WILL HINDMARCH
& JEFF TIDBALL

Introduction by Wil Wheaton
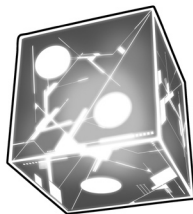Foreword by Robin D. Laws

THINGS WE THINK ABOUT GAMES

with John August, Pat Harrigan, Fred Hicks, Kenneth Hite,
John Kovalic, Michelle Nephew, Philip Reed, S. John Ross,
Mike Selinker, and Noah Wardrip-Fruin

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THINGS WE THINK ABOUT GAMES

GAMEPLAYWRIGHT PRESS

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by Will Hindmarch & Jeff Tidball
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www.gameplaywright.net

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FOREWORD

In art forms older and more established than hobby gaming, the line between practitioner and critic tends to be sharply delineated. Each circles the other from a wary distance. The creator seeks to demolish boundaries, to merge categories, to work intuitively. Critics tackle their job intellectually. They assign values and group like things, elevating certain works to the canon while consigning others to the nine layers of obscurity.

Sometimes the would-be practitioner begins as a critic, but leaves the analysis behind after stepping up from analysis to creation. In such cases the whiff of the critic lingers on, and may be detected in the creative work. The films of former critic Peter Bogdanovich are locked in dialogue with the classic studio-era directors he reveres. Former *Cahiers du cinema* writer Jean-Luc Godard shoots deconstructionist critiques of the medium's inherent politics.

Gaming hasn't yet grown big enough to gather around it more than a nascent body of critics. Into the breach have leapt a number of practitioners. Especially in the roleplaying sub-field, crossing the streams makes a certain amount of sense. Our form emulates, to varying degrees, the structures of earlier narrative analogues. To be practitioners of the RPG requires us to be critics of literature, film, comics, television, and the occasional spot of epic poetry. From there it's a simple leap to become cataloguers and categorizers of our own form.

Pitfalls lie in wait for the designer-critic. There is the tendency to design to make a critical point, to fit into a predetermined theoretical lattice. Mixture of intent can pollute in both directions. A critical framework may prove to be nothing more than a story we tell ourselves, installing our personal tastes as objectively superior to those dimbulbs over there who play that stupid game we don't like.

For this reason, I applaud *Things We Think About Gaming*, a critical work by two fine gaming practitioners, for its wisely scattershot approach. Divided into bite-sized nuggets, this is not a framework to keep ideas penned in. This is a Pandora's box full of rampaging gaming koans. It explodes in your hands as you open it.

I find the entries here alternately incisive, informative, and brilliantly practical. Some are obvious, others condescending, and a certain few flat-out wrong. I'd be undermining my own little thesis if I told you which was which. You may feel the same way, but about different entries entirely.

This book is determined to change the way you think about gaming without telling you what to think, exactly. An unholy mixture of helpful guidebook and jabbing provocation, it will earn its right to rattle around your brain. It is essential reading for designer, critic, and straight-up rank 'n' file gamer alike.

Robin D. Laws
Toronto, Ontario

INTRODUCTION

My name is Wil Wheaton, and I've been a gamer for over 25 years. While I've never designed a game, I have played an awful lot of them, from the simplest beer-and-peanuts diversions to the most complex multi-day epic miniature tabletop battles. Of all the things that make me a geek—and there are a lot of them, according to my wife—nothing is as important to me, or brings me as much joy, as gaming.

About a year ago, I was invited to contribute, (mostly, I suspect, because Will Hindmarch and I have a similar name—even if he spells his wrong) but since I've never designed a game in my life, I declined. The contributors in this book really know what they're talking about, because they are responsible for some of the greatest games of the last decade, and I didn't think I deserved a seat at their table.

During the months that followed, Will kept showing me portions of the book, repeating his invitation to contribute, forcing me to make increasingly difficult Will Saves. Eventually, I blew a save and agreed to make a small contribution of my own. So in place of the introduction that I've written and thrown out too many times to count, I offer 1d4+3 things I've learned from gaming, speaking strictly as a player:

1. Winning isn't everything; having fun is.

One of my favorite Zen koans is from a parable told by the Buddha:

A man traveling across a field encountered a tiger. He fled, the tiger after him. Coming to a precipice, he caught hold of the root of a wild vine and swung himself down over the edge. The tiger sniffed at him from above. Trembling, the man looked down to where, far below, another tiger was waiting to eat him. Only the vine sustained him.

Two mice, one white and one black, little by little started to gnaw away the vine. The man saw a luscious strawberry near him. Grasping the vine with one hand, he plucked the strawberry with the other. How sweet it tasted!

Let's contrast that with Vince Lombardi's oft-quoted saying "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing."

You know what? Screw Vince Lombardi. If the only reason you're playing is to win, you're missing out on the whole reason we play in the first place: to have fun. If the only thing you care about is leveling up or taking your victory lap, you will guarantee a lousy time for yourself whenever you don't win, and you'll guarantee a lousy time for your friends whether you're winning or not. Every game we play is a series of connected moments. Find the strawberry in each one, grasshopper, and you shall never be hungry.

2. Be a good sport.

Sometimes the dice really are out to get you (technically, it's called "probability," but nobody wants to hear that when they've just made a desperately needed to-hit roll… and ended up doing 3 points of damage.) Sometimes, you just can't kill Doctor Lucky. Sometimes, you keep getting turned into a toad in *Talisman*, and sometimes you get so close to winning in *Settlers*, nobody will trade you the last two wool you need. Sure, it can be frustrating, but isn't it still better than standing in line at the DMV or working late on a Friday? It should be, and if you're throwing your dice across the room, it gives your friends a good reason to uninvite you from future games, and it gives the dice a good reason to keep messing with you.

Conversely, there are times when you roll twenties over and over, draw every single card you need in *BattleLore*, suckout time and again in poker, or consistently build tunnels on your first try in *Ticket to Ride: Europe*, while the other players just can't seem to catch a break. Remember what it felt like when you were in their place? Save your gloating for the session report on Board Game Geek.

3. Play the game in the spirit it was intended.

There's a great old game called *Junta*. Players are part of a corrupt regime in a banana republic, and spend a lot of time trying to assassinate each other. It's not an especially complicated game, and doesn't provide for a lot of deep, strategic thinking. It's silly, and the game works best when it's played fast and the players don't take it too seriously. Nothing ruins an otherwise good game of *Junta* faster than someone taking five minutes every turn to think several turns ahead while metagaming and exploring every potential decision's eventual result. There are games designed to be played that way, but *Junta* isn't one of them.

Don't try to make games something they're not. To borrow a phrase, it wastes your time and it annoys the pig. Likewise, don't play *Munchkin* unless you're willing to be royally shafted by (and royally shaft) your friends, and if you ever have the opportunity in *Illuminati* to use the Girl Scouts to control anything, do it. It may not help you win the game, but the whole point of *Illuminati* (other than taking over the world, of course) is to build the most ridiculous power structure you possibly can.

4. Give new players a break.

New players may be easy targets, but if you utterly crush, kill, and destroy them while they're still figuring out the rules, they'll never come back for another game. Let them take a mulligan if they make an obviously bad move early on in *Power Grid*. Remember what it was like the first time you tried to build a 1,500 point *Warhammer* army, and got wasted in five turns because you forgot to put radiation shields on your Space Marines. Offer advice that doesn't necessarily reveal your entire strategy, but help them to understand the fundamentals so they can intelligently create their own.

5. Support your friendly local game shop!

These guys deal with hardcore, ponytailed, combat-booted gamers every single day. You know that guy you will cross the hall to avoid at a convention? Yeah, that guy. That guy comes into the shop four days a week, never buys a thing, and stands at the counter reciting his list of grievances against every game ever published.

But the owner of your friendly local game shop endures it, because he loves gaming even more than you do—enough to open a store! He can give you buying advice, a place to play with friends or strangers, and—most importantly—a sanctuary for new gamers to find out exactly why we spend as much time and money doing what we do.

Without the friendly local game shop, our hobby will surely wither and die. Without the friendly local game shop, future generations of potential gamers will never know the joy of finding their first secret door, or the satisfaction of shouting laser blast noises in *Mag*Blast* and successfully sinking Blackbeard in *Pirate's Cove*. Without the friendly local game shop, we're doomed to a future that's worse than boring: it's mundane. We can't let that happen, people. Won't someone think of the children?

