

# BOARD GAME DESIGN ADVICE

FROM THE BEST IN THE WORLD

*The 2nd Edition*



GABE BARRETT



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**FROM THE BEST IN THE WORLD**

## **GABE BARRETT**



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*Dedication:*

For my number one playtester, Brandy.



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# Introduction

“It is not enough that we build products that function, that are understandable and usable, we also need to build products that bring joy and excitement, pleasure and fun, and, yes, beauty to people’s lives.”

–*Don Norman*

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In September of 2017, I got an email from Tim Ferris telling me about his upcoming book, *Tribe of Mentors*. The amazing cast of people Tim was able to bring together for the book really impressed me. It was a who’s who of actors, entrepreneurs, leaders, and high profile people from all walks of life who were dispensing wisdom on tons of different life topics.

And as I read Tim’s email, I remember thinking, “I wish someone would write a book like that for game designers.”

Then, I thought, “Maybe I could write that kind of book for game designers...”

His book’s premise was basically that it would be amazing if these incredible people could mentor us and help guide us through life. But since they can’t, here’s their best advice.

So, I figured I could take the same approach except instead of life in general, I could just focus on board game design. It’s unlikely that we’ll ever be mentored by the greatest game designers in the industry, but what if we could at least read their best wisdom and advice?

I slept on the idea, and the next morning I drafted 12 questions that I wanted to ask the best game designers in the world. The questions needed to be deep enough so that a one-word answer wouldn’t suffice but simple enough so that people would actually take the time to answer them.

Here are the questions I came up with:

1. What is the game (or games) you've recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?
2. What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.
3. How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a "favorite failure" of yours?
4. How do you know when to walk away from a design or at least put it on the shelf for a while?
5. What do you do to get in the designing mindset? Do you have a ritual or certain process for getting into the "zone?"
6. What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?
7. In the last three years, what new belief, behavior, or habit has most improved your game design skills?
8. 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?
9. What advice would you give to a smart, driven, fledgling game designer just now getting into game design? What advice should they ignore?
10. When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)
11. What do you wish someone had told you before you got into designing board games?
12. What's one of your core philosophies in terms of how you live your life, and how is it manifested in your game design?

I felt like these questions hit on pretty much everything I wanted to learn and provided enough depth that I would get very different answers from each different person.

My goal was to create a resource that would help designers no mat-

## Introduction

ter where they are in their game design journey. I didn't want a book of vague, general advice. And I didn't want a book that got too caught up on design theory or on trying to explain how specific mechanisms work. Those books have been written.

So, I asked specific questions about specific situations. I wanted to know what designers would tell me after a bad playtest and before I sat down to pitch a game to a publisher and how to know when to shelve a design and so on.

I wanted people who found themselves in the common, specific, and often frustrating contexts of game design to be able to open up a book and see what the best designers on the planet would tell them about that situation. (You can see which designers answered which questions in the appendix on page 245.)

So, I started reaching out to designers. First, I contacted the best designers who had already come on the Board Game Design Lab podcast. They already knew me, so it wasn't a hard sell.

After that, I went through the highest rated games on Board Game Geek and contacted every single designer in the top 100. All in, I contacted 110 designers, and 68 responded to the questions.

I asked them to answer their favorite 3-5, but most answered far more than that, and I was blown away by the awesome insight that they shared.

Some designers were brief in their advice. Some designers wrote paragraphs upon paragraphs. All of them offered the kind of wisdom that only comes after years of failing, learning, growing, and succeeding.

Some designers were nurturing. Some designers provided a rather swift kick in the pants.

Some of their answers you'll agree with. Some of their answers you'll vehemently reject. Just realize that the advice you think is stupid is exactly the kind of advice that someone else needs to hear. (And vice versa.)

I hope you find the contents of this book helpful and useful. (I know I have.) But just realize that it's not a novel, and it's not a self-help book. It's a resource to help you work through the many snags of the game design path.

Game design is one of the most difficult creative avenues I've ever travelled down. It's a journey full of stops and starts, joy, frustration, and everything in between. Every designer I know has had numerous moments of looking at a failed design and looking in the mirror and thinking, "What am I doing with my life?"

But the difference between a game designer and a person with a game idea is what happens next. Game designers keep going. They push through the grind. They keep designing after the shiny wears off. They burn designs to the ground and rebuild them from the ashes.

They press on.

So, whether you read this book from cover to cover, jump around to different designers, or read all the answers to one question at a time, I hope the advice will help you along in your game design journey.

I hope it'll encourage you through the hard times and keep you humble through the good times.

I hope it'll be a call to action to get the designs out of your head and onto a table.

I hope you'll press on and bring some amazing designs to life.

And as you run into challenges, I hope you'll come back to this book time and time again to be encouraged and get advice from the best in the world.

I look forward to playing your games one day.

Gabe Barrett  
Tegucigalpa, Honduras  
March 2018

# Jamey Stegmaier

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

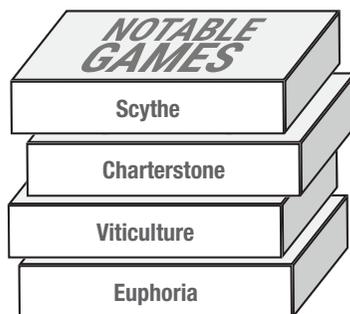
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## **What is the game (or games) you’ve recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?**

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.



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.”

---

## **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.”

---

## 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?

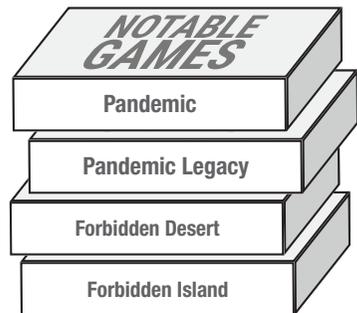
I over-invested in the visual design of my first self-published game (Lunatic Loop) and was reluctant to iterate on it since I was so attached to the artwork I had already created.

## 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 uninterrupted 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.

“Never forget how important hope is to your players. The longest odds make the greatest moments.”

— *JR Honeycutt*

“Don’t be afraid to change any of what you consider to be a core mechanic, because if it’s not working then it can’t be a core mechanic.”

— *Richard Launius*

# Richard Launius

“You have to love what you do; you have to be self-driven. I have found that talent and hard work are much more successful than talent alone.”

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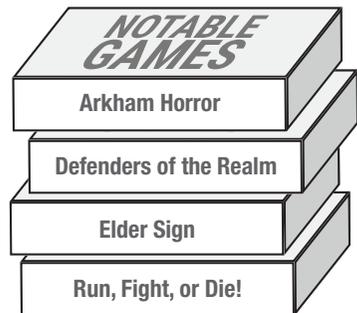
## **What is the game (or games) you’ve recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?**

I never recommend games to fledgling designers. If they are serious about being a designer they are playing a wide range of games, and even if not playing them, they should be reviewing the mechanics, audience appeal, and trends in the industry. My inclination on this is that if they are not doing this, they are not serious about being a designer and any suggestions are, quite frankly, a waste of my time and theirs.

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

All game designers have failure, and often the failures can be fixed at some point. I am not sure you learn any one thing from a failure other than that they are part of the process. I have noticed in the booming market we have today, many games that I would chalk up to as a failure and personally shelve, new designers are either publishing on Kickstarter or getting some small company to publish.

I think this is a grave error on their part. An average game, at best, will sell a small number of copies in its first run and then be done which results in them may-



be having hundreds of copies in a warehouse or their garage. And then publishers view them by their average game.

Granted, all games cannot be market successes, especially in the industry today where thousands come out every year, and the market can ignore a great game, but designers need to always focus on creating games that can be evergreen and sell year after year. That is the primary way a designer can make a good living in this industry and should be a core business pillar of each designer.

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

When you have made all the adjustments to a design and it does not deliver the gaming experience you envisioned with playtesters, it is time to shelve it and move on. It is usually obvious while watching if the playtesters are enjoying the game, and once you exhaust all your ideas, shelve it and move on to another design. As a designer you should have limitless designs and limited time, so pick what you are most passionate about and start a new one.

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

If you are a designer you are always in the mindset. Everything you see and experience generates ideas. If you do not have the base drive to start the project, you probably are not a designer. Designers are self driven and operate independently in their quests—probably the closest thing to “mountain men” of the American 1800’s in that they are by nature self reliant; at least the ones I know are.

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

“So what!” What designer has not had a playtest that went bad? They all have. But, that is when each design proves its value. A bad playtest is just a way to explore your skills, make changes to the game, or ultimately walk away and start another.

It is part of being a designer and is the true test of a designer. This is when the real work starts. Designing is like any other thing in life. If it was easy everyone could do it, but it is when it is hard that people define themselves regardless of their field. Every great designer has had failures, and even some of their best games had to be fixed a number of times in the playtest/design process. Often those ideas to fix a bad playtest take the game to the next level and make it successful.

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

The old values are the best. Get great ideas; do the work. Now, I think most new, and yes younger, designers should not rely on so much social media support and direction and should toss the smart phone on a shelf and ignore it and design games. It may be a lonely journey, but it is the journey to ultimate success.

### **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?**

Describe the experience the game delivers. Avoid describing mechanics to them. If they cannot see the mechanics they may not be the right company for your project. Also, only present your game to companies that publish similar style games or games that fit their portfolio. Know the company, what they publish, and what you think they need in their line of games. That way you do not waste your time or theirs.

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

Do the work. If you have all these qualities you should be able to succeed if you focus on doing the work. Often people fail because they lack the drive to do the work, especially when the design has issues.

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

That has never happened to me. Everyday I get up and ask God to enable me to be creative in doing the work I love, and then I go to work. This is a tough business and most days I work 12 hours a day, usually at least 6 days a week. You have to love what you do; you have to be self-driven. I have found that talent and hard work are much more successful than talent alone.

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

I am not sure I understand the question. Either you are a game designer or you are not. No words of wisdom will change that.

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

It is a blessing to do something you love and get paid to do it. Everyday I recognize there is a thin line between being self-employed and unemployed, and I make sure I am doing the work to stay on the self-employed side of that line in the industry that I love.

I try to use my talent with hard work in my designs and treat people I interact with respectfully to fully enjoy the great people in this industry and that support it as a hobby. In the end, I am an optimist and approach all challenges with that mindset. That may not always make things turn out right, but the journey is more enjoyable.

# Mike Fitzgerald

“Stay true to your vision for a game.”

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

What a great opportunity for improvement of the game, or for finding new play testers.

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

The true understanding that a particular game will not be for everyone. The trick is to help the game find its audience.

## **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?**

Tell them what is familiar about the game and what is original and why they should publish it.

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

Stay true to your vision for a game. Do not start playtesting with other people too early. Design a game with a beginning, middle, and end by yourself; then play it with others. If you start too early, your playtesters will be designing it and you will be very confused.

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



I listen to classical music and clear my mind, and things usually come into focus.

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

I started out making trading card games in the 90s and made a lot of money. I wish someone had told me that you will not make that much money from most games.

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

My core philosophy is to be the best person I can be. In my game designing, this means that when I think I have a good game, I say now let's see if I can make it a great game! I am not always successful, but I try.

# Tom Lehmann

“I have over 100 game concepts on my potential to-do list. This gives me the freedom to let a game percolate until I’m ready to do it or to set it aside if I’m experiencing issues with it.”

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

Doing 3 successive iterations, working through a bunch of issues, on the “Puerto Rico card game” that never saw the light of day helped me greatly when I did *Race for the Galaxy* a year later. I had a core game system that I knew worked, so I could concentrate on telling *Race*’s story without worrying much about mechanical issues.

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

I have over 100 game concepts on my potential to-do list. This gives me the freedom to let a game percolate until I’m ready to do it or to set it aside if I’m experiencing issues with it. Some good times to set aside a game are:

- 1) if it works with some players but completely falls apart with others—that’s a sign that its in-game incentives are not working and need rethinking.
- 2) If the game feels “flat”—that’s a sign that it probably needs one more big “twist” or idea and should be set aside until one occurs to you.



3) If it's not working and you are sick of it—set it aside until you regain your enthusiasm for it.

The tricky thing when I set aside a game at the concept stage, as opposed to a working prototype, is how to write up the concept well enough so that I can understand my notes and can get excited about it 5 years later. It's frustrating when you find a germ of what looked like a promising idea and some detailed notes that you can't decipher!

I find that if I write down what I think the key play tensions are, a tentative list of components, and both detailed setup instructions and a turn sequence, this helps me get back into the flow of the game so that my old notes about this or that detail make sense.

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

I do most of my design at a nearby teashop. It's my reward once or twice a week for spending 6 hours doing e-mails, product support, rules writing, graphics layout, prototype revision, etc. (all the grubby, practical bits of the job). Going to the teashop in the late afternoon with my clipboard, having high tea, staring out the window, jotting down ideas, and spending two hours doing the true creative design work is what I strive for. Knowing that this treat is coming helps me get my chores done (I don't go to the tea shop if I don't do them) and has my back brain mulling over ideas during the day so that they tend to just pour out when I'm there.

# James Ernest

“Game design is for the player. Only.”

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

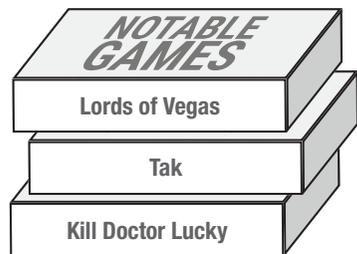
I think game designers already know what they like to play. Break out of your comfort zone and learn some games that you might not ordinarily try. And then start making games because you can only learn so much by playing.

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

I have long been searching for the perfect notebook system. I find that I’m more willing to write on the cheapest pages, so my main playtest notebook is now the cheapest composition book I can buy. That book gets much more use than the fancy notebooks that I’m afraid to mess up.

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

So many to choose from! One early stumble from Cheapass Games was a game called Bleeding Sherwood, about traveling salesmen who follow Robin Hood around Sherwood and sell useless crap to the poor people whom he has just made rich. It was a fun, tight bidding game for my crew of experts, but I failed to do any testing of the final design with new groups. Turns out it’s really easy to play that game “wrong,” give up on it, and never enjoy it. Today I try to remember to accommodate new players as well as catering to the experts.



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

I know a game is in trouble when nobody wants to play it! When I have to bribe my group to play Game X by saying that afterwards they get to play Game Y, I really should just finish Game Y and put Game X on the shelf. Sadly I don't always have that luxury, but I'm certainly aware that X isn't clicking.

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

Aside from deadline pressure? I wish I could say that I have the luxury for a ritual, but frankly my design work fills the cracks in my schedule when the biggest fires are out. I work on new game ideas, jotting down sketches and playing with ideas for mechanics and themes, whenever I have a free moment and a pen in my hand. Often when I'm traveling or waiting for a meeting to start!

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

It's been said many times before, but if your testers tell you there is a problem with your game, they are probably right, but if they tell you how to fix it, they are probably wrong. Analyze the suggestions to deduce the core flaws. Distill what is most important to you about this game, and then ask which parts of the current build support that, which thwart it, and which are immaterial to it. Throw away everything that isn't in the first category and try again.

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

Fearlessly workshopping the incomplete. There is literally no point at which it is too early to show your idea to a group of players and get their feedback. Test the theme by explaining it with no components at all. Test the core mechanic with blank components, if you can. Run a playtest session without a complete game

in place. Your first complete build will be broken anyway, so you might as well skip it. And the sooner you get external feedback at any of these stages, the less attached you will be to all the clever ideas you have to throw away.

**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?**

When you are playing your game with the publisher, if they start brainstorming how to improve the rules or the components, don't panic. It probably means they like 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?**

You learn by doing. There is no aspect of this business that you can fully learn from a book or a friend—least of all how to build a game from nothing. Do it a hundred times. Write bad games and throw them away. Cut fearlessly, finish bad things, and move forward.

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

If I have too many projects, I can lose focus on each. Try to finish the urgent ones first rather than working on them all. If I just don't feel like doing anything then it's time for a break. Do something restful that you love, or learn something you don't know.

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

The location of a buried chest of gold coins.

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

Game design is for the player. Only.

It's not about proving how clever you are, and it's not about mak-

ing something “groundbreaking” or “profitable.” Those conditions can be met by quality work, but they are not its intrinsic goal.

Our culture of manufactured entertainment seduces us into accommodating too many customers: the creator, the publisher, the distributor, the retail store, the critic, the “marketplace.” But art is a conversation between the artist and the user. Pandering to any intermediary diminishes the value of the work.

## Andrew Looney

“But don’t worry; the more painful it is, the more lessons it will teach you for the next version.”

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

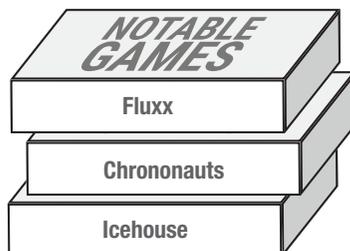
I don’t think there’s any single game I’d recommend (other than my own :-). What I recommend is playing as many different games as you can—move on to the next after you learn the lessons each game can teach.

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

Keep your chin up; it happens to us all. I wrote a chapter for the *Kobold Guide to Board Game Design* about how I design a game, and I drew a flowchart to go with it. One of the boxes you can end up in after playtesting is called “Get Defensive and Brood.” Sometimes this is a very important and unavoidable step in the process. But don’t worry; the more painful it is, the more lessons it will teach you for the next version.

### **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 expect to be able to make a living at this. You will need to be extremely lucky to make this a full-time gig. Develop other job skills, too.



FOUNDER OF



**LOONEY  
LABS**

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

Something else. Something different. Something that will take my mind off of the problem so that I can approach it later, refreshed. Maybe you just need some sleep. And when you wake up, you will have new perspective.

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

Everyone should have a chance to win.

# Don Eskridge

“Think about what they said and learn from it, laugh at yourself because life is laughable, and get going on the next iteration.”

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

Bohnanza. It’s simple to learn and play but provides great player interaction and clever facsimiles of generosity. Nobody is actually being kind in Bohnanza, but sometimes it feels like it!

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

Plastic bins for organizing bits and old prototypes. I felt great about the years of work I’d done when I could actually see all my old prototypes, and I was excited about the future by seeing all my hundreds of bits that could become games anytime I’m ready.

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

The third Resistance set, Hostile Intent, was not nearly as successful as Resistance or Avalon for more than one reason. There were severe production issues, but also the module I spent the most time on, Hunters, is probably more intense and rules-involved than the core audience for the game desired. That was a huge learning experience, and I still appreciate it. It was very freeing to have a failure after two successes. I now feel comfortable with simply creating and letting the world decide.



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

I'm not too addicted to my own designs. If even one or two play-tests go poorly then I'll quickly shelve the game and think on it awhile or work on something else.

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

My greatest impetus for designing is having an upcoming game night. I get to work quickly and intensely when I know that in a few hours I'll be hosting friends who are expecting something new. Once I know it must be done, I get to it.

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

Think about what they said and learn from it, laugh at yourself because life is laughable, and get going on the next iteration.

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



Blind playtesting is something I did more for Resistance, not enough for Abandon Planet, and now I'm doing much more for Black Hole Council. I am naturally an entertainer of sorts at game nights, which is actually not good for a game de-

signer. I need the game, rather than myself, to be entertaining. So for Black Hole Council I'm stepping back and watching more, learning more.

**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?**

Make sure you love your game, can explain it easily and confidently in five minutes, and know WHY the game matters. What does it do better or differently? And why does that matter to the publisher you're about to meet?

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

It is very unlikely that design royalties will be enough to make up for the time you spend, so be sure that this is something you would do regardless. If you're having fun with it and can keep paying the bills, you're doing great.

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

Thankfully I don't think about design 8 hours a day (typically), so in those cases I move on and work on whatever inspires me at the time. But if I need to solve something right then and there (for example if I have a game night coming up in an hour and need to play THIS game), then I try to keep Reiner Knizia's advice in mind: solve a problem with another problem. So I look for two trouble areas in the game and think, "how I can adjust one, the other, or both so that these mechanics work individually and can even support each other."

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

You'll have boxes everywhere in your house.

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

Human communication is very important to me; how to keep in-

teractions honest, clear and positive-leaning is a regular exploration. So concepts of communication can be found throughout my games:

Resistance/Avalon: How do I effectively communicate that I'm good/bad and that those guys/gals are evil?

Abandon Planet: How do I communicate my plans for where my rocket is going to fly, and how well can I make plans with a partner so that we can rocket off the planet this round?

Black Hole Council: How do I persuade the leader to move planets so they fulfill my secret agenda? How is the player to my left or right communicating so that I can deduce what their secret agenda is?

# Bruno Faidutti

“Keep things simple. I used to start complex and then simplify, but now I try more and more to be simple at the start.”

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

Cosmic Encounter because playing it can give one ideas for a few hundred more games. I think it is the game that really started modern game design—much more than Catan.

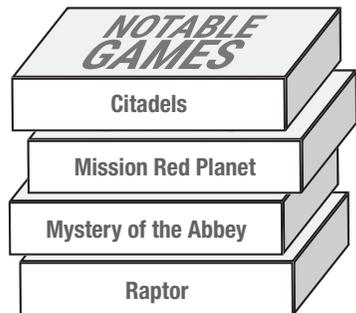
## **How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a “favorite failure” of yours?**

I don’t think there are definitive failures. When a game idea doesn’t work, I put it aside, and some of them might come back a few years later. I have a few which I thought would and haven’t so far, like the “Dwarves on the Shoulders of Giant” race game I wanted to design with Alan R. Moon.

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

When I get bored with it. There’s a fun thing happening at the moment. There’s a design which doesn’t really work, and which I’ve wanted to put aside for some time, but my playtester friends keep telling me it’s not that bad and I should go on...

## **What do you do to get in the designing mindset? Do you**



**have a ritual or certain process for getting into the “zone?”**

I don't believe in rituals and habits.

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

If you see that a game doesn't work, stop at once. Don't let it be played for an hour or more. Stop the playtest and start playing some good old classic everybody knows and likes. This way, you'll have fun and you'll be sure your playtesters will come back.

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

Keep things simple. I used to start complex and then simplify, but now I try more and more to be simple at the start.

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

Play all kinds of games by all kinds of designers, but try not to lose time with stuff that is too complex—neither with playing nor with designing.

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

I listen to some music, open a book, or take a nap. I don't try to keep on doing what I don't want to do.

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

The whole point of games is to be more serious and convincing than real life. So, take your games seriously, and have fun with your life.

## Donald X. Vaccarino

“I always have multiple projects to work on and take a break from one by working on another.”

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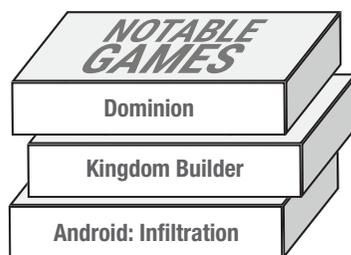
### **How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a “favorite failure” of yours?**

I was making a game called Spirit Warriors II. The players would build up a party of fantasy heroes and have a deck consisting of 10 cards per hero shuffled together. When you drew a bow card for your ranger, that would be something your ranger could do.

The idea was that a card might be like “deal 2 damage per level of bow skill.” You’d look at the card, look down at your ranger who is level 3 in bow, and do 6 damage. Remember that number, look at the next card, a sword card for your paladin. Look back and forth, do the math, and remember the answer. At the end of it, maybe decide, no, don’t attack this turn. It sounded like it would be way too slow. So I mocked up an example situation and showed it to some people. And they not only took forever to work through it, but they also got the wrong answer.

What I needed was for the cards to just be like “deal 6 damage.” But I wanted to build up the heroes. The solution was to add cards as the game progressed. You’d start with a small deck, and leveling up your ranger would mean getting another card for that hero—your best card yet for that skill.

When I saw that solution, I realized that I could make a game out of just that idea with none of the rest of the game. I typed up some notes on what that game might look like and went back to work on



Spirit Warriors II. Months later I needed a new game quickly and while Spirit Warriors II was still nowhere near being done, the basic deck-building game would be easy to whip out. So I whipped it out. And that's Dominion.

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

For me the best way to think about a project is still pacing. Second is having a conversation with someone about the project. If I'm alone and seated, I turn the music on if it's easy work, off if it's thinkier.

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

I switch projects. I always have multiple projects to work on and take a break from one by working on another. If none of them sound good, I play games. Another way to take a break is to answer interview questions.

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

There's a maxim I tell everyone within earshot that looms large but is invisible. I wouldn't say it dictates any life decisions, or game design decisions even, but it at least says something about what's going on. It's this: you can only maximize one variable. Which is taller, the tallest mountain, or the mountain with the longest name? It could be a tie; if not, the tallest mountain is the taller one. That seems trivial, right? But it endlessly applies. For example, at some point there will be a design decision where you either side with flavor and make the gameplay worse, or you side with gameplay and make the flavor worse. You can't maximize both at once.

Wait, here's one. There's a classic situation when playing a game where you have to make a decision, and it's really difficult. You're not sure which move is better. It turns out that this especially comes up when it doesn't matter or when the choices are about

even. Once you know that, you can learn to stop thinking in some of these situations, and just pick something. For game design you want to avoid generating these situations. Obviously they'll come up anyway, but you don't want to give people decisions where it's hard to get an advantage either way because they'll stare and stare, trying to see if somehow one option is better, bogging the game down. It's hard to apply to life, but these decisions matter!

“Nobody knows if your prototype is balanced.  
They only know if it FEELS balanced. Test  
wildly.”

—*T.C. Petty III*

“Observing tests of your game run by  
someone else lets you spot your influence on  
playtest outcomes and data.”

—*John Brieger*

# Shem Phillips

“Balancing actions and numbers is the easy stuff. Work on improving the player experience first.”

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

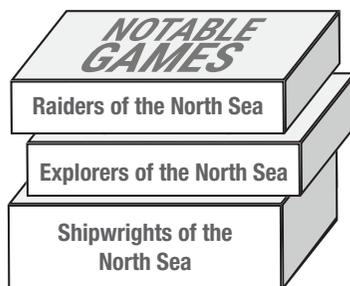
A lot of card sleeves and blank cards! This makes prototyping card games so much easier, faster, and cheaper. It allows me to print cards on regular paper at home, then cut to size and place in a clear sleeve along with a blank card. I only print higher quality, unsleeved cards when I'm preparing for a convention demo or blind playtests.

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

Don't be too quick to rip everything up and start again. Think about how players were responding during the test. Was a certain rule or mechanism causing frustration among players? Try and deal with that first. Balancing actions and numbers is the easy stuff. Work on improving the player experience first.

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

While I like to picture the fully-fledged, final product during design, I've also learned to focus on the small parts that make up the whole. For example: just testing one minor drafting mechanism with only 20 cards before printing and cutting the other 80. It not only saves a lot of time but also helps to isolate any issues early on.



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

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Try everything. Don't dismiss a bad idea too quickly and don't be afraid of creating a rubbish game (just don't publish it!). Secondly, get alongside other designers in your area. Iron sharpens iron. As you start to design and learn more, your advice will be just as valuable to them as theirs is to you.

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

I like to grab a game off my shelf and play it solo. I'll either play a co-op or just play a competitive game as two players. Sometimes just playing a smooth, well-balanced, and well-designed game is all I need to get refocused on my own projects. I guess it reminds me of what I'm working towards.

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

I like to keep things simple and manageable. I only own 1 car, 1 pair of shoes, 2 pairs of jeans. I guess it's no surprise that a lot of my games have very small and restricted resource markets. I like to design games with simple and easy to follow rulesets that allow for a lot of strategic depth within those rules.

# Grant Rodiek

“Work hard at everything you do. Always show up, and do so without excuses.”

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

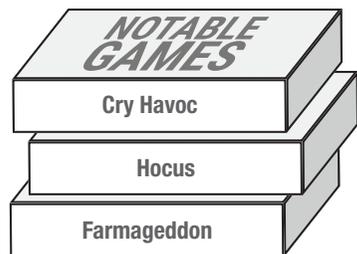
Coloretto or High Society. Both show a wide variety of situations with very few components or rules. You can see player interaction, player driven behavior, and tons of decisions, which are essential starting points for a new designer.

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

People should learn constantly. I listen to tons of podcasts and read about history, economics, politics, and comedy, and all of them influence and enrich my work. Podcasts are free, and you can buy a mountain of paperbacks for \$50. Read about things outside of games and bring it back into the field to make it better.

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

I get rejected constantly. It forces me to learn new things, be self-reliant, and constantly reinvent my skills to be better and more unique. Learn to deal with rejection so that you can emerge stronger.



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

When it isn't fun. Usually if a game isn't fun in some way by the third test I throw it away. It's usually a sign of a poor origin.

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

I walk my dog everyday for about 40 minutes and three or more times on weekends. It's on those walks, in my two hours of commuting every day, or in the shower where my mind wanders and I come up with stuff. I think about games constantly and it bears constant fruit. I just make it a part of who I am so I don't have to "be in a zone."

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

First, make sure they clearly identify the problems. Then, ask them to consider their goals for the game. Find out where those problems conflict with the goals. With that triangulation complete, isolate the pieces, and begin fixing them. Don't dwell on it. If you have a good idea, and you know your vision can succeed, then create a list and start fixing it. Get to work.

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

Think accessibility first. This doesn't mean you only make simple games, but constantly think about how people will learn and experience your game. I write rules early. I design reference cards. I constantly rework my graphic design. Always think about how your game's depth can be reached faster.

**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?**

First, ask if the game is right for the publisher. Is it the type of game they typically publish? Secondly, share the basics first: player count, length of play, complexity, approximate components.

Thirdly, get straight to the hook. What makes the game unique? Avoid comparisons to other games. Finally, be able to quickly demonstrate a turn, which should illustrate the hook.

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

Create constantly. Just keep at it. Especially initially, it's about volume, experimentation, and developing those muscles. Pay attention and try to internalize the lessons.

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

I tell people to think of their goals. What do you want the game to be? What makes it special? Your goals are your high level, philosophical pillars. They need to be things upon which you cannot waiver. Goals are not mechanisms, but the experience your mechanisms or theme will evoke. So, always think back to your goals. Let that focus you, then get back to work against your goals.

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

Honestly, I've enjoyed the journey. I love learning new things. I love having to get out of my comfort zone to experiment. I think this hobby is best for folks who want to just work hard for their own amusement more than anything.

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

Work hard at everything you do. Always show up, and do so without excuses.

“Express extreme appreciation for negative feedback, so that testers learn they should always speak up about issues.”

— *John Brieger*

“Tip for new designers: your first half-dozen games (at least) are going to be terrible. Lower your expectations, iterate quickly, and be prepared to throw them out.”

— *Peter C. Hayward*

# Alan Emrich

“You will learn more from other game designers by observing the examples of how they solve game design problems than anything else.”

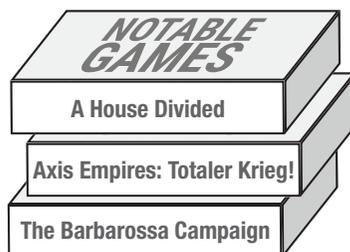
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## **What is the game (or games) you’ve recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?**

Strike Force One and Battle for Moscow (introductory war games because most new designers have never even dipped a toe into such serious games).

Cosmic Encounter and I’m the Boss (to see what freedom from a computer means and can really achieve).

Master of Orion (I created the term “4X” game to define it, and that has become a part of gaming lore ever since).



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

I fix other’s game designs. The most important lesson I’ve learned doing that is that you can’t save every game; some are just not going to gel satisfactorily.

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

When you hit the point of diminishing returns for your time invested, and it is still a long way from ready. Diminishing returns on your time are expected when finishing a game, but when mov-

ing to alpha or from there to beta, your progress should be making strides not baby steps.

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



“Now you know.” Then I would buck them up with the usual filters necessary to assess their feedback. Honestly, playtesting is 50% observation of body language and the player noise around the game -- the subconscious feedback.

Just as most people who enjoy roller-coasters couldn't tell you how to design a good one, so too are playtesters often unable to help you design a game. They CAN tell you what, to them, makes a good gameplay experience, and THAT'S the feedback you should greatly consider.

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

Narrative -- when the game's core systems and mechanics help the player unfold a narrative, you've got a beautiful thing.

**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?**

They already have more games that they want to publish right now than they ever could. Stop adding zeroes to your perceived value of your game's idea; you only need one.

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

You will learn more from other game designers by observing the examples of how they solve game design problems than anything else. The solutions to almost every game design problem already exists in another game, so observe as many as you can, and keep their solutions to different game design problems in your quiver of solution arrows.

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

How poorly you are compensated in relation to how much the player depends upon you for a great gameplay experience.

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

Making games is like sex: if you're not enjoying it, you're not doing it right.

“Every mechanism has problems and advantages. Good design is using them in the best possible way, for a suitable purpose.”

—*Behrooz Shahriari*

“Your playtesters’ minor irritants of today are your reviewers’ slams of tomorrow.”

—*John Brieger*

# Ryan Laukat

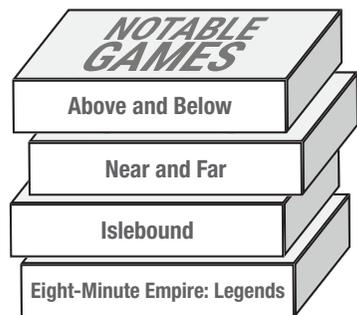
“It gets exponentially more painful to change a game the closer it is to being finished, but it’s been worth the effort every time.”

