FIND THE FUN

LEARN HOW TO GO FROM IDEA TO PUBLISHED GAME
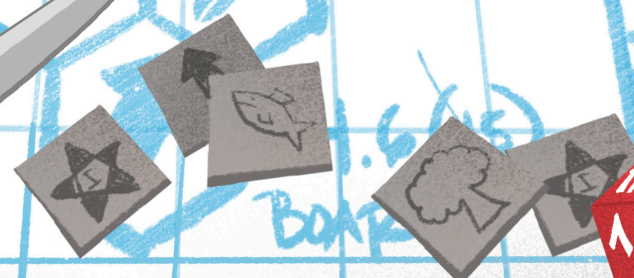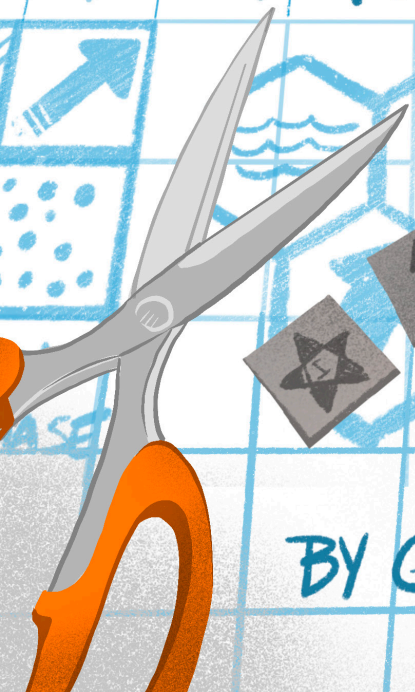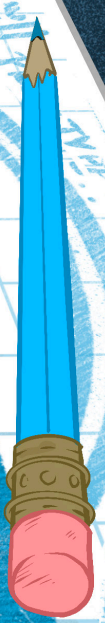
BY GABE BARRETT

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FROM IDEA TO PUBLISHED GAME

GABE BARRETT

Dedication:

For the best group of folks on the internet, the BGDL community.
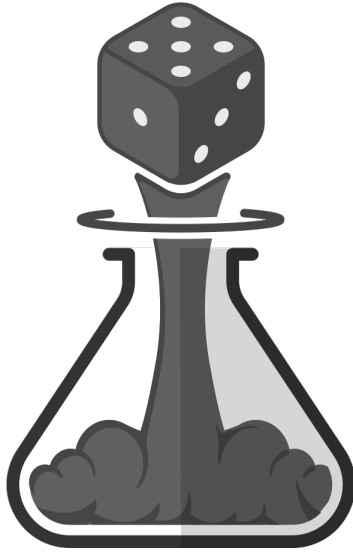
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Chapter 1:
Introduction

I'm so glad you've decided to travel down the game design path! It takes a ton of effort, but with a little creativity, a healthy dose of problem-solving, and some good old-fashioned hard work, I know you can bring your games to life. And my goal is to be a helpful guide in your journey.

Now, this book isn't meant to be an exhaustive resource. It's more of a curation of my best advice taken from designing games for fifteen+ years and interviewing more than three hundred of the best designers in the world through the Board Game Design Lab podcast.

This is the book I wish someone had handed me years ago when I was just getting started, and I hope I can help you not waste time on as many dumpster fire games as I did.

You're still going to create some truly awful games; that's just part of it; but the information in these pages should help you level up your design skills at a much faster rate than I was able to.

This introduction will lay the foundation for the core concepts you need to understand, and the rest of the book will reinforce the concepts from various angles.

So, let's get into it!

What Is a Board Game Really?

The traditional definition of "board game" is pretty self-explanatory: a game that involves moving pieces on a board. In recent years, the term has evolved to become a catch-all, and even games that don't include a board now fall under the board game umbrella.

However, for the purposes of this book, that's not really what I'm talking about.

Boards, cards, dice, etc. are just components, mere ingredients that can be turned into something much greater than the sum of its parts. In the same way you wouldn't say eggs, sugar, and butter are a cake, you wouldn't say cardboard, dice, and meeples are a board game.

What matters is how you put them together to create an experience for the players.

To put it simply, a board game is a **fun engine**. Players put time into it and get fun out. So, as a designer, your main job is to maximize the time-to-fun ratio.

Now, that's obviously easier said than done, but hopefully, this book will help you start figuring out what it takes to create a fun engine that players enjoy and that you can turn into a marketable product.

But anytime you see the word "game" in this book, just know that what I'm really saying is "fun engine."

For years, I designed games that worked but weren't particularly fun. However, once I started to understand games as fun engines, my designs got a TON more enjoyable to play. So, even if that's the only concept you take away from this book, I think it'll level up your design skills by leaps and bounds.