6. Those who can, teach.

One of my friends, for some mythical reason, can understand and interpret rules better than anyone else. He could use this skill to be an evil Rules Lawyer, but he's Lawful Good, and uses it to help shepherd the rest of us through the valley of the shadow of the rules so we can get down to the business of actually playing the game. As a result, I don't think he's paid for pizza or beer in ten years.

If you find yourself in a similar position, may I humbly suggest that you also use your powers for good, maybe at a friendly local game shop in the open gaming area on a weekend?

Finally, I'd like to leave you with my one fundamental rule of life: **Don't be a dick.** It's just four little words, but they are the key to happiness, and not just in gaming.

PREFACES

Jeff

I think about games more than I play them. In high school, this was because I was obsessed with games and gaming. These days, it's because I make games for a living.

Things We Think About Games has been, for me, an opportunity to formalize and record some shop talk. The short form has been an interesting challenge. It's one thing to explain your position from every angle, at exhaustive length. It's something different to boil it down while worrying, with every sentence and caveat you cut, that it'll be taken out of context, or the obvious exceptions thrown back in your face on Ye Internete. But the hope is that this format—and I think we were right to choose it—will make *Things We Think* more *actually useful*. The hope is that short, provocative nuggets will spark your own thinking and force you to make up your own damn mind.

Bring your thoughts to our website at www.gameplaywright.net and then say something there, whether that's unspooling your own Things or just telling us what you think of ours.

We'll see you there.

Will

I don't agree with all the Things in this book, and neither should you.

One nefarious game designer we sent this book to told me he had "an immediate visceral reaction to the one encouraging people to attend gaming conventions." This reaction was not, I think, immediate visceral agreement. Good. I hope you nod along with one Thing, then turn the page, read the next, and hurl the book across the room. I hope this book gets you wound up.

So what's in here are Things we have learned thus far in our time as game players, game designers, game writers, and game publishers. I don't know if all these Things are true, but they're all things we have learned. I might learn something that contradicts one of them when I play poker tomorrow or D&D the day after that. That's the way it goes.

The point is that we're putting what we think down on paper so you can smash what we think up against what you think and see what alchemical reaction results. Get mad. Call us names. Think your own Things and spread them around.

101 THINGS WE THINK ABOUT GAMES

The player of any game has, at most, two hands.

If your game requires a player to hold, handle, or move more than two things, you should know where the player sets one item while she is manipulating another. You should have a good reason for not including some indication of that place on your game board, in the rulebook, or in the money shot of your game on the box.

In poker, for example, the placement of cards and chips is customary. Even still, a nice poker tabletop has a chip rack and maybe a designated place for hole cards. A board game should provide a place for a draw deck, discard pile, and scoring if at all possible.

Take your turn, already.

Game players overestimate the gratification they can get out of thinking exhaustively about their options for what they're going to do on their turn. Think about what you're going to do on your turn while the other players are taking their turns. When your turn comes, just do something.

Most of the time, it's no sin to just choose an option that seems like fun, and let the next player get on with his own thing. The increase in fun is logarithmic when several—or all—of the people playing a game adopt this approach.

Roleplayers: This applies to you, too.

Humankind invented board games early.

Five thousand years ago, deterministic Egyptians believed the outcome of games like Senet, a randomized race game and potential precursor to backgammon, could reveal the attitudes of the gods. To them, the random components—throwing sticks instead of dice—weren't truly random; they were influenced or directed by the wills of gods. The winner of a Senet race was considered to be fortunate, not lucky. This was a great boon for the journey to the afterlife, so some players were buried with a Senet board among their funerary possessions.

Tags: board games | history

When you're part of a group that's all learning a new game together, stop doing that.

Learning a game isn't an "all together" activity.

One of you should figure out how to play on his own, and then teach the others. Having one player read the rulebook aloud while everyone tries to figure it out all at once is (a) horrible and (b) inefficient.

If there are no volunteers, sweeten the pot: the teacher's pizza is on the group.

Teach a game using both rules and examples.

Teaching a game with only examples ("If you're this guy, you can move here") isn't effective because then you're leaving people to deduce what they can actually *do* by themselves.

Here's a good example of the kind of thing you should hear coming out of your mouth when you're teaching people to play a game: "These units can move one space. If you control this one, you can move it here, or here, or here, but not here, because that's more than once space."

Identify what you're playing:

A *board game* is a game with a board.

A *card game* is a game with cards, but without a board. (If a game has both a board and cards, it's a board game.)

A *miniatures game* is played with figures that are representational, and non-abstract, and to scale with each other. It's played on a surface that also has a uniform scale, although the figures need not be—and usually aren't — to scale with the surface. This surface is not what any sane person would think of as a "board."

A *tabletop roleplaying game* is a pastime that generates a narrative. Very few roleplaying games are actually games, because no one wins, so it's more accurate to think of them as toys. A roleplaying game that requires a board, or cards, or miniatures on a surface, is suspect in its definition.

Tags: board games | card games | miniatures games | roleplaying

Try playing that new board game in public.

Maybe at a coffee shop or at the game store. You might find new people to play with. Plus, the hobby can always use a little more positive exposure.

Make sure you have two-player games in the house.

Unless the rules say otherwise, assume players can examine each other's components at any time, to count how many money chits they have, for example.

This doesn't mean that it's acceptable to just reach over and fumble around with someone else's counters and tokens. Were you born in a barn?

This assumption is made largely because of how annoying it would be if players (a) felt the need to obfuscate their pieces, and (b) felt the need to keep track of each other's incoming and outgoing chits, counters, markers, and tokens.

Exception: Another player's hand of cards can generally be assumed to be secret unless the rules explicitly direct otherwise.

Tags: board games | card games | miniatures games | unwritten rules

Strategy and Tactics

Your *strategy* is the design by which you intend to achieve an overall victory. It is how you deploy and arrange your resources for a large-scale endeavor. It is how you intend to invade and defend Europe. It is about armies.

Your *tactic* is the plan by which you intend to arrange and deploy your soldiers to achieve a short-term objective that, ideally, contributes to your larger strategy. It is how you position and activate your immediate resources for an immediate endeavor. It is about how you intend to secure a bunker that makes the capture of the beachhead possible. It is about squads and individual soldiers.

Sitting back and waiting for your opponent to make a mistake is a strategy. You need to successfully choose and carry out the proper tactics to survive long enough to make such a strategy viable.

"We should fix the fact that the average cartoon does a better job at portraying the human condition than our games do."

—Raph Koster, *A Theory of Fun for Game Design*

What your in-laws think.

Be aware that among the public at large, "gaming" means "gambling in Las Vegas and at Indian casinos," and "role-playing" means either "playing computer- or console-based RPGs," "engaging in training exercises at work," or "trying to spice things up in the bedroom." But even so, things are changing as more and more of the world's adults were born after the advent of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Tags: games and life

Fair methods for determining a first player:

a. The player whose birthday will come next goes first.

b. The player whose mother's first name is alphabetically last goes first.

c. For a game using a deck of standard playing cards, the deck is shuffled and cut, and one card dealt to each player. The player with the highest value goes first. In case of a tie, one more card is dealt to each tied player.

d. In a two-player game, by coin flip. If the choosing player is correct, he goes first.

e. In a game with dice, by roll-off. The highest roller goes first, with ties broken by another roll-off among tied players.

f. For games where each player has unique components and all players' components are the same shape—wooden cubes, for example—place one of each color in a box top, mix them, and choose one randomly. The players whose piece is chosen goes first.

g. If only one player wants to go first, that player goes first.

Don't fret.

Unless you're playing for real money, that extra card that came off the top of the deck isn't such a big deal. Just slide that card somewhere into the body of the draw deck or discard it. If anyone sees it, make sure everyone sees it. Then get on with play.

If a video game isn't fun early on, it probably isn't going to become fun later on.

Don't bother playing much of games that aren't entertaining you—there are too many games and not enough time.

A "tag" is a word that identifies a specific mechanical game effect.