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

I usually put a design on the shelf when my passion for it is gone and the game still has a lot of problems. Solving design problems takes a lot of mental AND emotional effort. If I burn out on a game and it still needs work, my solutions for it aren’t going to be true to my goals as a creator. I might use shortcuts or mechanical clichés just to fix things the easy way. Sometimes shelving a mediocre design can lead to a really great one.

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

Some of my best-selling games have had many discouraging playtesting sessions. It’s important to remember that gaming preferences are highly subjective, and you’re never going to please everyone with your creation. In fact, if you try, what you will create will not only be inauthentic but bland. I’d much rather create something memorable than something inoffensive. Playtester comments can be very useful, but only implement suggestions that you feel really belong in your design. Something might be wrong, and players will tell you, but listen to your own instincts about what to change.



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

One of the things I have relied on most as a designer is the willingness to make dramatic changes to a game if it could improve the design. What I've realized recently is that this is important in every stage of development, even the final ten percent. It gets exponentially more painful to change a game the closer it is to being finished, but it's been worth the effort every time.

**FOUNDER OF**



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

There's a lot of talk about what makes a "good" or "highly-rated" game, and it's easy to get caught up in all of it and let it affect your goals as a designer. Of course, we all need to be open to im-

provement and it's important to be up-to-date on what is going on in game design, but the conversation online can lead to homogenization and a lack of creativity.

I think it's better to focus on trying out your own ideas and watching people when they play your game. Are the players engaged or bored? Are they having a good time? Do they want to play again? Body language can be more useful than playtester suggestions.

# JT Smith

“When someone tells you that your game is broken in some way, believe them. But when they tell you how to fix it, take notes, but don’t let them assume the role of designer.”

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

A subscription to <https://component.studio>

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

When I know a game has problems, but I don’t have ideas on how to overcome those problems, I shelve it for a while. Sometimes a little distance gives you the room you need to find a better answer.

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

I work on what inspires me at the time, rather than forcing myself down a particular path. So even if I have a game close to completion, I might be more inspired to work on something new. I take advantage of that inspiration.

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

“Did we give up when the German’s bombed Pearl Harbor?” Then, I pause for a bit to see if they notice that the German’s never bombed Pearl Harbor. I find that a little humor to take their mind off of it is a good thing. As for advice to



help them pick themselves up, I tend not to give it. People need time to heal. Instead, I focus my advice on how to potentially mutate the game into something better.

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

I've stopped designing games to be published. I've killed the timelines. Instead, I just try to make the best game I can, and if a game gets good enough to pitch, I'll pitch it.

**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?**

Treat the publisher like a person, rather than a catch. Don't try to reel them in. Just have a conversation of substance.

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

When someone tells you that your game is broken in some way, believe them. But when they tell you how to fix it, take notes, but don't let them assume the role of designer.

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

Perfection is the enemy of profit. Find ways to be happy with 80 or 90% or you won't ever allow yourself to complete the project.

# Edo Baraf

“You’re not finding problems, you’re finding opportunities for success.”

## FOUNDER OF



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

Hanafuda. Cards are pivotal to most designs and Hanafuda is a century old card system that is like an alternative universe poker cards.

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

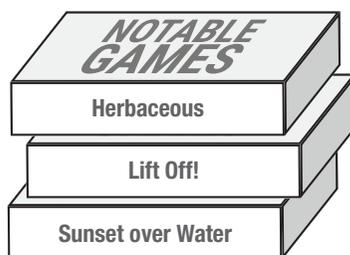
Never walk away from designs. Just shelve them. The more comfortable you get with that idea, the less you’ll need to know when to walk away. It’s all one fabric.

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

You’re not finding problems, you’re finding opportunities for success.

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

It’s all about the Journey, not the destination.



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

Just keep creating and completing.

# Sen-Foong Lim

“Share your ideas, and others will share with you.  
Do not get a patent.”

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

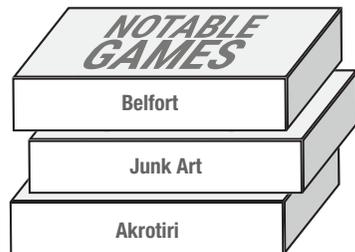
It really depends on the person’s current project, but I can never say enough about Magic: The Gathering in general. Add the wealth of knowledge about the game from developers like Mark Rosewater and you’ve got points to ponder for days! I also point people towards Jenga as an example of a near-perfect game-as-product.

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

It’s free to download: I’ve been listening to a ton of design podcasts from outside of board games, specifically, and venturing into tabletop more broadly. The RPG Design Panel Cast has really helped me to see games from an experiential and emotional point of view instead of simply mechanics and themes.

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

My favorite failure story is melting the brain of Matt Leacock. Matt, for all intents and purposes, is a pretty smart dude. Being a good friend, he agreed to playtest a game that Jay and I were designing. Both Jay and I had been playing with our sequestered playtest groups to the point that our groups knew the system hands down and



were always asking for more challenges, more mechanisms, more things to engage with. That was all well and good for them, however, for even a designer as skilled as Matt, it was too much. It was, by all accounts, a horrible playtest. But it was so valuable. From that single playtest, we learned how to scale the game back without losing the core elements, how to include additional features in a fluid and dynamic way that wasn't overwhelming, and how to create arcs through mechanics vs. theme/narrative. Positive feedback is nice but not helpful. It's constructive criticism like this that opens your eyes.

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

I rarely walk away from a design, but I often shelve them. I do so when no one is interested in them –either me, one of my co-designers, my playtesters, or a publisher. If any of those still has a spark of interest, the game will stay on the active roster.

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

Showers are my best thinking space. My drive to work is only 20 minutes, but I relish that time for listening to podcasts. I have a ton of fun playtesting other people's game, and it often leads to my own inspiration. I also like doing demo/sales for other people's products at conventions. I've learned so much about good game design practices from a teaching and marketing perspective from being on the vendor floor at Origins, etc.

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

“You should see the other guy!” Seriously though, I'd tell them not to take the feedback verbatim but to seek out the global truths that are hidden within the greater body of feedback.

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

As a game designer, I am curating an interactive experience for the players. If I'm not doing that, I'm failing to engage them meaningfully.

**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?**

Tell them who you play as in the game, how you win the game, and what the single coolest thing you do in the game is.

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

Share your ideas, and others will share with you. Do not get a patent.

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

I work on another game; I find that by solving a problem in game A, I will often find direction on how to fix game B. When in doubt, do.

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

I wish someone would have told me that I wouldn't have time to play other games as much.

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

Together We're Better. I learned that as a therapist. Together we can find solutions to problems that each of us, individually, would fail at. This is one of the reasons why I primarily co-design.

“Know what words you want to hear players using. Those words are a great way to tell if your design is immersive.”

—*Behrooz Shahriari*

“In order to survive in the gaming market, you have to go over and above. It’s not enough to just do enough. You have to be able to wow people, and to wow people, you can’t just play it safe.”

—*Mark Rosewater*

# Jay Cormier

“But if you equate failing with being a failure, you’re missing the point.”

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

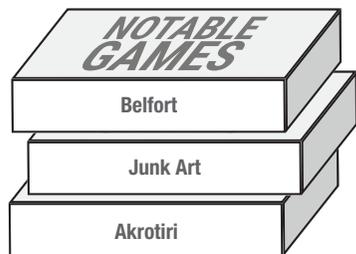
Through the Desert. It has very simple rules—every turn, place any 2 camels adjacent to your caravan of the same color—but the story arc that evolves is interesting. At the beginning players race to capture the watering holes worth 3 and 2 points. In the mid-game players start to carve out areas, then at the end players are trying to make the longest caravan. This all comes down to a player’s motivation. There are 3 ways to get points and each one requires different reasons for why you’d place your camels in specific locations. It’s a great lesson on how to keep things simple but allows the game to have an arc that evolves as the game progresses.

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

I’ve had a slow year of game purchasing due to co-creating 2 new babies that came into my life! I did get to play Exit and thought that was a great way to do an escape room in a box.

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

Failing takes up 95% of any designer’s time. Every time you play test and it’s not PERFECT, there’s failure there. But if you equate failing with being a failure, you’re



missing the point. When designing I like to fail faster, which means that I want to find out where the game isn't working, so I can go back and figure out how to get it working. The great thing about playtesting is that everyone there has the same goal as you do—to make your game better. While they might have solutions you don't always agree with, their feedback about the failings of the game will help you and your game.

A favorite failing: Repeatedly being rejected from publishers for a family game called Jam Slam, when finally a publisher said that it was just one step too complicated for kids. Sen, my design partner, said off-handedly, “Why don't we make the game for adults and make it about zombies?” What? Wait a second... to the drawing boards! We found ways to change the game and improve it to make it a game adults would play, and now it's on store shelves. And it's called (wait for it....) Zombie Slam!

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

When I don't have a clear idea on the direction to go next I will walk away for a while. Sometimes I change the game to make it better, but when I'm just changing the game to make it different, then maybe it's time to sit back and think about it for a while.

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

Congratulations! You've found people that were able to let you know a direction NOT to go. If you got feedback on how to improve it, well that's great isn't it? If you didn't get feedback, then you either have to work on your feedback requesting skills or maybe the idea just isn't worth any more of your time.

### **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?**

First: What's the hook? What is the thing that will help the publisher see how easy this game will be to sell? Is it a funky compo-

ment? Is it an interesting and unexplored theme? Is it a novel mechanic that hasn't been seen before?

Second: Make a sell sheet. There's info online on how to make one (including my site: <https://inspirationtopublication.wordpress.com/2010/10/03/step-14-create-sales-sheets/>). This goes a long way to showing that you're serious.

Third: Have the game ready to be set up and demoed. You're not going to be able to play a full game, so load the decks and prepare baggies for easy setup. Do whatever you can to make setup as quick as possible. You might even want to move to the middle of the game if that's where it's more interesting.

Fourth: Listen. If they provide any feedback, listen! Maybe it's not right for them, but their feedback will give you an insight into what kind of games are right for them.

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

Get it on paper ASAP. Get it out of your head and into a playable form as soon as you can. This will help you understand which elements work and which don't.

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

Positive persistence. Always assume the best, which is great in life and great when you're wondering why a publisher hasn't responded to your 3 emails.

“Every game sucks at some point. If you don’t feel like your game sucks, you are not being honest with yourself.”

—*Jon Gilmour*

“Don’t stop playing published games. Make it a point to keep informed of what’s going on, what new tools other people have invented. Only playing prototypes will leave you in an information rut.”

—*Tim Rodriguez*

# Jerry Hawthorne

“Look at the market and decide if what you are offering fills a blank spot in the market or if it just follows a trend.”

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

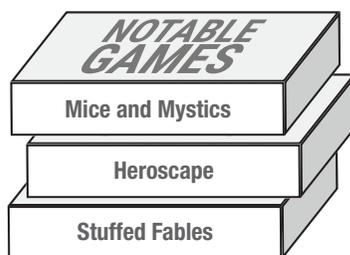
Quantum. The game has so much depth with such a clean and simple design. It’s a 4X you can play in 40 minutes. Games with this much streamlining are really hard to design, but any designer could benefit from eyeing their own efforts with the focus on reducing the complexity without losing the theme.

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

My yoga mat. Clearing my head and getting exercise really helps me write.

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

Failures teach you lessons that are harder to forget because they leave an indelible impression on your psyche. My biggest recent failure was to try and create a rulebook that teaches the game as you go to eliminate the need for such lengthy rulebooks. The playtesters were so frustrated with the effort and demanded a traditional rulebook. I learned that it’s hard enough to be a playtester without also having to decipher a mock up of an untested approach to learning. Cost me tons of time and darn near delayed my game.



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

If it isn't fun and intuitive. If the market won't accept it due to a similar design/theme. Timing is important.

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

I meditate and exercise.

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

Gather information! Ask questions where the answers might destroy your ego. Make the best you can out of the bumner situation. Thank the testers profusely for being forthright.

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

Emotional acceptance. Learning that the ego is not who I am and can conspire to undermine the impact I want to have on the world.

**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?**

Be enthusiastic and flexible. Talk about the innovation as much as the theme. Be open to changing the theme when pitching to publishers outside your wheelhouse. Ask to be involved in the development as much as they will allow.

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

Look at the market and decide if what you are offering fills a blank spot in the market or if it just follows a trend.

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

I play my game solo. If it is not at that stage I make lists in order of priority and try to get it out of my headspace and into the world as soon as possible.

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

The secrets to InDesign.

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

I keep a handy set of core principles with me at work: Do No Harm, Make Things Better, Respect Others, Be Fair, Be Loving.

“The optimal move/choice/strategy/character should also be the interesting one. NEVER make players choose between “fun” and “effective”.”

—*Keith Burgun*

“Designs are exciting to start and finish; learn to find validation and joy from the grind through the middle.”

—*JR Honeycutt*

# Colby Dauch

“Don’t take it personally or get defensive; playtesters are an exhaustible resource.”

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



Don’t take it personally or get defensive; playtesters are an exhaustible resource. Even if you end up at a dead end on a game, you haven’t wasted your time; you’ve practiced designing, and like with anything, your skills will sharpen with practice.

**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?**

Be concise and be practiced at your pitch.

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

Ask yourself: Do I want to be a game designer or a business manager? If the answer is game designer, put in a strong effort toward finding a publisher for your games before ever considering self-publishing.



“When you’re first getting started, design with the intent to learn, not publish – learn about the process, do the research, and listen to others as much as you can.”

—*Dave Chalker*

“Try to touch important projects every day, even if just for a moment. It keeps the brain engaged in the background.”

—*JR Honeycutt*

## Luke Laurie

“Just like in life, there’s no one true path that fits everyone; what’s important is that people can find a path that works for them.”

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

I recommend a variety of different games depending on the circumstances. I’m always encouraging designers to diversify their experiences and to play popular games in the same genre as what they like to design.

Besides the obvious classics, one of my most frequent recommendations is probably *Concordia* by Mac Gerdts. The game has such depth and yet is incredibly lean on rules and complexity. The game epitomizes the characteristics of a pure Eurogame. You can teach the game in just a few minutes, but the depth takes many, many, plays to explore.

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

I recently bought some EK Tools punches that are just the right size to use with standard blank tokens that you can get from The Game Crafter. You can find them on Amazon or a craft store. It makes life so much easier when I don’t actually have to make bunches of tokens from scratch. I just print out the graphics on a full sheet label paper, punch out the token graphics using the die cutter, and then stick them on the uniformly sized tokens. When I need to make a revision, I just print, punch, and stick right over the pre-



vious version. It saves a bunch of time from having to cut tokens out of chipboard, and allows me to use circles and squares of different sizes and make really nice looking, usable tokens.

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

I have some boldly ambitious projects that haven't yet succeeded. A few have been rejected by publishers; others never quite made it that far. My favorite concept that hasn't worked out is Dwellings of Eldervale which is a project I was co-designing with Peter Vaughan. It's kind of a kitchen sink of Euro mechanics and fantasy thematic concepts. It's my favorite failure because I think when the stars align, this one just might see light of day.

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

I don't know when to quit. I've been haunted by designs that are always close to completion but never quite there. I've stuck with some of these things for too long, revising, rebuilding, and torturing playtesters with yet another iteration, when they all really liked a previous version better. These days, I'm more selective about which projects I spend my time on, so there's less of a reason to really walk away from anything. There are many, many decent concepts that are sitting on my shelf, but the ones that are even better are the ones deserving of my time.

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

Designing is my default mindset. If I'm not designing board games, I'm designing lessons for my classes, LEGO robots, or home renovations. My challenge is time. I'm sure I'd be more prolific as a game designer if I didn't have my day job as a science teacher. I guess that's something to look forward to when I retire twenty years from now.

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

It's far better to experience disappointment at the testing stage than it is to experience it after a game has hit the market. Not all tests are good, and not all games are good, but even good games experience some bad plays during playtesting.

One thing is absolutely clear after a bad playtest: there's something to be learned. Was it something fundamentally wrong with the core concept, or are there minor elements that are gumming up the works? Was there a mismatch between the type of players who played and the target audience for the game? What can be done to improve the experience?

There's always something to be learned, and sometimes that hard, but necessary, lesson is that the game really isn't going to work, and the designer might be wise to move on.

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

I've slowed down. I build pretty big games that require a long gestational period. I've come to accept that if I focus on three or four projects a year, I'll be lucky to complete one. And the one I complete will likely take 2-3 years from inception to publication. With the acceptance of the slow pace of this process, I've committed myself to fewer projects, focused my energy on games within my preferred style, and I've slowed down on starting new things in favor of continuing to refine the projects I have.

### **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?**

Make it as easy as possible for the publisher to know everything they need to know from the game itself. The components and rules of the game need to be entirely clear and complete and at least tolerable to look at. It's the game that's the real focus here. Pitching takes a variety of forms, and there are skills and techniques

for that, but it's the publisher's review of the game that's even more important. Charisma and presentation can open doors, but ultimately, the game has to sell itself. Once they've accepted your game for a review, they'll be digging into the details of your game, and if it's incomplete, has fundamental flaws, or does not show innovation, it's not going to make the cut.

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

I've given tons of advice to fledgling designers, and some of them have followed my advice and found success while others have ignored me and found success. There's no one singular path to success as a designer, but if your true passion is game design, then focus on the craft itself.

If you continue to hone your design chops through building and refining your abilities and attending events where you can learn from others in the field, you'll gain the skills and perspective you need to succeed as a designer.

If your focus is instead on "your baby," that one game that you know will shatter the world, you might lose sight of yourself in all of this. It's true that your first design might be a smash hit, but it also might be a dud. Either way, if you play the long game, you're focused instead on the skills and habits that won't just create one game but will allow you to create a body of work that will be your legacy.

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

The healthy answer would probably be to go exercise, which I sometimes do. I can get some good design work done while walking or biking. But another approach is to play a game or run a playtest. Often that playing experience will stir up more design inspiration and bring me back with fresh eyes to my work.

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

I faced a lot of pressure to build small, cheap, lighter, family games that “everyone will love.” That wasn’t good advice for me. I wish people had told me to focus on the types of meatier games that I want to play with my friends. That’s where my design skills and background knowledge seem to work best. If you like light games and that’s your passion, go for it, but don’t be afraid to focus on games that will never sell at Target.

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

I strongly value free thought, innovation, scientific thinking, and approaching the world with an open mind. I try to create games where there are many paths to victory, and every game is little different. I want players of my games to have interesting decisions, but not paralyzing quandaries. I want them to have a chance to subversively use alternate methods and still have a chance to win. Just like in life, there’s no one true path that fits everyone; what’s important is that people can find a path that works for them.

“Playtesting, feedback. Playtesting, feedback.  
Long pause. Repeat. This will never cease to  
be the secret to making a great game.”

—*Ben Pinchback*

“When designing, your goal is to generate  
an ‘oo-OOO-oo’ response from your players.  
All 3 syllables. Get them excited just  
hearing the rules.”

—*Stephen Glenn*

## Martin Wallace

“Sitting in front of a computer trying to force a good idea to come out rarely works, while a nice walk among pleasant surroundings does wonders for your creative juices.”

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

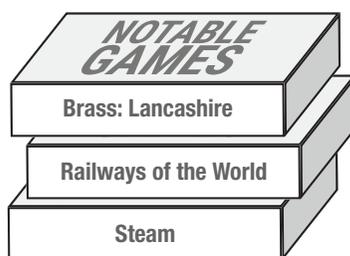
One of my earlier designs, Stockers, went through many iterations. One version had a neat mechanic, but it did not fit with the game. I took that out and developed it into a different game, which then became my first design published by another company. This was Und Tschuss and the mechanic involved a blind bidding system where you did not want to end up second.

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

You have to feel very positive about a design to continue with it. If you do not have that confidence in the game then putting it to the side is very often a good idea. There are many of my games where I have done that and then come back months later and realized how a simple twist could improve things.

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

Walking is the best aid to designing. Sitting in front of a computer trying to force a good idea to come out rarely works, while a nice walk



among pleasant surroundings does wonders for your creative juices. I'm sure it has something to do with getting a good blood flow to your brain.

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

I've had many games that have fallen apart at the testing stage. Rather than tweak the design, I try to think in terms of what the final feel of the game should be and what responses it should elicit from the players—without thinking of actual mechanisms. A failed game can very often point the way to what will work. Nothing is ever wasted in game design, even a negative experience.

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

Looking at the market today you need to give the public something that stands out from the competition. This may mean coming up with a blockbuster game such as Gloomhaven or a series of connected games that build a story, as in the Viking games from Shem Phillips. Just coming up with a Carcassonne variant will not do nowadays; the field is so much tougher now that you have to do something inspired. In that sense you have to be ambitious and aim high.

**FOUNDER OF**



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

Many of my games are designed around a specific theme, either historical or fictional. You sometimes have to stop and remind yourself of the critical

## Board Game Design Advice

elements of the theme you are working on. Sometimes a game can become a bit too abstract, losing a lot of its flavor. You have to keep the theme in mind at all times.

“Always make the prototype. Otherwise it remains nowhere near finished.”

—*Rob Daviau*

“Look at your theme, really look at it. What is it made of, what does it do, how does it do it, why, when, where? All of it. Take it apart and really look at what you have. Stop trying to make a ‘game’ when you can make an experience, something the players will talk about and feel like they were involved. ”

—*Benny Sperling*

# Bruno Cathala

“Then, I would remind him that the discouraging session is not a failure, just an experience.”

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

Frankly speaking it’s the first time someone has asked me that question. But in this situation, I would probably recommend “504” from Friedman Friese because it’s like a tool box leading to many different things that I’m sure that a curious, fledgling game designer will learn a lot of things experimenting with all the possibilities

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

We have to distinguish two different things:

- New sparkling ideas
- Development of these ideas

For development, it’s quite easy: based on a starting idea, I can organize my work day quite easily. I need time to create a prototype, playtest it, analyze the playtest session, make corrections, and so on until at the end of one of these loops I’m really satisfied.

But for sparkling ideas, it’s more mysterious and unpredictable. I can’t sit at my desk waiting for ideas. These ideas always come spontaneously, suddenly, when I’m doing something completely disconnected from games. For example riding my bike in the mountains, or driv-



ing on long and boring roads, or taking a shower.

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

First, I would suggest that he temporarily forget about the session by doing something different: reading a book, watching a movie, or playing a sport—something not connected with games.

Then, I would remind him that the discouraging session is not a failure, just an experience. And he has a lot of things to learn from the experience if he will analyze the reasons why it wasn't successful.

# Mac Gerdts

“Always try to keep rules as simple as can be.”

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

Look at Concordia. How can you create an interesting and challenging game with a minimum of rules? Always try to keep rules as simple as can be.

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

It was a book about the history of shipping for the board game Transatlantic.

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

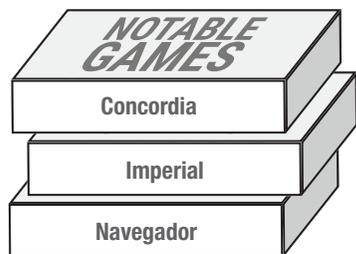
The graphical design of Machu Picchu was a nightmare. Although later designs still may have debatable issues, I learned a lot about the importance of visual presentation.

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

When my group refuses to play it with me

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

Nothing really. It can come over me day or night, at home or on holidays, in the bathroom or on a bicycle. One never knows.



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

Get over it and take a break for several days. Try not to think about it. Is there any homework that urgently needs to be done?

**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?**

Contact them personally. Writing emails never is enough to convince anyone.

# Mike Selinker

“This is supposed to be fun. There are unfun parts, and we get through those.”

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

I worked really hard on *Betrayal at House on the Hill*, but it was a failure. It didn't sell very many copies and nobody at Wizards wanted to make more of it. Thirteen years later, I'm pretty sure it's not a failure. So, just breathe. It'll all work out.

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

When you're playtesting a game, think like my friend Paul Peterson who designed *Guillotine* and *Smash Up*. Imagine the game you love the most. Now imagine the thing you love the most about it. Now remove that thing, and play the game 50 times without it. That's what game development is like.

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

I tell all people who come to me for advice, “Be the person known for that thing.” You know that thing? Well, you're the person who did that thing. Because if you did that thing, then someone might want the next thing you do.



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

Fear of starvation is a tremendous motivational tool.

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

“We’re not curing cancer here.” This is supposed to be fun. There are unfun parts, and we get through those. But mostly we can screw up and screw around, and everything will be okay. Sometimes it’ll be glorious.

# Tom Jolly

“The games that have done the best for me are the ones that I’ve playtested over a hundred times.”

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

There are quite a few games that have quite a few different mechanics—all of which teach different lessons. Stone Age teaches the rudiments of worker placement well, while being accessible and easy to teach. Dominion provides lessons in deck building, while Acquire teaches about economic games. But there are literally dozens of specific game mechanics, and familiarity with a lot of them will help any game designer. Even a general understanding of trick-taking games, area-control games (like Risk) and Go, and Chess, is important.

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

My first game was rejected five times back in the 1980’s. It was called Wiz-War, and I guess you could call five rejections a failure. Each time I got it back from a company, I changed it for the better, and eventually brought it out myself in 1985. It did well after that (8 editions so far). The big lesson for me is to playtest the hell out of a game before you submit it to anyone, and make sure that your playtesters are really enjoying it. And pay attention to any criticism you might get. It will help in the long run.



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

If you don't look forward to playing it a second time yourself, then you better shelve it. It doesn't matter if it plays well mechanically if it isn't any fun, and I've had a lot of games like that. If playtesters want to play again immediately after the first try, that's a very good sign. I have literally dozens of shelved designs, and sometimes I'm able to mine the failed designs for good ideas. The games that have done the best for me are the ones that I've playtested over a hundred times (Wiz-War and Drakon, for example). If you really enjoy playtesting your own game over and over, it's probably a winner.

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

I would tell him what I think is wrong with the game and hopefully provide useful suggestions for improvement. A designer cannot be "married" to a design and has to be willing to make major changes to make it work.

## **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 try to discuss contract details, royalties, or money. Don't ask them to sign a Non-Disclosure Agreement, since that will indicate to them that they are dealing with a "difficult" person and likely kill your deal. You will probably be giving them a 5 minute pitch on how to play the game, so be prepared for that—don't dwell on the fiddly rules.

They might ask you what makes your game special, so be ready to tell them that. If they like the 5 minute pitch, on occasion, they will want to play it on the spot, at least to run through a couple of turns to see how the game flow goes. If they like what they see, they will want you to send them the prototype so they can playtest it at their leisure. This will usually take three months or longer. If you make it past that hurdle, then they will

probably offer you a contract.

A pretty prototype can't hurt. The visual aspect of a game increases the appeal, and a strong theme often helps.

If you ever get a chance to go to a "speed dating" event, where you have 5 to 10 minutes to pitch your game to a number of publishers, it's good practice. And you might land a contract.

“If you plan on being a part of the game industry, it’s important to know that you can learn more for the cost of a round of drinks than all the money you spent on college.”

—*Anthony Racano*

“Testing and iteration are far more important than planning and inspiration.”

—*Tony Miller*

## JR Honeycutt

“And of course, remember that you’re building a relationship with the people in front of you, and even if they don’t think your game is what they need right now, they can still walk away impressed with you.”

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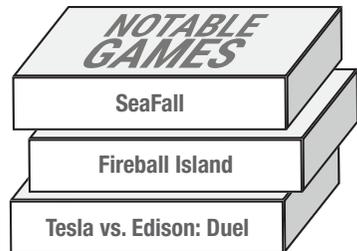
### **What is the game (or games) you’ve recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?**

I often recommend games during playtesting feedback as a way of helping a designer discover other games that do similar things to what they’re trying to do in their game. I end up testing a wide variety of prototypes through various events during the year, so the recommendations I make are pretty scattered as well.

That said, I think the most popular games often hold up as wonderful examples of good design. *Betrayal at House on the Hill* is fantastic at creating cinematic moments. *Settlers of Catan* creates a parallel between in-game and out-of-game behavior and language. *Codenames* provides opportunities for players to feel clever and to share that cleverness with others.

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

Tabletop Simulator costs \$20, and it’s a delightful tool. I can use



the same files I use for prototyping and put them onto a digital tabletop where I can test them with other people or by myself. I have a few games that simply couldn't have existed without the ability to playtest remotely. It's a wonderful tool, and I recommend it for every game designer.

I also bought a pad of architect's drafting paper (17" x 22") for \$10, and it's been incredibly helpful in making to-scale drawings of tiles, maps, and trays. I've used it for drawing 2D models of Fireball Island, in particular, and for working on infographics for some of the larger campaign games I've worked on recently.

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

If I'm not being paid to work on a game for a client or working with a co-designer, I tend to work on the things that I'm most excited about. Sometimes that means I shelve a design for a year and then suddenly come back to it, and sometimes it means I get most of the design done in a few days.

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

As with lots of other careers, this is a significant challenge. Sometimes the mood hits me and I'm at my desk for an entire day, typing frantically and trying to get ideas out as quickly as possible. Sometimes I'm at my desk playing video games for 8 hours because I can't focus.

I have a couple Pandora channels I listen to while I work. Motley Crue for when I need to get a lot of work done very quickly,

and Muddy Waters (he's a blues musician) for when I need to focus for a long stretch of time and ignore the rest of the world.

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

Don't fret! You're not alone and this happens to all of us on almost every game. Try to separate your feelings about yourself from your feelings about your game. If a game you thought was great failed spectacularly, take a few moments and answer some questions for yourself:

- What was most concerning about the playtest?
- What did you expect would resonate most with players, and did it?
- If not, what did resonate most with players?
- Was there anything that surprised you by being much better or much worse than you expected?

In general, don't expect to fix everything from one bad playtest. If it was much worse than you expected, get a different group and test the exact same version again. Take aggressive notes, but try to focus on just one or two things—preferably by removing something that players didn't like—and make them better. Then test again, and see if those changes affect the experience.

### **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?**

Try to listen more than you talk. Ask them questions about their line, their company, and what they're looking for. When they offer criticisms, accept them and take notes. Don't get defensive.

Make a sell sheet and have other designers (and preferably publishers) provide feedback on it.

When you pitch, convey information concisely and quickly. Elegance in communication is your design goal for a pitch. Publishers want to know different things about games than players do. What components are needed for the game? How could the game fit into their line? Does it resemble something they've already published, or is it something totally new for them?

There's no "right" answer; just do your homework ahead of time, know who you're pitching to and what their biggest recent successes and failures have been, and be ready for questions about how your game might fit in.

Have a specific goal for the pitch, and communicate it to the publisher. If it's to get them to consider publishing your game, say so clearly at the beginning of the pitch and again at the end. Listen to their response and criticisms. Most publishers have a lot of pitches at a given time and almost certainly won't take a game "on the spot."

And of course, remember that you're building a relationship with the people in front of you, and even if they don't think your game is what they need right now, they can still walk away impressed with you.

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

Make things as much as you possibly can. Playtest as often as you can. Ignore people who tell you that you "should" do something with your game. Listen to feedback during playtesting and from other designers, but make your choices on your own,

based on what you like.

Don't expect to be perfect. You're not, and you never will be. Try to do what feels right for you in the moment, and be open to new ideas.

Oh, and also, get used to the idea that your work is almost never going to be as good as you think it is. Playtests will almost always leave you frustrated and with something to fix. Your game will always have something you love that you have to remove. Get used to those things as early as possible.

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

A hard lesson for me to learn, especially because I work from home, was to allow myself time to not be working during working hours. Recently I had a particularly vexing playtest report for a legacy game I'm working on. My co-designer encouraged me to cut some pieces of the campaign that I was really attached to, and it took a little while for me to accept it.

I needed to revise the campaign and come back with new ideas, a new rules set, and some solutions to systemic issues, and I needed to do it quickly. I've been through this before, and thankfully I've received advice (sometimes begrudgingly) from some amazing designers about this exact thing.

It was tempting to dive in immediately and try to solve those problems, but instead I spent almost a full 24 hours playing PUBG (A survival/shooter video game) and watching Star Trek Voyager. I ate popcorn. I played with our new kitten. I played Onirim on my phone. I got into Facebook arguments with strangers.

In short, I did everything I normally do on a day off (whenever those happen), and I let myself be almost completely separated from that project and my designs in general. The next evening I pulled out a piece of paper and spent a couple hours revising the narrative and developing the game's core mechanisms.

That particular round of updates was well-received, and was certainly better than whatever I would have come up with the night before while I was stressed and frustrated.

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

“Good enough” isn't good enough. Take the time and effort to make your games better. I published quite a few games in the first year of my career, but the things that I've had the most positive responses to have been those projects that I took a long time working on.

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

“Treat people like they're the best versions of themselves, and they'll often be exactly that.”

This has been strained in our recent political environment—there are a lot of underlying systemic social issues that are being brought to center stage, and rightfully so—but I generally try to be kind and give the benefit of the doubt.

In my designs, I often think of the person who wants to have fun and treats gaming as a way to interact with their friends as a part of an overall experience that includes who they're with, where they're playing, what they're watching or listening to,

and how often they get to play in the first place. I like to assume they're invested in having a good time with good friends, and I want to make my games as accessible as possible so they can think about how much they love their time playing, as opposed to what the rules say about a certain situation.

“Designing for publication and designing to play with your friends are two completely different disciplines that require almost opposite mindsets. Start there, and your life/work choices will become abundantly clear.”

—*Eric Lang*

“Build your design process around play testing. Everything else is theorycraft.”

—*Eric Lang*

## Gordon Hamilton

“To stay fresh as a game designer you must always oxygenate your brain—probably from a discipline outside of the board game design world.”