What Makes a Game Fun? (Part 1)

When you're starting out, you should aim to make a game that works. The game should have a clear beginning, middle, and end. The players should be able to understand how to win. And the players' decisions should move the game forward and ultimately to a defined finish.

Now, a lot of new designers do all of that and think they're done, however, a game that works is not necessarily a proper fun engine.

To make a game that's fun, you need to understand two main factors: **choices** and **tension**.

A game can have amazing art, unbelievable miniatures, linen finish cards, and the most well-written rulebook you've ever laid eyes on, but if it doesn't have meaningful choices and the right amount of tension, it's not going to be particularly fun.

In the next chapter, I'll dive much deeper into choices and tension. I'll unpack concepts like the Choice Trident and the Goldilocks Decision Space, and I'll get into various ways you can find the fun in your game.

I'm mentioning this stuff briefly in the introduction since "fun" is probably the most important concept I'll discuss. (Hence the title of the book, haha.) And I want you to go ahead and put it at the top of your mind.

What Makes You a Game Designer?

I've talked to so many new designers who don't yet consider themselves to actually be game designers. Typically, they think that to become a legitimate, card-carrying member of the club, they need to get a game published.

But trust me, that is definitely NOT the case.

A game designer is simply anyone who designs games. Don't overcomplicate it, and don't feel less than just because you don't have a game on a store shelf.

I've played prototypes that were amazing but never got picked up by a publisher. I've played published games that weren't worth the cardboard they were printed on.

There are so many factors at play, and a lot of them are arbitrary. So, don't get caught up on having to be published or any other random qualifier. The being comes from the doing, or put more simply, you are what you do.

A writer is someone who writes. A painter is someone who paints. A game designer is someone who designs games.

So the real question isn't are you a game designer? That's a given. The real question is how good can you be?

And my goal throughout the rest of this book is to help you become as good as possible. It takes a tremendous amount of work to become good at any creative endeavor, but I believe you have it in you to bring some amazing games to life. (Don't prove me wrong!)

What Does a Win Look Like?

Before we go any further, it's important to take some time and define what you really want. When it comes to game design, what does a win look like?

Do you want to design games as just a hobby, but you don't really care if you ever get anything published? Do you want to design games that eventually show up on store shelves, but it's just a side hustle? Do you want to pursue game design as a profession, either part-time or full-time?

There's no wrong answer, but each path has different requirements and calls for a different level of sacrifice.

I encourage you to be honest with yourself about what you really want and to think through how much you're willing to commit to that path.

We often wonder why we feel like we're losing when the real problem is that we haven't defined what winning is.

So, what do you want? Write it down. What are you going to have to do to get there? What are you going to have to give up? Write those down too.

Then, get to work.

Why Designing Games Is Important

Several years ago, one of the most important people in my life found out he had cancer. His name was Randy, and he was an in-

credible mentor and an excellent friend. And during his battle with cancer, he discovered a little game called Ticket to Ride.

One day I went over to his house, and he asked if I had ever heard of the game. I laughed and told him once or twice. Then, we sat down and played it.

Randy played Ticket to Ride hundreds of times over the next couple of years. He'd come home from chemo and play it. Friends and family would come over to visit, and he'd introduce them to it. He played it literally until he couldn't hold his head up anymore.

And just before they lowered his casket into the ground, his daughter placed a small, red, plastic train on it.

Ticket to Ride brought my friend a tremendous amount of joy during his toughest times and darkest days. And a while back, when I met Alan Moon, the designer of the game, I was able to thank him for creating something that made my friend's final days just a bit more bearable.

I don't know about you, but I want to create things that bring people joy like that. And this is a prime example of how much games matter.

I know it can sometimes feel like game design is a waste of time. There are so many problems in the world, and we're just cutting out tokens and trying to figure out if a card should do two damage or three? I mean, really?

But please understand it's so much deeper than that.

Board games are different from other forms of entertainment because they're about a lot more than just sitting and absorbing content. Instead, games give players an active role in determining how the experience is going to play out.

They give people the opportunity to not only enjoy a story but also to have an impact on how that story gets told.

That means game designers are storytellers to the highest degree because what we're really creating is opportunities for others to

tell great stories. We bring people together around a table to experience something that will hopefully build relationships and create lasting memories.

So, whenever you ever find yourself asking, "Does this even matter?" the answer is YES! All artistic expressions come with their fair share of tough days, and designing board games is no different. But in those moments, just remind yourself that games matter, and they have the ability to improve people's lives.

And just remember the impact a game had on my friend Randy.