They appear most often on game cards, where the space available to present rules in long form is limited. They're used frequently in collectible or customizable games, where they can be used in combination—and in combination with unique rules (i.e., rules not codified into tags)—to create interesting and widely varied game effects that are nevertheless very robust.

Tags are often superior to simply printing a rule because they take up less space, are easier to scan for visually, ensure against drifting language that might be interpreted differently from card to card, and can be retroactively re-defined in later editions or releases if they become problematic.

"Trample" is a tag from *Magic: The Gathering*, for example. In other games, the capabilities of a particular profession, clan, or resource type are often codified with tags.

For obvious reasons, words used as tags in game should never also be used in the same game for their common English meanings.

You can tell if a die on an uneven surface is cocked...

…by trying to stack another die the same size and type on top of it. If you can do it, the roll is good. If not, the die is cocked; re-roll the original.

All variations on gameplay stem from two core types of alterations: expanding choices and restricting choices.

Gameplay is based on choices and consequences, from choosing pieces to move in backgammon to making a bet in poker. A player should always have a choice to make on her turn, but how many options she has to choose from can vary from turn to turn. As a game goes on, a player's available options may shrink or expand as resources (like chips or pawns) are lost and gained, or as cards are played and drawn, for example.

Five-Card Draw is a variation of poker in which a player's choices are expanded. In addition to choosing whether to bet or fold, the player chooses a number of cards to discard and redraw. Texas Hold 'Em is a variation in which a player's choices are restricted to betting options. Both games are poker, but each riffs on the player's options in different ways.

Scientific study tells us that humans find it excruciating to close off options, even when it costs them demonstrable losses in the immediate term.

To make a game design or roleplaying adventure feel punishing, make the players close off their own options frequently. To make it feel permissive, offer ever-increasing choices without ever eliminating any.

When you design the turn structure of a card game, the players should draw new cards at the end—not the beginning—of their turns.

Although the traditional order is to draw, then play, the beginning-of-turn draw makes the game drag. That's because each player must, after drawing, immediately consider new opportunities, during which no one else can do anything, because it's the considering player's turn. Drawing a card at the end of the turn, on the other hand, leaves each player something new to think about while the other players are taking their turns.

This applies to every game where variable resources are acquired randomly or semi-randomly, at some point in the player turn.

A game is a collection of rules, usually dressed up in a particular theme. Not every rule in every game needs to be wholly new, however. It is sometimes perfectly fine to import terminology and simple play mechanisms that are common parlance. It's not necessary to reinvent every mechanism or term for the sake of originality. Just as important: It's not necessary to appear to do these things for the sake of appearing original.

Put another way: If it ain't broke.

In a story, excitement hangs on the points where we hope some particular thing will happen, but fear that some different thing will happen. That is, narrative excitement comes from uncertainty mixed with emotional investment.

The excitement of a particular point of determination can be heightened by other activity that points forward toward to—and thus intensifies—the eventual resolution, as well as scenes that look backward and recall it. These "scenes of preparation" and "scenes of aftermath" both essentially increase the drama by multiplying its duration.

Preparation and aftermath can intensify investment even in games that aren't narrative, that don't have a story. Preparation might include (for example) the purchasing and massing of troops, the acquisition of resources, or the negotiations among players prior to a confrontation. Aftermath might include the allocation of casualties or the awarding of a consolation prize due to a force that was overcome.

When designing game systems, include explicit opportunities for preparation and aftermath.

In a tabletop roleplaying game, the characters are all wearing pants.

This is true even though none of the players informed the gamemaster that their characters were putting their pants on.

Issues such as these—things that any person would do without comment—are collectively "pants issues," and players in any sane game may always assert that they have done such things if it ever becomes important.

Tags: roleplaying | unwritten rules

Keep your eye on the discard pile. Shuffle it just before it seems necessary to do so.

Puerto Rico is a great game, but you should probably work your way up to it.

Start a new game player on a game like _Puerto Rico_ (or even possibly _Settlers of Catan_) and you risk scaring him or her away. That game has everything, but the problem is that it has everything.

You probably remember more of the questions from that old *Trivial Pursuit* set than you think you do.

Some games are exhaustible. They can be played only so many times before the thrill, the fun, or the mystery is gone. This is fine.

Trivia games are the most obvious examples—and knowing the answers to trivia questions because you've got a lot of experience with the current slew of cards in the box isn't quite the same thing as winning. New questions are the heart of trivia games, whether you're part of a trivia team down at the bar or you're just playing with friends twice a year.

Get rid of the games that have been played-out. Keeping them around contributes to a feeling of having "enough games already," and that can stop you from finding your new favorite game. Consider donating your old games or auctioning them online; you'll make room for you to get the newest edition of your favorite trivia game and you might help someone else find their new favorite game.

Tags: all games | trivia games

Awards for games can mean a lot of things.

Some awards reflect informed opinions of play and popularity. Other awards just mean the game won a popularity contest, or just that a lot of people had heard of that game. Still, that means something.

The argument that awards don't mean anything is well known. We can probably stop having that argument now.

When playing a game, be aware that the other players are not necessarily playing for the same reason(s) that you are.

You might be playing to compete, but the guy across the table might only have joined to hang out with the group, or bathe in the theme, or poach your girlfriend. Even among those who are "playing to play" there are different spins. Playing to win, playing to make sure everybody has fun, playing to broaden experience.

In an RPG remember that you, as the gamemaster (GM), are the arbiter of sensory facts.

Sights, sounds, smells, and tastes from the game world only make it to the players as clearly as the GM manages to describe them. Do not penalize a player or his character for being confused about details the character is meant to be experiencing first-hand. A player might be unsure what you meant by "squeaking sound," but the character is there in the game world, hearing it outright, and may be able to differentiate between the sound of an animal and the sound of a machine in a way that the player cannot with only the word "squeak" to go on. The player has to parse your meaning, but the character does not. Respect the gap between player and character—serve the player.

Don't be afraid to stop and clarify sensory details. Don't be afraid to use real-world, familiar examples or references to communicate the facts of the game world. These may be anachronistic, these may briefly pull the player out of the game world, but a character is only "present" in the game world if the player is able to understand what the game world looks and feels like.

This lesson can apply to any game set in an imaginary world, except it becomes the designer's job to clarify the world, rather than a GM's.

Tags: roleplaying

Dollar for dollar, a roleplaying game is very nearly the most efficient entertainment you can buy.

A game should be good to look at.

If a game is not somehow pleasing before it is played it's likely the game won't be played at all. A game that isn't played is like good food thrown away.

If you cannot wrangle good illustrations for your game, find another way to make it look good. Do not settle for "good enough" or something "close enough" to your original vision. If you cannot afford your original vision, find a vision that your game can attain with excellence rather than vague adequacy. People do buy games about stick figures.

You can tell what a game's designers and publishers valued by flipping through the rulebook and components.

Old-school, outline-numbered rules (1.1, 1.2, 1.3…) suggest logical organization at the expense of attractiveness and ease of learning. Flashy graphics suggest more attention could have been paid to developing the rules and playtesting them. Flimsy components suggest that either the publisher went with lower quality materials to pad his margin, or that the game's print run wasn't large enough for the publisher to make a decent return on components of more standard quality.

You can judge a lot about a book by its cover.

Mix color and shape when suiting components in a game design.

Games in which similar components are differentiated only by color—cubes in red, blue, and green; cards bearing the same symbol in different colors—pose significant hurdles to the colorblind, and can also go wrong when a printer or manufacturer uses, for example, a red and orange that are a little bit too close.

To avoid this problem, use both shapes and colors simultaneously. Use cubes, cylinders, and triangles (instead of just cubes), or print a shape on each piece in addition to color-coding. Even subtle differences can make a difference; the colored train cards in *Ticket to Ride* are an excellent example.

Symmetrical play spaces are boring.

Seek out—or at the very least, don't avoid—opportunities to play games with kids.

And while you're doing it, help them have a good time. (Does not mean: "Let them win." Does mean: "Help them have a good time.")

Think about age-appropriateness in an expansive way; think past the "Ages 12 to 112!" starburst on the box. Lots of us read novels intended for adults in grade school, and came out with an appreciation of real literature that's that much deeper for it. But in the same vein, inappropriate for kids is inappropriate for kids. Even if the game is *Chutes and Ladders*, the Nantucket limericks are right out.