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

Fledgling game designers should focus on redesigning cards for existing games rather than trying to design a new game from scratch. At age nine I did this with Cosmic Encounter. It is by far the most influential game in my life. Santorini's gods were a natural result of years of tinkering and designing aliens for Cosmic. Today I recommend the following games for budding game designers to sink their creative teeth into: 1) Star Realms. 2) 10 Minute Heist: The Wizard's Tower. 3) Dominion. 4) Santorini. 5) Neuroshima Hex!

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

I get inspired by math books. My most inspirational one of the last year is The Mathematical Coloring Book by Alexander Soifer. The core of the book follows the development of one of the most beautiful unsolved problems of mathematics:

the Chromatic Number of the Plane. To stay fresh as a game designer you must always oxygenate your brain—probably from a discipline outside of the board game design world.



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

Santorini was designed in 1985. A few failures might have toughened me up, but the lifetime of failures that Santorini bred is not wholly positive.

I do have a serious failure that woke me up though. I was in a car crash in 2010 that was totally my fault. Luckily nobody was hurt. After it I started counting my days. This was life #2. I gave up my job and put all my energy into putting ideas for mathematics education online. I had no idea how I was going to make money but knew that the quality of math puzzles that I could develop for the classroom would be world class. Without that car crash I don't know if I would have taken the plunge. In 2015 the American Institute of Mathematics started supporting MathPickle.com.

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

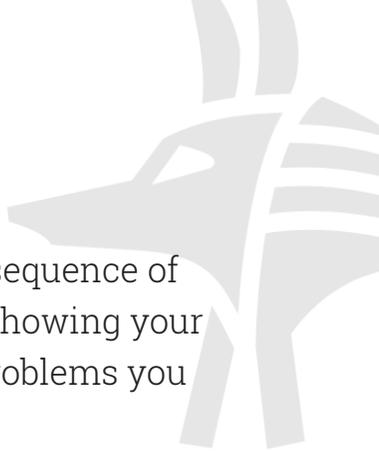
The most important thing is that ideas are #1. It doesn't matter where you are or what you're doing; if you have an idea write it down. I'm best in the shower in the morning and when falling asleep. I take 10-minute catnaps once a day as well.

**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?**

Show me first. Expect harsh criticism. It is not personal.

# Jacques Bariot

“I think that game designing is a sequence of failures that you must mend after showing your ideas to playtesters who dig out problems you hadn’t thought about.”



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

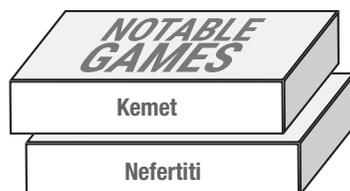
I would recommend The Settler of Catan for it’s simplicity in mechanisms but it’s difficulty to master. I had the luck to participate in an Essen world championship where I saw great players (I’m not) tame the dice chance which changed my vision of this game.

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

Maybe my friend Antoine Bauza’s masterpiece, 7 wonders.

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

I think that game designing is a sequence of failures that you must mend after showing your ideas to playtesters who dig out problems you hadn’t thought about.



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

When I don’t enjoy testing it anymore.

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

No ritual. I never know when inspiration will come (but often it's when I relax in a bath).

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

First, be sure of the skills of your playtesters (a very difficult task). I am lucky to be surrounded by very clever playtesters, so that I know that their commentaries are fair and justified.

Then, try to take a step back to see what are the sources of the dysfunctions.

And, in the end, keep in mind that game designing is a long-term job. Patience is an essential quality.

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

Don't be too serious, and be attentive to the people that surround you.

# Reiner Stockhausen

“The bitter truth is that you need some thousands of hours to get expertise or virtuosity in a specific field. The good news is that everybody can reach expertise with a lot of effort.”

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

Be alone, be quiet, take time, don't meet people, don't go to parties, and don't watch TV.

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

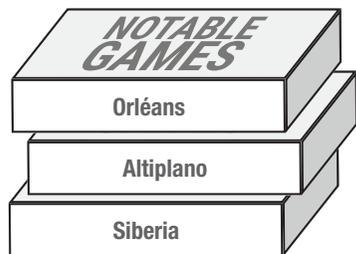
I would not give any advice as discouraging sessions are normal. If someone is looking for a less frustrating job, he or she will surely find one. If someone decides to be a game designer, he or she has to accept it.

## **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?**

Focus on the important things: What is original; what is inventive? Don't trail away in too many details.

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

The bitter truth is that you need some thousands of hours to get expertise or virtuosity in a specific field. The good news is that everybody can reach expertise with a lot of effort.



“Playtest with as many different groups of people as you can – from diverse backgrounds – and really carefully observe and listen to them to evaluate your game as you iterate.”

— *Matt Leacock*

“Playtesters enjoying the game doesn’t imply there is nothing to change, and vice versa.”

— *John Brieger*

# Ben Rosset

“Look at all feedback as a gift.”



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

GameTek, the book, by Geoff Engelstein.

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

As soon as you aren't having fun working on it anymore and/or aren't motivated to keep improving it, it's time to put it aside for a little while

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

Look at all feedback as a gift. Even if that feedback is telling you that the design needs a lot of work. Then engage the playtesters - ask them for ideas on how to make it better.

## **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?**

1. Make sure the rulebook has been blind tested and updated at least twice before the meeting.
2. Practice your explanation ahead of time so you can explain the rules as efficiently as possible.
3. Play the game at the player count that puts the game in the best light.
4. Have an extra copy of the prototype to give them if they request it.



5. Have extra sell sheets to give them if they request it.
6. If they aren't interested, ask them what would need to change to make them more interested.
7. Don't take it personally if they don't want to publish it!

# Leo Colovini

“Don’t worry. Sometimes a bad experience could come from just a little rule that must be balanced.”

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

It happens a lot that a game is refused by the publishers, but then you use the single mechanisms of that game in new games, and maybe you publish 2 or 3 games from only one.

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

When I don’t feel the hunger to play.

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

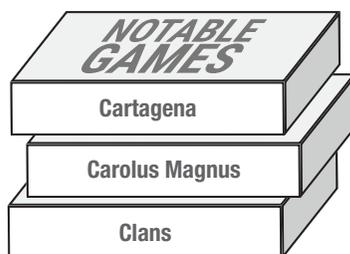
No, it happens everywhere, in any moment.

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

Don’t worry. Sometimes a bad experience could come from just a little rule that must be balanced.

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

Consider game design like an art, not like an alchemist’s experiment.



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

I simply work on something else. I reorder the files, the desk, the computer, etc.

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

I don't like to work hard. Life must be a pleasure, and for this reason I'll never create a game with too many rules!

## Morten Monrad Pedersen

“You might have the most brilliant ideas in the world, but if you stop once the creative rush is over you’ll never make an actual game.”

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

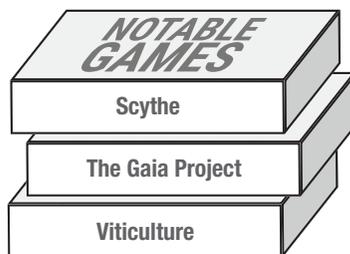
That would be a knife for cutting out cards and foam-board tiles. A strong runner-up is a batch of sleeves with different-colored opaque backs.

Being able to crank out prototypes fast is a huge help, since I make a lot of them and it’s mind-numbingly boring.

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

Before I got into board game design, I wrote a non-fiction book on an unrelated topic. I worked on that book for 10 years before trying to get it published. Let’s just say that it’s hard to get the attention of publishers when you have a niche book, and no one knows who you are. After I finally got it published, I started building a platform for myself in order to get people to notice that it exists.

When getting into board game design, I had learned the hard way that this was the wrong way of doing it, and so I first built a platform via a blog, community presence, and helping a publisher. The result is that instead of futilely banging on publisher doors, I now have publishers reaching out to me wanting to hire me to work on their projects.



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

I know that it's time to shelve a project when I have another project with a looming deadline.

On a more serious note, it depends on the project. If it's a contracted project with a deadline and I'm stuck, I don't shelve it but instead get input from my team (I rarely work alone).

If it's a side-project I shelve it if I've been stuck for some days and often return to it later. This can be a week later or months later depending on when I have the time. When I return I have a fresh pair of eyes, so to speak, but if I'm still stuck, I shelve it again and occasionally revisit it briefly in my head to see if I can now fix the issue that has me stuck.

I also do very short projects, which I start with the intention of shelving or discarding after at most a couple of days. These are projects I do to learn and keep my design skills keen, which can be necessary, since the vast majority of game design is actually not game design. Instead it's running external playtests, writing rule-books, answering questions, etc.

There are of course projects that simply don't work out. I've had one project that I worked on for a long time and it had been in a state of "almost there" for more than two years. I kept banging my head against variations of the same problems and at the end I was at a point where I had simply run out of ideas for fixing the issues—everything I could come up with was something that had already been found not to work. At that point, I concluded that I had to toss out the majority of the work with no good idea of how to remake it.

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

I don't think I've been out of the design mindset for 2-3 years. Design ideas tend to just pop into my head no matter what I'm doing

at the time. When I need to work on game design and ideas don't pop up by themselves, it's usually enough for me to start thinking about a specific mechanic or design problem, and my thoughts start racing.

Of course, I can get stuck on a problem that I can't overcome and thus get out of the zone. In such situations, I work on another unrelated project that I'm excited about. That will get my creative juices flowing which helps me when I return to the problem that had me stuck.

This unrelated project doesn't need to be something I'm working on with the intent to finish. It can be something I cook up at the time. E.g. make a game with nothing but meeples, a mashup of two mechanics, a game about my wife's hobby, or that idea that has bounced around at the back of my mind for the past year. It doesn't matter which and I know that I don't intend to finish it, but it puts me in the zone and I learn a lot about game design in the process.

Of course, like everyone else, I can procrastinate, but that's not because I'm not in the design mindset. My two main ways of reducing procrastination are getting enough sleep (which I suck at) and going to a local café or a park to work. Getting away from my everyday surroundings wakes up my brain. Getting out of the rut can also be as simple as sitting at another place in the house than I normally do when working.

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

The most important behavior for improving my game design skills has been to explain my design philosophy repeatedly. I do this on my blog, in discussions with my team, when being interviewed, and when asked questions on Board Game Geek and via email.

In general, if you want to learn a topic, you should teach it. Having to explain your thoughts on game design forces you to go from having a fuzzy notion about them to having a clear and operable

definition. And when articulating your thoughts you'll notice ways to improve your mechanics and how you use them.

Every time I explain my design approach for making solo modes it has become a bit clearer to me, and it becomes a bit easier for me to use it in my work so that I can now make better solo modes in less time than previously. It enables me to explain my approach to my team so that we can push our projects in the same direction instead of in opposite directions.

When building a house, you don't have a fuzzy notion of a hard object, which you bang on elongated hard objects to push the latter through long and softer but still hard objects, so that you can place a set of flat hard objects on top of them to keep out droplets of water and gas-phase molecules that are moving slower than the molecules contained within the structure you're building.

Instead you have a clear and operable definition of using a screwdriver to put screws through beams of wood to form a supporting structure for roof tiles.

It should be clear which of the two is the most useful.

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

Ask yourself what your goal is. Do you want to do this as a fun hobby or do you want to get published? Both are fine, and I'd even argue that the first one is the one that leads to the most fulfilling life.

When answering the question, keep in mind that as with most other endeavors, perseverance trumps talent any day of the week. You might have the most brilliant ideas in the world, but if you stop once the creative rush is over you'll never make an actual game. For most people, the really fun part of game design is the initial phase where anything goes and you feel the high of the creative flow. Once that's over, though, the actual work starts and that makes up 99% of the game design process.

It's that 99% that stops 99.9% of all games from getting done. Most people lose interest once the fun stops and the repetitive work starts. There's nothing wrong with that, since focusing on what's fun is a good idea, but if you want to get published you need to also put in that 99%. So, ask yourself: Can you do this when there's no employer snapping the whip, no contract signed for publication, and playtesters say that your design doesn't work?

Second, get a prototype to the table as soon as you can. Make that prototype as simple as possible. If you spend too much time on it, you will get emotionally invested in it and thus will be unwilling to change the game.

Play the initial prototypes by yourself pretending to be multiple players, and once you think it's good enough, start playing the game with your friends, and later on give it to people you do not know.

As that process goes on, you need to improve your prototypes. In external playtesting, it still doesn't need fancy art, but the user interface (e.g. icons that clearly convey what they mean) needs to be good (otherwise you're not testing your game, you're testing your game as seen through a dense fog so to speak.)

The advice you should ignore is the advice coming from your own inner voice that tells you that your initial design is brilliant, because it isn't. No one makes a brilliant game the first time. By extension you should expect that the first iterations of each of your games suck. It's that way for everybody, but as you gain experience, your success rate goes up.

“Record extra gamestate data at the end of tied games, so later, you can see how different tiebreakers would work.”

— *John Brieger*

“Keep grinding, the only way out is through.”

— *JR Honeycutt*

## Steven Aramini

“If you have other game designers in your community, I would really encourage you to try to organize or become part of a playtest group. It will absolutely improve your designing.”

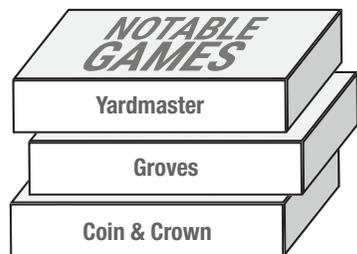
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### **What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?**

Keep your chin up, but learn from the experience. Separate raw negativity from true constructive criticism. If someone is just being negative without giving you reasons or helpful feedback, then it's not worth fretting over, and you probably shouldn't ask them to test with you again. But if there are genuine flaws or concerns with your game that have been identified, you've got to acknowledge those and try to address them. Ultimately you are testing to work out kinks, so any issue that arises is actually a good thing. It means you can fix it to make the next iteration of your game better.

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

I have been fortunate enough to find a playtest group locally that has become a regular part of my life. We meet weekly to test each other's stuff, and it has been invaluable to my game design process. One of the most challenging aspects of game design (especially if you're a new designer) is finding other players to test your games. I get it. I mean, who wants to go to game night and play a half-broken game scrawled on white cards with generic bits?



A playtest group is different. They understand that your game isn't finished and doesn't look pretty. They know you're there with a purpose—to try to get feedback and improve your game. Along the way, hopefully everyone will have fun! If you have other game designers in your community, I would really encourage you to try to organize or become part of a playtest group. It will absolutely improve your designing.

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

Play as many games as you can to appreciate the breadth of mechanics, the creativity, and the interesting themes that are out there. After playing games that you like, try to identify what parts you enjoyed from the experience, and begin to ask why you enjoyed them. Hopefully this will lead to ideas that you can inject into your own game designs. Also, seek out ways to get more involved in the gaming community, whether it's entering a game contest, joining a Meetup group, attending a game convention, or being active on Twitter, Facebook, BoardGameGeek.com, Board Game Designers Forum, The Game Crafter community, or whatever site or social platform grabs you. Eventually this involvement will lead to opportunities.

As for advice to ignore, I'd say avoid individuals who are negative or discouraging. Gravitate toward the positive.

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

I switch gears a lot. At any given time, I have several game designs that I'm working on in several stages of development. I do this to avoid getting overwhelmed or burned out on a particular project. If I worked on a single project continuously without any mental or creative break from it, I would probably come to hate that project. Or worse, I would grow so close to it that I became blind to its flaws.

Taking a break can sometimes be the best thing for a project. When I return to it after a break, I'll likely see it in a new light and probably be able to improve it. If I'm still struggling or losing focus, I look to my friends for support, and they often have advice or ideas that can help me break through a mental barrier or just give me the encouragement I was looking for to charge ahead once more. At the end of the day, I always try to remember that the whole reason I am designing games is because it's a creative outlet. If it stops being fun and starts feeling like work, that's when I know I need to switch to something fresh.

“When making a game, you don’t have to innovate if you’re improving on what’s out there. Also, as long as the game experience is new and novel, the mechanisms themselves don’t have to be.”

—*Seth Jaffee*

“It’s not a game until it’s on the table. Get it on the table. Then you’re a game designer. Congrats!”

—*JR Honeycutt*

## Randy Hoyt

“When you first start, you’ll discover so much about the process and yourself as a designer, and that discovery time will be so much richer if you are working on multiple games.”

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### **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 a pitch goes well, it will feel more like a conversation than a presentation. Start with a high-level overview of the game like you would give to someone who is considering buying the game. Tell them details like the player count and playtime, the objective of the game, who the players are and the kinds of decisions they’ll be making, and what makes it special. Then be prepared for the conversation to unfold differently based on the publisher’s interest level and process.

Have an information sheet or sell sheet that will give them a good overview of the size and the scope of the product. (If the publisher is an internal processor like I am, it will also give them something to focus their attention on while they are thinking about the pitch.)

Have a full copy of the game with you; they may want to learn the game and play it right then. They may want to schedule time to play it with you later if you are at a convention, or they may want to take a copy home to play.

Don’t be defensive or argumentative. Not only will the publisher be considering if they want to publish your GAME; they’ll also be considering if it will make sense to



work with YOU. And you should be considering whether or not you can work with them. Make sure that even if this particular game isn't a good fit for the publisher that they'd be happy to look at another game from you.

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



I'd encourage you to start designing multiple games—preferably with vastly different mechanisms, complexity, and themes. Get a handful of rough but playable prototypes together quickly. When you first start, you'll discover so much about

the process and yourself as a designer, and that discovery time will be so much richer if you are working on multiple games.

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

Playtesting a game is a lot about watching people play it. You can, of course, ask for feedback, and playtesters will usually give it. But I get my best feedback just by watching people. Is the game producing the feelings and the experience in the players you intend? Is it merely working or is it truly singing?

If you have never watched people play games before, it may be hard to make sense of what you observe. As a designer, you should spend time watching people play games you haven't designed. You can do it without being creepy. Sit out for one game at a game night, saying you need a breather. Ask at a convention to watch people play a game under the guise of learning how to play it. Volunteer to demo a game at a store or at a publisher's booth at a convention. Watching people play games will help you better understand what's happening when you watch people play your game.

## Jonathan W. Gilmour

“It’s ok to make games that suck. You have to do that to get better and make games that don’t suck. Failure is painful, but you can’t make art without pain.”

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

Cosmic Encounter and Hanabi. I think both are very important games. Cosmic Encounter because you need to learn that sometimes perfect balance does not make a game fun. Hanabi because it’s an example of how a very small change can make a game completely different and better.

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

A set of “The Deck of Lenses” which I carry with me to playtesting all the time. They are an incredible tool to help people who are not used to playtesting games find a voice.

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

I subscribe to the “fail faster” design philosophy, so I am constantly failing into success. I’ve really only ever had one design that just mostly worked from the start. Every other design has started with failure after failure.

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



When I feel like it's just not making any progress between drafts. If I am not making changes that make the game better, it's probably best to let it rest on a shelf for a while and come back to it.

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

Not really. I co-design a lot, so I try to adapt to the people I am working with. Usually, if we are in the “sit down and create the content” phase, it's music and focus. If it's scribble on paper and try things out, then it's usually silence so we can focus and discuss without distraction.

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

It happens to all of us, and we need those bad sessions to find out how to fix our games.

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

Watching this video actually changed my professional life: <https://youtu.be/1lTcgSzfoAQ>

I have now learned to force myself to be a professional and dedicate time to sit and pound out ideas even when it feels like the well is dry.

**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?**

Try to focus on what makes your game shine and stand out from the rest. Don't worry about the graphic design or art; worry about the game play.

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

Do it because you enjoy it and because you are passionate about

it. Because regardless of how smart and driven you are, the chances of you becoming a full time game designer are incredibly small. It takes tons of work and a lot of luck, and the field is incredibly crowded.

If you're serious about it, ignore that advice.

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

I've found that the answer to that is sadly that you have to force yourself through it. You can't wait for inspiration to come to you. Just make things, even if they aren't good. If you are completely stuck, try a different project, but actively make something.

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

Your first few games are going to suck. They will be bad, and you'll probably either chase them for a very, very long time and never get them to be as good as what is in your head, or you'll give up on them. Both of those are ok. It's ok to make games that suck. You have to do that to get better and make games that don't suck. Failure is painful, but you can't make art without pain.

**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 the most important things to me is making sure that people are included and feel welcome. I make sure that this continues in my games with good representation and diverse characters.

“You cannot start a play-testing session without knowing what you are testing. You must know exactly what you are checking that day. What question you are looking to answer.”

— *Ignacy Trzewiczek*

“Don’t dismiss feedback because it’s a tester’s first game. Most customers won’t play again after a single bad play.”

— *John Brieger*

# Seth Jaffee

“Sometimes it’s good to take a step back from a problem you’re running into and ask yourself not how to fix it, but what’s causing the problem in the first place.”

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

It’s always best to recognize failure, and use it as a guide for what not to do next time. I don’t know if I have a favorite failure, but right now I’m going through my first game release (Terra Prime) and addressing any mistakes or “failures” in it for a new edition that will come out soon!

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

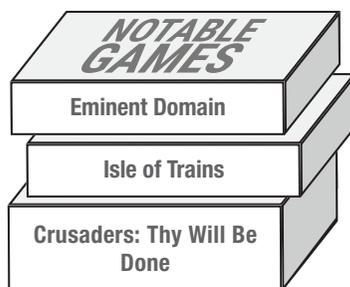
I do this when I feel like I’m not making progress on the design, but I don’t feel like it’s done yet.

Unfortunately, I also do this sometimes, not because I want to set aside that game, but because another project takes priority.

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

Sometimes I’ll pull up my design blog or notebook and read old posts/notes about games. That usually gets me in the mood to work on design pretty quickly.

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



It's always tough when your test session doesn't go the way you thought it would or the way you'd like it to. For the most part though, it's actually a good thing. It demonstrates what needs fixing in the game. So rather than get down about it, a discouraging session could be the impetus for some much-needed changes to the design.

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

Taking good notes has always been key to making progress on a game. Keeping rules and prototypes up to date helps as well, since you never know when a project will get shelved or back-burnered, and when it does, you never know how long it'll be before you get back to it. I recently revived a couple of game designs that I hadn't played in multiple years!

Creating a Google document to track playtest sessions has been a big help to me when trying to keep track of what games I've got in development and which ones I'm currently concentrating on.

### **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?**

1. Remember that a pitch isn't a rules teach. Don't get caught up in the details. Give an overview first.
2. Some publishers may disagree, but for me, it's OK to compare your game to existing games. It helps communicate what you're trying to do more efficiently. But make sure you point out how your game is different than the existing game you're using for comparison, and why your game would be played instead of the existing one.
3. Be sure you know the hook of your game, and emphasize that right away.
4. You better have done your homework before setting up the pitch, and make sure the publisher is likely to be interested in your pitch in the first place!

5. And it should go without saying, but if you're pitching a game to a publisher, it should be a complete, finished game—one you would be happy to see on store shelves as-is (gameplay wise, not art wise). But then don't be upset if the publisher wants to make development changes to suit their line or audience.

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

First and foremost, get something to the table. You can go on and on in your notebook, but you won't make any real progress until you actually play the game.

Second, don't put the cart before the horse. You're designing a game, so do that. Don't worry about production or Kickstarter or expansions. Just design a game first. Get it to the table as quickly as you can, and then start iterating to make progress toward a finished game.

Third, don't worry if your game idea has been done before or if the market is already saturated with your theme. Don't let that stop you from creating your first game. Remember that you're new, and your first game is not likely to be terribly good to begin with. You don't need artificial excuses to give up!

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

I think it's good to have more than one game going at a time, in different stages of development. That way, when feeling overwhelmed or unfocused on one project, you can turn to another.

Sometimes it's good to take a step back from a problem you're running into and ask yourself not how to fix it, but what's causing the problem in the first place.

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

I could have used someone telling me how to organize groups of playtesters and how to keep good records of playtests. That's something I still struggle with.

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

I like to have reasons for everything. I don't like to make a decision without having a good answer to the question "why?"

This helps in game design because you want all of your design choices to carry their weight, and if you make a choice without understanding the reason, then it's likely you'll end up with bloated mechanics and unnecessary rules in your game.

# Cédrick Chaboussit

“The ‘bad’ playtesting sessions are the best ones as you usually learn many things to improve your game!”

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

*The Kobold Guide to Board Game Design*, a very interesting book full of little hints from experienced designers.

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

My mind is more or less always working unconsciously, but I manage to push the ideas away when it’s not the right moment (while developing other games, working, etc.). Spare time (especially holidays) is usually the right time to allow these ideas to come out and check if they are of any interest.

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

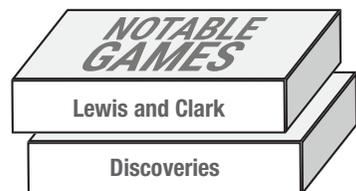
The “bad” playtesting sessions are the best ones as you usually learn many things to improve your game!

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

Keep it simple!

## **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?**

Even if it’s a bit late: Did you get enough information about the



publisher prior to the meeting? Is the prototype you are about to show suitable for them?

**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 think about designing games as a job (considering what "sells" or "doesn't sell"). Do it for your own pleasure, so you will design the games you love, with emotion and less pressure. And maybe one day you will share it with many and be successful!

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

Spend some time doing something other than designing to get some fresh air. It can be game related, though, like building a prototype, tidying up a prototype, having a good time at a convention with friends, or playing games.

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

The publishing process is usually very, very long !

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

I tend to be undecided, and I must shake myself to make important choices in my personal life. So I probably want to share this with the players of my games. To choose is to forsake would be this philosophy.

# Gil Hova

“If I’m not sure where to go, I ask myself how I want the players to feel, what I want them to do, and what sort of experience they should have.”

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

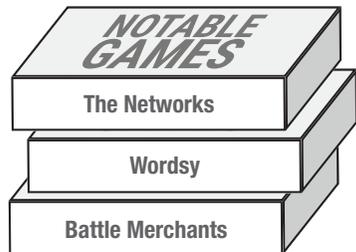
I always cringe a bit when a designer says something like, “I had a bad playtest” after getting harsh feedback. I can understand the sentiment; it was unpleasant seeing your darling torn to shreds.

But if that designer takes heed of that feedback, figures out the root cause of what’s going on, and iterates those rough spots out of the game, then that “bad” playtest is actually a positive; it was a catalyst that made the game better in the long run.

Meanwhile, I’ve also been in so-called “good” playtests where the playtesters cheerlead a game that clearly needs work. That makes the designer feel good and also points them right into a brick wall when they pitch the game, or worse, try to make it themselves. I’ve also been in playtests where a tester ruined a game by cheating, overly AP-ing their turns, or giving gibberish feedback, or testing a deeply cerebral game in an unpleasant, noisy environment. Those are all truly bad playtests in that they don’t move a game forward.

So my feedback to that designer would be: yes, harsh test, but very necessary. It’s a good opportunity to thicken one’s skin and learn that criticism of one’s game is not criticism of oneself.

Because here’s an inevitable truth:



once you get past that “bad” playtest, you’ll have to deal with publisher rejection, production delays, negative reviews, disappointed players, clearance sales, and daily notifications of your game appearing on auction and trade lists. And that’s all regardless of whether your game is successful or not!

So if you have a hard time letting go of a “bad” playtest, this is a good time to ask: are you in the right place right now?

**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?**

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Be able to pitch your game quickly. Like, can you summarize the experience in 1-2 sentences? And I’m not talking about “this is a worker-placement deck-building game.” That gives us a lot less of an idea of how the game plays than you’d think!

Instead, give us the hook. I don’t tell people The Networks is a card drafting game for 1-5 players. I tell them that they’re TV executives with a little bit of cash and three terrible shows, and they’re trying to get the most viewers over 5 seasons. That gives them an immediate sense of who they are in the game and what they want.

The purpose of this hook isn’t to explain the game. It’s to whet the appetite and garner interest. Once you have someone’s interest, you can move on to your 2-minute pitch. This is a quick overview of the game mechanically, what a player typically does on their turn, and how it pushes them forward in the game. It isn’t a comprehensive rules explanation, but it should give a good idea of how the game works.

Finally, if the publisher wants to play, don’t be afraid to stack the deck. If there’s a card that needs a bunch of explanation or reveals

an edge case in the first round of the game, bury it. Make the explanation as smooth as possible. Don't bother clarifying edge cases until they come up later in the game. Keep the teach as quick and smooth as you can, so they can play as quickly as possible.

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

My personal game design motto is “incentivize interesting behavior.” That’s my job as a game designer: creative incentivization. If I’m not sure where to go, I ask myself how I want the players to feel, what I want them to do, and what sort of experience they should have.

I’ve seen designers shrug and say, “I’m okay having people play my games however they want.” While it’s inevitable to lose control over a work once it’s released, I believe strongly that it’s the designer’s responsibility to incentivize players towards the desired experience.

For example: let’s say you have a negotiation game. Are you happy with players skipping negotiation and playing in their own worlds? Probably not! You want players to wheel and deal. So make it clear through your incentives: if you negotiate in this game, you will do much better than if you don’t.

So if I’m lost in a design, I take a step back and look at the experience. Perhaps the game needs to change to fit the experience; perhaps the experience needs to change to fit the game. But it all comes down to how I’m incentivizing the players.

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

I made a whole video about this! Here it is. <https://youtu.be/e9bT77zzr-4>

“Ninety percent of the time, my advice on particular game design and development issues boils down to this: Do the work. Avoid shortcuts.”

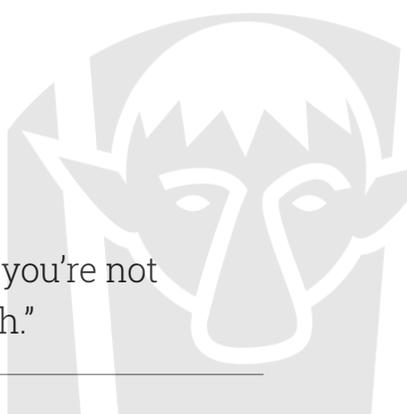
—*Eric Lang*

“Just because it works doesn’t mean it’s good enough to be published. If it’s not great, it’s not ready.”

—*Daniel Newman*

# Alf Seegert

“If you’re not failing regularly, you’re not experimenting enough.”

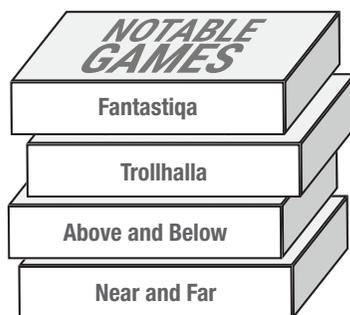


## What is the game (or games) you’ve recommended most to fledgling game designers, and why?

A point of comparison with video games might be useful. When I teach video games in the classroom, I go back to basics to help students get clear on the simplest mechanics involved and the dynamics produced through player interaction. Before the class dives into more recent titles we spend a fair bit of time analyzing classic works from the 70s and 80s like the text adventure Colossal Cave Adventure, the first action-adventure game Atari Adventure, and the seminal arcade games Space Invaders, Pac-Man, and Donkey Kong. We then see how basic mechanics can interface with narrative and with fully realized game worlds through titles like Out of This World (a.k.a. Another World in Europe) and Ico. We then look at much more recent video games that likewise do a lot with a little – they use what Team Ico’s Fumito Ueda calls “design by subtraction” by stripping away needless mechanics and interfaces: Loneliness, Thomas Was Alone, Shelter, Superbrothers: Sword & Sworcery EP, Journey, West of Loathing, and Gorogoa. I’d even put Dark Souls in this category.

Likewise, for board games I urge designers to play the cleanest games possible to help them cultivate strong habits in streamlining their designs. Here’s my short list of instructive games for new designers:

- The Amazing Labyrinth (simple enough for children, engaging



enough for adults, enchanting theme)

- Ticket to Ride (accessible to anyone, simple draft and set-collection mechanism, nail-bitey press-your-luck style competition for route placement)
- Carcassonne (beauty, serendipity, and the satisfaction of seeing a world come alive tile-by-tile, especially in the wild world of Carcassonne: Hunters and Gatherers)
- The Settlers of Catan (probability, surprise, player trade-interaction, the niftiness of a modular game board and randomized setup)
- Lost Cities and Battle Line (clever re-appropriations of rummy and poker-style games with appealing themes and strong 2-player dynamics)
- Akrotiri (a satisfying sense of exploration and the feel of a big multiplayer game in a small box)
- 7 Wonders: Duel (engine building made simple, multiple paths to victory, clever spatial uses of cards)
- Omen: A Reign of War (the intensity of Magic: The Gathering distilled into only a few dozen cards, with astonishingly beautiful presentation to boot)
- Concordia (dry but crystalline; a joy to play, teach, and study; it's been aptly described as "the Platonic form of Eurogame")

The term "elegance" is often used to describe such games as I mention, but I prefer the word "simplicity," by which I mean having the most complex and interesting interactions and outcomes which result from the simplest rules.

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

For years I've been laminating my prototype cards with a Xyron cold laminator. It looks great, but it's expensive, time consuming, and makes revision a pain. My friend Jacob Cassens pointed out

how much easier life might be if I simply printed on cardstock and sleeved the cards, and marked them up with revisions as we test. It works brilliantly!

