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How to Learn Board Game Design and Development

by David Silverman   29 Nov 2013

Length: Long   Languages: [English   ▼]

[How to Learn]   [Board Game]   [Game Design]

Over the past decade, board games have gained increased prominence within the game industry. With the growing popularity of Euro-style board games, such as Settlers of Catan, and the constant influx of new games and game types such as Dominion, the popular deck-building game, board games have seen an unexpected resurgence among gamers of all kinds. While board games share many ideas with video games, they are played in a very different way, and often use very different game mechanics. Designing for board games brings about different challenges than designing for video games, but the skills can be applied universally to make all of your games better.

ROUNDUPS

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An Overview of Board Game Genres

Before we get started, let's briefly look at a few genres of board games. This should help acquaint you with a couple of different types of board games, and the concepts behind them, and give you an idea of where to start if you're new to board games. Remember, many board games now have digital counterparts that you can play on an iPad or PC, so even if it's hard for you to play these games on an actual tabletop, you should have no trouble trying the more popular ones out.

Classic Board Games or Family Games

These games require the players to race around the board or follow a designated path to reach their goal. Sometimes there will also be a points system involved. These games have a heavy reliance on luck, and have less strategy than more modern board games. Games like this work best with groups where the game itself is not as important as the experience of playing together. Most of the time, these games have very simple or absurd themes which have little or no impact on the game mechanics.

Examples: Sorry, Snakes and Ladders, and Candyland

Euro-Style Games

Euro-style games are often about gaining *victory points*, an arbitrary resource that allows you to win. They usually last a certain number of turns, or continue until one player has a certain number of victory points. These games have strong themes which inform much of the design. There is also usually a system of resource management, and some kind of "political" play between the players as they negotiate the sale and trade of resources.

Finally, these games have fewer elements of luck or chance, and most issues the player experiences because of "bad luck" can be mitigated with strong strategic play.

Examples: Settlers of Catan, Power Grid, Carcassone, and Lancaster

Deck-Building Games

Deck-Building Games (DBGs) are similar to Trading Card Games (TCGs) where each player has a deck of cards they use during play. The difference is that in DBGs the players all work from the same card collection, and the deck-building occurs as part of the game. These games usually come with 15-20 different card types, but only ten are used in a single game. This gives the games a lot of replay value. In these games players build their deck over time by purchasing available cards from the pool of cards. Games like this usually end when a certain number of card types are depleted, or when a specific situation occurs.

Examples: Dominion, Thunderstone, Nightfall, and Quarriors

Abstract Strategy Games

Abstract strategy games include chess and checkers. The point of these games is for two players to have a complex strategic battle in which they try to out-match and out-think their opponent. These games are harder to describe without specific examples, and the game elements and goals are not quite as common across the genre. Instead of dice rolls or card combinations, the goal is often to position pieces in just the right location.

Examples: Chess, Checkers, Quoridor, and Push Fight

Strategy Games

Strategy games are much grander Euro-style games. These games usually have a very important board and a narrative which drives the game's progress. These games often involve a heavy amount of co-op and competitive play, forcing players to make and break alliances over the course of the game.

Players are usually participating as much in the game itself as they are in higher-level mind-games with each other: trying to get ahead, form alliances, and discern their opponent's motives. These games are generally marked by very long game sessions (six

hours or more, for some), and are sometimes affectionately referred to as "friendship-ending games", because of how passionate players become. Risk is perhaps the most well-known game in this genre.

Examples: Risk, Twilight Imperium, Arkham Horror, and Battlestar Galactica

Card-Based Strategy Games

Card-based strategy games are strategy games where cards are the primary game element. Games like this vary heavily, but there is often a drafting mechanic, or an element of character or base building where players use cards to gain abilities or bonuses. These games usually have a heavy element of luck or randomness.

The goal in games like this can be based on victory points, trying to complete a specific set of cards, or eliminating certain target players, among others. Games like Poker, Spit, and Egyptian Rat Screw don't fit into this category because they lack a central theme, and don't require anything other than a standard deck of cards. Deck-Building Games could fit into this category, but have become so popular I consider them their own genre.

Examples: Munchkin, Bang, 7 Wonders, and Chrononauts

Before We Begin

Like video games, the creation of board games can't really be boiled down to a specific set of steps you need to follow. You could give a general overview, but without going into the specifics, it's hard to explain game development of any kind.

To help you understand the concepts, I am going to use this article to walk you through the process I took while developing one of my ideas. This is by no means a complete game, but it should still help me illustrate a lot of my points by having a concrete example for you to learn from.

The key here is that you will get to see both the theory and the actual thought process I'm using as I develop this idea further. Hopefully by the end of the article you'll understand

how my idea went from concept to prototype, and how I could turn it into a finished project.

With all this in mind, let's get started.

Coming Up With an Idea

Image by Daniel Stockman from Wikimedia Commons.

The first step in any project is to figure out what your project will be. A great way to get inspired is to take a game you already play and enjoy, and to add or remove a major game element. Doing this forces you to look at the game from a new perspective.