Don't ask (and especially don't demand) to re-do something from a previous turn because you misunderstood a rule.

Not even if the rule was explained to you incorrectly. It's just a game, and you'll get it right next time.

Once you have cannibalized a game for its dice or figures, play money or pawns, assume that those things will never make it back to the game they came from. They almost never do.

A good GM looks like an idiot to anyone not participating in the game, because he is making faces, speaking in character, and snarling like a monster.

A good GM is not afraid to look like an idiot.

"GNS" is shorthand for the three main ways tabletop roleplayers approach the activity.

"Gamism" is an agenda concerned primarily with engaging the game as a game.

"Narrativism" is an agenda concerned foremost with inventing and telling satisfying stories.

"Simulationism" is an agenda concerned predominantly with representing, in the game, would would happen in reality, or some version of reality.

Few players pursue a single agenda exclusively. Most seek a mixture, or aim for different things at different times.

Just like at the video store, the older titles in your game collection will usually be better than the stuff on the new release wall.

How often is a masterwork like *The Seven Samurai* or *Settlers of Catan*, released into the world? But even past bona fide classics, there are also games in your collection that are the equivalent of *The Big Lebowski*. They're not going to make an American Film Institute list anytime soon, but playing them is a lot more fulfilling than sopping up whatever garbage Hollywood happened to barf into your local megaplex this weekend.

Dibs were marking stones used in an old game called dib-stones. In general, any game piece used to indicate ownership of something by a particular player is a dib. The army pieces in *Risk* are therefore both pawns and dibs. Thus, to "have dibs on" something is a gaming term and a claim of ownership.

Dibs can also mean money.

If you know a lot about history, here's something you should be aware of: Historical accuracy does not make a game more fun—not even a historical game.

If someone asks you, fine. If not, keep it to yourself.

Or, to say it another way,

Put a sock in it, Masters in Thirteenth-Century Arms and Armo(u)r.

When creating RPG characters, lots of people make up the same one over and over, in different trappings.

I know a guy who creates an inscrutable loner who lives by his own outsider's code of conduct, for which he'll gladly both kill and die, in every game he plays. Might be a ninja in one setting and a bounty hunter in another, but it's the same character from game to game to game.

Be aware of this tendency in yourself and others.

Tags: roleplaying

If you want to play again, you should probably not act like a fuckwit.

If you don't want to play again, still do not act like a fuckwit.

People might like you if you win. People will definitely not like you if you act like a fuckwit, even if you win.

Design good cards.

When creating the graphic design for customized cards, place each card's unique identifier, and perhaps most frequently used statistic, in the top half of the card's left side. That's the part of each card that's visible when a hand of cards is fanned out. Turn long text on its side, if you have to.

A die that falls off the table is no less random.

Whether or not it counts during play, however, is a decision all players should be aware of before the die is cast. At some tables, it's fair game to accept or reject such a roll as long as the result is not yet known to the dice-rolling player. You've seen this, right? A die rolls off the table and the player who rolled it immediately declares something like, "Not taking it!"

In the event of a dispute, let the owner of the game make the call.

Tags: all games | unwritten rules

A cooperative game isn't a solo game (with bonus assistants!) for the table's most active egotist.

If you're the egotist, ease up and let everybody else play. If the game is less fun for you if someone else makes a sub-optimal move, that's your problem, not theirs. You willing assistants, knock if off; you're enabling.

A roleplaying game is as cooperative as *Shadows over Camelot* for these purposes.

Having played chess does not qualify you to answer "Yes" when you are asked, "Do you play chess?"

Appreciate the difference between having played a game and being an ongoing player of a game.

"Omnivores" are gamers who buy and play games of multiple types: board, card, computer, console, miniatures, roleplaying, and so on.

Omnivores are some of the most obviously enthusiastic gamers around, leading many people to the not-substantiated conclusion that most or even all gamers are omnivorous. This misconception has derailed many a start-up game publisher trying to target a theoretically monolithic audience with a mixed-type product line.

But not only are there fewer omnivores than their enthusiasm might suggest, many self-identified omnivores are lying to themselves. No matter how much you might like to think of yourself as a roleplayer, if you haven't picked up an RPG book, much less sat down to roleplay, since college a decade ago, it's a bit of a stretch.

Here's the thing: There's nothing shameful about having a preference for a particular type of game and not caring one way or another about other the others.

Tags: all games (ha!)

Go to game conventions.

Collectible and customizable games give you great power at great price.

You can make your deck or build your army any way you want to—but the kicker is that you can't play until you do. The price is paid in setup time, and pre-setup time.

(And dollars.)

Miniatures gaming is two separate hobbies fused into one.

The first is playing tabletop wargames. The second is painting miniature armies. You're not broken if you like the one but not the other, or the other and not the one.

Attention, Gamemasters:

"When in doubt, have two guys come through the door with guns."

—Raymond Chandler

(Bonus Chandler wisdom: "Chess is as elaborate a waste of human intelligence as you can find outside an advertising agency.")

This time is for this game, not the last one and not the next one.

Play every game like you will get to play it again sometime.

The turn you are taking now, the play you are making now, the bet you are placing now is not your last ever. Presume you will get to try another tack when you play this game again sometime.

This may or may not be good advice for living life or waging war, but this is neither of those things. This is just a game.

Your shit-talking had better be part of your play. Otherwise you're just talking shit.

To play a game competitively, there's no way around playing it often.

Here, competitively means, "at a level where you can reasonably expect to contend for victory in an organized play environment." Although "organized play" usually connotes collectible games, it's as true for *Car Wars* and *Caylus* as it is for *Magic: The Gathering* and the CCG-of-the-moment.

You can read as much about a game as you want, and talk about it until you're blue in the face, but there's no substitute for playing.

Tags: all games | strategy

Most games have optimal and sub-optimal ways of doing things. In *Blood Bowl*, for example, the order in which your linemen throw their blocks makes a big difference in determining whether your team is going to get anywhere.

If doing well matters to you, learn the optimal methods for the games you like.

But keep in mind that it's OK to learn a game's optimal methods as you go along, as long as you don't mind playing sub-optimally for a while.

Note that roleplaying games are generally less punishing to sub-optimal play than other kinds of games, because the GM is able—if willing—to stand in for character expertise that the player lacks.

Be aware of "act breaks" in board games and card games.

Act breaks are points in gameplay when the main emphasis of play among the players changes. Claiming territory gives way to harvesting resources, alliances fall apart and carnage is the result, the midgame gives way to the endgame.

Predicting—or precipitating—these moments of evolution can give you a huge advantage.

There is no skill more important to playing good poker than paying attention to everything that happens at the table.

Sometimes I can see your cards when you hold them that way. Sometimes I will let you know.

Sometimes I won't.

"When we play, we must realize, before anything else, that we are out to make money."

—David Sklansky

Theme and *gameplay* are two different things.

Even when they are deeply interrelated, they should not be confused. Even if you want your player to experience the game without consciously separating theme from gameplay, you the designer must not confuse them.

Theme is what the game is apparently about: medieval warfare, the Second Battle of Bull Run, dueling pistols at dawn, email spam, Catholicism, or Vikings plundering Dark Age cities, for example. This is how the game is dressed.

Gameplay is what the game is actually about: trapping the opponent's scoring piece, defeating an enemy army, shooting a duelist, making money, reenacting history, or gathering resources. This is what the game is made of.

The theme of chess is medieval warfare. The scoring piece in that game is called the king. Knowing a great deal of trivial details about knightly armor will not help you win a game of chess, however, because the game is not actually about medieval battle tactics. It is about restricting your opponent's options until, finally, his or her king is checkmated. This is what the game is about even if the pieces are given a different theme, like *Star Trek* or *The Simpsons*.

Theme and *gameplay* are still two different things.

The true turning radius of an armored medieval knight on horseback does not legitimize a bad bit of game design. In chess, the knight moves the way he does for reasons of play, not for the sake of historical accuracy. The bishop's diagonal movement doesn't change if he is part of a themed set that calls him a Druid or a Star Commander. Nor should it. Changing the theme of your game may result in a different product but it probably does not result in a different game.