How to Get Ahead of 99% of Other Designers

Most game designers, and creative people in general, never make it out of the land of mediocrity and never realize their true potential for one simple reason: they give up.

Typically, this is because they know how their game should play in their head, but they can't turn that into reality on a table.

And that's because people develop taste before skill. In other words, they know what's good long before they can actually create something good.

Then, because of the very large and obvious gap between where they are and where they want to be, they quit and move on to the next shiny object without ever realizing how much of an amazing designer they had it in them to be.

This gets even worse when they start comparing their prototypes to other designers' published games. But if there's any absolute truth I've ever learned, it's this: Comparison is the thief of joy.

The world has no shortage of opportunities to compare yourself to others and feel like you're less than or behind.

But, for one thing, you don't know the whole story. You don't have any idea what someone went through (or didn't have to go through) to bring that game to life.

And for another thing, it doesn't even matter anyway. The race is long, and in the end, it's only against yourself.

So, don't measure yourself against other designers. Measure against a previous version of yourself. Are you a better designer now than you were a year ago? Are you learning a new skill today that's going to make you better tomorrow?

If not, why not? What can you do to get better?

If so, keep going. Keep finding ways to improve and push yourself forward.

But the main thing is to **just keep designing**. Those three, simple words are the key to you becoming the designer you have the potential to be.

There's simply no substitute for reps. If you want to get better, you have to put your reps in.

To put it in fitness terms, if you want to develop a stronger lower body, you should do more squats. Thinking about squats won't make you stronger. Reading about squats won't make you stronger. Posting online about squats won't make you stronger.

You have to do the actual work, and it's the same with game design.

So many designers never really get out of the "planning" stage. They have ideas, but they never create a prototype, and they never run a single playtest.

Unfortunately, it's super easy for planning to become procrastination. It seems like you're making progress as you research various topics and scribble down notes about dice-driven combat and possible worker placement locations.

While this feels like movement, it's really like being stuck in the mud. Your tires might be spinning a hundred miles an hour, but you aren't going anywhere.

So, how do you make sure you don't end up there like so many other designers? You make a prototype, you playtest, and you repeat. It's just that simple, and it's just that hard.

If you aren't doing those two things, you aren't actually going anywhere, and your game will never be more than an idea bouncing around in your head.

In later chapters, I'll share my best advice on prototyping and playtesting, but if you don't turn that information into action, this is all a waste of time. Two of the best things you can learn are to make ugly prototypes and to playtest terrible versions of your games.

The better you get at these two things, the better designer you'll become. And you'll find yourself much further down the design road than all the designers who stay stuck in the mud.

As James Clear says, "Rome wasn't built in a day, but they were laying bricks every hour."

You Have Enough Time

Over the years, I've had conversations with thousands of game designers, and the number one struggle they bring up over and over again is never having enough design time.

And I get it. Life is busy. Everyone has more to do than they have time to do it in. Family, friends, work, sleep, traffic, cat videos - there's no shortage of things to occupy our time.

However, something that radically changed my life was the realization that **I always have just enough time for the things I make time for**.

It's not about having time, it's about making time. So, I started putting game design into my weekly schedule, and then I protected that time. On certain days, at certain hours, I scheduled specific activities that were going to move my games forward.

(I also took this approach with the Board Game Design Lab podcast which is how I released an episode 300+ weeks in a row.)

And after the schedule was made, I died on those hills. My friends and family knew not to bother me on those days and times. Unless someone was bleeding from the head, I wasn't going to budge from my workspace.

Another pivotal moment was when I stopped saying "I don't have time," and I started saying "**it's not a priority**."

It's amazing how much of a difference that small semantic tweak makes. Instead of saying "I need to playtest, but I don't have time," it became "I need to playtest, but it's not a priority."

That phrase was just an incredible gut punch, and it helped me refocus. It also placed the weight squarely on my shoulders which is where it belonged. "I don't have enough time" put the blame on external factors. It was the universe's fault. But "it's not a priority" was on me.

This also helped me get clearer on what my priorities really were. There were moments when I would say something wasn't a priority, and I would realize that it really wasn't. The value of that kind of thing cannot be overstated.

But my main point is that you have enough time. It's just a matter of what you're currently prioritizing.

The average person spends four to six hours a day consuming online content. Social media, Netflix, YouTube, etc.

So, if you happen to be an average person, that's about five hours per day you could probably repurpose…

Now What?

Alright, those are the core concepts I think you need to understand in order to really set yourself up for success as a board game designer. They're the main pillars you need to have in place if you want to design great games people love.

Now let's start diving a bit deeper into various aspects of bringing a game to life!