Prototyping Tabletop Games: Some Tips from UVic English

Some experience with prototyping tabletop games (board games, card games, and role-playing games) can be very useful for careers involving writing, editing, history, collaboration, computer programming, procedural literacy, data management, user testing, and interaction, interface, and/or experience design. Game design helps us to better understand how social dynamics, play, and technologies are entwined with the creation of stories, rules, and components. But getting started in tabletop game design can be intimidating. Here, then, are some tips from UVic English. Enjoy!

- **Play some games.** One of the best ways to learn about games is to play them. Visit your local game cafe or start a game library with friends and family. Build a community. Ask people to recommend their favourite games. Try playing a variety of games, too, from party, tile, and deck-building games to abstract, role-playing, and cooperative games. There's more to tabletop games than *Monopoly*, *Catan*, and *Risk*, and the tabletop scene has a thriving indie community.
- **But try making your own game.** Prototyping your own game helps you to better understand the subtleties of play and interaction. You can also identify what's missing from the market and fill that gap. What kind of game do you want to see in the world? For whom would you make it?
- **Learn a type of game.** Identify a type (or "category") of game that interests you and play numerous games in that category. What about the category appeals to you? What are the best games in that category, and why? Consider the game's *theme* (subject matter), *mechanics* (the actions performed), *rules* (the guidelines for action), *design* (the structure and layout), *experience* (how it feels to play), and *duration* (how long to play).
- **But don't feel indebted to a type.** One of the most interesting things about game categories is when people experiment with them. The rules change, a theme is altered, new characters appear, the art is reinvented, or the game ends with an unexpected twist. Knowledge of the past—or what came before the current state of games—facilitates such experimentation.
- **Make connections.** A board game and a novel may have more in common than you think, game design may learn a lot from poetry, and role-playing

modules sound a lot like drama. Make connections across what you enjoy and consider ways to mash things up.

- **But note the differences.** Works of art and fiction are composed in certain media for a reason. Why is the game you're playing a board game? Why isn't it a novel? Or a card game? Or a play or podcast? Try playing the same game on both a tabletop and screen. The differences, especially in terms of design and experience, can be informative.
- **Go low-tech.** You can prototype a tabletop game with index cards, pencils, cardboard, graph paper, and nearby objects. Low-tech approaches may help you to focus on techniques, components, and the core experience of your game. You can easily move parts around and experiment with stuff. And you can always add polish later in the design process.
- **But try software, too.** Software may provide you with everything from icons, fonts, and templates (for cards, boards, and figures) to code, simulators, and probability calculators. Try making your game as a series of slides, or with a spreadsheet, or as an expansion of an existing game.
- **Focus on the experience.** Game design involves juggling various components. Try to focus on the dynamics you want to encourage. What's the story, theme, challenge, or problem? How do you want people to feel while playing your game? What will prompt them to play it again?
- **But don't forget about mechanics.** The mechanics of your game shape how people interact, follow the rules, and interpret the story, theme, challenge, or problem. Know your audience and what sort mechanics they expect or enjoy. Search the internet for lists of mechanics and examples.
- **Iterate and avoid scope creep.** Make versions of your game and its rulebook, share the versions, and then revise them. Share first with people you know, and then with people you don't know. Observe how people play your prototype but also try walking away and asking for feedback once the game's done. Iteration should help you to avoid "scope creep": the tendency for projects to grow beyond what they can meaningfully engage. What you think is one game could in fact be two or three.

(Today you met Kathleen Baxter, Stefan Higgins, Colin Keohane, Jentery Sayers, and Kim Shortreed from the University of Victoria’s Department of English.)