Knowing the tensile strength of folded steel made by Vikings in the 10th century is a not a good reason to add a rule to your game.

Tags: all games | design

A game has definite, usually explicit, goals.

A game has measurable progress, always, and conditions for victory or conclusion usually. If it does not have these things, your game might be a toy or a pastime.

Second Life looks like a game, but it is a toy.

A game, as a creative work, has no responsibility to historical or scientific accuracy.

Be aware:

Roleplayers always wind up running the games they really want to play.

Focus your game on a core element of gameplay—sometimes called the "core one minute of play."

If you have multiple major elements of play, you may have two games in there. That might be fine, but know what your game is really about and strive to cut away everything that is not that.

When naming characters in games:

a. Consider words with meanings (Mole, Star, Blackhead), rather than traditional or invented names, because meaning creates interest. If you have to associate some new meaning with a word that brings none of its own to the table, you're working harder than you need to. Of course, some names are both traditional and mean something (Rex, Christian, Will).

b. Alternate between common names and uncommon names (John, Nigel, Kate, Millicent) when introducing a series of NPCs, for example, or introducing a series of characters in a rulebook. That rhythm can help people remember who's who.

c. When naming fantasy and science-fiction characters, give sympathetic but unusual characters—space aliens, friendly ogres, melancholy robots—simple, real-world names, common or uncommon (Axel, Bob, Cromwell). The character becomes relatable, and also easy to refer to. Characters—even guns and spaceships—who can be easily referred to by name wind up being the subjects of in-character dialog from the players, even in board and card games. When players use your names, they're immersed, to some degree, in your game world.

When naming creatures and characters in your fantasy, science fiction, or historical game, do not make the names daunting to pronounce.

Have someone who is unlikely to buy your game for himself try to say the names out loud. If he can't, blame the name. Then change the name.

Do not put apostrophes in any name for aesthetic reasons. Include an apostrophe only if the name cannot be properly pronounced without it. Even then, think twice.

Seriously. Enough with the apostrophe names.

Don't assume the person reading your rulebook has played a lot of other games in the same style—not even *Settlers of Catan*.

Do assume that your reader has played *a* game before.

Clarity is vital.

Game rules may be evocative, they may be detailed, they may be thorough, they may be funny, they may be educational, they may be provocative, they may be shocking, but they can only be those things if they are also clear.

Game rules, whether in a rulebook or on a card, must be legible. No matter how good they look, they must also be legible. The typeface you've chosen may have historical meaning, but it must also be legible.

It is important that game rules be legible.

You have three pronouns available to use in your game rules: she, he, they.

If your game has non-symmetrical player roles—such as a Gamemaster, Banker, or Dealer—assign a particular pronoun to each role and stick with it in the rulebook. Otherwise, take advantage of the inherent clarity of each pronoun. Use *he* and *she* to represent two different players, and use *they* only to indicate multiple players. As a pronoun, they is happily gender-neutral, but it also implies multiple persons, making it a potentially confusing single-person pronoun. You want to avoid confusion in your game rules.

Tags: design | game rules

Grammar and punctuation standards are different for rulebooks than they are for academic writing.

Punctuation can be vital to your reader's understanding of a rule the first time it is read. Though the semicolon may be frowned upon by some of the academics and grammarians you hope will be playing your game, use it to connect closely related concepts, especially rules and their exceptions, or rules and statements bluntly overruling apparent exceptions. When a player references a rulebook, he may stop reading when a sentence or paragraph ends, potentially missing important information in the next sentence or paragraph; a semicolon leads into the next idea with a handoff rather than a break.

Keep your paragraphs short. Long paragraphs make your game look complicated. Shorter paragraphs make it look simple to learn.

Give each subject its own paragraph.

If a rule is optional, give it a name.

Players should be able to quickly describe their house game to other players by casually citing rule names.

Jargon is good. It creates a culture of play and is just more fun than quoting a rulebook. Part of what makes poker excellent is the swollen insider vocabulary that comes with it. For example, "We're playing Chicago, Follow the Queen, so high spade in the hole splits the pot."

If you can get players talking like your game talks, then you've got them.

Make your rules easy to reference.

Your rules will be read before play, but they will also be referenced during play. Use headers or bold text to make it easy for readers to find the right game rule quickly. Especially in casual games, for which the player isn't expected to immerse herself into a richly detailed world, avoid colorful headers that don't clearly indicate what rules follow them.

Before you break your game rules down step by step, provide a simple overview that zooms out and describes the whole game, from beginning to endgame, in quick and simple language. Explain the victory condition before you get into the finer rules or a step-by-step explanation of play. The end of a game can be suspenseful, but your rules should not be—your rules are your rules, and the game is the game.

Give each step of play, whether it's a turn or a phase or whatever, its own clearly labeled paragraph. Use bullet points or numbers to break up individual rules and exceptions. If a rule is an exception to another rule, say so outright.

Make your rules easy to refer to.

This is not the same thing as Thing #079. A rule may be easy to look up because it is easy to spot in the rulebook, but important rules should also have names or titles so players can easily mention them during play.

For example: The Golden Rule, poker's big and little blinds, the Infield Fly Rule in baseball, and Ulric's Fury in *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*.

Too much jargon is not good.

Good jargon emerges naturally, through actual play. But avoid laying so much jargon on your game that you find yourself teaching vocabulary instead of rules. If the answer to the question "What is that?" begins with the words, "That's just what they call...," then consider dropping that bit of jargon, because there's already a name for it.

Poker can bear more jargon than any other game or sport. Don't use it for comparison when judging whether your favorite game has too much jargon.

Some games have definitive, mathematical solutions.

These kinds of games are not necessarily "broken." They may simply be good for a limited number of plays. Think of these kinds of games as puzzles in addition to games—they can be played, but they can also be solved.

Balance is not the same thing as fun.

Plenty of games are rock-solid mathematically and deader than Socrates when they're played. Running the numbers on a game does very little, by itself, to tell you if a game is fun or not. Likewise, running the numbers does very little to tell you if a game is ready to be played.

Deadlines create pressure.

Just about any gameplay mechanic can be made more dramatic by creating a deadline. The bomb must be defused in one minute. The golden idol must be retrieved before the museum guards come back. You must flee the ancient temple before it collapses. That sort of thing.

Deadlines come in two elemental types: visible and invisible.

A visible deadline is one in which the time left to complete the task is known by the player—like when a bomb has a timer on it.

An invisible deadline is one wherein the time left to complete the task is unknown to the player, either because the time left is simply kept secret or because the amount of time left isn't pre-determined—like when a randomized timer controls when the board ejects all the pieces in play, or when there's a chance each turn that the ancient temple finally collapses.

Higher numbers indicate more of something.

This is how numbers work.

If a higher number indicates that an action is more difficult, that number cannot reasonably be described as an "Ease Factor," because it doesn't actually describe greater ease. Call that a "Difficulty" or "Challenge Factor," instead.

Avoid overdressing a game by giving every game piece or element a fantastical or obtuse name.

Sometimes it's okay to have victory points instead of Success Tokens and a scoring track instead of a Linear Metric of Victory Status.

Consumers, designers, and publishers should be aware—and beware—that the traditional model of RPG publishing is not necessarily (or even usually) good for the game qua game.

The traditional commercial model for tabletop roleplaying games assumes that a core game is followed by supplements that are released with some regularity. But expansion material typically (a) is written by different and less expert designers than the core game was, (b) treads ground that the core game's playtesting eliminated, (c) costs the consumer more per word, and (d) fragments the game's player base.

But even so, a game that's not expanded on an ongoing basis is almost always deprecated in the eyes of the commercial channel. Fans and retailers assume an unsupported game is "dead," which becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as retailers stop stocking it.

Tags: the industry | publishing | roleplaying

A game that is no longer supported is called "dead."

But that's business jargon. Don't let the state of a game line's release schedule determine whether or not you play it. Play it because it's fun.

A game and a product are two different things. Many products are the same game, albeit in different clothes. This is fine.

Make your game's packaging the right size.

A bigger box is not a better box. A bigger box is more of a letdown when it is finally opened and the game inside is revealed to be half as big. A large box should reveal that its components are large or plentiful. A small game in a big box is a little bit like lying.