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

My first published game (with Z-Man in 2009) was Bridge Troll. It has all the charm of a coyote with a crack-toothed smile, in no small part due to Ryan Laukat’s whimsical use of artwork. In the game you play rival trolls who have to eat or extort the travelers who want to cross your bridges – and drive away dangerous billy goats! The theme is wonderful, but its gameplay is messy and fiddly. But it got me in the door with publishers!

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

Coffee. Walking. Hiking. Sensing instead of just thinking.

Take notes immediately when a new idea hits you. Be open to ideas arising from anywhere – not from just other games! Let birds and landscapes and books and works of art and fairy tales and inquisitive peeing dogs guide you to strange and unexpected places.

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

1) I find it instructive and therapeutic to look up my favorite games on BGG and read as many negative reviews for them as I can find. You’ll find a surprising amount of hate for beautifully designed games! Maybe your own game is experiencing something similar?

2) It’s important to avoid player biases tilted in your favor by sharing your game with the sort of players who (in Phil Kilmcrease’s immortal words) “would tell you your baby is ugly.”

But that’s not enough. Also ask yourself: “Did the players at the table have good chemistry?” Much of a successful game

experience isn't just the game itself but the quality of player relationships. The zeal for objectivity in playtesting sometimes results in cold encounters with games and players who are cold with each other. Find testers who are truly invested in who they are playing with – and who enjoy messing with one another!

The first rule of good criticism is never to evaluate something that belongs to a genre you don't like. Make sure that players of your game enjoy games in its genre. Pay no attention to dismissals by players who don't enjoy games of the same genre.

3) Failure is a good teacher. It's entirely possible that the game, as-is, isn't worth pursuing. Test some more, revise, and perhaps completely abandon. If you're not failing regularly, you're not experimenting enough.

**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?**

Keep it short.

Ask only yes/no questions.

Share how your game has already been vetted (game designer groups, competition placement, etc.)

Make your prototype both functional and beautiful. If players don't find themselves drawn aesthetically to the game world, they will be left cold. Put another way, your task is to create the means for both mechanical immersion (via a compelling rule-set) and environmental immersion (via entrancing artwork and theme). Find artwork online as a placeholder if you need to. Indicate in your pitch that you are using this art for demonstration purposes only, and that you do not own the rights to it.

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

If not for love, then what? If you're doing this for money or similar motivations, you'll find better luck elsewhere.

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

Rarely do mechanical issues in games get fixed by simply adding new mechanics. Instead develop the theme and see how it might inform new and exciting mechanisms.

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

A clash between mechanics and theme (so-called “ludonarrative dissonance”) might be aesthetically repulsive, but players often don't mind one bit. Consider Ticket to Ride. If you read its overview, the story makes no sense whatsoever in connection with the game's mechanics – and none of that has kept it from selling millions of copies.

However, the reverse effect might be true. I created a Hippodice contest finalist called TEMBO which was about elephants carrying fruit around Africa. Playtesters complained that it felt plodding or laborious. I later rethemed it with Viking trolls ransacking islands for loot – Trollhalla! Playtesters praised how fast-paced and exciting it was. The thing is, the mechanics were identical with TEMBO's – only the theme had changed. A theme can do a lot to create expectations among players and affect dynamics in unexpected ways. That's one reason that I see theme and mechanics as part-and-parcel of one another rather than as distinct entities.

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

Hunter S. Thompson was right when he urged people to have a WAY of life instead of just GOALS in life.

If you design with a GOAL in mind – a goal of achieving popular success, for example – then you will easily be held hostage to the latest fashion, and your designs might suffer for it by pandering to the moment.

But if you design with a WAY in mind – a way that might be predicated on artistic expression or on simply making games that you yourself enjoy playing – then your designs will more than likely offer something unexpected and stand the test of time.

## Kane Klenko

“Be yourself. Publishers are looking for the next great game, but they’re also looking for designers that they want to work with.”

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

I get excited by new ideas a lot. As in daily. I have notebooks and scraps of paper with sketches and ideas and a Word doc of more recent unused ideas that is over 100 pages long. I obviously don't have time to work on all of those ideas, so I simply write them down and then think about them throughout that day. If I'm still thinking about them the next day, and the next, and I can't stop thinking about them, then those are the ideas that I pursue.

Once I start actually working on an idea, I'll try to put together a very rough prototype quickly. Just enough to test the basic idea of the game. My wife is my best playtester, so it's easy to get something to the table quickly if I need to.

After that first test, I'll either stay excited about it and keep moving forward until it's finished, or I'll lose some interest and put it aside. Sometimes I'll still be excited about the basic idea of the game, but things just didn't quite work how I wanted them to. In those cases I'll put it aside but try to leave it somewhere in view (to my wife's dismay) as a reminder to keep thinking about it.

Just seeing that idea sitting there will eventually spark the ideas that were missing and can allow me to move forward and finish the game.



It all comes down to what is inspiring and exciting to me in the moment. If a new idea comes along that I'm more excited about, then I'll put others aside. Basically all new ideas get put aside unless they consume my thoughts and I can't put it aside until I'm able to play that completed game.

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

I think about game design all the time. A lot of times it's actively thinking about how to fix problems in current projects or how to streamline things I'm working on, but in general my mind is sub-consciously always thinking about what would make a good game. New ideas can come from anywhere. Conversations, TV shows, movies, books, passing something on the street, etc. Even if I'm not actively thinking about game design, inspiration from the smallest things could strike at any time.

Once I have an idea and I'm actually working on a game, then I find it pretty easy to stay in the “zone.” My brain won't let me stop until I can finish a game, so I'm constantly thinking about it.

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

The goal is to make the best game that you can possibly make. Sometimes you'll have playtests where everything is clicking and new ideas are flowing, and sometimes you'll have playtests where nobody seems to be enjoying the game and you can't figure out what the problems are.

Both of these things will help you in reaching your goal if you use that information to keep moving forward. It's usually after these playtests where problems arise that push me to work harder and put more focus on that particular design. I'll spend every available moment thinking about different ways to approach the problem and playing through the game in my head. Of course, there are times when I just need to put aside a design for a while if I'm stuck,

but those difficult playtests usually push me to focus even more until I come up with a solution.

**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?**

You don't have to be a smooth salesperson. Be yourself. Publishers are looking for the next great game, but they're also looking for designers that they want to work with. Also, be sure that you know how to teach your game. Knowing how to play it and knowing how to teach it well are two different things.

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

No matter what you design, there will be people who don't like your game. Make the game you want to make. If you design something you're excited about, the work will be more rewarding. At the same time, you need to think about your target market. If the goal is to sell your games, you need to know who you're designing for and what they want in a game. While those two things may be at odds occasionally, I try to keep both of them in mind with every design decision I make. This helps in playtests too, since you will always find people who don't like things in your games. While they may have valid criticisms that can help you, knowing how that fits into the game you're actually trying to make is most important.

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

I try to prioritize when things get overwhelming. I usually have several projects going at a time, and they're all in different spots as far as development goes. It's easy to just move towards the things that are most exciting at the time, and sometimes that's helpful because I mostly work off of what's inspiring at the moment, but sometimes it's best if I step back and figure out what really should be done first, and what can wait.

Since I don't design full time I try to think about what times I will have to spend on games, and which games need work that will fit into that time slot. Some games need an afternoon of back-to-back playtesting, so I don't need to worry about that right now, for example, since I don't have that time available. This other game needs cards mapped out in a spreadsheet, so maybe I can do that on my lunch break. Breaking things up like this helps me stay focused and not get overwhelmed.

## Ted Alspach

“Schedule playtesting sessions ahead of time. This provides an intermediate deadline to get a project to the next level sooner than if it were to happen organically.”

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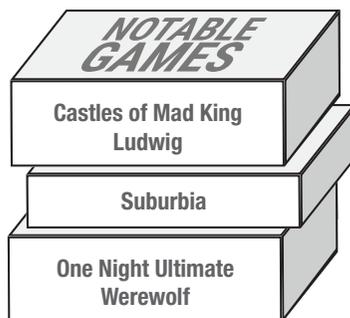
### **How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a “favorite failure” of yours?**

Any time a game is released that doesn't meet expectations in terms of player response, it's a great opportunity to learn what went wrong. Almost always, the signs were there in playtesting, but I was able to rationalize them away, either consciously or unconsciously.

The response to Colony was definitely underwhelming, and it was a classic case of “people aren't playing it the right way” which really means I didn't provide the tools for them to play it the right way. During playtesting, you have to be careful not to do too much handholding, or you'll miss key things like this. Had I done more blind playtesting with Colony, I would have seen this and would have been able to address it with a different starting card set, better rules, and even a different game description.

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

When there's an issue that comes up again and again that you just don't have a reasonable solution for. It's always better to do that than to try to power through and



hope the problem just goes away (you can also become numb to feedback about those kinds of issues if you don't address them, rationalizing that it's just the way the game is).

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

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Those sessions are rough, but you learn the most from them. Sometimes you can apply what you learned to that design, but more often they are lessons that can be applied to other games you're working on. The other thing is that it's SO much better to have a rough playtest session than to have a game (1) rejected by every publisher that sees it or (2) published and then have the public response mimic what was seen in that playtesting session.

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

Schedule playtesting sessions ahead of time. This provides an intermediate deadline to get a project to the next level sooner than if it were to happen organically.

**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?**

1. Know the publisher's line of games really well, and be able to explain how your game fits with their existing line.
2. Look for feedback in the publisher's expression, interest level, etc. while describing the game. Sometimes it's better to just stop and move on to another game (or stop entirely) so the publisher is more open to future pitches.

# Richard Breese

“Learn to take constructive criticism.”

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

Settlers of Catan, Ticket to Ride, Carcassonne. All great, popular, and elegantly designed games which should give new designers something to aim for.

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

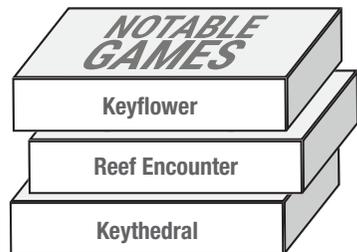
Re-stickable A4 sticker sheets. These are great for laser printing on, sticking on cardstock, and then cutting out high quality prototype card game pieces.

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

Keydom—widely recognized as the first worker placement game—was my third game. Hans im Glück and Bernd Brunnhofer reissued the game with a more elegant end game, and I was able to learn from the way Bernd approached the design issues.

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

I need to be happy that the game is introducing something to the gaming community but also is providing a challenge without too much luck in a stable gaming environment. If it’s failing to do this or excite me, then I will put it on the back burner for a while or indefinitely.



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

I think I am always in a gaming mindset. So it is just a case of getting other work up to date so that I can devote more time to the design process.

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

You learn a lot more from a playtest that does not go well—assuming of course that the problem that created the disharmony is fixable. If it is not, then the session has been positive in that it has told you not to explore that avenue or idea any further.

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

Playing games. Generally, I think designers improve with more experience and exposure to new games, mechanics, and ideas.

**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?**

Listen to what the publisher says. Publishers generally have a lot of experience and operate in their own corner of the market. If they like the design, take note of how they think it could be improved. Learn to take constructive criticism.

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

Listen to the feedback you get from playtesters and fellow gamers. Playtest with as many people as possible. Make changes as appropriate to address their issues if applicable, but remember it is your design and you alone know what gaming experience you are trying to create with your game, so stay true also to your objective and design idea and give yourself permission to ignore what others might suggest.

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

Put the game to the side for a while. Cook a meal, go for a walk, or go to bed, depending on the time of day. Pick it up again on the following morning when you are feeling fresh and the world is a better place!



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

How much I would enjoy it. I would have tried to devote more time to it!

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

Be at peace with the world. In my games any conflict or player interaction is through the game mechanics, not in a direct "take that" style.

“Always think about the player experience at the table. What are players physically doing? What are they feeling? How can you improve that?”

—*Kevin Wilson*

“You develop taste a lot faster than you develop skill. You know good stuff from bad stuff way, way, way before you can make good stuff. “

—*Matt Colville*

## Phil Walker-Harding

“Work hard, and keep practicing. You really do get better with each design project whether it is a success or a total flop.”

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

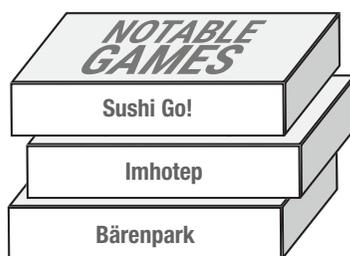
In the years leading up to designing Sushi Go!, I tried to design a set collection filler card game many times. Countless ideas didn't work and were discarded. However, I was learning so much about how set collection worked and different methods of scoring that when I got the idea for Sushi Go!, the card design happened quite quickly.

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

Usually it is when the game “works” but the fun factor just isn't there, or there's nothing special setting the game apart for the players. It is hard to just push through this barrier as something is fundamentally missing from the game. Sometimes I will come back to it much later and a new perspective will help me move forward on the design.

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

This is a hard one. I think a weekly routine helps and trying to work hard for blocks of a few hours. I often find it can take a little while to get on a roll.



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

If a game just isn't working at its core, ask yourself why, and treat this as a lesson. You often learn a lot from failures. Put the game aside, move on to your next idea, and keep working!

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

More recently, I have been pushing myself to try and design a bit out of my comfort zone. Trying types of games I wouldn't usually think of designing. I think this has sharpened my game design brain a bit

**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?**

Have a one sentence "hook" that explains what is exciting and fresh about your game. Don't just describe your game to them. Be excited about it and show them why they should be excited too!

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

Work hard, and keep practicing. You really do get better with each design project whether it is a success or a total flop. Don't be too worried about the details of how other designers work though, find your own style and habits.

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

I think having a very succinct brief for a design helps you stay focused. It's something you can always come back to when things get a bit muddy. If I see no way forward with a design, I often put it aside and switch projects for a bit.

# Isaac Childres

“Make games that you want to play and are passionate about.”

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

Ink for my printer.

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

After I make a prototype and play it and realize the central idea of it isn't enough to carry my interest.

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

A lot of my best ideas come to me right when I wake up in the morning. I go out into the world, experience lots of different media, and then let my brain arrange them in interesting ways.

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

If you can find something great and redeemable in the design, focus on that. Otherwise, work on something else.

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

Make games that you want to play and are passionate about.



“Spend as little time as possible creating the first prototype, because you will definitely trash it and build something new just after the first playtesting session.”

—*Bruno Cathala*

“Stop asking if your project is ‘done’. Start asking if it’s great.”

—*Peter C. Hayward*

# Matthias Cramer

“Normally, there is more than half a year between the first idea and the first prototype, so I have to write things down in order to not forget them.”

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

My favorite failure is a general one. When I start with a game, the original idea sometimes does not work, but as a side effect, I find some new twists that were implemented (to complete the game). So I continue with those side aspects as the new core mechanic.

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

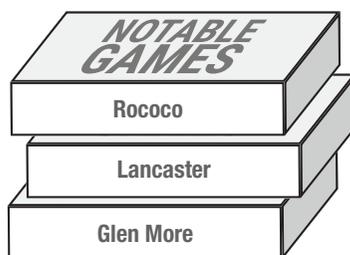
When I don't know how to improve the game. Most people think that it indicates that the game is ready and in most cases, it is wrong.

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

I am usually filling huge Word documents and playing the game just in my mind. Normally, there is more than half a year between the first idea and the first prototype, so I have to write things down in order to not forget them.

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

Perfect! Now, you know the problems. Happy changing.



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

Best advice: What does your game set apart from other (similar) games. What is unique? If you can't answer that, throw it away.

Bad advice: The look of your prototype doesn't matter—this is not true.

# Vital Lacerda

“You learn with your mistakes. So a failure is just a learning process.”



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

Brass because it is a masterpiece. All rondel games because of the simplicity of the action system.

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

Tabletopia

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

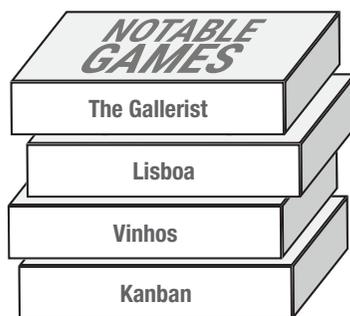
After the first edition of CO<sub>2</sub>, I learned first time players do not welcome hidden scoring systems. You learn with your mistakes. So a failure is just a learning process.

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

When I don't make progress from a while.

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

No ritual, just work. I also like to lie down or go to sleep thinking and looking for answers.



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

Those are the best sessions to make progress in your game. You will know exactly what is not working in your design.

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

It's just a matter of thinking on it and working on the design as much as possible. This is the only way to increase your game design skills—practice and experience.

**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?**

Be quick and interesting. Focus on the best parts of the game design. Show them your passion for your work.

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

Love what you design. Ignore all the rules about designing games in certain directions. Once you know the rules, how can you break them?

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

I just put it aside for a few days and send my focus elsewhere.

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

Go for it.

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

Whatever you do, do it with passion. You must love what you do to truly be successful.

# Richard Garfield

"I often force myself to make a prototype even if I know it's going to be far from my finished product."

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

I often recommend they think about Poker. Poker has many qualities that make it a rich source of inspiration, and many of those qualities are relatively rare in modern design.

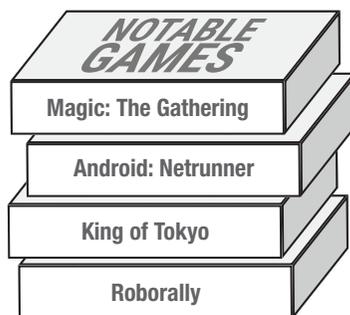
**Time:** Players can play a short while or epic length. Often players can even drop in and out.

**Luck:** The luck in the game makes anyone able to win. This makes it so a wide range of players can play together.

**Skill:** You can invest as much time as you like in the game, but you will not master it. If you want a format that emphasizes skill you can find one, but you can also just play well and be certain in the long run your skill will get its appropriate reward.

**Flexible:** Poker is really an operating system rather than a single game. There are many variations and formats that give a huge range of options, and they are all easy to learn once you know the basic idea.

**Game Theory:** There is something magical about hidden information. If board games are more important these days because they connect you in a way that is missing from our computer moderated social lives, then hidden information is possibly the most vital game mechanic. Trying to figure out



what your opponent knows, or behave in such a way as to mislead them—these are primal social activities. I always try to get hidden information into my games.

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

I used <http://www.makeplayingcards.com/> to get some custom cards and chips made. Usually for my prototypes I use stickers on cards, but I felt one project of mine really called for something that looked nicer. It was easy to use and not too expensive with great results.

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

My third trading card game, Netrunner, was well received but really didn't catch on the way I had hoped. There are a lot of reasons for that, but I always try to look at the game design and see how I could have helped things.

One thing I noticed was that despite the fact that Netrunner really wasn't more complex than Magic and V:TES, my first two trading card games, it took a lot longer for people to learn it. That was because I really tried to break a lot of the standards that my earlier games had helped create. That was one of the reasons its fans loved it so much but also one of the reasons (I believe) its reach was limited.

After that I always tried to respect whatever standards my audience had. I began to think of any complexity in the rules as counting against a “complexity budget,” and using a standard was a way to sneak extra complexity in without counting against my budget too much, since players already understand the standards.

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

I never walk away but often find myself putting it on the shelf.

I do this generally after I have made two or three prototypes that don't seem to be getting closer to what I am looking for. I am often not entirely sure what it is I am looking for but am used to my prototypes dancing around it without homing in.

At this point I have found I am best served by documenting what I have and closeting it. I find revisiting those designs are often quite inspiring, and when I do get around to working on them I can more easily break out of the rut I was in.

I rarely think I have wasted my time with a design. I take great pleasure in my large collection of fragmented games.

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

The only thing I find important is playing games. In periods of my life where I am not playing games I find it harder to design and I feel less inspired.

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

You get far more useful information out of a bad playtest than a good one. A good one might be indicative of a good product, but it is really easy to miss the weaknesses in the game. After a bad playtest, you can almost always find a few things to improve or be motivated to closet the design for a while.

I always have back up games. Sometimes it's things I want to playtest, but just as often, it's games I want to try. When a playtest goes south I switch over to the new games, and everyone has a better time than if you fold up shop or try a bunch of fixes without thinking them through.

**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?**

Have the game designed and playtested. Publishers are rarely interested in a partial game or a game concept.

Have some graphics and art in your game. You can use clipart if you like, but you should use something that helps the publisher see the final product. These days it is really easy to make a prototype look pretty good. You don't need final art by any means, but you shouldn't just have index cards with writing on them.

Be open to game design and flavor changes. A publisher is an excellent resource and often knows their customers better than you do. That doesn't mean you should accept them blindly; they don't know your game as well as you do. But very often you can find a solution that makes them happy and maintains whatever it is that you see as being the essence of your game—even if it isn't their first suggestion.

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

Play all games. Play games you don't even like until you find out what players see in it. Maybe in the process you will learn to like it, but even if not you might be able to capture what they like and put it into a game you do like.

Games are like any other cultural creation in that they build on their predecessors. Some designers like to isolate themselves from outside influence so their game design can be completely their own. I have very little patience for that attitude. It makes the design about the designer and not about the game. My favorite writers love literature and read voraciously. My favorite directors love films and watch everything. A scientist that tries to operate in a vacuum almost doesn't even make sense. Great game designers should play everything.

There are some great designers who have a different attitude, but I am convinced they would be even greater if they learned from their peers and their predecessors.

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

I often force myself to make a prototype even if I know it's going to be far from my finished product. I find the act of constructing the prototype really focuses my thinking on the tangibles of the game. Usually, I don't play these prototypes with anyone other than myself, and sometimes I don't even finish the prototype. Often this exercise really helps me get a playable prototype the next time around.

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

For my entire adult life I have tried to broaden my palate by learning to like the food, music, books, movies, art, academic subjects, and really everything else that I didn't immediately like. I reasoned that if there was something other people liked that I didn't, well, I just didn't understand it well enough. I reasoned that the more things I liked the more pleasure I would get from life.

This has helped me in game design because it drove me to play games that I otherwise wouldn't have played and learn how to appreciate them. Every time that happens, it broadens me as a game designer and a game player, and it makes my life richer.

“Even done right, playtesting can be frustrating. In essence, it’s experiencing failure repeatedly. For this reason, maintaining the decorum and respecting the craft and the social norms are especially important.”

—*Luke Laurie*

“If a rule doesn’t add to the fun of the game, get rid of it.”

—*Byron Collins*

# Sébastien Pauchon

“A game is ready when it’s ready. Never before.”

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

Blokus, Time’s Up, Ricochet Robots, Splendor, Cities and Knights, Citadels, Taluva, Puerto Rico, Love Letter, Kingdom Builder, Dominion, Pickomino, Ingenious. All very elegant games.

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

The Design of Everyday Things by Don Norman.

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

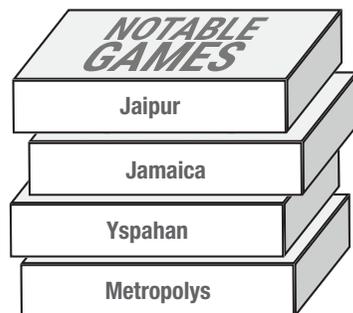
The rules of our (GameWorks’) first published game, Animalia. It had simple rules that were supposedly easy to read, but yet a lot of feedback from non-gamers told us how difficult a read it was. It made us think a lot about rules in general.

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

When I don’t feel like playing it as a player but can’t say why, and I don’t know what to fix.

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

Mostly at night, lying in bed with a notebook.



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

No worries; it happens all the time. Focus on why the session was unsuccessful, and see if you can fix it.

**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?**

Know your stuff, do your homework, and be ready for any questions: Why so many cards? Do you really need that many dice? What are the odds of winning if...? Does it really play well from 2 to 6? Don't you think it should be 20 minutes shorter? Etc.

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

I go shoot pool or play the guitar.

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

A game is ready when it's ready. Never before.

# Simone Luciani

“Always try to do what you like, and try to make your dreams come true. And, whether you succeed or not, have fun while you try.”

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

Scorepal and Scoregeek, really cheap or free apps which you can easily use to track playtest data—nice tools to balance games!

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

It’s the most difficult choice. Experience helps, but there are no rules, unfortunately.

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

No, because I’m really often in a designing mindset. It takes nothing more than seeing an image or reading something to trigger an idea.

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

I started working on games full time.

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

Always try to do what you like, and try to make your dreams come true. And, whether you succeed or not, have fun while you try.



“Unless you know for sure that a suggestion isn’t going to pan out, then it’s worth doing due diligence and testing it out. You never know which decent-sounding suggestions will be right for the game, and which just won’t pan out, until you try them.”

—*Seth Jaffe*

“Remove anything you can that will delay you getting the first prototype to the table – that is where you will learn the most about the game, not on your computer or in your head.”

—*Matthew Dunstan*

# Rüdiger Dorn

“Test your game many times, and be open to criticism.”

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

Carcassonne because of its elegance—less rules and a certain kind of “game depth.”

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

Hearthstone. I fell in love with this game because it’s so similar to magic (one of my all-time-favorites), but it has some better components (e.g. the continuous increase of mana, damage remains, and some cool visual card effects).

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

The biggest “failure” in my career was the defeat of VEGAS in 2012. I was so sure that VEGAS was the perfect family game for the Spiel des Jahres game of the year.

When it didn’t win, I was very depressed, and I needed time to recover. When the dust settled, I got back up and got back to doing what I love: designing games.

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

My wife tells me, and unfortunately, she’s always correct. How-



ever, if I'm really liking the core idea, I rearrange the game a couple of times to try to get it to work.

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

No, during a day or a week, I'll have one or two ideas spark in my head. If the idea becomes something more, I begin to create a game.

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

I've grown weary of games with many rules and/or many ways to earn VP's. So, now I tend to design simple, elegant games.

**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 the publisher isn't convinced, just accept it. Ask for reasons why the publisher isn't seeing the game's potential, but don't argue with them.

If the game is good and has an interesting core, don't be sad if it gets rejected.

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

Test your game many times, and be open to criticism.

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

That I must accept that the flavor of the editors at different companies is different. Many companies can reject a game, and then the next company is very happy about it.

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

I want to enjoy and feel every second of my life. Game designing, in general, is one way to experience life.

“Whatever the players do the most in your game should be the most fun. Don’t relegate the best part to 5% of game time. Weave it throughout.”

— *Kevin Wilson*

“The single biggest thing you can do to be more productive is to reduce the time between your playtests. Play your games a LOT.”

— *Ben Pinchback*

# Jacob Fryxelius

“It’s easy to focus on the negative, but even a failed prototype usually has something good to preserve or build on.”

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

Sometimes I try different mechanics for a game but never really get it to work in a good way, so I abandon that project or put it on hold. During this process, though, I try lots of ideas, and suddenly I find that one of those ideas fit perfectly in another game I’m working on.

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

When I would rather play something else. If you don’t do it for fun then you’re in the wrong business.

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

Designing has many components, but my main mindset would be to brainstorm new ideas, whether it be mechanics for a game idea, thematic setting and style, target audience, how to streamline the game, etc.

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

Going back to the drawing board is part of being a game designer.



Only the best ideas are good enough to publish in the end. But you should also analyze what went wrong and what was actually working. It's easy to focus on the negative, but even a failed prototype usually has something good to preserve or build on.

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

In FryxGames we have come to discuss our developing games in more and more detail. It's a lot of work and very humbling, but together we are usually able to pinpoint problems and brainstorm solutions and adjustments, taking our games to a higher level.

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

Do it for fun, and don't expect to make a living off it. It's a small market and huge competition, but as long as you have fun, it's worth it.

## Hermann Luttmann

“No design is perfect out of the box and no design survives first contact with good playtesters.”

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

Ha! My favorite failure was my very first submitted design, which eventually became my most successful one, Dawn of the Zeds. When I played Zulus on the Ramparts (part of the States of Siege system), I enjoyed it immensely for the historical narrative and situation, but I was also immediately struck by how well this would fit into a zombie siege theme. Mind you, I was not (and still am not) a huge zombie fanboy but rather more of your standard, run-of-the-mill enjoyer of the classic zombie movies. But that theme just seemed so obvious to me for this system that when I first decided to actually propose a zombie game design, I really assumed that Alan Emrich would tell me that he had already received a million such proposals for the States of Siege series.

Well to my surprise, he had not. So I went to work doing what I knew how to do (being a lifelong wargamer) and designed a zombie wargame. Well, that did not go very well and the design was rejected by Alan as being too wargamey. A definite blow to my ego for sure but he was also absolutely correct. This type of game should not be a technical and fiddly wargame. It should be a game about the theme. In fact, it should be game of narrative, atmosphere, and horrific surprises and not one of mastering game mechanics.

So instead of discouraging me, this advice actually opened my eyes. I re-thought the entire design



and approached it from the point of view of the terrified gamer. What can I do to scare the gamer like he/she is participating in a zombie movie?

So I changed the emphasis of the game from tactical and detailed placement of units and combat mechanics to one of event cards representing the unknown while throwing every zombie cliché possible at the player in a torrent of chaotic and unexpected events.

This created a pleasurable kind of “gamer anxiety,” and it actually worked! The initial reactions from gamers were not posts about rules or modifiers or components; they were simply stories about their game experience, told as if they were writing a zombie short story. And most pleasing of all was that they were having an absolute blast telling these stories and losing at the game almost all the time.

The fact that they could rarely beat the game was a source of enjoyment! I could not have been more pleased. So that initial design failure actually provided me the guidance for almost all my subsequent design work. Even my historical wargame design work is now based on the narrative of the event and has led to my general philosophy of simulating historical chaos to drive my games.

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

I shelve a design once I find myself no longer anxious to work on it. There is no definitive point at which this occurs, but you will eventually recognize the morphing when it does. When you have transitioned from “I have to find time to work on my project because I have so many cool ideas!” to “damn, I better get working on that stupid project; oh wait, there’s a cool show I need to watch on Netflix; the project can wait another day,” then you know it’s time.

You either abandon the thing entirely (if you never really were that enthusiastic to begin with) or shelve it for later and approach it from another angle (if it's something you were really jacked about from the get-go).

Coming at it after a break will generally snap you out of the tunnel vision that you can get caught in. If you still can't finish it, then it probably was never worth finishing in the first place.

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

I would say that every playtesting session is a learning session and an opportunity to improve the design. In fact, I would even go as far as to say that if a designer does not get any negative feedback at all, something is wrong!

No design is perfect out of the box, and no design survives first contact with good playtesters. I certainly go into all playtesting sessions with the thought that the design will not remain intact as originally conceived, but that's OK.

Your job as designer is to provide the framework, the parameters, and the guiding principal of the design. The nuts and bolts of the execution of that vision will be exchanged, tweaked, dropped entirely or may even make it through the building process unharmed. Who knows? But in almost all cases, tough rugged playtesting with all its accompanying blood, sweat, and tears (yes, mostly your blood, sweat and tears!) will ultimately be worth it and can only benefit your design in the end. So embrace the pointy elbows of the playtests!

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

Probably the most influential habit I've gotten into is playing other designers' games and learning from them. And I mean of all genres, types, sizes, and styles—even if they do not match my

field of design interest.

There is so much designing talent out there, and every brilliant mechanic you discover and play can trigger an idea in your head that could possibly be applied to your particular design—even if it doesn't seem like it would fit.

For example, the main mechanic in my design *In Magnificent Style*, which is a solo game on *Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg*, was primarily influenced by a dice game I played as a kid. Mechanics such as the simple but brilliant follow mechanic from Scott Almes's "Tiny Epic Galaxies" will see the light of day in some form in one of my games, as it is a genius way of keeping players constantly tuned into the game during other players' turns. Deck-building games are incredibly versatile and can be adapted to almost any style of game.

So, playing and learning from those other games is not only an enjoyable behavior but also provides quite a valuable resource.

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

Well, first of all I wouldn't ignore any advice. Just weed through it all very carefully and assess each piece before acting on it. If I had to advise new designers of anything, (and this may sound contrite or even cliché, but it is true) it would be to design what you know and what you love. Pretty simple, but I've followed that advice myself, and it has worked.

Look, if you have no interest in World War II, and some big publisher asks you to design a game on the Battle of the Bulge, I would advise a new designer to pass on it. If your heart is not in it, then getting up the energy and imagination to create a good Bulge design will be very difficult.

But if you love baseball and a smaller publisher says that they would like you to design a baseball simulation, then dive into that

project head first and do what you are enthusiastic about.

Sure, you may not make a great commission or tons of sales, but the design will probably be superior and something to be proud of.

Oh yeah, here's another piece of free advice: if you think you're going to make a lot of money at this gig, forget it. At the start, you'll even lose money. At the end, if you're successful, you'll probably net minimum wage.

But then again, if you're designing as a means of primary income, you're doing it for the wrong reason. Design games because you love it, it makes you feel good, you meet great people, and it's healthy for you mentally (as it keeps the brain plaque from forming as you get older). Anything else is pure gravy.

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

I'm pretty much a very easy-going guy and treat life as an exciting adventure that is here to be enjoyed. And that's the way I try to design my games as well. When I play a game, I want there to be a sense of adventure, excitement, and a bit of the unknown, but wrapped around a veneer of strategic thinking as well.

And I don't want to have my head buried in a rulebook the entire game either! So I try to design the same way, with the players having to deal with various serving-sizes of chaos (historical or otherwise) in an accessible and understandable format. And in order to do so successfully, they must use their wits, sound judgment, good (or bad) fortune, and the ability to think on their feet.

But this is done not only to provide an intellectual challenge but also to be fun. The surprise and excitement of dealing with an ever-changing situation is a true joy for me, and I hope for players of my game designs as well.