When you try adding or removing something from the game, you start looking at the existing components much more critically. The moment you remove something, it becomes much easier to see why that element was so important or unimportant to begin with. This can give you a deeper understanding of the game you are playing around with, and a good insight into the purpose of many of the game mechanics.

Another great technique is to start with a real world theme or system you like, and to try building a game around that. If you start working with a specific theme or system in mind, it makes it much easier to determine what sort of gameplay you want. Starting this way can also help you nail down how the players will be interacting with each other.

For example, if you are making a game about zombies you could make some players humans and some zombies; you could make everyone humans and have them working to escape or kill all the zombies; or you could have the players competing to be the final survivor left standing.

Starting with a theme also gives you the ability to draw from that theme when trying to think of new game elements. If you are already making a game about characters in space, then you can always reference books, movies and other materials about space to find inspiration for new elements. This was the method I chose to use when working on my game.

My first idea was related to drug dealers because I was watching Breaking Bad and imagining what it would be like to be Walter White. As I thought about this idea more, I realized that the central conflict in drug-dealing and drug empires is in gaining and controlling territory, and I knew specifically that I didn't want to make a game that would require me to do a lot of work laying out territories on a game board.

With that in mind, I settled on doing a card-based strategy game, and ditched the drug empire theme since it would be too hard to convey territory in that game style. I then started thinking about other competitive industries, and specifically industries where control over, or positioning on, a map are not important. Eventually I settled on the movie industry as the system I wanted to base my game on.

Image by Jelson25 from Wikimedia Commons.

The movie industry is a good choice because it is already a competition-based industry where companies compete for sales and awards. On top of that, a movie can easily be boiled down to a collection of parts which you as the designer can quantify and use as game elements, a screenplay, a director, actors, genre, and release date, among others.

There's also the fact that most people already have some understanding of how the movie industry works, or can infer many of the details. This meant that the game concept would be easy to understand, and quickly accessible to most players. Finally, the movie industry is composed of many different elements and "moving parts", and would give me a lot of resources to draw inspiration from.

Fleshing Out Your Idea

Once you've settled on your theme, you need to determine what your game is about, and how it's played. Start by writing down everything you can think of relating to the game, and putting every idea you have onto paper.

Your initial idea is going to be very rough, and if you described it quickly to ten different people, they would walk away with ten different concepts of how it works. The goal right now is to put as much thought into the concept as you can, and to think through every

aspect of it that interests you. You want to walk away from this with a solid understanding of what your game is supposed to be, and how it is played.

At this point, it's also helpful to write your intent for each idea alongside the idea itself. It's not uncommon for me to find my initial ideas don't work as well after I flesh things out. During these moments, it's helpful to know where the idea came from. This allows me to refine ideas I don't like, while preserving the original goals. It's also important to consider alternative ideas, or variations on your initial concepts. Having a lot of potential methods to achieve the same results will prevent you from hitting roadblocks when a key system needs to be reworked.
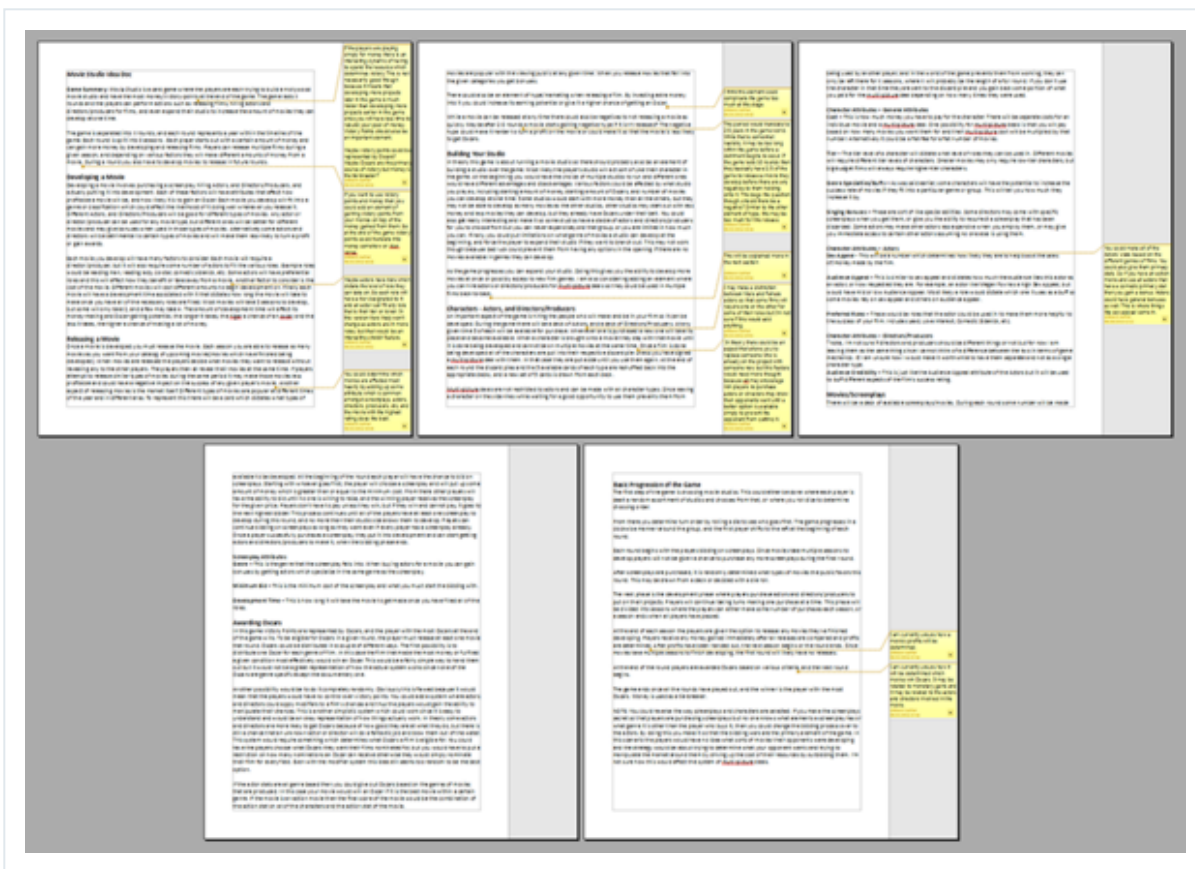
This is the initial design document I put together when working on the movie studio idea. The yellow parts on the side of each page are notes to myself or future designers I bring on, about certain important game aspects or about other ways I could make certain systems.

