



# BOARD GAME DESIGN ADVICE FROM THE BEST IN THE WORLD

# GABE BARRETT



# Jamey Stegmaier

"The real work in designing a game is what follows that first prototype."

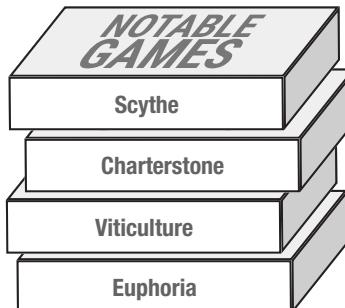
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## **What is the game (or games) you've recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?**

I can think of many games that fall into this category, but one that I see people mention the most in my game design videos is Concordia. It has such an elegant mix of clever mechanisms despite a really short rulebook that I think it's worth the time of any designer to play. On a more meta level, I'd encourage any designer to play games outside of their wheelhouse. If you play and design Euro games, for example, try to play a party game (e.g., Telestrations), a thematic game (e.g., Star Wars Rebellion), and a dexterity game (e.g., Flip Ships). You'll learn a ton by finding the fun and cleverness in games that are distinctly different than what you usually play and design.

## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year?**

This is a ridiculous answer and probably not all that helpful, but I bought a Slice box opener for about \$10, and it's amazing! As a publisher, I get a lot of sample packages from China, and it's brutal on my hands to try to open them with scissors. One other tool I'll mention that I didn't buy in the last year but is one of the best sub-\$50 purchases I've ever made is a mobile app called Captio. With one click, it'll pull up an e-mail to yourself,



and you can type or speak text to create the e-mail. I have a ton of random ideas when I'm driving or playing games, and rather than forget them, I can e-mail them to myself with Captio and process them later. Definitely worth the \$2 or so it costs on the app store.

### **How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a "favorite failure" of yours?**

While I'm forever grateful for its existence, I consider the first edition of Viticulture to be a failure. It isn't good enough. There's no grande worker, many of the visitor cards are situationally bad or good, it included unnecessary components, and it didn't go through nearly enough blind playtesting. Yet it was a success on Kickstarter, and it sold over 600 copies to distributors on the first day it was released.

#### **FOUNDER OF**



**STONEMAIER  
GAMES**

My broker urged me to start another print run immediately, but I'm incredibly glad I waited. I gathered feedback from players, I gathered knowledge from playing other games, and I swallowed my pride and cre-

ated a second edition. This is something no designer or publisher wants to do after a single print run. But it was the right thing to do for gamers and for Stonemaier Games. The first edition sold 2500 copies total. After that, we've sold over 30,000 copies of Viticulture, and it's risen to #19 on the BoardGameGeek rankings.

### **How do you know when to walk away from a design or at least put it on the shelf for a while?**

I consider these two very different things. I put games on the shelf all the time—usually when they're in the brainstorming stage. Typically, it's just because I'm excited about something else. I rarely desert a game entirely until I play it once, and I know right away if the game has potential or not.

How do I know? Typically it's because there's at least one element that's special and unique. The rest of the game can completely suck, but if it has one thing that shines—or shows the potential to shine—I'll give it another chance. If not (or if it stops shining), it'll go on the shelf forever.

**What do you do to get in the designing mindset? Do you have a ritual or certain process for getting into the “zone”?**

I've tried to break from this habit, but most often I need to have a minimum of 2 hours when I have nothing else scheduled (I'd prefer for this to be as little as 30-60 minutes). Sometimes I lead into it by watching a video about a game that inspires the game, and then I'll turn off all technology or all distractions and sit down in silence to work.

**What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?**

I would tell the designer to put their notes away and go exercise for 30 minutes. When you return, ignore your notes and do something else for the rest of the day. Get a good night's sleep, and then sometime the next day, take out the notes and learn from them. (Disclaimer: I would say the same thing about a really good playtest session.)

**In the last three years, what new belief, behavior, or habit has most improved your game design skills?**

This is terrible advice, but I'm going to say it anyway: I commission sample art really early in the process, and it's had a hugely positive impact on my design. I don't design abstract games, so I find it really difficult to design a game with theme if I don't have a visual sense of the world it occupies. It also really helps me design within constraints that I'd rather know about sooner than later. For example, having Mr. Cuddington create a rough illustration of the Charterstone game board was hugely instrumental

in designing the world and the way buildings worked.