The game environment is an opportunity and vehicle to pres-

ent players with some escapism and a dash of adventurism. In the case of wargames, historical chaos is not only more fun but actually yields a more realistic simulation for what can happen on a battlefield.

So my approach to life in general is to enjoy it while you're here! And when playing a game, it should be an enjoyable experience. It should provoke laughter, cheering, occasional moans, and some challenging analysis, but in the end it should be an experience that will not easily be forgotten. Much like life itself.

# Hisashi Hayashi

“Play many existing games. Increasing the amount of input is very important.”

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

I shelf a design when after I think about the game for more than an hour, new ideas do not come up.

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

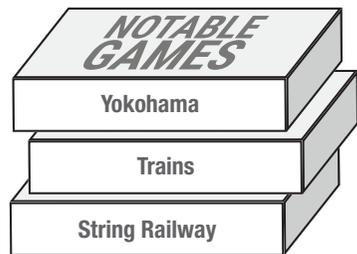
Make yourself relax as much as possible when thinking about ideas. Do other things that do not use your brain.

I do simple exercises such as walking and swimming.

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

Play many existing games.

Increasing the amount of input is very important.



“Don’t let your fears or your worries stop you from designing games. Make something great, and then worry about the details afterwards.”

— *Kevin Wilson*

“Don’t separate what you like as a player and what you’re making. Bring your robust personal tastes into your design to guide you.”

— *Grant Rodiek*

# Chris Kirkman

“Don’t feel rushed with your designs; creativity takes time.”

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

Anything by TC Petty III.

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

Failing can feel devastating, but really it’s an opportunity to take a step back and make something better. One of my favorite failures was the original Kickstarter for New Bedford. I knew the game was great, but it wasn’t gaining as much traction as it could. So, the project was cancelled and we took some time to reevaluate our approach—new art and more build-up before the campaign.

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

When you’ve playtested it extensively and made improvements and tweaks based on quality feedback, and yet something about the design still isn’t operating smoothly. That can mean you need to take a step back from the design for awhile. If you’re designing on a deadline you need to push through, but if you’re just designing for yourself you can wait for inspiration, and it can come from anywhere. Don’t feel rushed with your designs; creativity takes time.

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

I stay up really, really late and drink Jameson.

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



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This is an opportunity to make your game better. Nothing hones a game design better than a sub-standard playtest. Be sure to understand the factors of why it was a discouraging session. Did the player dynamic play a role? What was the player count? How long did it take? Were there aberrations in this particular session in comparison to other sessions?

It's all just data. You have to learn how to interpret it and use it wisely to make your game the best it can be.

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

Write down ideas as soon as you have them, no matter where you are or what you're doing. Get in the habit of keeping extensive notes, and then go back later and categorize those notes and ideas. Keep the good ideas, and write them down again.

### **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?**

Be succinct. Practice your elevator pitch; describe your game, the mechanics, and any key factors in under three minutes. Most publishers don't have a lot of time, and you need to engage them as quickly as possible. Give the best details, but let the publisher ask questions. Don't try to sell them on how marketable the game is. Leave that up to them as that's their job. Try to avoid overused buzzwords like "unique gameplay". Don't tell them that your mom loves it.

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

Network, network, network. Definitely make sure you have a solid game to pitch first, but after that just be involved with the community. Seek out publishers and other designers at conventions. Be on Twitter constantly. Finally, if you want to be prolific, pander. But if you want to be happy, stay true to your art.

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

I try to talk to someone I trust. I bounce ideas off them or see if anything comes to their mind that I can riff off. You don't have to have a dedicated design partner, but it is helpful to have someone that can be a sounding board and offer some input to get your creativity and drive moving again.

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

Don't live a deferred life. In other words, don't wait for tomorrow to do what you think you should be doing. Do it today. I would recommend the book *The Monk and The Riddle* to anyone, not just game designers. It will change your life, and it's the reason that Dice Hate Me Games exists.

“Design pitch tip: “I’ve spent X years developing this game” is a red flag sentence for many reasons. It doesn’t help your pitch.”

— *Nate Murray*

“It’s not enough to have a cool theme. It’s not enough to have cool mechanisms. Your game lives at the intersection of its theme and its mechanism.”

— *Gil Hova*

## Stephen Finn

"I'm a strong believer in the idea that failure is the best teacher, even if it temporarily sets you back."

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

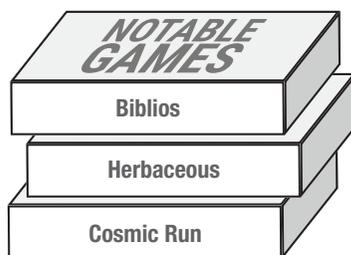
I don't have a particular game that I recommend to new designers, but I recommend playing as many different games as possible. I was speaking with a new game designer at a convention not too long ago and talked about games by designers like Stefan Feld and Reiner Knizia, whom this designer did not know of.

In my real profession, I am a teacher and I've often heard that being a good teacher is like being a good thief, in that you are willing to just steal from other people. Nothing I am doing in game design is completely original and it is rare that any game designer devises something completely new.

Instead, it's often about using other people's ideas in creative, new combinations. So, the more games you play, the more you are exposed to different ideas, and you'll begin to find yourself drawn to certain kinds of mechanics and themes, which you may draw on. You need to expand your toolkit by playing a lot of games.

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

I'm a big fan of failure. However, I am trying to establish a good name for my business, so I cannot fail too much or on a grand scale. That said, I continually make small mistakes that I learn a great deal from.



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In my business model, I am responsible for managing the whole project from initial design to Kickstarter fulfillment, so there are a lot of decisions that need to be made. For many designers, who pitch games to publishers, many of the details of production can be overlooked. As just one example: in my game *Capo dei Capi*, I have influence tokens that have values from 1-3. I made the mistake of having the numbers on

only one side of the token, when I should have had it on both sides. The original reasoning for one-sided was based on the fact that I used to manufacture my games, and printing on both sides of the token so that the values were centered on the token was difficult to achieve. Yet, for this game, I was having it manufactured by a professional. The result is that players need to flip all the tokens over at the start of the game.

This experience, as well as playing a lot of games, has made me more conscious of token design. I also learn from the mistakes of others, so this is another reason to play other people's games as much as you can. Even big publishers make mistakes and, as you play a game with a design flaw, it becomes obvious why it's a flaw.

Text size and text colors on cards, for example, are areas in which publishers screw up. I won't say the name of the game (because I like it), but the publisher chose to use dark red lettering on a black background. It's terrible. Or, as another example, if you have different values of coins in your game, for example, why not make them different sizes so they are easily distinguished? I know that the punchboard die-cut design is a factor here because publishers want fewer die-cut patterns since each one requires its own mold,

so it helps to have same sized components. Yet, there are often creative ways to design punchboards to accommodate this.

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

Following up with my commitment to failure being a great teacher, having a discouraging play test session is one of the best things that can happen to a designer. Assuming that it was discouraging because the playtest revealed a serious flaw in the game, a designer has just learned something very important that needs to be corrected.

I'm a strong believer in the idea that failure is the best teacher, even if it temporarily sets you back. It is better to discover flaws in a game before it is sent off to a publisher or launched on Kickstarter. The worst thing that can happen is to have a published game that is later realized to contain a serious flaw. For independent publishers, especially, it is very important to seek out flaws and ask playtesters to try to break the game.

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

A couple years ago I met Edo Baraf from Pencil First Games after he had reviewed a couple of my games. We eventually began a working relationship, and he put together a great team that developed *Herbaceous* and *Sunset Over Water*, both of which were published by Pencil First Games.

What I've discovered through this relationship is the importance of art and presentation. I've always recognized that art is important, but I never focused on it. Instead, I've always been most interested in developing the game mechanics and the art/presentation has come second. However, as more and more independent (and even established) publishers use Kickstarter to fund their games, it has become increasingly important to make your game (and Kickstarter page) visually appealing. The game needs to stand out in

Stephen Finn

some way to be successful. For my past couple of games, I believe I am continuing to grow in this respect. It also helps that my business is more established, so I have more resources than before and am willing to spend more for the artwork and graphic design.

# Philippe Keyaerts

“People matter. Players are visiting worlds I designed. I want them to feel welcome.”

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

Not games; I recommend looking for inspiration elsewhere: books, movies, cooking, anything one enjoys.

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

I think it’s two books: *Sapiens* (historical essay) and *Plenty* (cooking).

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

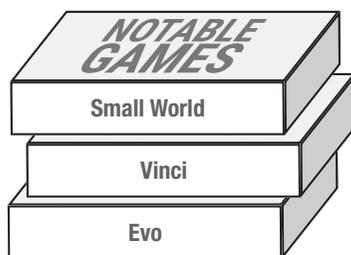
When I’m running in circles with nothing new coming to mind and the game is just not fun enough. I never walk away from a design, but most of them spent a lot of time (or still are) on the shelf.

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

I try to have nothing to do and nothing scheduled for a couple of hours—if possible the entire day.

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

Do not give up, sleep on it and analyze what went wrong. Horrible playtest session often have a lot to teach.



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

I think I begin prototyping earlier than I used to. Having something to play with helps a lot.

**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?**

Keep it short and simple. Details will come later.

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

Just do it. Playtest a lot, listen to your playtesters, but do not forget you are in charge.

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

I take a nap.

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

People matter. Players are visiting worlds I designed. I want them to feel welcome.

# Glenn Drover

“Game designers sometimes fall in love with the system or the experience that they are creating and can forget that it’s supposed to be fun.”

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

*Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*

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

My early game designs from 2000 - 2003 gave me the experience in game design to finally create something worthwhile with Railroad Tycoon and Age of Empires III.

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

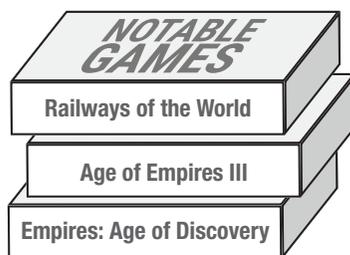
When it isn’t fun. Game designers sometimes fall in love with the system or the experience that they are creating and can forget that it’s supposed to be fun.

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

The shower, walking the dog, and flying on a plane are my best design environments.

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

‘MISS’: Make It Simpler, Streamline



**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?**

Much like a book author, make sure that you jump right into the action and describe the experience in a way that grabs the “reader.”

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

Stop and do something else.

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

Be fearless.

# Geoff Engelstein

“If you don’t have a vision for where you want to be, it’s really hard to make adjustments.”

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

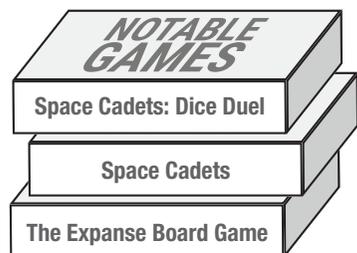
Treshem’s Civilization (1980) is a masterclass in game design. The way the systems build on each other gradually over the first few turns means that even though it is ultimately a sophisticated game, players can start playing within a few minutes. The trading system is iconic, as is combat and movement. It’s a wonderful piece of work.

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

When the ideas for how to improve things or fix problems have dried up, I will put the game away and pick up another design. That’s why I like to have 3-4 active projects at any give time. While I’m away, there’s always a piece of my brain that’s working on it behind the scenes, and that piece comes up with great ideas sometimes if I just leave it alone.

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

Why was it discouraging? You should have a vision for what you want your game to be—how it should make the players feel. If there’s a gap between that vision and what is happening, try to figure out what’s causing that, and



adjust. And feel free to over adjust. If people aren't taking an action you like, make it incredibly overpowered. At least you'll see what it can do.

If you don't have a vision for where you want to be, it's really hard to make adjustments. And you shouldn't start a design without a vision. Otherwise it's way too easy to get lost in the woods.

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

You're going to include too much in your early games. Simplify, simplify, simplify. No matter how simple you think something is, the players will find it more confusing.

# Daryl Andrews

“It matters more for a player to have a great first experience before worrying about replayability.”

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

El Grande, Santorini, Jaipur, Patchwork, Carcassonne, Sushi Go, Kingdomino, Acquire, Can’t Stop, Modern Art, Sagrada, Hanabi, The Game.

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

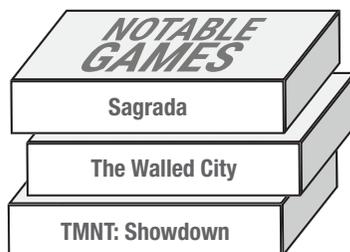
Colored card sleeves.

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

I learned who you sign a game with matters. I learned to trust my gut (and my co-designer) and sign games with people we want to work with.

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

If you feel like you are forcing a solution, let the game simmer on the backburner. Make sure to work on enough games that you can focus on which game is flowing. You can always come back to a game with fresh eyes.



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

I find putting aside a block of time (at least 4hrs) with a co-designer is the foundation for a game to really make progress. Build in times for snacks and breaks, but if you can get a big chunk of time to focus on games, you can make major progress on multiple projects.

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

Remember that you just got lots of information, but it's your game to make. Interpret the information. Don't blindly follow the playtesters' feedback. Instead, take some time to think about why they said what they said, and think of ways to address the root of their issues. Also, remember your game is not for everyone. Make sure you make adjustments but for your target demographic. You can't make everyone happy.

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

Follow the fun. Cut anything getting in the way. And make sure the first game experience (when the game is done) is amazing. It matters more for a player to have a great first experience before worrying about replayability.

**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?**

Be prepared. Do your homework. Spend time thinking about why that publisher wants to make your game. Have a vision, but also be practical. Paint a picture, but leave room for the publisher to make their mark. Most importantly, remember publishers are people too. Build relationships with the people you hope to work with.

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

Ignore the advice that your prototype can be ugly. People keep saying that publishers can see past it, but it is really important to cast a vision and feel for your game. Don't pay for art, but spend the time to make your game look good, and more importantly, focus on functionality. You don't want the prototype to distract from the pitch.

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

I have built some intentional mentorships with people I have identified as advisors in my life. I turn to them for wisdom and listen to their life experience. I ask myself questions like: What steps do I need to take to get where I want to be? How can I make this game even just 5% better? Who can help me tackle this moment. Also, I give myself permission to rest and refocus.

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

Thankfully, I had some of the best mentors coming into the hobby. People like Sen Foong Lim, Jay Cormier, Eric Lang, Dylan Kirk, Kevin Wilson, Mike Gray, and Nate Murray have invested in me, and I can never thank them enough. I would recommend to anyone getting into the hobby to listen and learn from anyone willing to help you. Be intentional and pursue the people you want to learn from.

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

I believe people matter. When I make games I want to bring some joy to peoples' lives. A motto for my life is Be. Love. Serve. I remind myself to be humble, work hard, and help others where I can. This leads me to be thankful to my playtesters. It makes me loyal and respectful to the publishers who I get to work with. And it makes me want to help other designers achieve their dreams.

“It’s absolutely crucial to your design, at every stage, to slow down, take a step back, and look at your game with a critical eye. You need to find a way to take off the ‘designer goggles.’”

— *Nat Levan*

“The difference between those who succeed with large creative projects and those who do not, is not talent, it’s stamina. To succeed you must stick to the project, once the creative rush is over and the boring part rears its ugly mug.”

— *Morten Monrad Pedersen*

# Joris Wiersinga

“Make something small work. Test it. Then do the next part. Don’t try to solve things all at once.”

## CO-FOUNDER OF



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

Printable sticker sheets.

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

This happens when the design starts going in circles or if it is just meh. If it’s great and annoying at the same time, you can improve it; but if there is no emotion or interest when playing, throw it out.

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

Be glad you did that session with a test copy and have not invested your life savings in printing 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?**

Good advice: Playtest, playtest, playtest. But be aware the game will not appeal to all testers. Our game Roads & Boats was tested by a very famous game journalist/collector who opined it was bor-



ing and would never be popular. Instead, it has been a classic for 20 years.

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

Make something small work. Test it. Then do the next part. Don't try to solve things all at once.

# Alexander Pfister

“Right from the beginning of a project, always think about the possibility of terminating it.”

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

No game specifically. However I think it is important that game designers know what games are on the market. It’s a little bit like science: You should try to make innovations, and for that you must know what’s out there. On the other side it’s also a little bit like art: There is often no correct or better way to do things. It’s the composition of all mechanisms.

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

I’m done when, after multiple tests, there is no desire to change something.



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

Feedback means you can improve the game. If the game did not work that well, think of going back to an older version where you got better feedback. Focus on your core mechanism which hopefully is innovative and fun. If you don’t like the core mechanics, maybe it is better to stop the project. Right from the beginning of a project, always think about the possibility of terminating it. Sometimes the core of a game is too weak, and investing time in it is a loss.

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

Terminating a game design early on when I feel it is not going anywhere. And using stronger emotions in my games.

**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?**

Keep it short; don't mention little details. Talk about what is unique about 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?**

Get good and experienced testers, and watch them while they play. Are they involved or bored? Do they have to make difficult decisions?

And try to be up to date in the gaming industry.

# T.C. Petty III

“I love negative feedback. I crave it. It’s the perfect opportunity to ask questions and formulate real solutions.”

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

I have trouble sleeping sometimes. The strange trick that works for me is to leave a menial task undone as I lay down for bed like leaving the hall light on or the bathroom door open. I have a compulsion to complete the task, but I don’t want to leave the bed. Seconds later, I’m dead asleep.

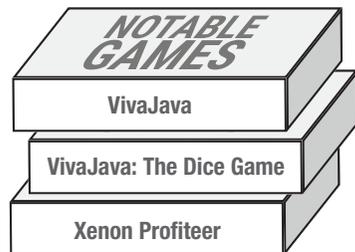
Most people’s brains set up distinct boundaries and labels on what is considered fun and what is considered work. So, if I trick my brain into believing that the area outside of the bed is work and underneath the covers in fun time, the task of sleeping becomes simple.

After the initial creation of an idea, game design is work.

If I want to be creative, I set my alarm ten minutes early and hit the snooze a few times. My brain doesn’t want to work, so it escapes. If I want to be productive, I try to stay up a few hours after bedtime. My brain is caught up in the moment and repetitive tasks become soothing. That’s when I get work done.

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

The worst thing a designer can do when a playtest goes sour is to become defensive. I love negative feedback. I crave it. It’s the perfect opportunity to ask questions and



formulate real solutions. It's free quality assurance! But, it's so easy to start providing justifications for your design decisions and wanting to blame the players for making poor decisions. Being defensive solves nothing and it creates a mental block against finding good solutions.

When you return home later, question existence. Get frustrated. Leave the game alone for a month. Punch a pillow. Eat a pint of mint chocolate chip gelato. But when you're ready to be sensible again, consult the notes from your playtest. That means spending more time listening and recording what others are saying even as you scream internally.

Then, make 1 or 2 significant changes and repeat the heart-wrenching process once again.

**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 feel bad if your games suck. And if they do suck, try your best to experience the iterative process. Jump back in and make changes between each playtest. You'll get the amazing opportunity to see improvements and total failures. And once you can't stand it or you get bored, don't be afraid to hide your flawed prototype in the darkest corner of your walk-in closet. Then, start a new game.

I've thrown out so many more games than I've cherished enough to bring down the difficult road to publication. Your first game will probably not be your best, but you should try because that effort carries over into the next design and the next. You'll soon find that problems you would've spent months figuring out in the past now take a single afternoon.

Try your best, but don't beat a dead horse. Experience is great.

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

"Maybe YOU'RE the idiot."

To be a good game designer, you have to have an ego. If you listen to every piece of feedback every playtester says and change your game wildly to reflect it, the design process will never end. But, if someone would have just said to me, “maybe you’re the idiot. Did you ever think of that?” I could have saved myself so much time.

Sometimes you’re just too close to a project to see its faults. Sometimes you think an idea is great simply because you made it. Sometimes you get so wrapped up in the experience of creation and iteration that a bad idea or even a good idea becomes an over-complicated mess.

So be sure, every now and then, to take a deep breath and ask yourself, “Am I wrong?” Because more often than not, you’re wrong about something and you’ll need someone else to help you fix it. Be open to it.

“Being a good game designer means coming up with a 100 of the coolest mechanics ever seen, and then finding out which 98 need to be trashed.”

— *Scott Almes*

“Listen for the heart of the feedback. Playtesters can’t always find the exact mechanism, but they know what part they liked & didn’t.”

— *Peter Gousis*

# Jason Matthews

“Do the project you care about, not the rehashed Euro that we have all played 20 times already.”

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

I highly recommend Michael Schacht’s work, which includes such classics as Zooloretto. Why? Because Schacht has mastered the art of imbuing binary choices with deep meaning. It allows his games to be played by any age group. The small kid can make the binary choice and be oblivious to its repercussions. The strategy gamer, can study the binary choice and other limited information available and plan out two or three moves ahead.

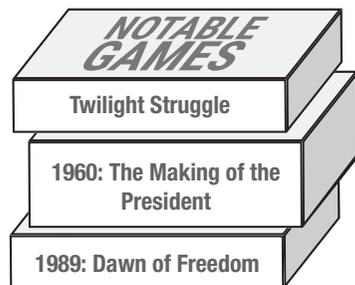
## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year?**

I picked up a book called *The General and the President* that has inspired a new design idea.

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

For me, game design is like sculpting. I start with a big marble slab, and I keep carving it down until I like the thing I see. But that means the process is one of endless mistakes that must be smoothed out and refined. The whole process is trial and error. Failure is the only path to success in context.

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



I know a design is done when it's fun for me to play. Until that's true, it needs more work.

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

No, I design a lot in traffic though. Its a good pastime for the mind-numbing chore of commuting into Washington, D.C.

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

That's the most valuable experience you will have as a designer. That reaction just saved you a ton of time and taught you valuable lessons about your audience. Positive reviews do not tell you much at all.

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

The state of the art in board game design, like computer game design, changes. And a good board game in 2018 is not the same as a good board game in 2010. So if you want to design well, you must keep up with tastes, and play a lot of other people's work to see where tastes are headed.

**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?**

Practice your pitch. This is a sales job, and being a great designer is a different task than being a good salesman. Be ready for the obvious questions. I am always surprised and disappointed when a game is clearly derivative of an existing design, and the designer does not have a good answer for why we need this new game. Do your homework. Check Board Game Geek, and be aware of what else is out there so you can respond intelligently to a publisher's inquiries.

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

The market is now awash in game designs. So being a game designer is increasingly like being an author. You have to have something interesting to say in a design to be heard above all the noise. Therefore, I think designers should follow their passion. Do the project you care about, not the rehashed Euro that we have all played 20 times already.

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

I set a deadline and have a deliverable that I owe another human being.

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

Designing a game for a small publisher or a large publisher is exactly the same amount of work, but the compensation is incredibly disparate.

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

I am a dilettante. I love knowing a little bit about a lot of things. And that's exactly the right level of knowledge for game design.

“Try to play your game as quickly as possible. Find out whether your core idea has the spark to be interesting. Don’t think about it; try it. Forget about balancing, artwork and UI. Instead try to define what you consider to be the core mechanisms, and test whether they are fun at all.”

— *Asger Sams Granerud*

“If you’re a first-time game designer, be very careful of the word ‘and.’ It is so easy to add a rule to a game, and the best game designers spend all of their time taking rules out.”

— *Luke Peterschmidt*

# Jeroen Doumen

“Having an idea for a game is the easy part. Actually turning that into a game that is worth playing is a lot of work.”

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

It’s hard to know. The essential answer is “when the game is no fun to play,” but that is very subjective. And it works for us since our design process typically starts with an enormous design and then cuts down different non-essential parts until just the core is left. We’ve had instances where we ended up with a perfectly polished game, which was no fun at all to play anymore.

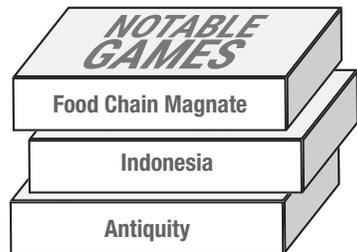
## What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?

You’ve just learned a lot! While it feels better to have a group play through your prototype and enjoy it, that only gives you so much information on how to improve it. When the game breaks, you get to see where and how, and what parts are interesting and worth saving.

## What advice would you give to a smart, driven, fledgling game designer just now getting into game design?

### What advice should they ignore?

Playtest more. You can never test often enough.



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

Having an idea for a game is the easy part. Actually turning that into a game that is worth playing is a lot of work.

**CO-FOUNDER OF**



# Stephen Glenn

“Publishers are always looking for great games.

If you believe you have one, there is really no excuse not to attend the big conventions and start making contacts.”

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

A small notebook and a pen with a fine, felt point. Don't spare money on good pens. Give your ideas the luxury they deserve. Keep them by your bed with a small flashlight so you can write down those middle-of-the-night ideas without getting up.

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

I would ask them what they learned from the session. Problems can be gold mines. I can't tell you how many times the solution to a problem made a game better than I thought it could be even before I knew it had the problem.

## **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?**

You have to really love the game and be enthusiastic. You better be ready to explain why this game deserves to be one of the hundreds that will be released this year.

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



Publishers are always looking for great games. If you believe you have one, there is really no excuse not to attend the big conventions and start making contacts. Your game may not fit their immediate needs, but if you pitch a quality product in a professional manner, it will build your reputation as a serious, talented designer who deserves attention.

## D. Brad Talton Jr.

“Don’t be afraid to break something down if you think you can rebuild it better. You won’t regret it in the end.”

---

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

Libertalia - This is a great game with simple components and easy-to-understand mechanics but a lot of depth and variety—one of my favorites.

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

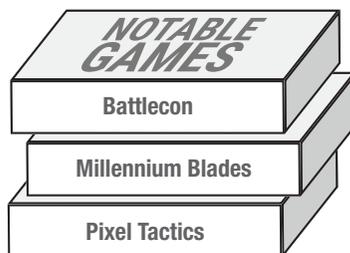
Scrivener, by Literature and Latte, is one of the best tools for making notes and tracking changing versions of rulebooks.

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

I try to play a wide variety of games and look critically at what I liked and didn’t like. I keep a game journal of the games I play and my thoughts about them and how they might be improved.

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

Don’t be afraid to break something down if you think you can rebuild it better. You won’t regret it in the end.

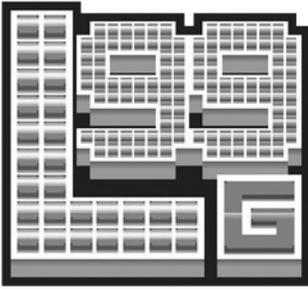


**If a friend of yours is about to sit down to pitch a game to a publisher, what are some tips you would tell him or her?**

Be flexible, be humble, and show energy for the design

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

## FOUNDER OF



Excitement exists in the space between discovery and mastery. A game should strive to be easy to learn but hard to fully comprehend or play out. A player should always be learning something new with each new play and finish with an idea of what they can do better next time. I experience this same cycle with each new game I develop as well.

**2<sup>nd</sup> Edition**

## Alan R. Moon

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

Definitely Carcassonne. Practically all you do during each of your turns is draw a tile and play that tile. But I've played Carcassonne over 100 times, and I still find it different and interesting. And it has something I don't think exists in any other game: if someone is stuck on where to play their tile, they can just show the tile to the other players and everyone can give them suggestions.

Beyond that, the electronic version of the game is even better than the board game for two reasons. For one, you can see all the tiles that are left in to be drawn. This allows you to know what is possible and access the odds of completing things on your future turns. The second reason is that if you move your tile over the board to the locations you might want to place it, big "Xs" sometimes appear to show what other locations will then be unplayable. This makes it much easier to mess with the other players' plans. That's more of a gamer feature than a mass market feature, but it also serves as a very simple way to increase the strategic thinking of non-gamers.

For me, the art of game design is all about the elegance of simplicity. I try to take everything out of a game that can be taken out, leaving just enough to make the game fun and challenging. I want a player to decide between two or three things each turn, and ideally each of the choices will seem like a good choice. At some point later in the game, maybe just a few minutes later, they will suddenly realize if they made the best choice or not.

Carcassonne is a great example of the elegance of simplicity. It's a super gateway game and one of the games I most wish I had designed.



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

In 1990, I was totally frustrated. I had been submitting prototypes to game companies for quite a few years with very limited success. In some cases, the companies would keep the prototype for a year or more. They probably weren't intentionally stringing me along, but that was the result.

After being approached by a German friend about starting my own company, I started White Wind. The idea behind White Wind was to produce limited editions of 1200 copies as a way of getting my name and my game designs out to a bigger audience, including other game companies. Because the real hope was that bigger game companies would then buy the rights to the games and reprint them. From 1990-1997, that was a huge failure.

Then in 1997, Amigo bought the rights to the White Wind game *Elfenroads*, which became *Elfenland*, which won the *Spiel des Jahres* in 1998. So while I would never start or run another game company, without White Wind I would almost certainly not be a game designer today.

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

Knowing when to walk away from an idea is tough. On the one hand, you need to trust your own judgment about your ideas. On the other hand, in many cases you may not be the best judge of your own ideas.

I've talked to designers who are convinced they have a great game, even though lots of game companies have turned it down. I think they are wrong and the companies are right. If I show a prototype to four or five companies, and they all pass on it, that says to me that I either need to rework it or just give up on it.

Stubbornness does not make you a better game designer. Learning from your experiences makes you a better designer. Of course today, most of those unsold games become kickstarters.

# Nikki Valens

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

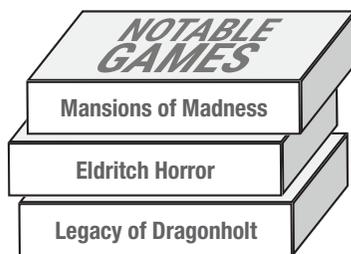
I tend to recommend games with only a single mechanism such as *The Mind* or *Zendo*. Not only do those games allow fledgling designers to focus on what makes the mechanic function, but they also prove that games don't need to be complex to provide deep gameplay. It's important to not conflate complexity and mechanical depth. Mechanical depth keeps players coming back time and again, but complexity prevents new players from getting into your game.

## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

Invest in prototyping materials for the types of games you want to make. Blank cards, sleeves, blank tokens, meeples, tiles, etc. Invest in ways to easily prototype your games so that you can iterate faster and more efficiently. With a well-stocked prototype library, you can go from concept to table in a matter of minutes to quickly playtest your ideas or improve them.

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

The most obvious tell is when I'm continuing to put effort into a project without noteworthy improvements. Whether that means struggling to overcome a design challenge or simply not being able to figure out what a design needs. A change of perspective is vital for solving tough problems, and often that change of perspective



can only come after stepping away from a project for a significant amount of time.

If I find myself struggling with a project, I will shelve it and either work on another project or take time to check out new games or revisit old favorites. Whether I give it months on the shelf or just a single week, stepping away and letting my mind refresh itself has always proved to be the best solution.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

There are two portions of a design that I've noticed I struggle with the most: the transition between design and development, and the last 10% of development. (By development, I mean the portion of the design that is just making additional content and no longer designing mechanics or systems.)

I struggle with these because I lose motivation and excitement for the project. To regain that excitement, I playtest. Seeing players get excited and having fun with my games revitalizes me and gives me the drive to finish what I've started. Whenever I'm deep in the weeds and can't find the energy to keep going, I know a good round of playtesting will pull me back into a design frenzy.

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

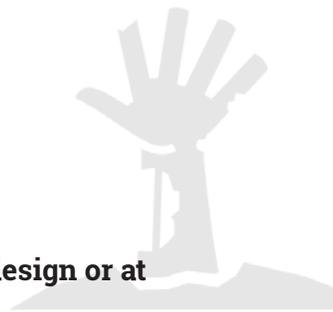
If you want to design games, just do it. You don't need a degree or years of experience or magical powers to be a designer, only a passion for design and creating fun experiences. Not every design is a success, even for "successful" designers.

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

Trust your instincts. Over the years, both regarding game design

and other parts of my life, I've learned that my first instincts are almost always right. And even when they're off, they lead to the best outcomes. As you're playtesting your games, trust what you feel. If you're not having fun, something needs to change. Even if the game adheres to your expected "balance," remember that the game needs to be fun and feel good to play.

# Isaac Vega



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

Many times I will put something in front of people, and it doesn't work the first, second, or twentieth time, but the seed for what it could become still connects with the players. However, sometimes I don't get that spark. If that happens enough times, even if the concept is still enjoyable to me, I think it is a good time to shelf it and move on to some other idea.

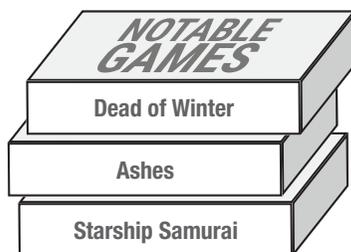
The games that have worked out tended to have something that has made other people interested in coming back early on, even if it was ugly for a long time before it was ready to go out into the world.

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

Honestly no, which can be kind of frustrating. I don't know what triggers “design mode Isaac.” It just comes and goes, and the best I can do is just let it take me when it happens. Having a nice chair, some relaxing sounds or music, being well fed and getting some good rest can help on some days.

But on other days, I can check all those boxes, and it does absolutely nothing for me. It really just depends on my mood, so all I can do is try my best to keep myself stress-free, and inspired by other people that are doing creative things in any form.

Hearing about their struggles and triumphs seems to (usually) get me back into the creative zone. When I am not feeling very inspired I try to focus on the more technical aspects of my work so that something is still getting done. Emails, editing, and tidying up my workspace are good things to tackle when I am feeling this way.