You should also try to detail exactly how the mechanics could work. Ask yourself questions about the game while you're working on it. This keeps you from ignoring the smaller details, and allows you to continually analyze your design and where it's going.

Ask yourself questions like:

- How many players will there be?
- How long should the game be?
- What choices will the player make, and when will they make them?
- How will the player make these choices?
- How will one player's choice impact the other players?
- How will the players interact with each other?
- Are there any choices that can be made by one player, but not by the others?
- How does the game progress? Is it strictly turn-based, or is it in rounds with phases?
- What actions will the player be able to take?
- How will the outcome of an action be determined?
- What is the player's goal?
- How can the player win?

Even if you don't know all the answers yet, you may find that keeping the questions in mind while working will lead you to the answers.

I try not to move forward with development until I can read through the document without questioning the details of any specific mechanics. I also know I'm not done with this stage if I haven't determined how a round or turn progresses, how long the game is supposed to last, how the player wins, and how many players I want in an average game.

You cannot run a successful playtest, or build a prototype, without answers to these questions. You will know you are ready to move forward when you can look at this document and understand what the game is, and how it works, even if it's not perfect.

For my Movie Studio concept I started by determining the goal of the player. The most logical concept was for the players to create and release movies to try and gain awards (victory points) and money (the primary resource).

From there I determined that the script, the director, and the actors are the most well known aspects of a film, so I thought those would make good game elements as well. Making a movie also seemed pretty straightforward: buy a script, hire a director, find the actors, and film the movie. This made sense with what I had so far, and seemed like

logical things for the player to do during their turn, so I settled on this as the structure for how a round would progress.
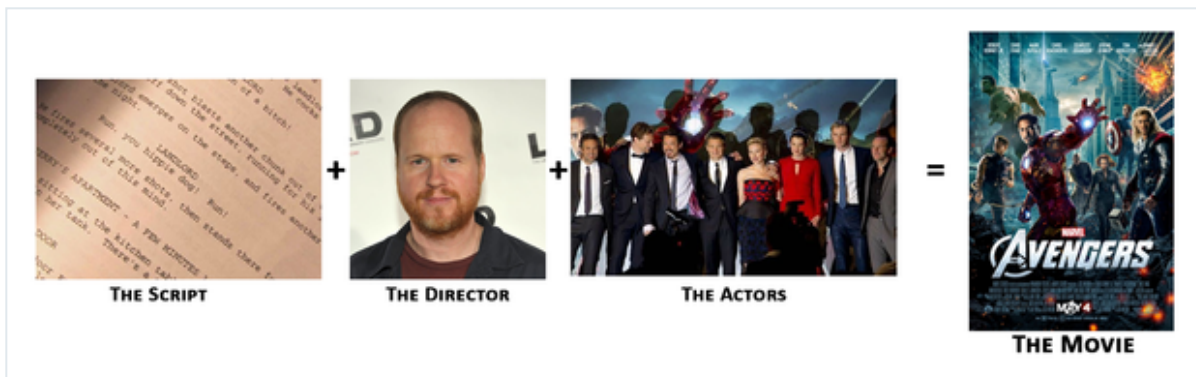
After settling on the basic game elements, and how they interacted, I determined how awards and money would be distributed. For this I created a genre attribute for scripts, and decided that actors and directors could specialize in certain genres. This gave me a solid way to link actors, directors, and scripts, and allowed me to quantify a finished movie based on the ratings the associated characters had in the given genres.