Game Speak: An Intro Care of UVic English

The language of game design can be a lot to take in. Here are some common terms:

- **abstracts**: games that don't rely much on chance, theme, or hidden information
- **action drafting**: requires a player to select specific actions from a set available to all players; actions are commonly selected by the placement of game pieces or tokens on the board
- **analysis paralysis**: taking a long time to make a decision during your turn
- **area influence**: a mechanic that awards you for controlling or influencing a majority of units or spaces
- **asymmetry**: when players may choose different actions or abilities; not everyone will play the game in the same way
- **auction**: a mechanic that requires players to place a bid on items
- **balance**: describes whether the challenge is appropriate for the audience, whether the game is fair for all players involved, whether components are weighted equally, and/or whether strategies toward end conditions are equal
- **chits**: a type of game counter used to track progress, randomize a game, or suggest terrain attributes on a board
- **collection**: a mechanic that encourages players to collect sets of items
- **cooperation or co-op:** games where players win or lose together through mutual reliance, usually without a moderator (compare with negotiation)
- **deck or pool building**: players have a personal collection of cards/tokens that provide different actions or resources; players manage the contents of their collection by adding and removing cards/tokens, often through actions provided by the cards/tokens themselves; over time, players build decks/pools that are more specialized and effective toward some purpose
- **dexterity**: games that involve physical dexterity to perform actions or tasks
- **drafting**: players pick cards, dice, or tokens from a limited subset, such as a common pool, to either gain some advantage or assemble hands of cards or collections of dice/tokens used to meet objectives within the game
- **end/win conditions**: the conditions that result in the conclusion of a game; mechanics include empty hands, group or individual achievements, set collections, area control, arrival at a destination, the expiry of time, the end of a story, player elimination, a score, and the conclusion of a scenario or level
- **hidden or secret identity**: a game where players are given a secret identity and asked to deduce each other's identities; players may not always be aware of their own identities; often creates an "us vs. them" dynamic
- **legacy**: games that change over time based on the outcome of each session and the choices made by players; may take weeks, months, or even years to finish

- **metagaming**: analyzing a game aloud as you play it; used for planning but, in some cases, also to shape play and dynamics; depending on the game and community, it may be encouraged or frowned upon
- **mixed motive**: games where the interests or incentives of players are neither strictly coincident nor strictly opposed
- **negotiation**: a mechanic where players are encouraged to make deals or alliances; may also involve betrayal (compare with cooperation)
- **quarterbacking**: when one player tells other players what to do, often because they think they are more familiar with the game; common in co-op games
- **pacing**: the speed or intensity of gameplay or progression through a game
- **pickup and deliver**: requires players to pick up an item at one location on the playing board and bring it to another location on the playing board; initial placement of the item can be either predetermined or random
- **points salad**: a negative term used to describe games where all or many actions yield points; in other words, the game involves too much counting
- **prediction**: a mechanic that requires players to forecast or anticipate what may happen later in the game (compare with randomness)
- **programmed movement**: a mechanic where players (often secretly) choose and commit their moves for the next turn; all actions are determined and locked before they are executed; requires planning ahead
- **randomness**: a lack of predictability in events; this lack is usually designed into a game and interpreted by players as chance, luck, and even fate; when used persuasively, it increases incentive and/or perceived relevance of actions; when not used persuasively, it overwhelms players, decreases incentive, and/or eclipses a player's sense of agency or choice (compare with prediction)
- **route or network building**: a mechanic in games involving networks where players are encouraged to build connections or long chains of pieces; common in train and grid games
- **rules lawyer**: a player who privileges the letter of the law over the spirit of play, often to gain advantage over other players; may also involve referencing obscure rules in a manual or handbook
- **shedding**: the objective is to be the first person to empty their hand of all cards
- **tableau**: a category of games where players have a visible array of components that they build and manipulate; the array affects the quality, quantity, or variety of available actions
- **trashing**: putting cards (often strategically) into a discard pile
- **turtling**: a strategy emphasizing defense, usually to avoid risk
- **twitching**: a mechanic that requires fast decision-making
- **variable player order**: when the sequence of player turns is inconsistent from one round of play to the next