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

Don't worry too much. It happens, and it is going to keep happening as long as you want to be a designer. The most important thing to do in these moments is to take all the feedback you can. Push your players to be as honest as possible. Don't take it too personally; instead, crave the information they are giving you.

Remember, it is hard for people to be honest with you, so anything they are willing to tell you is worth listening to. You don't have to take everything that is said into account. You are the designer, it is your final call to make. Just make sure you take that feedback, make changes, and get it back to the table as quickly as possible. The faster you are able to bounce back, the faster you are going to find something that connects with people.

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

Patience. There is a pot of gold at the end of that rainbow. It's just going to take some time to get there. It is still the hardest thing to do, but now that I have been through this a few times I know that even if it seems like a grind, if I work hard, be patient, and bounce back from my failures as fast as possible, something good is going to be waiting for me at the end of it all.

**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?**

Know what kind of customers your game is targeting, and know that the company you are pitching to has a history of attracting those customers. You want to make sure that your game and the company make sense together.

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

Learn to make prototypes as quickly as possible. Most of being a successful designer is making sure you have something to bring to the table. If everything is just swimming in your head, nobody can actually play it, so get out that printer and get to cutting out those cards. The quicker you can make it real, the quicker you can make it good.

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

Be inclusive. I have strived to make sure that my games represent as diverse of an audience as possible. I want to make sure people that don't often see themselves in entertainment can see themselves in my work. It takes effort, and sometimes I fall short, but I want to make sure to keep striving to include more than just a narrow perspective and open as many people to the wonders of tabletop games as possible.

# Ignacy Trzewiczek

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

While working on First Martians for three years, I forgot I was designing a game and instead created a Mars-themed massive tabletop simulator. The project was rooted so deeply in science and actual NASA projects and simulations that at some point it lost the basic fun factor and changed into a perfect tool for reliving and testing different situations on Mars.

Never before have I received so many emails from scientists from all over the world saying congratulations. Although that was very kind and pretty fulfilling after all that homework I did with my research, that proved to be a sad point as it was no longer a game per se. Lesson learned I hope, as my next design, Detective, was much lighter and much more fun oriented, although once again, we did an insane amount of research. But we tried to keep the fun factor though very high.

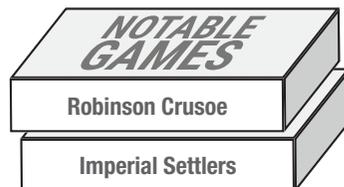
## **How do you know when to walk away from a design or at least put it on the shelf for a while?**

You finish when your production department takes it from you. Often after brutal melee combat. And yelling at each other. And cursing.

I am never finished. I always tweak. I always change. I cannot stop.

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

Working with Eric Lang on a secret project and the failure with First Martians both taught me that



less is better, cut rules in everything, and cleaning and smoothing are the king and queen.

**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 talk about mechanics. Talk about the game. Tell me why it's fun and why I'd love to play it. I am not going to have fun because it is a worker placement game with a deck building mechanism. I am going to have fun because I will be stranded on a deserted Island

and will be desperately looking for food, building shelter, and trying to create some simple tools to protect myself from beasts and wild animals.

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Portal Games  
Board games that tell stories

# Reiner Knizia

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

Oh, I have lots of failures. But I have a problem with the word failure because it already says this was a failure, and I’m not set up for the future. I think it was an early learning process for me. I grew up in a very small town where the barber actually was the only one who sold a few games, and so I did that for my own fun, and I had quite a big collection of my own games just for playing. Then, I decided to send my favorite games out to some publishers. And I got lots of nice little turn-me-downs, but through them, I was learning.

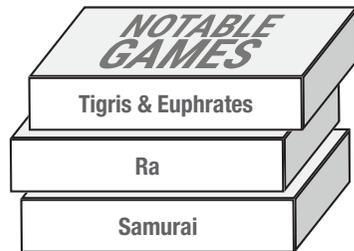
I got them because I treated my games not as finished products but just as ideas. So you have to build things for the future and design games for publication. And that means investing all the time that is necessary to develop a good idea into a perfect game.

And that is a very long process, and that process has to be completed. That’s the big thing to learn before you even approach a publisher. If you approach them with something half-cooked, you will be seen as a half-cooked designer.

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

That is a very tough question and a very relevant question because one of the biggest dangers as a designer is to fall in love with a design and throw good money or good time or good energy after that. So the sunk cost fallacy issue, if you want the technical term, doesn’t help you.

Personally, I have the curse of



the many ideas but the path from idea to finally having a perfect product is a long one, and there are always too many ideas that want to be fed and want to be nurtured and developed.

And when we test we can only play so many games in one testing session, so if you're not playing a game at least once a week you're not really working. And you're playing the games which are most promising which are the ones that are keeping you excited.

So, it's actually a natural evolution that never forces me to say I'm killing a game. I just didn't notice it laying there for two years. So it's a quiet death for many of these designs. But it's not painful because it just happens, and it's a natural process.

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

All I need is time and to get away from the daily hectic.

Avoid interruptions and get yourself a free piece of time when your mind is not halfway somewhere else. But that also means you don't want to have any big troubles you are worried about because it just distracts you. You want to be in harmony with yourself, and then the ideas will flow.

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

It depends. What's discouraging? Where does this discouragement come from? If it comes from the game not working, being disappointed is the normal business. If you found out very drastically that the game doesn't work, be happy. The curse is the game which somewhat works.

It's too good to be killed and too bad to be published. And this is much more a dilemma and a burden. So if you get a clear message that it doesn't work, be happy and work on something better.

But if you're disappointed because the game testers were very hard on the game, I must say be very happy. Then you have the right playtesters and good playtesters are people you want to con-

tinuously strangle because they don't give you a nice time. They give you a hard time, but it's very constructive. And if something like that discourages you, look for another job.

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

Recently, I moved back to Germany, so I had to create new play-testing groups. However, this has brought in a lot of much younger playtesters than I had before, and they have sparked a lot of new innovation because these younger people have grown up in a different world. They play different games.

It wasn't a habit, but it was a change of circumstances that influenced me the most and very positively. And it's nothing against the other playtesters. It's just this change of environment. The new demands and expectations for a game have really sparked a lot of new ideas and designs, and it's helped me to stay relevant.

**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?**

Well, ninety percent of the activities have already happened when he sits down and pitches the game to a publisher. Because what is very important is to, first of all, know what other products are out there and to know what are the right publishers to show the game to. And so this has all happened once you are sitting down with the publisher.

You have to understand what this publisher has in their mind and which markets the publisher serves and how your design fits into this overall environment. So if you have that understanding, I think it helps you very much to connect with the publishing partner on a higher level and create an understanding that goes beyond the individual game to see how it fits in the framework.

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

I think the best advice is don't do it as you are advised. Find your own way.

Try to build your career. Be not afraid that your game idea will be stolen by the next person or the next publisher. Have trust in the publishers, particularly if they are well-known. But I think the best advice I could give is to go for the small publishers because if you are new you will learn much more from the small publishers.

If you deal with the very big companies you are not part of that process. You lose control over the design. You may make more money, but if you are in it for the money, forget about it.

And with a small publisher, you will get clearer feedback and faster feedback, and you will also know that their heart is in it because they cannot afford a flop.

And I think your objective when you start is not to have a hit. It's nice to have a super duper hit. But play the long game. Get published. Get known. Get familiar with the industry. Get published in different countries and different cultures and different types of games and build up this basis and the understanding for a career. If you can do it in one or two years, good for you. I couldn't.

I needed many, many, many, years and am still learning a lot.

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

I'm a very strong believer in simplicity. I'm trying to keep my life very simple and to have very few commitments. My commitments are very much towards my inner circle of friends and family where I have enough time, and the simplicity in my life just allows me to focus on what I really want to do and allows me to create many games and bring lots of enjoyment to many people around the world.

And I think that is my greatest philosophy, and it expresses itself everywhere, but it also expresses itself in the games because I'm also by nature a scientist and scientists reduce redundancy to a few principles.

## Dustin Schwartz's Top 3 Tips for Writing Rulebooks

1) Use plain language. Readers will process your rules better if you write informally. Plain language is vastly preferable to dense legalese. Even college textbooks and government manuals are targeted to a middle-grade reading level. If the language is comfortable, it becomes invisible, allowing the gameplay concepts to shine through. Take cues from your teaching script to help develop an engaging, conversational tone.

2) Start with the skeleton. In every good term paper, the outline comes first; rulebooks are no different. Starting with the outline will help you progress from the big picture to small details. It's no secret that this macro-to-micro approach is how many of the best game teachers approach their explanations. It simply makes games easier to grasp — whether you're teaching verbally or communicating through the written page.

3) Explain the why. You've played your game countless times; you know all of the mechanical nuances and all of the strategies. But the keys to playing correctly — and playing well — may not be as apparent as you would like to think. Sprinkle in a healthy dose of why so that readers grasp the important decision points. They'll have an easier time with your rules if you offer up context.

# Corey Konieczka

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

This happens even with the best games. My playtests usually alternate between amazing sessions and discouraging ones, sometimes with few, if any, gameplay differences! The discouraging sessions are often the most helpful as they will help highlight what your design needs to make it to the next level.

## **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?**

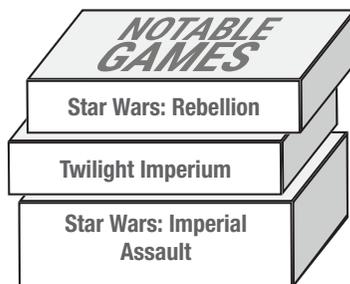
Every publisher is interested in different sorts of games. Research the games in the publisher's catalog, and make sure your game is a good fit for them. You may also need to explain how your game is different than what is in their catalog, so be prepared for this as well. Lastly, have fun with it. If you're having fun teaching the game, then they are more likely to have fun playing it.

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

You need to be original. Don't try to copy the trends and popular games in the industry, because this is what everyone is trying to do. Do something fresh and new that people aren't expecting.

## **When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

I find a small task in my project and try to tackle it. This gets me in a productive mindset and almost



always inspires me to tackle the bigger problems. Just remember that it is a marathon, not a race. No matter the size of the project, if you make small progress every day, then you'll eventually reach the end.

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

Designing games requires grit and determination. You will get plenty of negative feedback about your games, but it is not personal. Use this feedback to improve your games and become a better designer.

# Jason Tagmire



**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

I'm a very hands-on game designer. Whether it's drawing up a prototype, cutting out shapes, or jumping right into photoshop for some visual inspiration, I think I make the most design progress when I start getting crafty.

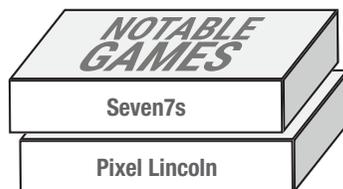
As a terrible artist, I was thrilled to receive The Game Crafter's Game Designer Ruler as a Christmas present from designer Jason Greeno. It's an amazing stencil/ruler/compass/all-in-one that I use to create card shapes and hexes and cubes and everything else that I struggle with on my own. It's as inspiring as a big pile of components but in a nice, portable, and customizable package.

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

I will put it on the shelf as soon as a new design has me more excited. You can't fight that excitement, and as long as it's not a paid project that you are working on, you probably shouldn't try to fight the excitement. Take it and get the most out of it before that dies down. Now, some people work only in those bursts and would end up shelving everything. In that case, I think the best bet is to find a design partner that is better at the development side of things.

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

I always like to think about perspective and context. If someone really hated and tore the game apart, does that mean the game



isn't doing what it should? It could also mean the game is doing exactly what it should be doing, and that type of game is simply not for them. But if somebody is breaking the game, it's hard to not get discouraged watching the things that you thought worked, start to fall apart.

In that case, take a big, deep breath, and instead of getting down or defensive, try to get a solid discussion going so you can fully understand the core of the issue. Is it something the game is overdoing, or is it something the game is missing? Getting the complexity of the issue out of the playtesters will soften the blow of finding out that the game is breaking. If you end at their initial feedback alone, you'll end up with so many questions and likely be very discouraged.

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

I started a daily design diary based on Merriam Webster's Word of the Day. I take the word, no matter what it is and try to make it into something game-related. It doesn't have to be a full game and can be as small as a turn order mechanic. This has been everything from impossible to inspiring and everywhere in between. Now I have a full book of mechanics and themes to look back on, further develop, or even stay away from. It's been a great learning experience.

# Flaminia Brasini

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

The tendency to abandon my ideas is very high! I get discouraged and bored easily, unfortunately.

About the ideas on which I work with others (with Virginio now and first with the Acchittocca team), there are actually only two cases: to abandon the project or to put it aside temporarily.

I want to abandon a project only when I see that a prototype does not generate enough fun at the table. It isn't important if the mechanics seem to be interesting or if everything goes smoothly. If most of the playtesters do not get excited, it is better to let it go.

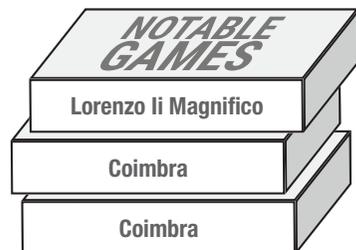
Putting it on the shelf for a while is much more frequent. If you notice that you are fixating on something that does not make what you have in mind, take some time and get some distance from the game to allow you to start again by thinking in new ways. On the other hand, since Virginio is much more stubborn and constant than me, it happens rather rarely.

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

In order to create games, like in any other creative activity, there are two things that open my mind and allow me to think: a long walk and a hot bath! It is also very useful to talk with others but in different phases.

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

Play everything you can without



assumptions and with the greatest possible openness. Work with others. Not only in the sense of doing as many tests as possible of your games (which is fundamental), but also in the sense of trying other people's prototypes, talking about games, going to meetings, etc. The things we discover together are infinitely more than the things you would discover by yourself, and the pleasure of discovering together is enormously greater.

About the advice to ignore, I would say not to focus too much on things that are "trendy" at a certain moment. Fashions pass, tastes change, and it is better to work on good, well-made, interesting things and create a personal style, instead of trying to adapt to the present trend.

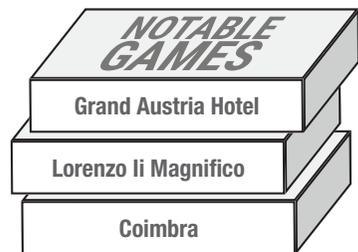
# Virginio Gigli

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

I think Splendor is an exemplary game from the point of view of game design. I have a lot of admiration for how Marc Andrè managed to “dry” the mechanics and nevertheless has left significant tactical and strategic choices. It is a perfect game to examine the various elements that constitute the “raw material” of game design (resources, mechanics, short and long-term objectives) that are very evident, analyzable and fully functional. I'd like to be able to create a game like that. My games are much more complex, but it's probably easier to make complex games than simple ones.

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

In 2014, a very important German publisher was holding Signorie and Principati, two of our games in which we had high expectations. We had already received an advance payment for Signorie, and it seemed that the game would be released in a year. Then, we also gave them Principati with the idea that it would have been the game for the following year. At Essen, we met the publisher who told us that he had doubts to publish Signorie, and he would have liked if we had tried to make a game just by putting together some elements taken from both games. Flaminia and I looked at each other and decided to take back the two games to show them to other publishers. It was a great disappointment, but now I remember it with pleasure, because both games are on my shelf, but with the names changed. Now they are called Lorenzo il Magnifico and Coimbra.



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

First, it is better to have a really discouraging playtest than a falsely encouraging one. Second, the main thing to understand is if the game did not work because of problems in its structure or if the central idea is weak. In the first case, analyze all the problems that occurred during the playtest and find a new solution for each one of them, in order to replay it as soon as possible. In the second case, recover the wooden cubes and the cards sleeves, which will be useful in the next game.

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

Play a lot (you cannot compose music if you have not heard much of it). Read as much as you can about game design. Be humble and evaluate the criticisms more than compliments from playtests. If possible, work together with some other author. For me and Flaminia to be together is very helpful, and we have always worked with someone else. Working together is very useful for brainstorming and playtesting and makes everything more enjoyable.

The advice that I think should be ignored is to focus on “what the market asks.” Often, it will stop asking soon.

# Tim Eisner

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

Magic the Gathering. Playing MtG for years and reading articles by the Wizards of the Coast design team introduced me to game design. In Magic, you are combining different mechanics and cards and, in a sense, doing game design within a very controlled environment.

Getting into Magic can be a big investment, so this is not a whole-hearted endorsement. I think a lot of modern deck builders can teach similar lessons.

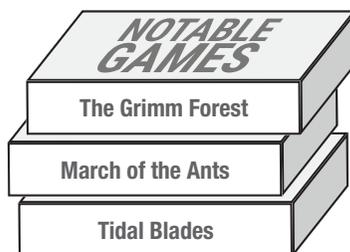
## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

A good paper cutter! Sleeving prototype cards is the most efficient way I have found to iterate my prototypes and having a good paper cutter makes the assembly so much quicker.

I also recently bought a notebook with section dividers. As I am currently working on multiple designs, this helps me keep all my notes in one place, while keeping notes for each game together.

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

In 2015, I ran a Kickstarter for a game I designed called Little Pig, and it did not fund. I had already run a successful campaign for March of the Ants and assumed that Little Pig would fund easily. It did not, based on multiple factors; one of which was the name. When said out loud, "Little Pig" can have a kind of menace but in writing it



gives the impression that the game is for little kids. After the Kick-starter failed, I was pretty discouraged.

Fast forward to Gencon 2016, and I have renamed the game “Grimm Forest” and pitch it to Druid City Games, and it is a perfect fit. The Druid City Games team did awesome development work on the game, exceeded my expectations with out-of-this-world production, and the game ended up reaching a huge audience.

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

I try to make a list of design goals when I start a new project to help me remember what the main focus and inspiration of the game is. If the game gets bogged down in playtesting and is still having issues after a few rounds of development, then I will return to those design goals. If I’ve lost sight of those original goals I know it is time to put it on the shelf for a while.

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

A few years ago, I got in the habit of taking extensive notes during playtests. I now try to write down all of my thoughts and observations. Writing these down lets me return my focus to the game and ensures that the note will not be lost. Taking notes when receiving feedback after a playtest helps me retain what I hear, and shows my testers that I am listening to and considering their thoughts on 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?**

Get your idea to the table as quickly as possible. Live tests of a game are the best way to see if it is viable and the quickest way to analyze what needs to change. It is also one of the most fun parts of designing and can give you the boost you need to keep working on a design.

Don't spend too much time making your game pretty at the beginning, but don't ignore the impact of a nice looking prototype on players once the game is more polished.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

Getting out in nature works the best for me. When I am neck deep in a design I am spending a lot of time in my head and in the abstract systems I have created. Hiking around in the woods helps me refocus and remember that the system I am working on is just a very small part of this world.

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

Having a co-designer can be immensely helpful in seeing a project all the way through to completion. Game design is a lot of work (and fun) so having a dedicated collaborator will make it more fun, and help you keep going through the rough spots.

# Adrienne Ezelle's Top 3 Tips for Working with an Artist

1) Know what you want. Do your research. Know how things should develop over time. And know what you want the final product to look like.

Create a file of art you like. You can just right click and save images off the Internet. Try to remember where you got them. If it's somebody that does art for games and you might want to hire them then it'll be beneficial to know who that is.

And it is also helpful to have a list of things that you really don't like. A few of those examples are great because that's going to save you time and changes. It's going to save your artist time. And time is money.

2) Know what your artist does and is capable of. If you need something photorealistic there are certain people you can go to and certain people who just can't do that style. So make sure the artist you're working with can do what you expect. If you show up to somebody that you know only works in black and white and you ask them to work in full color, that's not going to work.

3) Know what your budget is and stick to it. Make sure your artists know that this is your final budget, and that's going to allow for really open communication as far as iterations or changes or how large something can be, or how long they can take to work on this for that amount of money.

Artists typically have an hourly rate and a project rate, and they need to stick to that as well because they're paying bills just like publishers are.

And it's easy coming from the publishing side or even the playing side. It's easy to look at art as something that's not quantifiable as far as time, but as I said, time is money. And that's not really fair to the artists, and you'll start getting a bad reputation if you want ten hours of work and only want to pay for two that. That definitely makes its way around the community.

**Bonus tip)** Art Station is my go-to website to find artists.

# John Coveyou

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

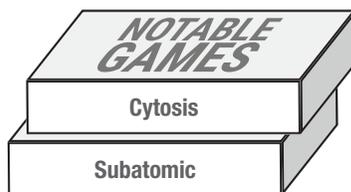
Getting into the design mindset can be tough - especially during work hours when I'm trying to balance design work with regular tasks necessary to keep the business afloat. Designing is a totally different mind space for me than business work.

To get into the designing mindset, I do what probably sounds counterintuitive to the creative process - I actually begin with a ton of research. I try to isolate myself and remove as many distractions as possible! I sit down with my stack of biology or chemistry textbooks, and I study the intricacies and inner workings of whatever topic I'm about to design a game around. This is what tends to get my mind into the zone for actually generating useable and innovative ideas for a game. Along the way, I take notes on things that strike me, or I start tinkering with ways that the science I am learning could be translated through a game mechanism.

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

First, there is no such thing as a discouraging session of playtesting. Games are not about the paper and cardboard they are made out of, nor are they about the designer who made them. Games are about the experience they offer the players who are playing them. A good designer remembers this ALWAYS! So how can you make sure the experience your games offer is amazing? By soaking up as much information as possible from the people who are playing your game.

If you go into a playtest hoping to hear nice things about your game, you are already destined for failure because your intentions and



mindset are wrong, and your game will suffer for it. If you go into a playtest session hoping to identify what the most frustrating, the most confusing, the most clunky, etc. parts of your game are, you will succeed. And now you know what needs to be fixed next! This is what a successful playtest really is.

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

First, I have a commitment to my team at Genius Games to work on game designs for at least sixteen hours every week. And I don't mean writing rulebooks or corresponding with the artists. I mean actually designing, prototyping, and playtesting the games I am currently in the middle of creating.

The second habit is doing work that involves deep concentration in a quiet distraction-free place for long periods of time. I don't think it's very effective for me to work on a design when I only have twenty or thirty minutes. It's best for me to work on a new idea when

I know I have a few hours of uninterrupted time in front of me.

The third is getting things on the table and playtesting them immediately. No nice artwork or fancy components, just pieces of paper with scribbles on them and start playing to see what works and what doesn't. I am not saying everyone should do this, and most of the time we don't do this because we're insecure about what people will think if the design sucks. But the design process is a very iterative process. Nothing comes out ready the first time. So getting the first few iterations done quickly and finding out where "the game" is with your design right away (and what's not working about the design right away) is a great habit to get into.

The sheer regularity and accountability of all of this has helped

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me hone my design skills immensely. There are so many things that you can't be taught - you just have to learn. And that takes a commitment to regularly practicing your craft.

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

First I would ask, do you just want to make a game or do you want to be a game designer? These are different things. Anyone can "make a game." That's easy, and it doesn't mean the game is going anywhere. But to be a game designer, that takes practice, perseverance, the willingness to fail over and over again and the emotional maturity to learn from those failures. And when you do that, you realize there's no such thing as failure, just another thing you've learned.

Something that was a huge benefit to me as a new game designer that I heartily suggest is to do disciplined design sprints. Set yourself a short timeline in which to design a small game with a specific limited amount of components, say only eight dice. Design it, playtest it, fix it, maybe playtest it again, then toss the idea in the trash. Now, create an entirely new game (can't use the same core mechanism as the previous one) with those same eight dice, and repeat. Then do that over and over and over again, and once you get totally and completely sick of designing dice games, then repeat the whole thing but with tokens...and then tiles...and then cards...etc

This will help you with a few things:

First, and maybe most importantly, you'll learn not to fall in love with a certain aspect or mechanic of a game so much that you are unwilling to let it go, even if it doesn't serve this game well. You'll learn to take feedback and that a game is just a thing you're working on, and how good or bad it is is not a reflection on you.

Second, you'll learn how to really think outside the box and get really creative with all the possible uses of components. This will be a great asset in your designer toolkit.

Third, you'll learn to iterate quickly.

Also, learn what to leave out of your game. As a designer, you'll often generate way more content than you can possibly fit into a game. Figure out what is truly essential to your game, then strip away what doesn't enhance or support those essentials.

Once you've played your rough prototype to see how it functions, here are a few key things to consider to start developing it into the final product:

Fix the worst things first. Remember back in school when you made mostly 80's and 90's in on all your assignments, but still your overall grade was a 75%... how come? Usually, it was because there were one or two assignments that you totally bombed - and that pulled your entire grade down! It's the same thing for those few elements in your game that are the most irritating to playtesters, the most difficult to explain or remember, etc. Those are the ones that bring their overall impression of the game down. Focus on fixing those worst things first, and you'll get a great return on your effort.

Find the fun - then amplify It! What actions do players enjoy taking most as they play your game? Make sure these are things that are optimal paths to victory. It would not be a great experience if the things that win you the game are the least enjoyable things to do, and if things that were the most fun (and appropriately challenging) didn't get you anywhere in the game.

And listen. Games that offer rich, memorable experiences get talked about more often, get played more often, and get purchased more often. That's a fact! With this in mind, remember that game design is NOT about the thing you make - rather it's about the experience people have while playing the game. So as you refine your game, you need every clue you can get about what that experience is really like for people. Listen very carefully for what's behind every excited laugh, frustrated comment, and even minor critiques.

# Tim Fowers



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

I'll often recommend something based on what space they're in. Usually, they have something they're working on and we'll discuss it and we'll look at where they're going with it. And so a lot of times I'll ask high-level stuff like what is your goal and what is your victory condition.

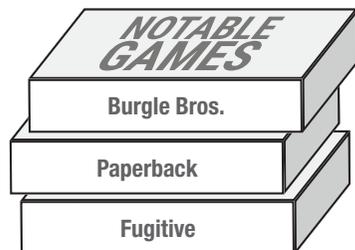
That is a very common thing I ask young designers and by victory condition, I mean your journey in this industry, what is it?

What does a victory look like? Is that getting a game on a shelf? Is that getting something accepted by a publisher? Is that doing board game design full time? And that can certainly shape a lot of business decisions they make. But when it comes to individual games for them I always try to find something in the same design space as what they're working on.

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

A big one I had was in the video game realm, but I had a game called Clock Words that we made an initial version of. It was a tower defense typing game with some deck building elements, and we made a first version that was pretty popular. Then, we were coming back with the second version of it, and I had an ethical crisis with it.

And so I really jumbled up the game design and went away from why it was successful in the first one, and it didn't really sell well. And it just went away, but then down the road, a couple of iterations later, it became the game Paperback. So, that worked out.



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

I think it's when you get to what I call thrash where it's not working, and you just start to try really radical things. It's when you've tried a bunch of things and it's not going anywhere, and you feel desperation where you really want to make it work, but you can't quite turn the corner on it.

Sometimes you've got a really seductive mechanic that you try to shoehorn designs into. I still have ones that I hope to someday get to work, but you need to just get away from it for a while and maybe resurrect it later. The psychology can mess with you if you put a lot of time into it, but if you don't have anything new to try, you need to move on.

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

Your first couple of playtests are always going to burn to the ground. You have to develop a thick skin, but a lot of it is understanding that you are not what you make.

As a creative person, you can put a lot of your self-worth into a game, so I tell new designers to start a second design for their mental health. That way, whenever they don't have answers for a game or if they just had a bad session, they can go work on the other one.

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

I've had to learn to pace myself. When I went full time, I thought I'd be able to make more games and make them faster, but I learned that doing too much at once made life too hectic. With all the extra business activities that I'm responsible for, I've realized that I'm a "one game a year" guy. I just try to put an hour or two each day into design

to move a game forward, and that seems to be pretty healthy for me.

**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?**

For this, we're talking about the victory condition again. They need to understand that they're only going to walk away with a couple thousand dollars, and in the end, if their victory condition is to get a game on shelves, as a first step, that's totally valid.

You need to know your elevator pitch. You need to be able to explain your game really quickly and be resilient. Sell the fantasy of your game and then dig into mechanics. Sell the magic moment in the game above all else.

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

I really don't like when someone tells a designer they should just pitch stuff to publishers. A lot of people aren't made to deal with shipping and manufacturing and whatnot, but it gets back to what your victory condition is and what you're really wanting out of your experience in the industry.

I look at it this way: you can have a day job or you can do the gaming business stuff you don't like. Either way, you're going to have to eat your vegetables. And you might be one of the five people in the US who can live off being just a game designer, and you could also win the lottery. But if you want to take a shot at doing this full time, don't be afraid of Kickstarting and manufacturing and shipping. Doing all of it isn't for everybody, but there are plenty of people who can do the whole process.

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

I probably should have started using Kickstarter in 2010 instead of 2013. Even a failure would have been educational and probably got me to where I am a little bit faster. But who knows. It might have changed the trajectory.



## James Hudson

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

Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective. It creates a sense of teamwork unlike other games. The team has to work together and the interactions and discussion are unlike most games. It gets people interacting and talking better than most games.

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

Rotary paper cutter. A high-quality paper cutter is life changing for game design. I started out doing everything with scissors and boy was that stupid! Then I met Travis Magrum at a design retreat and he changed my life forever. He introduced me to the rotary paper cutter and I have never looked back. Seriously, if you don't read anything else, this will change your life!

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

My favorite "failure" was Guardian's Call. It was a big let down for me personally. The Kickstarter did not perform at the level I had expected. It finished with \$37,000 and I had expected it to be in the \$100-150k range. Let me preface this conversation with the understanding that I am "complaining about a funded campaign," but there were things I wanted to add into the game that were not feasible because it didn't have the support.

One of the big reasons I consider the campaign a failure was because I went with a 10 day Kickstarter campaign. At the time, it seemed like a fantastic idea! Most funding comes in the first 48 and the last 48



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hours, so trimming out the middle was very logical. However, just because something is good for you, the creator, doesn't mean it will align with consumers. I learned this the hard way! I thought the added urgency would encourage people to go ahead and jump on board, but instead, it made people feel rushed to make a decision so they instead opted to not support it.

This made the campaign fall in that weird space of funded, but not enough of an overfund to be able to make anything on the campaign. That barely funded space is a tough one for creators and something to be aware of.

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

I think when design choices aren't naturally flowing is a good time to take a break. This happens to me a lot. I have several projects in that state right now actually. Inspiration is hard to manufacture so when it dries up, I have found it best to unplug and go do the things that inspire me.

What are those things, James? I am glad you asked! For me, it's reading books, watching movies, playing other people's games, listening to music, and getting outside away from electronics. I have found I need a minimum 5 days unplugged a few times a year to really recenter and start bringing fresh ideas to the surface.

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

Typically, it's when I am trying to sleep. I think it's because my brain finally stops working on the "to-do" list and has some free time to just "tread water." This sometimes leads me to get back out of bed and go into a prototyping frenzy or a note writing session.

Either way, get that stuff out of your head and onto paper!

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

THIS IS THE TIME TO MAKE YOUR GAME GREAT! The best progressions of my games have come after the most brutal playtests. I remember taking *Tidal Blades* to Jeremy at Man vs Meeple and thinking, “He is gonna love this!” He played it and looked like he was in pain the entire time. His response was, “That was terrible,” and then spent 15 minutes ripping the game to shreds.

It was tough to hear. Of course, I instantly got defensive and wanted to negate everything he said with “that’s his opinion,” but then on my 8-hour drive home from his house, I really thought about all his critiques and started letting my mind think about ways I could address them. What spawned from that playtest was one of the biggest swings in the gameplay mechanics of the game, and now we have a fantastic game. I owe a lot to Jeremy for being the kind of friend that tells you what you don’t want to hear.

### **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?**

Listen to everything they say. You are getting a glimpse of someone that knows what their audience is looking for in a game. If they say there is a reason that a game won’t appeal, note it, and see if it is something you can address.

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

Get a game signed with someone you trust to help you see your vision executed, not just the first person to offer you a contract. Not all publishers are created equal. Finding a partner that can help you make your game better and marketable is key.

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

I had heard people talk about how much work it would be, but I didn't really have perspective for that. The amount of work it takes to make a game a physical product is enormous. Enormous!

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

The harder I work, the luckier I get. - Yogi Berra

This can be applied to your career, your home life, and your relationships. Put in the work, even more than you think is fair, and opportunities will find their way into your lap.



## Kelly North Adams

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

A notebook to write down all my thoughts, inspirations, and ideas. I have a list of mechanics, random thoughts, and design ideas in my notebook that I regularly pull from. I try to write everything down because you never know when that little idea might work in a future game design. It is nifty to read through your iterations of games as it sort of tells a story which can be really neat to look back on. You'd be surprised how much you learn about yourself as a designer in doing this. I cannot count how many times I've forgotten about an idea in my early design days because I didn't write it down. Now I write everything down.

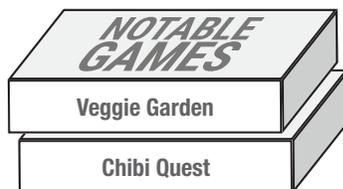
**What would you tell a designer that just experienced a really discouraging session of playtesting?**

It happens to all of us, so don't fret. Most importantly, start a discussion around the table. Recognize and take good notes about what didn't work and listen to all the people who are taking the time to playtest your game and give you feedback. This is one of the most valuable parts of the game design process.

**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?**

Come prepared, keep it short, and read the room.