The rest of my development at this stage focused on filling in the details of how a round progressed, how actors, directors, and scripts are bought, and how the players actually complete a movie. Once I'd worked through all the interaction the players would have with the system, I settled on a progression of play for each round, and for the game as a whole. Finally, with all the major pieces in place, and a solid understanding of my game, I moved onto the next stage of development.

Content Development

Now that you understand what your game is about and how it is played, you need to make all the content.

If you are developing an abstract strategy game like chess or checkers, this stage will be much simpler because it will likely come down to balancing and finalization of rules and pieces. On the other hand, if you are developing a content-heavy game like the movie game I'm working on, this stage will require a lot of time and effort settling on what types of content you need, how much content you need, and what to base your content on.

No matter what type of game you are working on, it's always best to start by determining what types of content you need, and how much of it you need.

In the movie studio game I need at least three content types: scripts or movies, actors, and directors. On top of that I need to settle on awards for the player, and create all the cards that dictate how much money the players get from their movies.

My game is divided into rounds. If I assume that the maximum number of movies a player can develop at any time is two, and the maximum number of players is four, that means the players need to be able to have up to eight unique scripts for each round. If I then assume there are six rounds in the game, I now know I need 48 unique script cards in the game, since script cards are never reused. This number tells me the bare minimum number of scripts my game needs for a single game session.

(Once the mechanics are finalized, I may add more scripts to increase the replay value or to allow more rounds in a single game, but it's still important to know what the bare minimum is.)

Next, I need to figure out how many actors and directors can be purchased among all players in a given round. Unlike scripts, actors and directors are eventually shuffled back into their respective decks. This means I need to know the minimum number of actors and directors that can be used before any are reshuffled into the deck if I want to prevent players from running out.

Currently, actors and directors are not removed from a film until the film is released. This isn't entirely realistic, but it makes gameplay much easier. With this in mind, I need to know how long a film can go unreleased to determine the maximum number of actors and directors that can be occupied at once. Since a round represents a year, I decided that two rounds was the longest a film could go without being released by the player. So, with a maximum of eight films being developed each round, and each film requiring one director and up to three actors, I knew that, each round, up to eight directors and 24 actors could be bought by players. If we multiply those values by three to account for two rounds of

unreleased films, and the films being made in the current round, we get 24 directors and 72 actors as our bare minimums.

Continue to Simplify

I think it's worth noting here that at one point these numbers were actually much higher. After doing the math, I realized that I would have too much content to make before I could test my game. Keep in mind that, even if it's unlikely, your game could end up failing, so it's good to try and minimize the amount of time you spend making content, until you are sure the game is worth committing the time to.

At this point I also settled on having six awards each round, one for each genre of film. Since the awards would remain the same the whole game this was not a big deal. On top of that, I decided to make 18 scenario cards which would be used to dictate how money was distributed in a given round. This gave me the ability to test the game three times and be guaranteed different outcomes, since in each round you only use one scenario card. Both of these things were easy to develop compared to the other content, so I thought the time investment was worth it.

Once you know how much content you need, you have to actually make all of that content. Until I've started play-testing and know my game is fun, I try to think about my game in terms of the mechanics I'm working with, and the strategies I want the players to be implementing, and not so much the flavor text or art aspects. This saves time, and prevents me from having as much work go to waste when I need to redesign things later.

Thinking about the game mechanics, I know I want some scripts to be more likely to give the player money, and some to be more likely to get them awards. To make this work, I will look at the stats that matter for both, and see how I can distribute them in different ways to affect the odds.

I also know that I want there to be interesting ways for actors to interact with directors, scripts, and each other. To do this I can create special buffs that actors get when they work with certain other actors, or give some scripts buffs when they have specific

directors attached to them. I can also add more unique features, like scripts that automatically come with certain actors or directors attached if those actors or directors aren't already being used by other players.

If I used real actors and directors in my game, I could have a Director card for Tim Burton, and Actor cards for Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham Carter. Since these three are all known to work together on almost all of their projects, it would make sense to give them bonuses when you use them on the same movie. The same thing could apply to James Franco and Seth Rogen, or Matt Damon and Ben Affleck. While it's unlikely I'd use any real actors in the game, this still gives me a good model for how different characters could interact.

Organizing Your Game's Interactions

It helps to make a list of all the potential interactions you come up with while working, and to use that list as a reference when creating game elements. This ensures you don't forget any potential interactions, and gives you a reference to ensure there is a good variety for each type if you keep track of how often you use each one.

You should also try writing rules for how character stats should be generated, or how certain card types should work. In my game, I know there should be an even breakdown of genre specialties among actors, directors, and movie scripts to keep the game balanced. On top of that, I might consider making rules like "A character cannot have a buff greater than X unless a certain condition is met", or "A character should never have more than Y stat points, or fewer than Z". Defining rules like this helps you keep a your design consistent and makes it easier to bring new designers in later on.

