Utility

Maybe you've heard the saying, "You can't have too much of a good thing." Sounds nice. But it's absolutely wrong. You can definitely have too much of a good thing, where it ceases being good and may even start to become very, very bad. This phenomena is described by the law of diminishing returns, or diminishing marginal utility. Economists even make graphs and charts that make

it look very legitimate and calculable. Luckily, it's also something we understand inherently, given an example.

Consider Oreo cookies. Mmmm … that first Oreo tastes awesome and is incredibly satisfying. The second and third Oreos are pretty satisfying, too. That tenth Oreo, though, starts to feel less satisfying than the first one. The eleventh is really pushing things and has less individual value than Oreos one through ten. The 25th Oreo might end up having negative value because I start feeling sick.

In simplest terms, *the more we have of a thing, the less value each individual thing has*.

In gaming, there is a point where you no longer need to hoard gold, or you have plenty of wood and stone in your reserves, or you've got a big enough lead over another player, that eventually getting more of that thing (gold, wood, stone, a lead on one player) has less and less value than other options (like diversifying into other resources or closing the gap between you and a third player).

When designing games, if you keep this in mind, you may be able to see trouble spots or things that may be out of balance before your design gets to playtesters.

- When do the resources in my game start to diminish?
- How much of a particular resource do you need before additional resources of that type start to lose value — or become meaningless?
- Are there certain actions that don't diminish in value over time? That always provide such value that players will repeat them over and over without considering other options? (I call this "spamming" — when a player simply repeats the same action over and over because it always has greater value than other options, without diminishing returns.)

A Numbers Game

Economists rely on a lot of data — and a large marketplace — to be accurate. The more data you can draw from, the better. Nowhere in game design is this more apparent than in playtesting. The more playtesters you have, the larger the pool of ideas and feedback available. And the more playtest sessions, the more data you can gather.

Playtesting helps designers decide if they have the right prices assigned to goods, the appropriate number of action points allotted each turn, or the balance between different event cards tuned correctly. The more times your

game gets played and the more times different combinations of decisions drive the gameplay, the greater your understanding.

This is key to making decisions based on player feedback. Is this card really overpowered, or was that just an anomaly? Is there really that big a victory point gap between first and last place? Does the game really take three hours to play? These things are hard to judge in just one or two plays.

It's important to keep in mind that, unless you're managing *hundreds* of playtest sessions, you will never match the sample size that is going to be generated once your game is released to the public. Suddenly hundreds, possibly thousands, of game sessions are being played, generating results that you hope line up with your original goals.

As your game is tested (or considered in the abstract), don't overlook the anomalies. That is, don't say, "That will rarely ever happen," or, "A player would never play that way" as a justification to disregard inconvenient observed results. Because once your player sample size explodes to encompass the entire gaming public, those rare situations will recur in the wild, and there will be players who play in an unexpected or undesirable way.

The reason a designer needs to be mindful of these anomalies and unlikely situations is that these are the sessions that people remember. Players remember little from a game where everything that happened was typical, average, and normal. But they definitely remember — and post to Facebook or forums — those times when something incredibly unlikely actually happened and wrecked the experience, or when someone found a way to break the game.

Bringing It All Together

By being aware of some basic ideas about economics and the way people evaluate game elements, we can become better designers.

- Knowing what influences a player's decision allows you to make sure game elements provide the best possible information to gamers so they can make rational decisions.
- Understand that a player will make different decisions as the value — the utils the player assigns to an action or resource — changes based on the situation.

- Realizing that a game both models *and* breaks a number of basic economic theories provides a wider, clearer perspective on how a game functions as a system.
- Accept that as much as we want to see our game operate as intended, it won't always work that way, and we need to be aware of how those edge cases and oddities impact the game experience.

Jay Little is an award-winning game designer and hobby game enthusiast. Jay has a broad range of tabletop and roleplaying games to his credit, including the popular **X-Wing Miniatures Game** *and* **Star Wars** *roleplaying system for Fantasy Flight Games. Jay shares his zeal for gaming by teaching video game design and board game production at UW-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin.*

In Conclusion

I hope you are fired up and excited to make your game, and that you now have the tools to get your game into the world.

After all, the best game ever isn't in this box — it's in your head! Explore your ideas, get them onto the table, test them, refine them, perfect them, and get them into the hands of gamers all over the world!

Good luck and good gaming.

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About the Author

Jeremy Holcomb has been designing games since he was eight. He started with puzzles and mazes for local community magazines, and custom roleplaying games for his friends and classmates. As he got older and more foolish he began self-publishing his own card and board game designs, eventually co-founding Bucephalus Games to publish games including *Timestreams*, *Toboggans of Doom*, *Zombie Mosh!*, and others. He has also worked as a designer and developer on collectible card games including *Anachronism* and *Phase*, and worked with publishers to produce board games such as *The Duke*.

He now works as a professor of game design at DigiPen Institute of Technology, training the next generation of video game designers.

His personal quest is to play every game at least once.

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