1.) Come prepared - bring a sell sheet highlighting all of your games you'd like to pitch. This allows the publisher to tell you what they are interested in instead of you trying to figure out



what they might be interested in. Most publishers already know what they are looking for to flesh out their current portfolio.

2.) Keep it short - don't start setting up an entire game expecting them to play it. Publishers meet so many people and see so many games during a fair or event, they just want you to tell them what makes your game unique. Then ask them if they would like to know more or how they would like you to proceed.

3.) Know how to read the room - if they do not seem interested, don't be pushy or waste their time. Sometimes it is just about making a new contact in the industry or finding out what that publisher's needs are. You might not have the game they want today, but you might be working on an idea they want in the future.

# Adam Sadler

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

I always recommend just playing the games you find fun. While you play those games, try to pinpoint the exact parts of the game that are fun for you. This will help you bring your own version of that fun into your own designs.

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

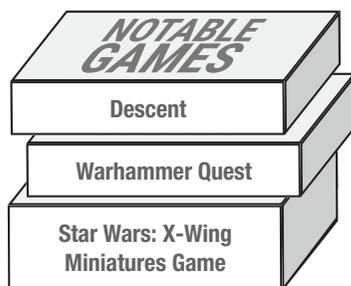
It usually comes down to what contracts we are working on. Brady and I hardly ever have the luxury of having a game designed before signing a contract. Publishers typically contract us to design a specific game for them. I know that this isn't true for many other designers, but that's how we work.

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

I typically work with Netflix or Hulu streaming in the background of my office. For whatever reason, listening to *The Office*, *Friends*, or *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* keeps me very productive.

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

Brady and I like to draft a rulebook for a game as early as possible in the design process. I've talked to several other designers who do this at the end, and we try to avoid this. We always want a copy of the rules on hand during playtests to make sure everyone is following



the current rules exactly, and we can make notes about any changes as we play.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

Take a break. I've found that dwelling on a lack of focus just draws it out even longer. Most of the time, after I take a break from a design that has me stumped, I'll go watch a movie or play a video game, and it distracts me enough for new ideas to find their way into my mind.

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

Designing board games can take away some of the fun of playing board games. When you make your hobby your work, it does become work. Regardless of how much you enjoy your work, it brings with it the normal stresses of other jobs. You have to think about the business behind developing, manufacturing, distributing, and marketing the games as much as the games themselves.

# John Brieger's Top 3 Tips for Running a Successful Playtest Session

1) Start with observation. The experience of your game is happening while players are playing it, and something I see a lot of designers do is focus too much time and effort and attention during a playtest into the questions they're going to ask players post-game. Spend more time thinking about the data that you're collecting during play. Use the post-game time to mirror and deepen your understanding of players' experiences during play.

2) Empathize and understand that your playtesters are people who have their own needs which may be different from yours. As an industry, we need to be paying more attention to the idea of research ethics.

If you're going to present testers with material that may make them uncomfortable, you need to inform them ahead of time. Playtesters need to be comfortable stopping your test at any time and quitting. You really want to make sure that you aren't creating an uncomfortable situation for someone

3) Analyze. I think it's really easy to look at data that comes back from a playtest and make knee jerk responses. You always want to interpret data in aggregate, so take some time to collate data between tests or between players. Then, try to make one fix to the iteration of your design that solves multiple issues.

# Brady Sadler

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

I've actually never singled out a single game as inspiration because I believe to be a successful game designer you have to play as many games as possible—good and bad games.

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

My shelves are lined with failures (unfinished or shelved designs). I keep them in plain view as motivation because I don't have much shelf space left for failures so I better keep succeeding.

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

Get used to it. Playtesting is easily the most grueling part of the process. Don't use it as the sole indicator of your project's fun factor.

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

Know your goals. I personally found myself trying to innovate until I took a long look at games I liked and realized none of them were super innovative. Innovation is always a noble thing to strive for, but once I accepted that I don't need to innovate to create things I love, my focus and output significantly improved.

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

My main advice would be not to hinge personal success with hav-



ing your name on a box. Instead, focus on creating something that you honestly want to enjoy with other people.

Ignore any advice that goes directly against why you want to be creative in this space. Everyone has different reasons they want to make games, so take everyone else's advice with a grain of salt as they might not align to why you're creating games.

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

Keep your day job.

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

I like to think that creating is similar to speaking. How you say something is more powerful than the thing you are saying.

# Josh Carlson



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

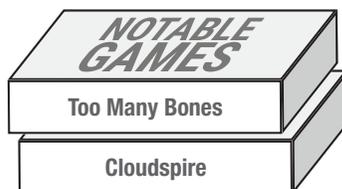
Beef Jerky. My go-to beverage. My go-to teammates.

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

Take a break. Learn a game or two you’ve never played before to purge the rut you’re in. Before jumping in again, review what’s working in the game. Let that decide and fuel (or not) your efforts and strategy. Really good games don’t just happen, and golden ideas hit just as many roadblocks and require just as much blood, sweat, and tears. That said, if a review of what’s working doesn’t spark excitement, maybe it’s time to change course.

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

The “magic” happens in the middle, and the middle is much much bigger than me. That perfectly awesome game concept I think I may have at the very beginning could be complete crap without the innovation, inspiration, and investment by the rest of my team. Everyone needs a sounding board of some sort. The sooner I involve others in small or big ways throughout the entire process, the better the result.





## Elizabeth Hargrave

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

I don't really have a ritual, but I do find that I'm more creative and productive in a designing sense when I have a good amount of mental downtime. People really do have good ideas in the shower because their brains are roaming freely. But in my lifetime, I've seen smartphones make a lot of those little pieces of idle time go away. Waiting in line, I might pull out my phone and check email; walking over to a friend's house, I listen to a podcast. There's no empty space.

So I try to remind myself to create those empty spaces and to just be okay with the boredom and let my mind wander. To go for a walk without putting my headphones in. To lie in bed for a while in the morning without picking up my phone.

Vacations are also really important. If I have a couple of weeks away from everything, I literally start waking up every morning with new ideas.

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

Every game is terrible when it starts out. You can't make it better without feedback. Sometimes the biggest breakthroughs come from the worst playtests because you've exposed the fatal flaws of your design.

Don't take the feedback personally or think that people are judging you based on the current state of your game. Most playtesters understand that every game has to go through this process. They don't expect your game to be great yet. They know you're smart enough to make it better, and they want to help you get it there.



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

Learning NanDeck was a huge breakthrough for me to make and revise a set of cards or tiles quickly. It was absolutely essential for the huge Wingspan deck. But even for the 18 cards in Tussie-Mussie, I reached a point where it was clearly going to be faster to make revisions in NanDeck than in the Word document I started in. Being able to change all the cards at once just saves a mind-blowing amount of time. It doesn't have to be NanDeck, but probably every designer working with cards or tiles should be using some merge-based program.

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

I hear from people quite a lot that they're working on something, then it turns out that they haven't playtested it yet. I think this comes from fear of being judged. The most important thing to realize is that you absolutely cannot make a game without playtesting it.

And if it's your first design, you'll probably need to playtest it a lot. Wrap your head around the concept of a hundred playtests, which a lot of people recommend. Wingspan had far more than that before it was finished.

Given that you're going to need this unfathomable amount of playtesting to make a really good game, you just have to push through your fear of being judged for your design. There is no other way to make progress. You must put something out there.

Make friends with other designers. They'll have more patience for playing games that aren't good yet, and they often can articulate what needs fixing better than your average player can. And you'll avoid burning out your regular gaming friends as playtesters.

Up front, spend as little time as possible making things pretty.

It will all change. Playtest first. Later, I do think making things pretty will help you get playtesters if you're going to public events. And a lot of people say that publishers don't care about whether your prototype is pretty, but how can they not? At some point, aesthetics are part of the UI. The trick is finding the sweet spot where you're not wasting time on aesthetics before they matter.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

My weekly playtesting buddy, Matthew O'Malley, usually pushes me to articulate who I think the ideal player for a game would be and what I want their experience to be. I find this surprisingly hard but really productive.

Often, when something isn't working in a game, it's not really clear how to proceed. Do I add something or remove something? But often it's because I'm not really being clear about what my goals are.

If you know, for example, that you're working on a game for families, and you want people to enjoy the tactile experience of the pieces, that gives you a lens that dramatically narrows the search space for improvements. The starting point might be to streamline, to keep it family weight. And you might do that by taking out anything that doesn't involve manipulating the pieces because you want those to be the focus.

Or maybe that game that you started as a family game isn't family weight anymore, and you like it better in its more complex form. Asking yourself these questions can help you realize that, and it can make the path forward so much clearer.

It comes more naturally to me because I'm so theme-driven, but asking the same questions about whether things are working with the theme or against it can also help many designs.

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

Playtesting will eat up a lot of the time that you would otherwise spend playing published games.

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

That's such an interesting question. I try to live by the golden rule, assume the best in other people, and leave the world a little better than I found it. And I think those things do come through in my game designs. I tend to avoid negative player interactions, and I like giving players the feeling that they're building something. Even if you're not winning the game, having built something can be very satisfying. And that's true in life, too, isn't it?



## Curt Covert

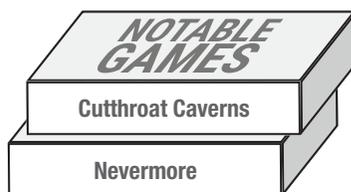
**How has a failure, or apparent failure, set you up for later success? Do you have a “favorite failure” of yours?**

I tend not to use the word failure, as it connotes a sense of “things ending as a result.” I view such setbacks in my ongoing endeavors as hard lessons, and I have learned a LOT of lessons over the years.

As a publisher, my first hard lesson could have been my last, leading to true failure. I did all I could to try to avoid as many pitfalls as possible when I started. These were the days before Kickstarter, so I had to put my house on second mortgage to pay for my first print run. The problem was I printed WAY too many (5000), without any means of getting them to the public. I wouldn't get a chance to meet distributors and retailers until 6 months later at the GAMA Trade Show. They sat in a warehouse, costing me money and potentially for a very long time. But happily, I ended up catching the buyer of Spencer's Gifts on a good day when she took my unsolicited cold call (unheard of) and then ended up buying half the print run in one shot, which paid for the run.

As a designer, I had to face a hard truth about one of my designs. It was broken, badly. Nevermore had originally featured player elimination. These days, player elimination has fallen into extreme disfavor, and deservedly so, but the mechanic had been a mainstay of backstabby games like ours forever. Here, however, it was particularly horrible as players could be eliminated suddenly and potentially early in the game, which was unacceptable. I walked away from the playtest understanding changes were necessary, but unclear how to proceed forward. It was one of those moments where you wonder if you need to shelf the game for a while.

But, inspired by the discussion afterwards, I ended up breathing



new life into the game with player transformation. The idea was that by changing a player's game state to a severely disadvantaged one, but one that could be recovered with great effort, players could

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keep playing and still have a hope of winning. Because it was hard to correct and you couldn't win in that state, it was still meaningful for other players to transform you. It scratched the player elimination itch, without the baggage. On top of that, it completely changed a transformed player's game experience and strategy, mid-game. Some players so love the challenge, they ended up looking forward to the transformation into a Raven.

Player transformation was borne out of necessity and has become a favorite mechanic in my arsenal of design tools, but never would have come about without the playtest crashing so badly.

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

Game design is an iterative process. No game is perfect out of the gate and most are in need of several serious shakedowns and rebuilds. Playtests should not be viewed as a means of verifying your game is good or that you are a good designer. That's your ego talking and it has no place at a playtest.

It is intended as an opportunity to make your game better, and this can only happen if you find problems. If you are discouraged by playtesting, it means you are focused on the end of the process or have naively assumed game design is easy. But mostly, it means that you have misunderstood the value of that playtest.

A successful playtest is one where you identify problems, especially if the test suggests a way in which the game can be improved. The worst playtest is one in which friends and family don't tell you

your baby is ugly and wrap up with, “This was fun.” That’s why playtests are best done with people who don’t know you or won’t hold back constructive criticism. Far worse, in fact, is the case where a problem is not identified in the testing process and goes to press with that “time bomb” of an issue waiting to be discovered by the gaming public. Once released, your reputation, the game’s reputation, and your financial investment in the game is at risk.

You may also become overwhelmed with too much feedback that sends you spinning trying to address every piece of input you receive. Stop. As the designer, you are the filter and final arbiter. You will receive lots of ideas and opinions from well-intentioned playtesters. Keep your ears and mind open for true gems of inspiration that could help shape and refine your game, but realize that not all input is actionable input. You must decide what changes will push your game to be better and what input would steer the game away from your vision.

Learn to love bad playtests. You will learn more from that test than any other.

**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?**

Be professional and be prepared. Unpacking this statement could fill a book, and understanding the depth and nuance inside will make a huge impression and greatly increase your chances, simply by putting your best self forward and assuring your game is shown in the best light possible.

Interestingly, presenting yourself professionally is only half of what is meant by “be professional.” Sure, having positive energy, being warm, sharing your excitement and passion for your game is a big part of it. That’s why you are there. And if you are about to sit down to pitch a publisher, it’s probably because you already contacted them beforehand with an email to set up an appointment. They probably already know a bit about your game from your quick description when you arranged to meet with them, so they are just

as interested in speaking with you as you are with them. But the second half of “be professional” is being mindful of your audience and the context surrounding the meeting and having a little perspective from the publisher’s point of view can be very helpful in this.

Most publishers are insanely busy and often trying to juggle their schedules, especially if you encounter them at conventions or other public appearances. So, right at the outset, thank them for taking the time to see you and ask them how much time they have. This immediately places you on a more professional footing and allows you to tailor your pitch to the time allotted. They may ask you for the top line overview, ask you some questions, or invite you to sit and show off the game. They may or may not have the time to actually play the game, but you can always ask if they would be interested in a follow-up meeting. If a publisher wants to see more, they will make time for you.

Understand too that publishers see a lot of game presentations over the course of a year and are pretty good at assessing their interest fairly quickly. The flip side is that they may identify one of your designs as less of a fit for them rather quickly. That’s okay. Don’t belabor it. Move on to another design, or if you don’t have one, thank them for looking at the game. Instead, take a moment to get to know more about their company, their plans for the future, things they may be looking for – all great intel for your next chance to pitch them.

Being prepared, though, is the real key. Here is a punch list of important thoughts to consider:

1. Make sure the game is actually ready to show. It is easy to be excited about your design early in its development and want to show it sooner rather than later. Don’t. Show it when it is really clicking. You always want your game to be as tight and ready to go as you can possibly take it before the pitch. Not the art, mind you, but mechanically. Why? If they enjoy it, they will ask to take your prototype with them, where they will put it through rigorous testing. I often share it with players who don’t know me –

and if it doesn't lead fairly consistently to a reaction like, "Dude, when is this coming out?" or something else that indicates to me there is a need to own the game, I will end up passing. It is an excellent barometer for you in your own testing. The ability of your game to inspire a need to own it on a somewhat consistent basis signals the time you should start showing it to publishers. Not before.

2. Have a passing knowledge of the publisher and their major and recent titles. It doesn't have to be extensive, but you don't want to have a publisher feel you've come to them at random.

3. Know who this game connects with best - the type of gamer it interests most and why. It forms the foundation for your pitch.

4. Since the time you will have to pitch can vary so widely, have a handful of presentation formats/durations worked out in your head. Often, one will cascade into another. Think of it like a newspaper article with a 10,000-foot view first, and more details as you go deeper into the article.

4a.The Napkin Pitch: A sentence or two that encapsulates the concept and what makes it special. The core hook of the game and what gets players excited about it. This is a thirty second to one-minute pitch.

4b.The Overview: This can be a minute to two minutes in length roughly. It will include the information above (in the napkin pitch) and will touch on all the important top lines: number of players, length of play, key mechanics utilized, who the game is intended for and why they are excited about playing it. This is not a discussion of the rules but will likely outline the objectives and challenges players face in meeting them.

4c. The Sit Down, 5-minute pitch: The previous two are stand up discussions. This is when they "just have a few minutes" but would like to take a look. You probably have ten minutes, but your pitch should be no more than five minutes long to allow for questions and clarifications from the publisher. You will likely be

able to set out your prototype for this type of pitch, but it's more to provide something to point to as you broadly discuss the broad brush strokes of gameplay. Again, this is not teaching the rules, but this will give the publisher a strong sense of how gameplay flows and what makes the game interesting to play. Highlight those aspects as the key content to underscore.

4d. Can We Try It?: This is the bonus round for any pitch. If the publisher wants to try a round or two, be prepared with a quick way to get them into the game. It is not only okay but also recommended to “stack the deck.” What I mean is to set your prototype up to quickly and easily showcase the game in its best light. Rather than randomly shuffle the cards, make sure the best examples are set to appear at the right time as you show off the game. Weird edge cases will trip you up, so avoid those things. Give them all they need to know to start, and then guide them through turns as you play so you can start playing sooner rather than later.

5. Have a sell sheet, with a picture of the prototype and all the important data about the game featuring the hook and key selling points. Find examples to emulate. Have printed rules in the prototype box and be sure your contact information is written on them. You will be surprised how often this does not happen.

Armed with all this, you are guaranteed to stand out in a publisher's mind as a professional designer, worthy of serious consideration.

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

“Good” games are no longer good enough. This renaissance of board gaming has created a marketplace that can no longer accommodate all the games produced in a year. Many great games, even from established companies, are not getting the attention they deserve as a result. So your game needs to push harder and be better than ever before. It is a significant challenge but one that designers

are rising to. From Metatopia to ProtoTO and many other game design focused conventions, the quality of new games has skyrocketed in recent years, even from first time designers.

My advice is to attend these shows, see what your peers are up to, test your designs, break them, and make them better. One of the wonderful things about our community of hobby game designers is that we are very open, collaborative, and willing to help. Metatopia, taking place in Morristown, NJ every autumn is superlative. There you will take part in seminars and round table discussions on every aspect of board game design and publishing. You will spend an entire weekend having your game tested by both peers and industry professionals. You may even have a chance to pitch your designs to publishers. But you will learn more in those three days than anywhere else I can think of. Always have your eyes, ears, and mind open for the best experience.

What advice should you ignore? I wouldn't ignore anything out of hand, as things change so quickly and today's advice may not be the best advice for tomorrow. But, as of today, I would strongly caution the urge or suggestion to self-publish your game. Yes, it is far easier than ever to do with the advent of crowdfunding. As tantalizing as a few of those 'big number' Kickstarter games are, those type of results are few and far between.

But while the barriers seem lower, one should never tread into self-publishing lightly, especially these days with the market so glutted. It is one thing, I suppose, to print just enough for your backers and thrill to the fact that your game exists and is being enjoyed. That is totally cool. So long as you know what you are getting into and understand all the hidden costs, taxes, logistics and what it actually takes to get a game produced. (and for most, this is a daunting thing to begin with – and should be).

BUT, if your vision of success is to have that game on retail shelves, that is a whole different ballgame. Getting distributed and onto a retail shelf has never been easy, and now it is 100 times more difficult.

Equally or more important is that you have just officially crossed the line into opening a business. You have now created a monster in your basement that needs constant feeding, and you immediately fall subject to the pressures and on-going expenses of any small business venture.

Prepare for it to consume your life completely. It will. It must if you have any chance of succeeding. Games are so fun, and for that matter, the experience of creating them is so enjoyable, that it is easy to gloss over how hard a business it actually is – and it is not for everyone. My advice to those who hope to see their design on retail shelves, without wholesale changing their lives, is to license the game to an established company, who already has a means of getting to distribution, who knows the ropes and who can help develop the game further to give it every chance of success. But above all, learn as much as you can from any experienced designer or publisher who will talk with you, before deciding which pathway is right for you.

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

Live honestly, own who you are and design from the heart. Design games that you absolutely love and you will find people who value them as well. Set expectations as you describe your game and assure that you deliver on those expectations in a compelling way, and you will delight people more consistently. I would have also said, “don't be a jerk,” as a life philosophy, but my “backstabby” game designs tend to not be sterling examples of that.

# Carla Kopp

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

I put games on the shelf if I playtest them a few times and I don't get any inspiration on what to do next with them, and I'm not getting consistent feedback. Before I put a game on the shelf, I try to playtest with different player types, different player counts, and players of different gaming experience levels. If none of this leads to me being excited to take the game in a specific direction, putting the game on the shelf and giving my brain time to think about it might just be what the game needs.

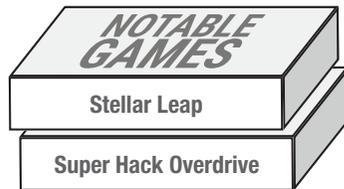
I've never really walked away from a design, but I have had a few designs that have been on the shelf for a few years.

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

I try to get rid of all my other distractions and make things quiet in the house. I also try to make sure that I'm caught up on everything I'm supposed to be doing, as being distracted by my task list immediately takes me out of the zone and makes focusing hard. When there's nothing to think about but game design, the designing just happens!

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

Writing everything down has definitely improved my game design skills. One of my biggest flaws is not being able to remember everything, so if I write down all my thoughts, feedback, and things that I've tried, I don't forget them. I also then have a list of things that when I'm stumped, I can read through all of it, start re-



membering, and usually I'll get ideas on where I want to go from there before I read through all of my notes. I also write down notes on what I like and dislike when I play other games and really focus on writing down something for every gaming experience I have. Each game should bring something new to the table and provide a learning experience if you just take the time to figure out what that learning experience is.

**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?**

Make sure to know your game and know it well. It's great if you can say your pitch in a variety of ways as each publisher is looking for different things, and not everyone wants to hear the same details in the same way.

Be able to describe your game and what is great about it in 30 seconds, 5 minutes, and 20 minutes.

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Be prepared for any outcome. The publisher might not like your game at all, they might later request a copy of it, or they might ask to take home the copy you're currently pitching. If you're prepared for any of those outcomes, you won't be caught off guard.

When you're pitching a game to a publisher, you're also pitching yourself as the designer. Not all publishers care about the people behind the designs, but enough do, so making yourself out to be a competent person that's willing to work and take feedback will definitely give you a better chance than if you come off as overly emotional or someone who doesn't listen. There are enough designs out there that publishers can make the choice to only work with designers that are going to be an asset to the design.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

Take a break! Go play some games and give yourself time to remember why you love design. I can get overwhelmed if I have too many things to do, so reprioritizing my task list and schedule tends to help. I try to be realistic on how much I can get done when things need to get done and what I really want to work on. I also try to break large tasks up into smaller tasks, so I can easily get something done and see that I've made some progress.

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

I try to always be positive in life and focus on the good things, and I think you can tell that in my game designs. I try to make sure that when you take a turn in one of my games, you're better off at the end of the turn than you were at the beginning of it and that you've made some progress toward your goal.

I also like to have a good table presence in my games. I want players at the end of the games to be able to sit back and be proud of what they've accomplished. You won't see "take that" or negative side effects in my games. If there is a negative side effect, it's more that you won't be able to gain or do as much on your turn as you otherwise would.

# JR Honeycutt's Top 3 Tips for Working with a Developer

**1)** Be ready to answer questions. A lot of questions. Part of the development process is looking for every single place in the game that something can break down -- every single thing that could cause a negative experience for a player or just every single thing that could be a problem later on.

The earlier we can start finding those corner cases and issues either in the game as an experience or as a product, the earlier we can start addressing them. And oftentimes I find that some of the best work comes from realizing these little threads of problems exist, and you keep pulling on them and pulling on them until something really big shows up. So be ready to answer a ton of questions because that is exactly what development is. It's coming back and saying well how does this work? How does this work? How does this work?

**2)** Have good file and project organization. Whether you use Google Drive, Dropbox, your own server, or whatever, have things organized in such a way that it is easy to find what you're talking about and to find your documents.

The earlier you start thinking about your hierarchy and your project organization, the better it's going to be. And if you can create a simple system or even just a system of some folders that lets you keep your stuff organized, you always know what you're working on.

**3)** Know your target market and be specific about them. Know who they are, how old they are, where they live, what kinds of things they like to do, how much money they make, how they spend their free time, etc.

Then, we can think about it not just as an experience for the player but also as a product that you then need to sell, and that helps us give you much better feedback.

And it leads specifically to conversations about accessibility. No matter what your game is or who it's for, the more accessible it is, the more it gets played.

# Mike Keller

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

It takes skill to see the potential in a game. Sometimes it's there, but you don't see it. Sometimes it's there, and you get a glimpse of it. If you have several glimpses, you know it's worth it to keep working on it. If the glimpses don't have the right color, you can put the game on the shelf for a while.

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

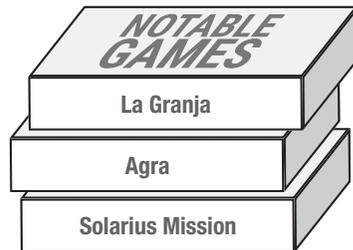
Let's try it again at least 3 times. After that, you can make some changes, maybe even radical ones. Then give it another go...

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

Designing a game is fun, but to really make it a good game is hard work. I never expected that there would be so much work behind a good game, not just from the design side, but also getting every detail right and writing it in the rules so that everybody understands it.

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

I like a lot of freedom in my life and thoughts (as much as possible with 3 kids). So, I try to implement a big chunk of freedom in my games. Sometimes it's better to have some "guidelines" within a design, especially for the start. But feeling this freedom in a game really makes me feel free.



# Manuel Rozoy



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

Texas hold 'em poker to realize you need to focus on what's essential in a game: the player.

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

The Design of Everyday Things by Don Norman.

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

Identify the superfluous to get to the core design faster.

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

Only one piece of advice: Playtest, playtest, and also playtest.

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

It's a world as rich as architecture, theater or literature. Go ahead!

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

The essential is often hidden behind the insignificant. In design, it's often an unimportant detail that will reveal a crucial point.



# David Turczi

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

I learned “tightness” from Caylus, I learned elegance from Tzolk'in, I learned simplicity from Concordia, and I learned fun from Dungeon Petz.

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

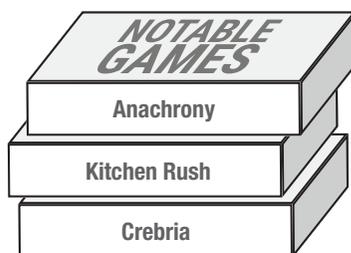
Sticker paper and modeling cardboard. It makes prototyping so much better than glue+paper+amazon packaging.

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

Seth Jaffee once characterized one of my (now scrapped) designs as “ultimately unremarkable.” That (and many less spectacular failures) taught me how to be even more critical of my work and how to raise the bar.

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

Ask yourself what ultimately makes your game what it is. What's the best bit? If you answer “the theme,” then you have an idea but not a good game. If you answer “a mechanism that doesn't really matter here,” then you have a good mechanism in the wrong game. If you can't answer it with confidence, chuck the whole thing, or at least go back to what you were trying to design.



# Michael Schacht



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

One of the games I often recommend is "Cartagena" by Leo Colovini. In my eyes, it is a good offer for all kinds of players as well as for fledgling game designers. It is a simple design with just a few rules but lots of decisions and is also a very good example of long-lasting gaming fun.

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

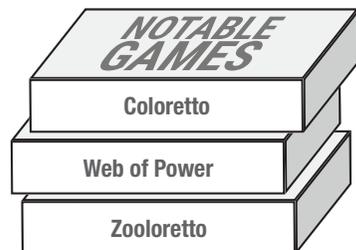
Usually, I lose interest in the project. I need enthusiasm to move an idea forward. I have collected a lot of white boxes over time, and most of them I will not touch again. If there are really strong elements, I keep them in mind, hopefully remembering them later.

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

Starting a new idea from zero is very hard for me. So, I usually collect ideas over time as little notes. When I have an interesting place to start, I usually leave the office. I like cycling in the suburbs, taking a walk, or going to the supermarket - any kind of simple engagement that supports the thinking process.

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

Indeed, that is usually very frustrating. Try to take as many notes as possible during and at the end of the session. Maybe you can even find one or two quick subjects that you can set up for the next day's



work. Then just trust your brain will continue working in the background without notice overnight and maybe during the next few days. Things often will get clearer then.

**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?**

It's useful to be able to say what the special thing in your design is in just one sentence.

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

When you get the first refusal, don't start wanting to release your game yourself. You need patience and a thick skin. Don't take the critics too seriously.

# Matt Tolman

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

It's always specific to the game they are working on. I find most fledgling designers have not played enough games to know if the thing they are trying to do has been done, and if it has, it's usually been done better. They are often exploring a path that someone else has already gotten to the end of.

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

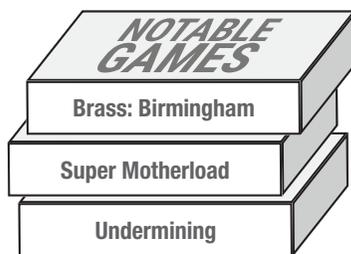
I never beat my head on a brick wall. If it's not coming easily, I immediately bin it. A lot of solutions to problems come instantly and involuntarily, so the more things you bin, the higher the chances you will think of a solution to something in the bin.

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

No tricks; you just have to start. Whenever I'm creating content, I just start putting stuff down, and by the end of the list, I've gotten to a point where I'm designing stuff well. I then immediately go back through the whole list now that I'm in the "zone," and redo everything. It's kind of a double pass technique. I find it's much faster than trying to make things good in one go.

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

Nothing ever works as you imagined. Approach all tests as a form of discovery with no expectations. If you approach it in this way,



there is no such thing as a discouraging session as all you can do is learn how the system behaves. If you imagine how it will work, you will not only be frustrated when it doesn't work that way, but you will be unlikely to pursue the opportunities in front of you because they don't match your expectations.

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

Publication is not the goal. Almost all designers I know learn this after they finally get their first game published. They spend too much time trying to get someone to publish their game and not enough time making great games.

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

If you don't think it's good, it's not. Always take heed if playtesters tell you your game is bad, and never listen if they say it's good.

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

In terms of being a creator, there's no point in doing anything that's not incredible. I have always set my sights at the pinnacle of the hobby. We don't need more games, we need more good games. Mediocre games dilute the market, and make for worse average experiences for gamers, resulting in fewer people joining the market and fewer people staying in it.

# Daniel Zayas's Top 3 Tips for Preparing for a Kickstarter

**1)** You need to do a lot of research. You need to add a lot of emails into your normal, daily life which encompasses things like quoting with manufacturers and freight providers and fulfillment partners.

Then, you need to read up on the latest trends on Kickstarter, and you need to actually look at all of the successful campaigns to see how they are being run, but not just on a surface level. You need to do a deep dive and see how successful campaigns are run day-to-day.

**2)** Don't be a manic marketer. Manic marketers are people who share links and superficially share artwork and superficially do all sorts of things and don't actually connect with the community who will be supporting them.

You see this a lot on Facebook especially, but anywhere online you'll see a lot of people who are just not tapped into the backers. The whole point of crowdfunding is to have a direct connection to the people who are giving you money.

**3)** Give back. You are trying to sell something on a platform that rewards being part of the community. You should one hundred percent, as part of your growth process, be backing other campaigns. You will learn more that way than you could any other way. And also you will connect with all sorts of people on both the backer side and the creator side.

## Erica Bouyouris

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

Sushi Go, Pandemic, 7 Wonders, and Ticket to Ride are just a few of the ones that I would recommend off the top of my head if asked by a fledgling game designer. Each of them creates a unique experience and have a mechanic or moment that I feel is the secret to their success. What they each do, they do really well.

Ticket to Ride is easy to learn but has great depth for players in their short term and long term game. It also keeps the players happy by rewarding them for even small achievements. The player gets an immediate positive moment every time they complete a line. Then, they feel even more clever when they can complete their routes, and then again when they can complete as many routes as they can, etc. This game has already created an experience where the player will keep coming back, even if they don't win. I think a big part of this is that everyone playing gets a sense of accomplishment.

Pandemic is an incredibly quick game to set up, and once you know the rules, players can begin a game almost immediately after opening the box. It has a theme that is easily relatable and mechanics that are all logical extensions of that theme. What designers should pay attention to is the clever mechanic sequences that work with and affect each other. For example, an epidemic in Pandemic will trigger three really clever things: it first brings out a new city, then requires that the existing discard pile gets shuffled and placed back on top of the deck, and it can create the now iconic cascading of cubes that allow them to spread across the board. Besides this being really clean, it creates all these moments of positive pressure when the players get excited without feeling overwhelmed. If



you can create tension that makes the players even more engrossed in the game, you know you have something.

7 Wonders is a great example of drafting, set collecting, and multiple paths to victory. This is often a gateway game for many, and its levels of choice and drafting allow players to get better at the game the more they play. There is a familiarity that people who play cards have with some of the mechanics that allow them to pick up gameplay quickly. It also has many paths to victory which is often found in hobby games rather than mass market games that have a very direct approach to winning.

Sushi Go is a great example of how to keep things simple as part of the fun. This is a game where players can be completely aware of what is happening around the table and still have a conversation with each other. There is an elegance to the level of choice that players have. Most hands feel like a big decision in which card to keep, but players never really feel like they made any “bad” choices. This game creates a friendly experience, which is a big part of its success. It is not easy to create a seemingly simple game. It’s a great design exercise for new designers. Look at the Sushi Go rule book. Create a game that uses no more rules than it does, and see what you can come up with.

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

One of the things that I find I spend my money on most is bits-lots and lots of bits. This could be buying games from the thrift store for parts, searching dollar stores and art supply stores, or anything else that can result in either bulk component needs or to find something unique. Looking for possible game components can be incredibly inspiring. It can help create themes, ways to deliver your mechanic, etc.