Iterating the Ruleset

This stage of development may take a while, but it's also very important, so don't rush it. You should also know that there's a strong possibility some of the work you do here will become useless or unusable when you realize certain mechanics don't work or need to be retooled. This is okay, though.

Just because an idea doesn't work now, doesn't mean you can't re-integrate it down the line. Once you nail down all the game mechanics, the only game design step left is this one, the rest is about understanding your game, making it look pretty, perfecting it, and

marketing it. Spend a lot of time on this step, because the more consideration you give these elements now, the less likely it is that you will have to redo them all later.

Designing and Building Your Prototype

With your content developed, the next step is to actually make a prototype. The first thing to remember is that your prototype doesn't have to look pretty. While well-designed cards with beautiful artwork will improve some players' opinions, it takes a long time to get those things right. Remember, your game may need major revisions, or get scrapped entirely, and if this happens, it stinks to know you spent an entire day or week working on beautiful images and designs that will never get used. Believe me, I've made this mistake, and it's not fun.

This is the prototype for a game called The Infinity Formula, which was made by one of our editors for the Global Game Jam.

With that said, you shouldn't just throw together your game board or cards without considering layout or readability. Although these designs are not final, take some time to determine what information is most important to have, and how to effectively show that information. I start by listing all of the information needed on a card or game piece, and then prioritize that information so I know how important each aspect is.

If your game has multiple decks of cards, you also need to differentiate these decks so that players can tell which deck a card is from. For the prototype, this can be as easy as using different paper colors for each deck, but when working on the final product you should create clear distinctions and designs for each card or piece type.

You should also consider what the piece is being used for, or what it represents. For the movie game, I tried coming up with a way to make actor cards look like the head-shots an actor gives to casting directors. This ended up not working because it didn't leave me with

the room to effectively list the actor's stats, or the price for the actor. Despite this, I still used elements of head-shots in the design, and decided that the image of the actor used on the card still be a head shot, even if it wasn't exactly what I had intended.

This was the format I originally envisioned for the cards. The problem with this was that I had too little room to include more information without making these images very small. This would make it a waste to have four images since it would make it hard for the player to appreciate the time and effort any artists put into the images.

While this format wasn't quite as compelling, it made each individual piece of art easier to appreciate, and gave me more room on the card.

While some aspects of the design, such as my actor and director cards, can be left incomplete or simplified in the prototype, things like game boards may need to be much farther along before you can really test the game. If you were making a custom *Risk* board, you'd *need* to draw an actual map, since the balancing in *Risk* relies on positioning, division of country borders, and the number of total countries.

In these cases, there are a few techniques you could use to make preparing a prototype easier. You could draw the map on a whiteboard or chalkboard surface so it can be modified easily, or make the map on the computer so you can print it, and wait to draw territory lines until the map is printed. You could also put each country on separate pieces

of paper or cardboard which can be moved around and re-positioned until you find the ideal configuration.

Digital vs Physical Editions

Also, keep in mind how easily you can send your prototype to others. Many of my friends are game developers that live hundreds of miles away from me. Since they can give me a different perspective than the average player, I like sending them early copies of my games.

This makes it important to consider their limitations when I design items like cards which need to be printed, or pieces that need to be built. It also prevents me from using too many colors, since that makes printing more expensive. I have to try and keep everything on 8.5 x 11 pages, so that it can be printed more easily. I could neglect these limitations and build the prototypes myself and mail them, but this is obviously more expensive. You may not know any game designers to send your game to, but you may want to do a print-and-play release on your website, and the same limitations need to be considered for that as well.

Finally, no prototype is complete without a full copy of the game rules. Your players will need to refer to these, and you probably will too in the first few tests. Having the rules written out allows the playtest to continue with as little interference from you as possible, and allows the players to read through any rules they don't understand as many times as they need.

Writing out the rules also lets you make sure there's nothing you're forgetting to build for your prototype. At the very least, make a reference sheet for the players so that they can look up the cost of common purchases, or a list of basic actions, whenever they need to.

One of the most useful game pieces in Settlers of Catan is the reference card which tells you how much each game element costs. Without the reference card, Catan would be a much slower game, especially if one or more people had never played before.

Playtesting

With your prototype built, you are ready to move on to the most crucial stage of development for any game: playtesting. Like with video games, playtesting is where you get to see all of your ideas in action, and when you get to see how well the game actually works. Most importantly, though, you get to see if your game is fun.

If you are working on the game with other people and it's possible to play through some rounds without bringing in anyone new, I highly suggest you do. Doing this allows you to work out any small kinks or bugs that are easy to solve, and gives you a better handle on how the game actually flows.

While it's good to use the opinions and insights you gain from the game at this point, you should always remember that your opinion will be skewed by all the time you spent developing the game. Because of this, you may subconsciously try and justify feelings you already have. Keep this in mind, and take note of anything you see or feel while playing. It's possible you're right, but it's good to get the opinions of actual players anyway.