A large box can promise a lot of game for your money, but can be difficult to store. A small box can make a game feel slight, but it can also attract people who want to carry that game around. Both sizes have their appeal. Accept that your game is the size it is.

Tags: all games | design | publishing

Brevior vita est quam pro futumentibus negotiam agendo.

(Life is too short to do business with fuckwits.)

—James Wallis–era Hogshead Publishing motto

If, while writing the rules for a game, you find yourself saying—either to yourself or out loud—"They'll figure it out," go back and do better.

Keep fixing your rules until "they" will not have to do any "figuring."

If the game has not been played without the designer present, it has not been playtested.

A game has only been playtested if players have attempted to learn the game using the rulebook alone. If your game does not play as intended without you there, refine the rulebook or the game. A game is for players, after all.

Game demos are at least as much about making the customer understand the fun she'll have playing as it is about conveying the rules of the game.

It's okay to hold back some rules. It is not okay to hold back fun.

From most important to least important, these are the critical factors that will determine whether you will enjoy playing a given game:

a. Whether you're in a mindset to enjoy playing a game.

b. Whether you enjoy the company of the people you're playing with.

c. Whether the game design is any good.

Corollary: It's much better to play an RPG with a good gamemaster than to play a good RPG with a bad game master.

You cannot convince someone who is not having fun that he is.

"We improve ourselves by victories over our self. There must be contests, and you must win."

—Edward Gibbon

Having balance in your life doesn't mean playing lots of different games.

"Balance" means having interests that aren't games, and doing things that aren't gaming. And let's be clear: Talking about games on the Internet is not a discrete activity from gaming.

People who like games so much that they become professional game writers and designers are, traditionally, the grossest violators of this dictum. Or, alternately, perhaps I am the only one.

Tags: games and life

Rule 16a. No person shall bowl under an assumed name…

—ABC/WIBC General Playing Rules

If you have more fun when you pretend that it makes a difference when you "warm up" your dice, then by all means, do it.

But keep in mind that warming up your dice is about *fun*, not about math, or physics, or probabilities, or magic.

Unless you have more fun when you pretend that it's about math, physics, probabilities, or magic.

Know why you play games.

AND ANOTHER THING...

(26 MORE THINGS ABOUT GAMES)

Life's too short to play bad games.

Contributed by John Kovalic

Give the gift of gaming.

Games make great presents, even for folks who don't think of themselves as gamers. You won't just be giving a gift, you'll be gaining an opponent.

Contributed by John Kovalic

Women make up 51% of the population.

Try including some in your game. Fully clothed.

Contributed by Michelle Nephew

A good playtest group is a mean playtest group.

Most people are nice by nature. They want to think the best of others, give them the benefit of the doubt, and be supportive of their work. This is the opposite of what makes a playtest group useful. Playtest groups have to look for flaws in the game, exploit them mercilessly, then point them out in a cold hard report that they know the designer himself will see. They have to be mean, and that takes training, so value such groups highly.

Strangely enough, simply getting them to admit when they *didn't have fun* is the most difficult thing you can train a playtest group to do.

Contributed by Michelle Nephew

When naming characters in roleplaying games:

d) Remember the period. For 1920s games, consider names like Clark, Reginald, Esther, Clarissa, etc. For nineteenth-century games, consider Woodrow, Simon, August, Levi, Zadok, etc. Any individual name might occur in many time periods, but immersion is helped if *all* the PCs and NPCs have period-appropriate names.

e) Names are ethnic identifiers. For real-world games, especially period games, names like Greta, Karel, Jose, Annabella, Jing, Patrick, etc., can imply a lot about a character's background, neighborhood, economic status, and skills—for good or ill.

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

Tags: design | roleplaying

Don't multiply cardboard.

Gamers want value for their money, so it's tempting to put more and more in the box. But if there are handfuls of tokens for characters, influence, money, control, items, special actions, round markers, etc., you increase set-up time and raise the odds that an ill-timed cat will permanently disrupt the evening's gaming. If you absolutely must include lots of tokens, include redundant ones so that players can still play the game if some get lost.

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

It's not *Squad Leader*.

In my gaming group, when a player is taking to long to decide his or her action, someone usually says, "Come on. It's not *Squad Leader*." This is because *SL* is representative of a type of game (hex-and-counter stuff mostly, and chess) that actually requires time-consuming, brain-burning deliberation. Most games are not of this type.

The one time I actually played *Squad Leader*, my opponent Joe Scrimshaw said, "Come on. It's not *Siege of Jerusalem*."

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

Tags: all games

RPGs are not literary forms.

Someone once said that a great book can't be read, only re-read. Literature of quality reveals further depths on reexamination. It's characterized by psychological depth and a careful, innovative use of language – things RPGs are not good at.

RPG scenarios are played once, possibly as part of a linked campaign. There is no reexamination, only forward movement. Whatever artistic qualities RPGs may have, they are not literary ones.

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

Tags: roleplaying | story

RPGs are generic forms.

The things RPGs do well are the same things genre fiction does well: plot, suspense, surprise, memorable characters, the satisfying of expectations. Embrace this. As a GM, your job is to make interesting use of the already-familiar.

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

People buy the theme first.

Let's say I buy *Battle Cry* because I'm interested in the Civil War. If I like the gameplay, I might buy *Memoir '44* or *Battle Lore* too. If I don't like it, I'll go buy *For the People* or *Gettysburg* instead.

However, if I'm introduced to a game by a friend, thematic importance isn't so important. If Duane wants to play *Condottiere*, and I'm a good friend, I'll agree, even though I know and care nothing about Renaissance warfare. If I like it, I may pick up a copy for myself.

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

When explaining the rules, the first thing to do is tell me how to win.

What is my goal? How many points/territories/cards do I need to reach it?

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

Lose graciously.

When you lose a game, congratulate your opponent on how well she played. Do not obsessively reconsider your own actions and say things like, "I should have bid higher in the third round," or "I shouldn't have invaded Karelia." Your opponent won; don't undermine the accomplishment.

Contributed by Pat Harrigan

If you don't have a good feel for naming characters, it's probable that someone at your table—or, as a collective entity, your play group—does.

So share the task: when you bring in a new face, ask your players to give it a name. This too will help them remember the NPC's name, since after all, they came up with it.

Contributed by Fred Hicks

The "long tail" effect, made possible in large part by the Internet, is changing the landscape as far as dead games go.

Online, "dead" games live on, and still sell direct to customers, even long after the retail channel has given up on them.

This is only really a problem when the publisher *wants* something to die, and it *just won't*.

Contributed by Fred Hicks

The One Question

There is in gamer fandom a justifiable dread of gamers talking about their characters (if invited, we do rattle on), but I've found that the following, pitched sincerely, is the most important question I can ask when screening new gamers for my table:

What's your best character, ever?

The wording here ("what" instead of "who" and "best" instead of "favorite") is crucial, designed to crystallize the query into one of hard priorities, whatever they might be. Listen carefully to the answer, to every aspect of it, and you'll learn a lot about why this player plays and (if you do end up gaming together) how best to engage his imagination.

Contributed by S. John Ross

A game is only late once, but it's bad forever.

Do not hold a game's failure to be released on time as a sign of failure of anything but that. You can wait till the game is good before paying for it. You will find something else to do with your time till then.

However, if you see a game released on schedule, be wary of its quality. That game's publisher might be the kind to value cash flow over long-term quality.

The greatest publisher in the history of video games is Blizzard. They've had to disappoint their parent company's wishes for Christmas bonuses more times than I can count. Money spends the same in February, says I.

Contributed by Mike Selinker

Don't let a game teach you anything other than how to play the game.

The early hex-based wargame *Afrika Corps* included the rule: "A hexagonal grid has been printed on the board to determine movement. Hereafter, these hexagons will be called 'squares.'" They printed that rule so you, the game player, wouldn't be confused.

James Ernest and I decided *Stonehenge* was better with 60 bluestones rather than the 56 that were there, because it made our game better. The original *Axis & Allies* suggested that there was a country called Borneo-Celebes. The *D&D* monster with the very French-looking name "bulette" is officially pronounced "boo-LAY." None of these are right.