**If a friend of yours is about to sit down to pitch a game to a publisher, what are some tips you would tell him or her?**

If you're literally sitting down in the same room as a publisher, make an effort to smell nice. Even though we may never see you again, your first impression will live with us forever. Make sure you know what the publisher believes in and what they want in a game (and what they don't want). Only bring one game to pitch instead of presenting a host of options—do your research up front and pick the game you think fits that publisher the most. And if you have at least 20-30 minutes, focus your pitch on playing the game with us. Don't spend more than 2 minutes teaching the rules—just jump right in, guide us, and point out what makes the game special as we experience it in real time.

**What advice would you give to a smart, driven, fledgling game designer just now getting into game design? What advice should they ignore?**

One piece of advice to heed is to be an active member of the board gaming community. You'll learn so much about games, mechanisms, and perceptions by talking to other gamers and designers. One piece of advice to ignore is that you shouldn't play games from other designers. I've heard one very famous designer say this, and I've seen other designers do this without saying it outright. It's incredibly shortsighted to think that you will get better at design if you're limiting yourself to your own games. It's like trying to write a novel after reading zero total novels—it's not going to turn out well.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do?**

Usually I just focus on something else for a while. But if I have a project that I really need to move forward with on a timeline, I find it really helpful to discuss it with someone else who knows the

game, appreciates it, and is willing to give you honest feedback. I find this both invigorating and inspiring, and usually it helps me get back on track.

**What do you wish someone had told you before you got into designing board games?**

“Don’t consider a game designed until you’ve playtested and iterated dozens of times, followed by blind playtesting.” When I was a kid designing games, I thought that “designing a game” was thinking of an idea, writing out the rules, creating a prototype, and playing it once. Sure, I was a kid, and it was nice to feel accomplished, but I wish I had realized that the real work in designing a game is what follows that first prototype.

**What’s one of your core philosophies in terms of how you live your life, and how is it manifested in your game design?**

One of my core philosophies is to simply be aware of the people around me. Like, if I’m standing in a group of people, I try to position myself so I’m not blocking anyone from joining the conversation. In social situations, if someone is looking out of place or uncomfortable, I try to spend a few moments with them. When I walk into any place with a manual door, I check behind me and hold the door if someone is there. The parallel to the games I design is that I like to give players passive reasons to pay attention to other players. Perhaps it’s looking at the card colors in another player’s hand in Viticulture or the numbers on an opponent’s dice in Euphoria, or the action taken on their previous turn in Scythe. It’s a little bit of information, enough to parse and consume without overwhelming you or making an opponent feel targeted. It’s just enough to say, “I see you.”

“Drown your game in passion and play testing. Get hundreds of people to play it, and then listen to their feedback. Specifically, listen to the problems they isolate, but not necessarily their solutions. That’s your job.”

— *Marc Neidlinger*

“Start with a mission statement – something that is distinct and unique from available options and pursue that. We are spoiled for options right now in the board game world and the ability to stand out is what will determine your success.”

— *Artem Safarov*

# Rob Daviau

"You're going to be good at this. Stop worrying."

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## **What is the game (or games) you've recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?**

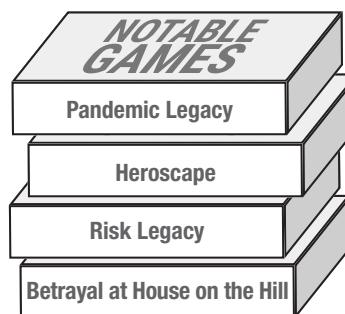
I don't often recommend a game by default. If people are serious about being a game designer, then they've played a lot of games and are usually working on a few things. That information gives me context as to what I might recommend. Mike Selinker had a book (maybe just a list) of 100 games that you need to play once as a game designer. It's a solid list. (<https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/188490/100-games-you-absolutely-positively-must-know-how>) I often find myself recommending they play Diplomacy once. Just once.

## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year?**

Do bottles of wine count? Maybe the cost of watching Westworld? Maybe a copy of an EXIT game. My online Marvel comics subscription perhaps?

## **How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a "favorite failure" of yours?**

I created a few Trivial Pursuit DVD games that had a "campaign mode" that burned up content but allowed me to control the experience better. These were not received well but set me up, a few years later, to the legacy concept.



Also, the middling to mixed reviews for Seafall were eye opening, once I could get solid food down again. My favorite failure was probably Trivial Pursuit DVD for Kids.

