

Running a Game Publishing Company

Chapter 8: Designing Games

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Written by Stephen V. Cole, designer of *Star Fleet Battles*.
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[New material added since 4 June is in blue so you can find it.](#)

In a very real sense, this chapter is the hardest to write (because there are so many different kinds of games) and the most useless (since the vast majority of those who read this book will be game designers who can't get anybody else to publish their games, i.e., you already know how to design games or you wouldn't be reading this book).

Nobody taught the author how to design games. He (like almost ever game designer) started by playing games and then moved on to changing, adding, or deleting rules. [Maybe the fact that I studied engineering and military history gave me a good foundation, maybe that just got into the way. I don't know.](#)

In the most basic case, anyone who takes any published game and changes, adds, or deletes one rule has "designed a new game" since the modified game is different from the original. Of course, a game with such minor changes is not different enough for you to make a living publishing it. For one thing, you would get sued for copyright violation. For another, you'd be laughed out of the industry.

As for teaching you how to design games ... well, shucks ... I don't know how I learned it so I don't know how to teach you. What I can do is offer some advice, a few examples, and perhaps open your eyes to some new ideas.

If You Aren't Going to Play the Game...

...you do not get to mess with the rules. Seriously, you need to play games, a lot of games, a lot of different kinds of games. You never know what kind of games will sell and it's up to you to market a game people want to buy, not up to the gamers to buy the kind of game you want to design. The author of this book made his game publishing career based on Star Trek games, but would (quite frankly) rather be doing World War II in Europe operational-level games.

Even if you are just not interested in RPGs or in tactical boardgames or card games or whatever other kinds of games, you need to understand and have familiarity with such games. Not just play a few hands of *Magic The Gathering*, but actually figure out and understand how that game (or any other game) fits together.

The Game Should Not Play the Players

If the players have no decision to make (just roll dice and do what the chart says, or maybe they have choices but only one of them works) then the game is playing them, not the other way around. Avoid that kind of game design.

The point of a game is for the player to match his wits against the situation. If your game isn't allowing him to do that, then your game isn't going to have "replay value".

I am sure somebody wrote a book...

...about game design. Maybe you might want to go read it.

Ok, I'm being flippant, but I'm really not coming up with any ideas about how to design games. I get the feeling that if you haven't already figured it out, I'm not going to be much help to you.

Start From Reality

Most of the games I have done (even the science fiction ones) have some basis in reality. I spent a few years in the military, and a few decades hanging around the edges of the military. I know "military common sense" without being able to define it.

Every war is the same except for the things that make them different. The same thing can be said for generals, weapons, vehicles, tactics, and everything else. What you need to do is find the best "game model" (from existing games) and apply your own creativity to represent why those differences really matter.

Google "The principle of war" and read several of these. Oh heck, here is the one you want:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Principles_of_War

The Principles used by the US military include lots of things like Objective, Security, Unity of Command, Offensive, Mass, Economy of Force, Maneuver, Surprise, and Simplicity. Other countries add or change or delete a few others, such as Discipline, Annihilation, Cooperation Between Allies, Morale, Flexibility, Sustainability, Asymmetrical Warfare, and so forth. These principles apply to every war, from Babylon to Star Trek, from the land to the air, from the sea to deep space.

Buried Treasure

If you run the kind of company that has a continually expanding product line based in a given universe, one thing you should always be doing is burying treasure you can find in the future. If you just can't get started today, or have nothing specific that you need to write, then go create a one-page thing (or a multi-page thing) that could find a home in a specific (or one of several) future products.

The author's partner (Steve Petrick) is always doing this kind of thing. He creates a new starship, a new scenario, or a background article that he just sticks in a "potential future use" pile. Then in the future when the author is trying to finish a product and has some leftover space, Steve Petrick pops up with a stack of ready-to-print articles and other worthy pages to fill the gap.

Levels of Design

To be really successful, you have to "design" on several levels, probably at the same time.

Game Design: This is actually writing the rules and scenarios and character/unit stats and so forth. It's what most of us think of as "game design".

Product Design: This is many things, from the graphic presentation (if you can do it in color, lots of interesting things are possible), what symbols are on the counters, how much art you use (more is prettier), how charts are presented (size, shading, fonts), and all of that.

Packing Design: Box or Folio? Color cover? Internal compartments to keep components in place?

Product Line Design: Do you want fries with that? Seriously, you want players to want fries (boosters, miniatures, play aides, whatever).

Fill In The Blanks

One fun thing to do is have a company magazine (or a series of general-use adventure modules, or whatever) of which you print an issue every few months (or once a year, or whatever). You want to create a format for this magazine, while leaving a few pages, maybe a third of them, for "whatever

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shows up, or whatever we need to do”.

For example, the author’s company produces a magazine called “*Captain’s Log*”. We refer to this as the “39 blanks to fill in” product. Every issue has fiction, convention reports, updates on previous products, photos of new miniatures, a page or two of new rules, sixteen new starships, a page about our RPGs and a page about our card games, a page with “ten questions” and a page of “why questions”, and other regular recurring features. Each issue has a section for *Federation & Empire* (including a scenario, tactics, playtest material, a Q&A page (to tell people where to find things that are already in the rulebook), and a Rules & Rulings page to plug loopholes and resolve contradictions in published products) and a similar section for *Federation Commander*. Several sections combine to make a somewhat larger presentation for *Star Fleet Battles*.

Whenever we’re bored or don’t have a specific thing to do that day, we look at the next issue of *Captain’s Log* and do one or two of these pages. That way, when we reach a point four weeks from the “go to print date” for the next issue, we start with 30 or 40 of the 120 pages already done. When you consider that *Petrick’s Buried Treasure* fills another 30 or 40 pages, it’s easy to bring the issue home.

A similar technique could be used for RPG books. Supposing you have a universe with a dozen countries in it, and you do a book about each of these countries. Once you have a format (history, religion, politics, military, culture, equipment, sample characters, adventure seeds), each of your books follows the format.

This makes it easy to deal with people who show up and say “I want to write something. What do you want me to write?” You just tell them to look at the format for your magazine or RPG books or whatever and then to write something that fits into one of those blanks.

Ok, Ok, my apologies

I’m a game designer with over a hundred published games, 30 years in the business, three Origins Awards, and several best-selling titles, and I just can’t figure out how to teach somebody to design games. Maybe I’ll come up with some good stories to tell in the second edition.

Please do not post this document on a web site or pass it around. Anybody who wants a copy can ask or download a free PDF. That’s not because I want to be a control freak but because I do update individual chapters whenever I think of something to add and would just as soon there be one place for the most recent copy.