Games can lead you to all sorts of knowledge. It's probably true that you first heard the word "initiative" playing *D&D*. But game designers aren't, Richard Garfield to the contrary, professors. We just make games. Don't let us raise your kids. Just get a real book.

Contributed by Mike Selinker

Tags: design | teaching games

All games are designed systems—but this doesn't mean the same thing for tabletop and computer game design.

Tabletop designers create systems for players to understand—they must be understood to be played—while computer game designers mostly hide system operations.

This gives computer game designers the freedom to create more complex systems. But it also creates *the risk that the best part of the design is never experienced by the players.* A clever game AI that doesn't express itself in a way that reveals its design is little better—and may be worse—than one based on virtual coin tosses.

Contributed by Noah Wardrip-Fruin

When I GM, I tend to proceed on a basis of impatience—with myself.

My NPCs take action quickly, boldly, and *without tactical optimizing*. If it turns out they did something stupid, so what? I probably just made things fun for the player who's getting to take advantage of that.

Contributed by Fred Hicks

You can strum the strings of emotional investment by lengthening the time between the formation of a goal and its ultimate resolution.

Dogs in the Vineyard does this by separating the declaration of goals from the resolution of who wins and who loses with a sequence of dice rolling and bidding, back and forth, with bits of narration tied to each interstitial step. You want this sort of thing to have a finite length (whether by the clock or a dwindling resource pool), because making it open-ended is more likely to increase frustration rather than beneficial tension.

Contributed by Fred Hicks

Tags: roleplaying | stories

The more logos a game has, the worse it is.

Licensed game products are most often products, not games. Licensors generally sell the rights to make a game to a publisher, and don't really care whether the publisher makes any money at all. So their incentive to help make something a good game, especially when "helping" means "giving up control," is roughly equal to their incentive to set themselves on fire.

There are a few exceptions, and there's a reason why these are called "exceptions." It's usually because the publisher is exceptional, and doesn't put itself in situations where it loses control of its quality standards. Seek them out.

Disclaimer: At Wizards of the Coast, I was the creative director of licensed games, and once said, in a room full of very important people, "I'm not happy until my game looks like a race car."

Contributed by Mike Selinker

Clip your goddamn fingernails.

In all games covered by this book, you spend a great deal of time manipulating things with your fingers. So it stands to reason that people will be looking at your hands a lot. Do 'em a solid and make your fingernails presentable, for the love of god.

Contributed by Mike Selinker

If you as a game designer claim that your game is "about" something, and it contains no rules or mechanics for do-ing, or simulating, or modeling, or telling stories *specifically* involving, that thing, then you, sir, are a liar.

Do not lie to your customers.

Contributed by Kenneth Hite

Let the Wookiee win.

Or in this case, the newbie.

Sure, you can crush many a beginner who is not over-familiar with the finer intricacies of the barter system on a vaguely hexagonal deserted island that happens to be flush with sheep, wood, and whatnot. But dial back your natural gamer instincts and skip that death blow Joe Clueless just set himself up for. Better yet, point out what he did, and why you decided not to decapitate his dreams of a ruminant-based island economic powerhouse in one easy move.

Stomp a newbie in his first game, and you feed your ego for a day. Teach a newbie how to game, and you've got an opponent for life.

Contributed by John Kovalic

Tags: all games | noobs | teaching games

I cannot scream this loud enough:

You should never include the same rule in multiple locations in your rulebook.

Almost nothing makes a rulebook more confusing than when the rule for applying damage to an armored opponent, for example, is listed in two or three different places in the book. I say "almost nothing" because, in some rulebooks, the rule in question is different in each location that it appears.

If you need to refer to the same rule more than once in your rulebook, then write the complete, detailed rule in one place and then use a page reference everywhere else! Don't just print the rule again.

Contributed by Philip Reed

Design for good players.

One of the qualities of a strong RPG design is confidence in the basic fairness and decency of the players. This isn't naiveté; we've all encountered rules-abusive and selfish gamers…but jerks will be jerks even when your rules put roadblocks and speedbumps in their way. Meanwhile, the good gamers will suffer the same inconveniences, as creative ideas that should thrive become snared in rules meant to prevent more selfish notions. Build a clear foundation for considerate play.

Contributed by S. John Ross

7 LESSONS LEARNED FROM *WORLD OF WARCRAFT*

by John August

1. Kill injured monsters first

When facing multiple bad guys, the temptation is to go after the one who's hitting you hardest. This is often a mistake. That injured razorback, the one who is running away? He'll be back in 15 seconds, likely with other baddies in tow. So take a few clicks to kill him now. Once he's dead, you can focus completely on the guy who's smacking you.

The real world may not have druids and paladins, but it's chock full of monsters. At any given moment, there may be one monster that looms larger than all of the others, who clearly needs to be attacked. Before you strike, look around for injured monsters—the half-finished tasks that probably need only a few more minutes to complete. If you don't deal with them now, they'll be a constant distraction, and may eventually come back stronger.

2. Grinding is part of the game...

"Grinding" is the process of killing a bunch of fairly easy monsters or mining a bunch of resource nodes, one after the other, strictly to rack up loot and experience. There's no adventure to it, no real challenge. It's tedious and mindless, but it's often the fastest way to level up, which is why everyone does it.

Daily life is full of mindless tedium, but there's an important distinction: grinding has a point. While the task may be dull and carpal tunnel-aggravating, there's a clear goal: you're doing X in order to get Y. You're xeroxing scripts in the William Morris mailroom in order to get a job as an assistant. You're proofreading your script for the seventh time in order to send it to your friend, who works for that producer. You have to be willing to do serious grunt work in order to move ahead.

3. …But grinding is not the game

It's easy to confuse what you're doing with why you're doing it. Remember: you're not paying $15 a month to kill the same set of spawning critters. Grinding is a means of achieving a specific goal, whereas the game itself is supposed to be entertaining. So once you level (or get enough deer skins to fabricate that armor), stop grinding and start exploring.

4. Give away stuff to newbies

You start the game with almost nothing: a weapon and the shirt on your back. Each new piece of gear you accumulate is tremendously exciting. Cloth armor seems luxurious. But as you level up, that early gear becomes increasingly irrelevant and basically worthless. It's not worth the trip to the store to sell it. So don't. Instead, run back to the newbie lands, find the first character of your class, and hand him all the stuff you don't want. It takes two minutes of your time, but gives the newbie a tremendous head start. (Not to mention it builds your karma.)

My site, johnaugust.com, is really just me running back to the newbie lands and giving away what I can. There's no financial incentive in it for me. I see it as the take-a-penny, leave-a-penny flow of information. On a daily basis, I find myself searching the web for answers on topics in which I'm a newbie (Flash programming, DC mythology, teaching toddlers to swim) and leaving thankful that someone out there took the time to write a tutorial on exactly what I needed. So in exchange, I write up what I know about screenwriting.

If everyone took the time to build a site about the areas of their expertise, the world would be significantly cooler.

5. Keep track of your quests

WoW is refreshingly open-ended—you could spend all your time skinning bears, if you felt like it. In order to provide a sense of structure, the game helpfully provides quests: multi-step missions to collect, kill, or deliver things. While the system does a solid job tracking these official endeavors ("13 out of 25 tusks"), most of the time what you're really trying to do ("find a better shield") is frustratingly amorphous. The trick is to identify these unofficial quests you've bestowed on yourself and break them down into distinct steps:

• browse the auctions to compare prices

• pick preferred shield

• sell off unneeded linen to raise needed cash

• bid

At any given point, you may have 10 of these pseudo-quests, and unless you take charge of them, you're liable keep running around, cursing your stupid shield.

GTD ("Getting Things Done") enthusiasts would label these quests "projects" and each of the bullet points "next actions." That's geekery, but it's an acknowledgment that most of life's work consists of a bunch of little activities in the service of a larger goal. You don't write a script; you write a scene. You don't design a website; you tweak the CSS so the navigation looks better. No matter what the project is, you can't finish until you get started, and you can't get started until you figure out the steps.

6. Storage is costly

Perhaps sensing that messy teenage boys are a key demographic, *World of Warcraft* won't let you leave something on the ground. If you don't pick up that fallen warhammer, it vanishes, never to return. So learn quickly the importance of storage: belts, bags, backpacks, and chests. Unfortunately, there's never nearly enough space and adding more becomes ridiculously expensive. (That's by design, clearly. The developers want to minimize hoarding.) So always keep in mind the carrying costs. If you never use that second bow, get rid of it and use those slots for something you need.