Once you've done a few playtests on your own, you can bring in new people and see how they react. Playtesting board games is very similar to playtesting video games. First, always try to have the game set up and ready to go, before anyone shows up. Second, make sure you have a thorough and easy to understand explanation of how the game is played.

Really, though, the best way to run the playtest is to give the players the rule book and see how much trouble they have figuring everything out. Doing this tells you how easy the rules are to understand, and how well written they are. If you don't want to do it this way for the first few tests, that's fine, but you need to run a few playtests like this before you say the game is done, to make sure the rule book is thorough and easy to understand.

Record Your Playtest Sessions

If you can, it's also a good idea to videotape the entire playtest and write down the time signature on the recording when important events occur. Recording the session gives you a concrete record of everything that happened, and writing down the time signature at crucial points ensures you don't have to re-watch the entire video to reference just five minutes of play. If you can't record an video you should still have a notebook or computer

that you can take notes on. If you don't, you will inevitably lose some important information or feedback from your players.

Try to be as detailed as possible with your notes. If you're not, you will end up with important notes that you cannot remember the context or meaning of. This is even worse then having no notes at all, since it means you took the time to write it down, but can't remember why. Finally, take note of how long each game phase is taking, and how long the game as a whole takes. If your game is supposed to last one hour, and it lasts two, you need to know what the hold-ups were if you want to fix it.

The Playtest Journal is a notebook that's specifically designed to help you keep track of information while testing a game. Even if you don't want something like this, you should still keep a journal by your side to take notes.

It's also important how you behave during the playtest. The most important thing is not getting in the players' way. At the beginning of the playtest, make sure to tell the players to voice any opinions they have of the game out loud when they have them. This prevents you from constantly having to interrupt the playtest to ask them whether they like different mechanics, or if they are having trouble understanding things.

Ideally, you want to simulate an actual game session as much as possible. This means that you want to see not only which rules the players don't understand, but also *why* they don't understand them and how they try to reconcile them. This helps you to rewrite the rules more effectively, and helps you determine how the rules are flawed. So, with that in mind, try not to interfere with the game unless you absolutely have to.

Ask for Feedback

The final thing you need to do is an end-of-game questionnaire or discussion with the players. After the game is over you should be prepared to spend 15-20 minutes sitting with

your players and asking them what they think about it. Your goal is to gain a greater understanding of everything that happened during the playtest.

Some questions to ask include:

- What was your favorite part?
- What was your least favorite part?
- What did you have the most trouble understanding? Why?
- What one mechanic would you change, and how would you change it?
- Do you think the game was too long?
- Are there any game elements you felt imbalanced the game or weren't needed?
- Would you play the game again?
- Did any of the mechanics feel too complex? Too simple?
- Are there any game phases you wish were longer? Shorter?
- Was it fun?

You may not need any or all of these questions, but always end a playtest by talking to the players and getting their opinions on the game; don't just assume you understand everything they felt about it.

Finishing and Releasing Your Game

Playtesting takes a long time and a lot of sessions, but eventually your rules will be finalized, and your game will be complete.

At this point, you should finalize designs and layouts for things like cards, game boards, pieces, rule books or sheets, and so on. On top of that, if you plan on selling physical copies, you should figure out what kind of box your game will come in, and what the box will look like.

While it's important to consider things like readability and effectiveness during gameplay when making these designs, a lot of this work is related to graphic design concepts. Keep this in mind while working, and don't be afraid to use "unconventional" resources for help when working on your game pieces.

Finally, try to test your game a few times with the finalized designs in place. Sometimes a design will seem like it works, but because of how people play the game it is actually flawed in an unexpected way. Play through your game a couple times with the finished designs, and you should be able to quickly resolve any issues you encounter.

Once you've finished designing all of the game pieces, you need to determine how your game will be released. There are a lot of options to consider, so I've put together this list of the biggest ones:

Print-and-Play

The original version of Cards Against Humanity was a Print-and-Play release. This helped them get the funding to do a Kickstarter, work on the game full-time, and eventually make an official print release.

A print-and-play game is one that people can buy online and then print at home. This option is good for small games like abstract strategy games, card-based strategy games, and games that don't have many pieces.

Before going this route, you should consider a few things. First, most people don't have access to high quality printers, or printers that can print larger than a standard sheet of paper, so try to keep everything on 8.5 x 11 inch paper (or A4 paper, in some parts of the world). Colors can also be problematic: if your game is too big and too colorful, your game may deplete someone's ink cartridge and indirectly increase how much they are spending on your game.

This option can be good, but keep these limitations in mind, because potential buyers definitely will. When preparing for a release like this take the time to optimize the way your game is being printed and how it's laid out on the sheet so that it's not only inexpensive to print, but also easy to cut out and "build". Always try doing a test-print before releasing to ensure that it's not too hard to do.

Personal Print Runs

Personal print runs are when you get the game printed on your own and sell it through a personal website or business. Print runs like this vary heavily in terms of quality, but they usually don't work as well for very large-scale games, and work best when the total number of pieces is somewhat limited.