**How do you know when to walk away from a design or at least put it on the shelf for a while?**

When previous playtesters want to flee the room when it comes out or when I approach it with more dread than hope.

**What do you do to get in the designing mindset? Do you have a ritual or certain process for getting into the “zone?”**

Early morning quiet and a cup of coffee and some light music. No email access helps A LOT.

**What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?**

Welcome to the club! Games suck until they don't. There's no shortcut. Once you are upright and no longer shaking, take a moment to write down five things that players didn't like THAT YOU AGREE WITH. Then write down an idea to fix these ideas. Then find one new idea for the game to get genuinely excited about and go from there. Game design is a lesson in optimism.

**In the last three years, what new belief, behavior, or habit has most improved your game design skills?**

Videoing playtests. Matt Leacock is a genius.

**If a friend of yours is about to sit down to pitch a game to a publisher, what are some tips you would tell him or her?**

Don't tell me how the game plays; tell me how it feels to play the game.

**What advice would you give to a smart, driven, fledgling game designer just now getting into game design? What advice should they ignore?**

Don't ignore marketing, positioning, cost, the marketplace, competitive ideas, etc. All those matter to the success of a game. You can also ignore the idea that games can have a perfect balance. Just make it fun and reasonably balanced. Heresy, I know.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do?**

I take time off completely. I'll do two or three days of stuff around the house or just go to the movies or cook. I have to have a complete and total break to recharge. I don't do that enough.

**What do you wish someone had told you before you got into designing board games?**

You're going to be good at this. Stop worrying.

**What's one of your core philosophies in terms of how you live your life, and how is it manifested in your game design?**

Every day design something. Maybe take weekends off, but, like writing, consistency is key.

"One of the great parts of working in a super crowded design space (zombies, dungeons) is that the audience already gets the premise.

However, where most people fail is not sufficiently setting themselves apart from their peers in the genre. You have to differ meaningfully."

— *Grant Rodiek*

"I think the hardest part for any designer is letting go. You have to be willing to kill your babies if you want to design effectively."

— *Chris Kirkman*

# Matt Leacock

"Make sure you work on projects that you really believe in."

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**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year?**

*Art of Game Design by Jesse Schell*

**How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a "favorite failure" of yours?**

I over-invested in the visual design of my first self-published game (Lunatix Loop) and was reluctant to iterate on it since I was so attached to the artwork I had already created.

**How do you know when to walk away from a design or at least put it on the shelf for a while?**

I put a project on hold when I can't identify the problem I'm trying to solve.

**What do you do to get in the designing mindset? Do you have a ritual or certain process for getting into the "zone"?**

Each morning, I write down a prioritized list of to-dos in pencil on college-ruled paper. I do them in priority order, but any item that I can knock out in 2 minutes or less can be done sooner. I try to block out no more than one big design problem per day and try to ensure I have at least 2–3 unin-



errupted hours for it. During that time, I try to avoid email and social media.

**What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?**

Better to discover the problems now than after the game is released. And if you can identify the problems with your game, that's the first step toward making it better.

**In the last three years, what new belief, behavior, or habit has most improved your game design skills?**

I now methodically record observations, ideas, and issues from playtest sessions in a spreadsheet and use them to generate punch lists for the next iteration of a design. This makes it harder for me to sweep smaller problems under the rug, makes it easier to identify recurring issues, and forces me to confront larger problems with a design.

**If a friend of yours is about to sit down to pitch a game to a publisher, what are some tips you would tell him or her?**

If you don't believe that your game is truly something special, it'll come across in your pitch and the publisher will pick up on it. Make sure you work on projects that you really believe in.

**What advice would you give to a smart, driven, fledgling game designer just now getting into game design? What advice should they ignore?**

When playtesting, carefully observe the player's behaviors during play – not just what they tell you at the end of the session. Players may have an easier time describing the way a game makes them feel than they will describing how to make a game better.

And I'd tell them to ignore advice that tells them that a prototype should look attractive. You should always consider every part of a prototype disposable so that you can iterate without getting hung up on sunk costs.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do?**

I'll put the game on the shelf for a while. Also, it's helpful to remind yourself what your goals for the project are; then step back and reassess your progress with those goals in mind.

**What's one of your core philosophies in terms of how you live your life, and how is it manifested in your game design?**

Great work is its own reward.