Last year, we cleaned out our garage. Instead of a traditional yard sale, we did a virtual version. We took pictures of everything we were getting rid of, built a page in Backpack, and sent the link to all our friends. Whoever wanted something could email us and take it. They got a free desk, we got a free garage.

7. Overthinking takes the fun out of it

The game is supposed to be fun. Yes, you can spend hours pouring through the forums, finding exactly the right talent tree. Or you can wing it: explore some mysterious new lands and kill some big new monsters. Obsessive planning doesn't make the game more enjoyable. It just makes it more like work.

I'm often asked about outlines and treatments, and whether they're necessary before sitting down to write a script. They're not. Like a map, they can help you figure out where you're going, but when you follow them too closely, you miss a lot of amazing scenery along the way.

On a bigger level, as you look back at any period of your life, you don't remember what a solid plan you had. You remember what you did. You remember the adventures, the scrapes, the unanticipated detours that turned out to be fascinating. So don't plan your way out of an exciting life.

If we examine the games and game-worlds that have come and gone, patterns emerge and it becomes easy to spot dozens of elements shared by those with the widest appeal. Here are five I consider crucial.

CLICHÉ
COMBAT
FELLOWSHIP
ANARCHY
AND
ENIGMA

by S. John Ross

5 ELEMENTS

The value of **cliché**—the use of stock imagery and other familiar elements—is accessibility and mutual understanding. If the gamemaster tells you the new campaign is to be set in the "Duchy of Crows" and concerns an evil priest gathering the Hill Ogres to his cause, that may sound a bit threadbare, but it also provides a reliable common ground. Everyone can *jump right in* and focus on what the game is really about: the PCs and their adventures. If, by contrast, the GM tells you the new campaign takes place in the Shining Tertiary Plane of Tsalvanithra, a science-fantasy blend of Mayan mythology, Depression-era satire, 16th-century French politics, and Japanese courtly manners, you're in for some research before you dare put a mark on the character sheet. The most popular games rely on stock images as a *language* for skipping to the good parts (and for sharing in a celebration of things gamers enjoy celebrating). Games that make a point of shunning cliché tend to be more niche.

Nothing's very dramatic (or funny, or scary) without some kind of conflict, and RPGs thrive on every sort. But the specific value of **combat** depends as much on game-structure as the visceral appeal of a fight scene. In gameable terms, most forms of conflict are best defined as a single instant (sneaking past a guard, casting a healing spell). We gain nothing by breaking the action down into its component steps, because the steps themselves are seldom infused with drama without forcing the issue. But in a *fight*— whether it's swordplay, a tavern brawl, a superhero slugfest, or a psychic showdown—every swing of fist or sword, every blast of energy, is something dangerous and potentially important. That packs a fight with a *series* of choices and consequences, providing fertile ground for enjoyable game mechanics. What's more, it provides a stage on which the PCs can cooperate and act as a team. Only a few other kinds of action can rival this under the right conditions, and none can trump it with any consistency.

5 ELEMENTS

RPGs are an ensemble medium; the core experience is that of a **fellowship** of PCs cooperating (more or less) toward a common goal. The most successful RPGs embrace this, provide tools to enhance the group experience, and build system and setting assumptions around it. This means providing for *variety*, both in terms of character concepts and their viability (it's well and good to say you can play a Librarian, but the game-world must also provide opportunities and challenges appropriate to the Librarian's skills). This element skews the genre-leanings of successful RPGs to some extent, because there are some popular genres (espionage and mysteries, most notably) that require some re-tooling before they comfortably support the concept of a half-dozen diverse PCs working together. Similarly, some stock character types (lone-wolf vigilantes, burglars, assassins) become notably *chummier* in RPGs, seen more often clubbing with a team than brooding indulgently in the shadows. RPGs gain a lot of mileage and color from the ubiquity of "strange bedfellows."

RPGs need rules at the table level, but they thrive on **anarchy** at the character level. The most successful RPGs are built on the assumption that—once the adventure is in full swing—the PCs are on their own, free to make their own solutions. Games that impose chains of command, or require PCs to check with "headquarters" before they do anything questionable, limit their audience in the process. Even a *Call of Cthulhu* session set in the straight-laced reality of 1920's New England is traditionally an exercise in the ritual abolition of order. In the early stages of the adventure, it's all urbane wit and let's-call-the-police, but once the tentacles start dragging people screaming into the dark, propriety and legality evaporate to irrelevance, and it's an anarchic fight for survival and sanity. Games with a military or

pseudo-military premise likewise benefit from this kind of collapse. This taps into what may be the most unique feature of RPGs: *tactical infinity.* In chess, the White Queen can't sweet-talk a Black Knight into leaving her be; in *Squad Leader*, a group of soldiers can't sneak through an occupied village dressed as nuns. In an RPG, you really *can* try anything you can think of, and that's a feature that thrives on anarchy.

The quality of **enigma** is—inevitably—the most elusive of these elements. In literal terms, it means any quality of the gameworld that the gamemaster is presumed to understand on a level the players never can. In many worlds, this means *magic*. In others, it may mean an alien society freshly met from another galaxy, or the labyrinthine mysteries of conspiratorial politics. Beyond the enduring appeal of a mystery, this is a quiet, foundational tool for the gamemaster, who can exploit this consensual "shadow zone" as a spawning ground for scenarios that *play fun* even if they wouldn't otherwise make sense, and a place where plot-threads can vanish if they become distracting instead of exciting. From within the enigma the GM can pluck both questions and answers, making adventure design and campaign management less of a chore. The benefits to a game's appeal are vast, because any RPG that eases a GM's stage-fright (and opens up his creative latitude) is an RPG built to please.

These elements aren't keys to *quality*—a game can be crummy with them and excellent without them. They are, though, a useful window into the appeal of RPGs as games, into the conventions of RPGs as a fictional medium, and into the considerations that make the design of a *game* world a beast distinct from other kinds of world design.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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In 2004, he and his wife moved to Atlanta, sight-unseen, like carpetbaggers, so he could become a professional lunatic for White Wolf Game Studio, serving as the developer of the flagship World of Darkness Storytelling Game, *Vampire: The Requiem*. Prior to that he designed numerous game titles for publishers like Fantasy Flight Games and Atlas Games.

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Jeff Tidball

Jeff Tidball is an Origins Award–winning and Diana Jones Award–nominated tabletop game designer active as a professional designer, writer, and producer of games since 1996. He took a break from full-time game design from 2000–2002 to earn an MFA in Screenwriting from the USC School of Cinematic Arts, which learned him some good story.

Jeff's proudest creative accomplishments are *Pieces of Eight*, a pirate-ship-combat game played with minted coins and no table, which received the Origins Awards' Vanguard Award for innovation in game design, and *Gravity*, an unproduced feature screenplay.

Jeff has worked as an employee of Atlas Games, Decipher, and Fantasy Flight Games, and done freelance writing and design for Eden Studios, Green Ronin, Steve Jackson Games, White Wolf Publishing, and others. He has served as the line developer of the tabletop RPGs *Ars Magica*, *Feng Shui*, and Decipher's *The Lord of the Rings*. Until it went south, he was a regular contributor to *Games Quarterly Magazine*.

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"An unholy mixture of helpful guidebook and jabbing provocation, it will earn its right to rattle around your brain. It is essential reading for designer, critic, and straight-up rank 'n' file gamer alike."

— Robin D. Laws, creator of *HeroQuest* and *Feng Shui*

Will Hindmarch and Jeff Tidball think a lot about games. At their commentary website, Gameplaywright.net, they think out loud about what it means to play games, make games, sell games, and love games. They are gamers.

Here, with fellow game designers and notable game players, they think out loud on paper in the first Gameplaywright book.

Things We Think About Games collects dozens on dozens of bite-sized thoughts about games. From the absurd to the magnificent, the demonstrable to the dogmatic, this collection spans both the breadth of games — board, card, roleplaying and more — and the depth of gaming, offering insights about collecting, playing, critiquing, designing, and publishing.