In cases like this you would want to look into services like Kickstarter and IndieGoGo to try and gain funding. There are not too many services that will print your entire game for you, but websites like The Game Crafter, which I talk about in more detail below, specialize in that, and if you look you can find many services to buy generic and custom game pieces all over the internet.

Turning a profit can be hard with things like this, but if your only goal is to make a game for personal use or you know there are already people interested in buying the game, this can be a great option to consider.

Getting a Publisher

Another option is to take your game to a publisher and try to get them to release it. Most publishers have pages on their sites where you can submit game ideas. The specifics of how this works is different for each company, but you will need to send them a copy of your game either digitally or through the mail, and you will then need to wait some amount of time while they review it and make a decision.

If this is your goal, take some time to determine which company (or companies) would be most receptive to your game. Don't pitch a complex strategy game that takes three hours to play to a company like Steve Jackson Games who are known for making short, humorous card games.

The theme of your game may also be important. If you send your sci-fi space opera game to a company known primarily for games about medieval combat, they are unlikely to accept it, simply because it doesn't fit the theme of their products. On the other hand, if you send it to a company which has a wide variety of game types or themes, try to keep in mind what they already offer or are working on, since they may not want too many games in the same genre or category.

Just like when designing your game, you need to consider the audience you are pitching it to.

Video Game or App

This is a screenshot from the popular Settlers of Catan Online, a version of the game which can be played online in your browser for free.

The final way you could release your game would be as a video game or app. This allows you to reach a much larger audience, but it may also makes it harder to succeed if your game isn't well known. While there are many board games which have created successful apps and video games, most of those games already had an established fanbase. This helped them a lot because it meant they already had a guaranteed install base of people who like playing board games virtually, and who enjoy their game.

The fact is, the market for people who want to play board games in a virtual setting is fairly limited since the idea of a virtual board game somewhat undermines what makes a board game compelling to begin with. Keep that in mind when turning it into a video game, and you may be able to re-orient some aspects so they fit the medium better and draw in more players. If you don't have the money to do a print run, but have the experience to do something like this, it's definitely worth considering.

Where to Go From Here

While there are still other things we could cover, at this point you really need to just get out there and see what happens when you try to make a game. I hope this guide helped you get one step closer to your goal by showing you where to start with your project, and how to come up with an idea. If you want more advice, or just need to purchase some supplies for your game, here are a few good resources I use:

Board Game Geek

Board Game Geek is the premiere website for information on board games and board game related topics. You can find information and reviews on just about any board game on the market, and it's a great place to meet and talk with other people who are interested in the same things.

It also has a great community of developers and has a number of tools and resources on its forum and all around the site in general. If you are looking for a new game to play, or for advice on your current project, this is where to start.

/r/boardgames on reddit

Reddit has a number of great subreddits related to board gaming, and /r/boardgames is just one of them. This subreddit is very active and can be a great place to find out about new games, see what people think of popular games, or even to plug games you are working on. It always has a lot going on and is a great place to connect with other gamers.

/r/tabletopgamedesign on reddit

/r/tabletopgamedesign is another great and relatively active subreddit. I haven't been a member of this subreddit too long, but from what I've seen the members are often posting great articles and resources related to board game design.

Board Game Designer's Forum

As you can probably tell from the name, BGDF is devoted to the art of designing board games. The website itself hasn't been updated too much over the last few years, but they have a very active forum.

This is a great site for getting feedback on, and for finding beta testers for, your game. If you are trying to find a good community to bounce ideas off and chat with about the intricacies of board game design, then that's exactly what you'll get here.

The Game Crafter

The final site I want to mention is The Game Crafter. Not only does this site have some interesting articles and videos to check out, it also has a number of great resources for producing the cards and pieces you need for your game.

If you have a game and want to take it a step further by self-publishing it, this is a great site to order your custom cards and game tokens. On top of that, they also have many classic pre-made game tokens you can order in bulk, if your game doesn't need as much specialization.

Conclusion

Like with any project you work on, building a board game will take time and effort. You probably won't make a perfect game the first time you try, but you can definitely learn something from every attempt you make.

Try getting started with something simple—anything, really—and seeing what sort of unique or random ideas you can create around it. You may end up with a boring game that you throw out, or you may end up with something you love that you want to work on for a while.

Either way, your success will always come down to whether you actually take the plunge and do it, so get out there and go make something.

ROUNDUPS

6 Incredibly In-Depth Guides to Game Development and Design for Beginners

Michael James Williams

David Silverman

David Silverman studied Game Design, 3D Modelling and IT at the Rochester Institute of Technology where he also helped run the Game Development Club, and created an indie puzzle game called Chromathud. On top of his personal and school projects he also spent time developing games for the One Laptop Per Child program and taught Level Design and 3D Modelling at InternalDrive Technology Camps.

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Daniel Gallant • 4 years ago

Alot of usefull information here. However, for one thing, I would like to know about steps people should take to protect their idea and product.

thanks.

12 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›

> **ZillaGod** ➜ Daniel Gallant • 3 years ago
>
> This is never an issue. Nobody is going to steal your idea and make a game out of it while you are also working on it. More people get hung up on this than almost anything else. You can list your game on Board Game Geek so it has a date stamp.
>
> We tend to overestimate how great our ideas are. Truth is, most games don't sell very many copies (5,000 is very rare) and most don't make a profit. So do it for the love of the process, share your ideas with other designers (it will make your game better), help other designers make their games better, and keep thinking of new ideas so you have multiple projects at various stages.
>
> 3 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›
>
> > **Rafael Perez** ➜ ZillaGod • 2 years ago
> >
> > I would like to agree with you, however.......I think it is necessary to protect your idea and your product. Some games take a long time to develop and can become costly (depending on how far you take it), I would not want somebody to benefit from my efforts and profit from them. I would like to re-post Daniels Question....."I would like to know about steps people should take to protect their idea and product. Thanks".
> >
> > 3 ⌃ | ⌄ • Reply • Share ›
> >
> > **Cocinero geek** ➜ ZillaGod • 2 years ago

That's why some people will never be rich

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

_M AA ➜ Daniel Gallant • 9 months ago

write a detailed description of your game (and/or development progress--including the persons you have involved in the development) and mail it to yourself. it will hold up as a legimitate document in court as long as it has not been opened :)

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

The Jackal ➜ _M AA • 6 months ago

This doesn't work in the USA. https://en.wikipedia.org/wi...

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Kaarin Engelmann • 2 years ago

This is excellent. Thank you for taking the time to put it together!

2 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Marshall • 3 years ago

About the set of questions that ask about some basic concepts of the game, such as how the player wins, and what actions they can take; I would add "How does the game end?" to that list.

2 ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Marshall ➜ Marshall • 2 years ago

most

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Michael James Williams Mod ➜ Marshall • 3 years ago

Good call!

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Findus Maximilians • 5 months ago

I have a question, I'm currently stuck at the "make a prototype" point. I want to make a game where each card and each field on the board has an individual ability. To do this would be a lot of work, even for the prototype. Of course I could just make less abilities but then that could get boring more easily and could create a false image of the final game. Does anyone have suggestions to solve that? Thanks in advance

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

cookie • 7 months ago

this was very useful!

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Marcia Melbourne • a year ago

Very useful, the feedback questions, recording the testing/game play and other sites to visit.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Lucas • 2 years ago

Fascinating article! I love boardgames and I want to design one. I came up with an idea. However, I'm not sure. It's euro based game and the theme is about heaven and hell (very Succinct). It happens during XI and XII. What do you think? The hole thing is still foggy, but I thought something about crusaders. What do you think?

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Cocinero geek • 2 years ago

In my opinion... this kind of article is a double edge sword... You may be doing it to help people, but I think you'll make creativity to stuck... People should be creative and make a game by themselves, not creating something following a guide, if you can't creating something by yourself, you should not be creating anything...

Just like Alejandro Jodorosky said once: "We are all good in something, but not everyone's good in the same thing..." I dunno if it's can be understood in english :P

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Jack • 2 years ago

Amazing, this helped so much but what program did you use for writing yuo your notes and fleshing out your ideas (want to know how to do the sticky notes on the side)

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

> **Cocinero geek** ➔ Jack • 2 years ago
>
> Be creative
>
> ∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Love • 4 years ago

I came here looking for advice in how to proceed with my (and my gfs) idea for our first board game. This is very helpful in terms of doing work in the right order to avoid losing too much work. I would add one question after playtesting: "Did you feel that the outcome was based more on skill or chance?"

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Noppadol Ekpaksakool • 4 years ago

This has given me important first step to move forward to.
A lot of valued information I can explore further....thanks indeed.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Josh Willhite • 4 years ago

Missed a lot of different game types; dice games (big and small amounts, Marvel Dice Masters or Zombie Dice), ameritrash/dungeon hunts (big boards, complicated rules, typically sculpted models like Zombicide or Descent), Wargames (large maps, thick rulebooks, hex maps and cardboard counters like Advanced Squad Leader), and many others. Just the same a very good thorough article about game design, lots of great advice and suggestions, definitely required reading.

∧ | ∨ • Reply • Share ›

Kat • 4 years ago

What if a game concept is based on a familiar classic game such as Monopoly or Clue? The basic play and layout is the same, but topic and details different.

︿ ｜ ﹀ • Reply • Share ›

Yulia Sokolova • 5 years ago

Great stuff! Thanks for sharing!

︿ ｜ ﹀ • Reply • Share ›

BE Owens • 5 years ago

Great primer for board game design. Very well-written and informative article. Nice intro to a few of the different categories of BG and excellent resources provided at the end. -- thank you!

︿ ｜ ﹀ • Reply • Share ›

Shane • 5 years ago

Great article. Hope I have the motivation to build one.

︿ ｜ ﹀ • Reply • Share ›

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