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

Your first design will fail--at least for most of us. I think it's a great thing to remember and embrace. Make a game, show it right away, and see what happens. It's why many designs will say "fail faster." What they mean is to get your designs in front of people as soon as you can. Find out right away what works or doesn't work about your design before jumping too far into a game that you might be dramatically changing after the first playtest. It's not the easiest thing at first, but look at failure as something positive for game design. When something fails, it means you already know what doesn't work. It's amazing feedback on what part to work on next. Failing is a part of every game that you will design, at least at some level. Finding the parts that fail and making them better is often what builds great experiences in a game.

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

Walk away or put down a design when it starts to feel hard. This is not simple procrastination as a lot of us are functioning procrastinators. This is an aversion (anger, frustration, block) to sitting down with the game. If you are feeling any of these things, it's probably time to set it aside for now.

Two things will likely happen. The first is that you will find a new design inspiration for the shelved game when you are working on or thinking about something new. The second possibility is that you will forget about the design. It will disappear onto the shelf and stay there. In that case, it's a walk away moment (which you did without really noticing). Design is really about inspiration. If what you are creating isn't inspiring you, find something that does.

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

My brain is always moving--often too fast for me. When I want to get into a "zone," I have to try to focus my ideas in a specific direction in order to get anything done. I personally like to have different types of music playing with tempo and theme that I

connect with the feeling of my game. I often really like video game music for this reason. It has great energy, often a specific kind of emotion, and is easy to stay in the background without distracting me from thinking or working.

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

If you have a really discouraging playtest, the best thing to do is look for the positive. Look for the fun. What was it that the players were most engaged with? Where did they feel the most clever and productive? It goes back to the idea of failing faster. Use the experience to narrow in on the core of the game that you really want the players to experience and focus on working to make that the centerpiece of the game.

A bad playtest can actually be more helpful when developing your game than a good playtest. It definitely doesn't feel the same, and you will slowly have to build a thicker skin to be able to take different kinds of feedback, but a bad playtest can point out important information really quickly.

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

There is no substitution for practice. The more I design, the better I get at it. The ideas come quicker, the solutions become a bit more obvious, and it creates a lot of opportunities to learn and grow from mistakes. I intentionally look at game design as design exercises, meaning I will purposely pick a theme or mechanic I have never used before and use that to inspire the design. It forces me to learn a mechanic well and figure out how I would put my spin on it.

**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?**

Practice your pitch, and get it narrowed down to the best way to describe your game quickly and concisely. Playtesting is one of the best ways to create a great pitch for your game. Each time you present and teach your game to people, you are trying to find the best way to deliver what your game is about as quickly as possible.

As you practice this, you are creating a great pitch for your game that you can then use when you are talking to publishers. You will feel more confident about explaining your game because you have done it so many times.

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

Make games because you want to make games. Find other designers in your neighborhood if you can as it is an incredible resource for information, playtesting, advice, etc. If you can't find them locally, we are incredibly lucky that there are great design friendly spaces online. Twitter is where I met a lot of people for the first time before I finally met them in person!

There are also great forums and groups on places like Facebook. I am part of an online show called The Meeple Syrup show where we talk about design and the industry, talk to designers, and give general advice. We also have a Shop Talk group where people can ask and answer design/industry questions. Join groups like that. Even if you don't post right away, it is really likely that someone is asking questions similar to what you are wondering.

I would never say to outright ignore someone's advice, but instead, consider what they are trying to say with their advice. Sometimes when people are offering advice about design, they might be suggesting advice based on the kind of game they would design, not the kind of game that you would design. The intent behind the advice is important, but it's fine to listen to all advice, and act on the ones that make the most sense for you. Experience will often be the decider on what is good and bad advice.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

Usually, the first answer is - take a break! Maybe you're overtired or overworked and you just don't have the brain capacity for what

you want to work on at the moment. Allow yourself time to refresh before approaching your design.

If you are feeling overwhelmed about your design, ask yourself what parts are feeling daunting? Are you working beyond a comfort level? What is it? Is there a way to scale back to where you aren't feeling overwhelmed anymore?

If being overwhelmed with a design is an issue, it sounds like chunking your work into manageable pieces would be important to work out. If you are feeling unfocused, what are things that help you get into a zone to work on design?

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

The pace that you want to work is the pace you set. We gamers tend to be competitive and will often use the progress of others to try to benchmark our own work from. I have seen people get upset that their first design isn't complete by the deadline that they set for it. It's understandable to be disappointed, but it shouldn't result in being disheartened with your design because it is not ready. No one will hold you to the date you set (unless it's under contract), so don't put unnecessary stress on yourself.

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

I enjoy when people around me are having fun. I like knowing that people are happy. These are things that I want to create in my games and in general how I approach my day. I am a teacher and a game designer. If you want something to be memorable and interesting, there has to be something about it that really stands out. It's how I often approach my lessons. I try to create experiences or inquiries in my class that will help my students remember what it is I am trying to convey to them. Creating a unique feature is something I find myself doing in game design. I like to create some aspect that really stands out on a table--something that will create interest (hopefully) just looking at it.

## Wei-Hwa Huang

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

I finally decided to pay for Google Drive's extra storage. The ability to send and share digital files with co-designers, publishers, playtesters, etc. helps a lot. Also, there was a nice sale on Insync, which is a much better alternative to their desktop version.

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

Be humble about your designs. If you're unable to see the flaws in your game, then either you're too prideful to see them, or your game is flawless. The chances of the latter being the case are close to zero.

If someone gives you advice that you should be very protective of your game design and get playtesters to sign NDAs and the like... ignore that. You'll be wasting a lot of time, energy, and money.

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

Good decisions often lead to good outcomes, but there are many exceptions due to this factor called luck. Always be wary of deciding that one of your past decisions was good just because it led to a good outcome, and the same is true for bad decisions and bad outcomes.



# Samuel W. Bailey

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

Dominion, Carcassonne, Resistance. Each of these is the 101 class of their respective type of game. They are classics that do what they do well with little fuss or extras (until you get into expansions). Even if the new game designer is a long time gamer, it is important to go back to these cornerstone games and look at them with a designer's eyes.

## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

A good pair of scissors. A paper-cutter works as well, but personally I enjoy taking a little break as I snip out prototypes and watch some board game reviews.

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

If there is a problem that I just can't get my head around after a few weeks, I usually put it away for a while. Often some solution will come to me while I am involved in another design, but there are a few designs that are still sitting on the shelf collecting mental dust. Not every design is a winner.

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

I usually start my ritual the night before when I lay in bed, falling asleep, I usually ponder the designs and problems I had that day. Often, I will come up with some new idea or solution so that in the



morning I am already in the designer mindset, excited to implement that idea or solution.

**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?**

Presentation is often just as important as the design. Even if you have a great design, a publisher might overlook it because your presentation is bad. And plenty of bad games have been published in part because the designer was a good salesman. Be relaxed, friendly, and ready to sell your game as a future successful product for the publisher.

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

Go to every convention you can. Bring your prototypes and play them in public areas where people can see something interesting going on. Play other designer's games and get to know them. Almost every opportunity I've gotten has come from other people I know in the industry.

Ignore whatever advice doesn't work for you. Every designer has a different process that works for them, but that doesn't mean it will work for you. Find your own process over time.

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

It is a lot of work. And you have to do that work if you want to be an excellent game designer. Ideas are well and good, but implementation and development are probably more important.

# Sami Laakso

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

I recommend studying a wide range of games across different genres. The exact games aren't as important as the variety. Some games I've really enjoyed and learned from are Cosmic Encounter, Root, Captain Sonar, and Resistance. Each of them does something innovative and feels very different from the others.

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

Generally, I have a clear vision for a game, and I will work on it until I'm happy with it. I very rarely shelve designs. However, I know that I'm an outlier in this way. As long as I have the passion to continue working on a game, I don't see a reason to shelve it. On the other hand, if you do lose the passion for a design and have no desire to finish it anymore, I believe that's a clear sign that you should try and find something else to work on.

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

I have so many roles to fill that when I do get to do design work, I'm all for it. If you find yourself burned out, try doing something different. It can be something to do with your game like polishing the layout of different components or something totally outside of gaming like exercising. Giving your mind time and space to think really helps.

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



Setting up guidelines for myself and defining the design space has improved both the speed in which I can design and the quality I can achieve. Instead of trying something blindly and hoping it works, define a target for yourself that you want to hit. Then you have something concrete you can aim for.

**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?**

Study the publisher and their line of games. Practice introducing your game without getting too much into detail. Doing these two simple steps gets you ahead and avoids wasting your and the publisher's time.

As for the actual pitch, start with the unique aspects of your game. Hook them in and continue from there. If the publisher gets interested, the pitch should turn more into a natural conversation than an advertising speech.

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

When you play games, don't play them just for fun. Think about why the designer has made the decisions they have. How would you improve the design and why? Once you get into this mindset, it can make playing games even more fulfilling and rewarding!

Also, disjointed ideas are cheap and everyone has plenty of them. Creating the actual game, including prototyping, playtesting, development, and polishing is where the work is really being done. When you get an idea, get it to the table as fast as you can. Make a quick prototype of the game's core and test it out. Don't hesitate to change large portions of the design to test things out.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

## Board Game Design Advice

If you get stuck, put the problem on your back burner. Work on other parts of the game while remembering that part that you're not entirely happy with. I often get new ideas for those problem areas in surprising places when I least expect it



## Ole Steiness

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

There can be many reasons, actually. If I start to repeat myself, like removing and re-inserting the same mechanisms into the game, or if I struggle really long with minor details that shouldn't concern me. Most often, it has been if I discovered that the intended core elements of the game work but just aren't fun. Then, I need to rethink if I am going in the right direction, or if I should even be doing the game at all.

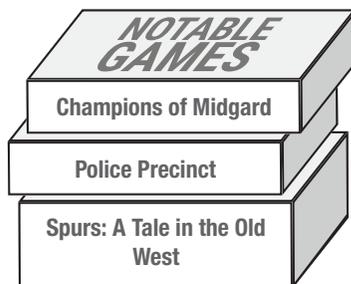
### **What do you do to get in the designing mindset? Do you have a ritual or certain process for getting into the "zone?"**

The idea and concept generating part of the design process usually come to me when I bike. I ride my bicycle 90 mins every day, and this is a perfect time to let the mind wander. I put on music - always movie or game soundtracks that fit the theme. When I designed *Champions of Midgard*, I listened to the *God of War* game series soundtracks. It might not be about Norse mythology, but it was epic and adventurous. It supplements me well when I imagine Vikings battling monsters overseas.

When I did *Police Precinct*, it was the *Bad Boys* soundtrack, and anything Harold Faltermeyer. I usually end up hearing the same soundtracks hundreds of times over the months, but it doesn't bother me as it is important, non-intrusive background sounds to feed inspiration.

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

Any feedback, good or bad, is in-



formation you can work with. Even if you disagree with the feedback, it gives you an opportunity to revisit that part of your design with fresh eyes. Don't get caught up in your emotions, stay focused on what the feedback is actually about, and try to be analytical.

Playing games is about experiencing fun, after all, and all involved parties can get emotional about it. If playtesters end up being frustrated, good! It means that they expected something else, but the game didn't deliver. Now, dig in and find out why they expected something else, what it is they expected, if you should comply with this, and, if so, how to follow up.

I had a playtester who was disappointed that *Champions of Midgard* didn't have villages to pillage or trade with. That's fine, but my vision was to make more of an epic, heroic feel. My Vikings were courageous monster slayers, not pillagers and traders. Those games are out there as well, and you can't design games that satisfy everybody anyway.

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

Keep it simple. A rulebook should have as few exceptions and special cases as possible. If a small change to a game leads to more text in the rulebook, you should probably omit it.

**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?**

Keep it short and to the point. Here is a simple three-step procedure you can use: Settings, Objectives, Mechanics. Settings cover game type (cooperative, competitive, solo) and overall theme. Objectives cover what actions players are mainly doing, described on a higher, abstract level which also includes end goals. Mechanics cover the most important mechanics. Example: *King of Tokyo* is a competitive, casual game where players control giant, evolving monsters that duke it out to see who lasts the longest in the center of the city. Players take turns rolling custom dice and use the

results to either damage each other, score points, or upgrade for special skills.

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

Advice that tries to change your game into another game should be ignored, at least until you have fully explored your initial vision; that's what ignited your spark, after all. Stay true to this vision as much as possible, even if it is just a feeling in your head. That is how it almost always starts, anyway.

For example, Champions of Midgard came out of a feeling that I felt an unfulfilled desire when I played some of the other worker placement games. I lacked the feeling of accomplishment when I converted resources and cashed in my victory points. So, I came up with the dice warriors to meet that desire.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

I revisit my initial idea. Is it still there? Is it still valid? Do the things I add help or hinder that idea to flourish? Don't be afraid to go back and revisit things that are already done. Maybe they don't need changes, but going back can help you wipe the slate clean for the next natural step in the design process.

It's easy to get stuck in a loop because you become too focused on using a particular mechanic in a certain place. For example, I initially had the trolls in Champions of Midgard attack specific buildings every turn. Thematically, the buildings were put out of order as they were attacked and players were supposed to try to hinder this by attacking the trolls. I spend so much time trying to make it work, but it was never motivating enough to go against the trolls. We ended up scrapping that idea and instead introduced the "blame" system which works much better.

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

Don't waste time. That doesn't mean you should rush things or not spend time on fun. But don't waste anybody's time with rules, mechanisms, or gadgets that don't add value. Keep things simple and sleek where possible, without omitting vital information or actions, of course. That would waste time clarifying or tidying up afterwards, anyway.

# Sarah Reed's Top 3 Tips for Teaching Your Game

1) Start with the end first. Players need to know what their goal is in the game, both thematically and mechanically. Don't skip out on either as you'll lose players' engagement. Telling them that their goal is to get the most points by gaining cards they pay for with resources is only half the game. The other half is how they are building structures in the ancient world with natural resources their tribe has collected.

2) Have the game set up and give players components as you explain how to use them. This will help a lot of players who learn games tactilely. But beware of components with heavy text because players will read them and not pay attention to you. If you do need to give them those types of components, make sure you give them time to look them over and get all eyes back on you before continuing.

3) Structure your teaching in phases or chunks of related content. Then, stop between each section to ask if the players have any questions. If you go past a player's comprehension, they will tune you out, but they may not feel comfortable interrupting you to get their question answered. Along with this, try to gauge players' faces as to how well they seem to be comprehending. You may need to slow it down or break it down into smaller chunks.

# Darwin Kastle



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

Ticket to Ride. The one action per person per turn system is super elegant. It makes the game really easy to learn, but the game still allows for satisfying amounts of planning and strategy.

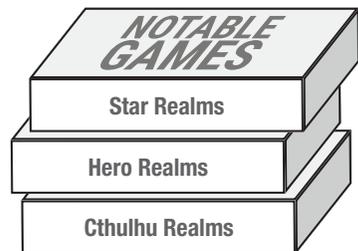
**If a friend of yours is about to sit down to pitch a game to a publisher, what are some tips you would tell him or her?**

Be prepared to explain the game's hook. What makes the game special? Why will it stand out? Why will people want to buy it? Why will they like it? Also, be open to retheming the game if it's a publisher you really want to work with.

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

Design games that you yourself would really enjoy playing. Design a game that you wish existed so that you and your friends could play it.

People may advise you to never give up on an idea that you're passionate about. I think it's important to be able to let go of an idea that isn't igniting a spark with players, even if you put lots of work into it.



# Rob Dougherty

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

I’m not good at forcing myself into the designing mindset. I prefer not to rush it. I toy with concepts in my head for a while until a game structure comes into focus. At that point, I tend to be super excited about working on it and things flow incredibly fast. I feel I get to the finish line faster taking this approach than trying to push through.

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

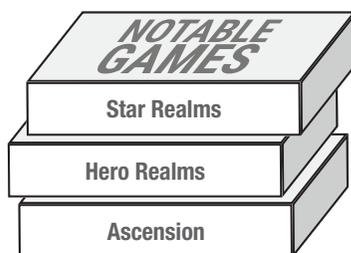
You learn a lot more from things going wrong than from things going right. Pay attention to what things frustrate players. What are they complaining about? What is generating those “uninstall” moments? Try to address those issues and playtest again.

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

Your game isn’t done until your playtesters are dying to play MORE. They should be asking to play again, or trying to schedule another playtest session, or asking to bring a prototype copy home. If you have to ask them to test more, it isn’t ready.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

For me, working on something else for a while helps. Test a different game, do some unrelated work,



or stop working altogether. Come back at the problem fresh in a little while.

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

Do what you love, design what you love. While I try to keep various player types in mind and make games that will have wide appeal, in the end, I design games that I want to play.

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## Behrooz ‘Bez’ Shahriari

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

As long as you’ve played a few games from this century, I don’t think there is any single game that anyone has to play. Most themes and mechanisms have been explored very well by multiple games. As such, I think it’s more important that someone forms a well-rounded understanding of modern games than plays any specific game.

For a specific project, I was given this advice some time ago: look at the competition after you start, but before you finish. This gives you the opportunity to forge your own path when embarking upon your design but means that you can learn from everything else out there when it comes to development. When starting *In a Bind* (now *Yogi*), I was only aware of the relevant games I’d come across by happenstance: *Dancing Eggs* and *Twister*. It was towards the end of the design that I explored all of the things I could on BGG, buying a couple of games, watching reviews, and replaying a few in order to ensure that a) my game was actually unique and b) my game used all the modern “technology” that it could. As long as your game is a unique concoction, reusing existing ingredients seems prudent.

### **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

Probably marker pens and blank playing cards. Staedtler Lumo-color is my permanent marker of choice. In the UK, kentandclear.co.uk is the best place to buy blank cards.

There are cheaper (and more efficient) ways to make cards, but writing/drawing directly upon them is my favourite way as it aids



my creative flow by making it easier for me to see the big picture and quickly get a first prototype made whilst also giving me the satisfaction of writing and drawing directly on things.

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

Am I being paid to do this? Am I enjoying this process? Am I moving towards a game I'm proud to have made?

If the answer to all three questions is no, then I stop.

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

So much work expands to fit whatever time we give it. I find that if I give myself a couple of hours before a playtest, either the night before or early that morning, then I'll be able to get a game started, prototyped, and ready to try; or make the next meaningful iteration.

Deadlines help me, especially when they're enforced externally.

A playtest scheduled to start at an exact time is ideal for me.

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

If people didn't enjoy the experience as much as you hoped, then ask yourself why! Were they the wrong audience, or does your game not have an audience yet? Regardless, you might be able to gain inspiration for new things to try out based on your observations or post-game discussion.

Don't be afraid to drastically change some things. Try inverting the goal, cutting the number of resources in half, turning it into a play-

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er-elimination game, changing it from a dice game to a card game or vice versa, etc. Sometimes you need to get away from a “local maxima” and make the game temporarily worse in order to eventually make it the best it can be. It's like descending a hill to later climb a mountain and enjoy even greater heights.

If you have run a couple of playtests and have no idea what to try, it's totally okay to shelve the idea. Whether it's shelved temporarily or permanently doesn't matter. I'm sure you'll have more ideas and maybe, eventually, you'll use aspects of this idea in your future designs. Time spent playtesting helps you build a mental model of human psychology and how experiences work, so it's never wasted.

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

More playtesting opportunities!

In January 2016, there were 6 dedicated playtest events in London, totalling around 31 hours. For January 2019, there are 10 such events organised, totalling around 50 hours of actual playtest time.

The Friday daytime playtests, which are a weekly event I instigated, have been especially lovely in my opinion. Having 5 hours of play testing spread out between 10am and 4:30pm offers advantages compared to 5 hours squashed between 6pm and 11pm. There is time to socialise, discuss tangential ideas, and enjoy a meal. Everyone seems to be more energetic. London has the population density to make this work, but maybe you can do something similar in your city - you can start with just one committed friend.

If you live in the UK, I would recommend looking at Playtest UK, which lists all the events on [meetup.com/playtest](https://www.meetup.com/playtest)

**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?**

First, congratulations on the meeting!

If it's at a con, aim to give a five-minute demo. Pitching to a pub-

lisher and pitching to passers-by at a con are quite similar in many ways. It can be useful to get people playing straight away. You don't need to explain every single rule at the start. And unless it's a very short game, you probably won't have time to finish it.

Your immediate goal is to get the publisher to take your prototype and prioritise it when appraising all the submitted prototypes back at their office. As such, get them excited and give them the knowledge they need to start playing easily.

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

People say that your first creation will be terrible. What does that even mean? What is "your first creation?" Yes, your skills will improve as a designer. Yes, most games are terrible when first prototyped. But maybe you'll be unusually lucky with that first effort. Maybe you'll be a one-hit wonder, well known for one game and unable to recreate that spark. Maybe you only have interest in doing exactly one game and don't want to keep designing long term. Whatever you do is OK.

I guess that's the key lesson: we all have to forge our own paths and, broadly speaking, whichever path you want to take is OK.

Ask yourself what you want to achieve. Is it fame, money, curiosity, the intellectual exercise, the desire to be responsible for someone else's fun, or a desire to create a game that doesn't exist yet? If you work out what you want to achieve, then you're more likely to get there.

Remember that creative pursuits can have inconsistent results. If you keep practising, you will generally improve, but the quality of your results will remain variable. You'll have times when you're struggling and sometimes things will flow more easily. Don't beat yourself up or get too complacent.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

Why am I making this? Who am I making this for? What do those people actually care about? There is so much we can worry about that doesn't matter in the end.

Most players won't care about your design journey - only the experience that they have. It doesn't matter how long it took you to make, how many dead-ends you ran into, or what your thought processes were - only the game in the box. So feel free to mess up as much as you want!

Clear goals and permission to fail are key.

Sometimes, though, I just need to take a quick break. Swimming, walking to the local park, visiting the library for a couple of hours, cycling, or listening to music or podcasts. Sometimes I just need to sleep.

Sometimes I need a few days off to explore the city, reconnect with anyone in my life, travel, or even try a new hobby for a few weeks.

In truth, I haven't done that in a healthy way. Over the past four years, I had the privilege to spend nearly all of my time working on games but then became increasingly narrow in my experiences. In 2018, I took very few days off at all. Last summer, I think that continuing to work on things alone led to a vicious cycle - getting increasingly upset that I wasn't making the progress I hoped for. It was only when I got the help of someone else that I finally got back on track.

In 2019, I personally plan to forego most of the Monday evening playtests in order to explore other hobbies. In the end, I believe that this will lead to better games - not to mention a better life!

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

When it came time to sign my first contract, there were some

things that I was happily aware of or was luckily offered. However, there a few things that I just didn't consider.

Things I will always demand in a contract now:

- 1) A termination clause in the case of a slow release. If the publisher hasn't released the game within X years, you should be free to pursue other opportunities.
- 2) A growing number of minimum sales per year. Whilst many (if not most) board games will only be printed once, anything lucky enough (and of a high enough quality) to be continually printed should escalate in copies sold. Word of mouth makes all multiplayer board games inherently viral. You should be guaranteed X sales in the first year, then a larger number each subsequent year. If the publisher doesn't sell the guaranteed number of copies, you are at liberty to terminate the contract.
- 3) Some free copies from every version in every print run. It's great to have a game translated into dozens of languages but annoying if you get sent less than half of them.
- 4) The right to buy at wholesale price. I attend conventions myself, and it's sometimes nice to have copies of my games to sell, even if they are being published by others. I am, of course, happy to maintain MSRP.
- 5) A growing % royalties based on copies sold. With more mass market titles, it's common to get a slightly higher % after 100k or 200k units have been sold.

My first contract was very reasonable, but few people talk about the emotional advantages of getting copies of all the languages your game is printed in along with all the newer editions. Not only is it a way to celebrate your own successes, but it also allows you to check what the publisher is doing with future editions and let them know if anything seems wrong! Future printings are often an opportunity to make minor corrections.

It is important to be realistic - a Napoleonic war game will strug-

gle to sell a tenth of what a lighter party game will achieve.

It's also important to be mindful of what you want to achieve. Some games I hope to make money on. Some I just hope to have available one day for those who love the concept. There is no chronology for this that fits everyone. As mentioned earlier, it may be that your first game becomes your best-selling thing. Everyone's path is unique.

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

I believe that our time is valuable. I believe that we should respect all the resources around us; not just of each other's time and money, but also the resources of oil, paper and all the other things that go into the production of a game.

That's partially why I created a game system. Wibbell++ is something I plan to continue working on for many decades to come, and a game created in 2037 will be playable by someone who bought the deck in 2017. They don't need to buy anything more. Hence the earth's resources and players' money aren't strained.

Though there are well over 50 games available for the deck, some are better than others. It's on me to recognise that and relay that information, choosing some to be core games. These are the games that I will include in some future editions of the deck and highlight on the website, as they are the best starting points.

Too many games are left unplayed or never realise their full potential. It's on me to not only make games that I believe will stand the test of time, but also summarise the intended experience through their names, the Kickstarter marketing, the style of art I use, any words on the box, and the opening lines of the rules.

For the Wibbell++ games, this means that the opening words of each rulebook, the diagrams, and the website are things I need to keep thinking carefully about and keep improving. Hopefully everyone can make an informed decision of whether or not to play

and find the experience best for themselves.

I try to make all my games not only fun to play but also easy to learn. Every rule must have a real benefit that outweighs the added complexity.

I hope that for anyone interested in the experiences that I am trying to craft, they will appreciate this respectful approach and that the games (which have used up resources in their physical creation) will continue to bring joy for many years to come.

# Vlaada Chvatil

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

Any and all games. I mean, seriously - you do not learn game design by analyzing games that work but by understanding why they work, and for that, you need to see examples of both those that work and those that don't.

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

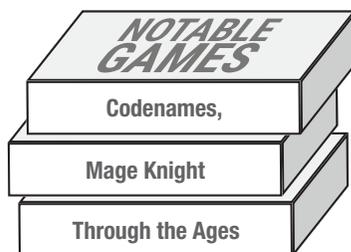
I walk away when I am not happy with the game, even if there would be players that like it. Finishing a game to a publishable form is lots of work, and I need my own taste to lead me through it. (I usually do not discard the game completely. I set it aside, maybe for a few weeks or a few months or even many years, but you never know when an idea that clicks will appear.)

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

Do not blame the players for breaking or disliking your game. They did a valuable service to you. And when analyzing the failure, be honest with yourself. Find the real reasons it doesn't work, and don't make excuses.

## **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?**

For most publishers, accepting your game means also accepting you as a person they will be working with. Be a person they will want to work with. Be prepared to react to critics in a constructive way. If



the publisher points out some weakness in your design, you should not try to prove them wrong but rather show them you know how to deal with it. Consider it even in the case you think they actually are wrong. If your presentation turns into a struggle about who is right, you have probably already lost.

And most importantly: Do not express any worries the publisher may steal your idea. This is a sign you distrust them and also a sign you overvalue your ideas. Neither is a good start to a fruitful relationship.

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

Do the games the way you and the people around you enjoy. Whether you succeed or not, you will have fun during the process. As for the second question, well, if they take game design seriously, they should probably ignore this very advice. But honestly, who cares about those who take games too seriously, haha.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

I play a game. I spend time with my wife and kids. I watch a movie. I read a book. I will probably find the right answers when not focusing on them. If I really need to concentrate on a problem, I go for a long walk. Being alone, away from the computer and any distractions, helps to sort the thoughts a lot.



## Paul Dennen

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

Alan R. Moon's *Ticket to Ride* is a game design masterpiece. Think about how all the various elements create a satisfying experience for the player. Sure, the production values are great and there's plenty of tactile fun in placing your trains out on the board and seeing your rail empire shape up, but it's backed up with mechanics that make the game a pleasure from start to finish:

- Learning the rules is a snap because the game is so elegantly designed. It does a lot with very few rules. Players enjoy clear frameworks, not confusing ones.
- Starting tickets provide players with some clear long-term goals which is a common problem among new game designers. It's easy to find yourself so knowledgeable about your own game that you forget about the perspective of the new player. Players enjoy having some clear objectives.
- Despite the simple ruleset, players have a variety of options in how they go about their games. Players enjoy agency. Give them puzzles and dilemmas; let them feel the satisfaction of finding ways to jump those hurdles and accomplish things in ways in which they can take ownership of.
- The shared board and limited routes that might be gobbled up by other players create interaction, tension, uncertainty, and drama. I can't stress this point enough because humans enjoy all of this stuff. A lot.
- Also in the uncertainty department, most players in *Ticket to Ride* aren't sure who has won the game until the final reveal of tickets. Again, super important. If players know who the winners



and losers are while the game is still going, then something has gone wrong!

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

Welcome to the club. Game design is really hard, and you're going to have failures, including discouraging playtests. Remember that everyone has been there. Don't be defensive about your game; don't explain to players why they should have had fun. If they didn't have fun, there are likely reasons you'll be able to pinpoint through observation and looking at your game through the lens of the new player.

I work in the computer games industry, and changing a computer game after negative feedback can be costly and demoralizing. The good news with board game design is that you can radically alter your prototype quickly. Don't be afraid to chop it all up and experiment with different approaches, assuming you can keep finding different playtesters for each iteration.

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

Play lots of games, read some books (you are!), and watch video seminars. Don't be afraid to work on multiple projects at the same time. Sometimes ideas may need to cook in your brain for months or years before you crack the code that unlocks a great game, so having other projects to work on when you become blocked can be invaluable. I ran my first playtest of what would become Clank! in late 2013, and I thought it was pretty good but not worthy of continuing. I shelved it indefinitely until I had a lightbulb moment two years later.

# Tony Miller's Top 3 Tips for Making Great Prototypes

1) Make a prototype as early in the design process as you can. Your game is the space between the players and the components, not just the components themselves so you can't actually design it without getting it to the table.

2) Don't try to make a finished product out of the gate. It is better to build just the minimum amount needed to determine what form the next iteration needs to take. If you think you need 250 cards, make 50. Don't worry about token colors/counts, focus more on making sure that you won't run out during the test.

3) Form should follow function. When making iterations, focus on usability. Make notes on how the presentation of the information helps/hinders gameplay. Answer questions like: Are players having problems finding things that they need? Is any information obscured or otherwise unclear? Are the colors that I chose color-blind friendly? Did I double-code information with colors and icons? Are players repeatedly making the same errors in processing my ruleset?

# Nate Chatellier



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

All of them! Play all of the games, lol. This is a fool's errand of course, but I genuinely believe that the more games a designer plays, the more they will have in their subconscious toolbox to pull from. Setup or attend a routine game night, and play many different games over time. Try the top rated games on Board Game Geek, try the "most played games" on Board Game Geek, and ask your local game store what some of their best sellers have been. Then, start with the games that sound most appealing to you, and work your way through as many games as possible over time.

## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

A membership to Audible! To get you started, I recommend "Creativity Inc.," "Actionable Gamification," and "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People."

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

I'm both a game designer and software engineer by trade. My co-designer, Manny Trembley, and I put a lot of time into creating a functioning prototype of a mobile game we called "Dice Forge" (before there ever was a board game with that name). We showed it to a friend in the industry, and he shared a personal story of his mobile game. He spent 2 years in development, launched the game, put \$30k of his own money into the marketing budget, and had nothing but 5-star ratings. Unfortunately, he only had ~100 ratings and not too many more downloads than that. In



the end, he barely broke even. He explained that the challenge with the oversaturated app store is no longer “can I make a great game?” but rather, “what is my plan to have my great game be DISCOVERED?” It was a very discouraging conversation that made me feel like we had wasted a ton of time and energy. However, after I got over my discouragement, I converted the game into a board game and later changed the name to Dice Throne.

Failures are really great opportunities in disguise--opportunities to learn, to course correct, and to refine our character.

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

When you're no longer having fun working on a design, it's time to put it on the shelf. At least for me, the primary reason to be a game designer is to have fun! If the joy is gone, move on. Perhaps down the road you'll have a light bulb moment that brings the design down from the shelf and rekindles the joy.

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

Who doesn't experience really discouraging play sessions? It happens to all of us. So rather than be discouraged, use it as an opportunity to make refinements. Start with identifying as many potential causes for the bad experience as possible. This could be a lack of clarity of rules on your part, a bad edge case you hadn't considered, or even a fundamentally bad mechanic that needs to be changed or removed.

Alternatively, the cause might have nothing to do with the game at all. Perhaps the venue was bad or a playtester was tired/hungry/cranky/trolling. Maybe your game is amazing, but it's just not the style of game this particular playtester enjoys. If the bad experience was an anomaly, then solicit more feedback, and don't be overhasty to change your design. Otherwise, evaluate all possible factors, and then adjust accordingly.

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

I began listening to many different audiobooks & educational podcasts (such as “Board Game Design Lab” and “Masters of Scale”) like they are going out of style. Every time I’m in my car, doing household chores, making lunch, etc, I’m listening to something educational or inspirational. My only regret is that I didn’t start this behavior earlier in life. It has propelled my personal growth over the past 3 years more than the previous 10!

**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?**

1. Don’t be arrogant. They are testing what it will be like to work with you as much as they are testing out your game.
2. Do your homework. Understand their portfolio and share with them which games you really like within their current portfolio and why you think your game will expand it in the right ways.
3. Love your game. If they can’t feel your personal excitement and joy of playing your own game, it will be an uphill battle convincing them to love it.

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

1. Learn! Spend ample time self-educating every single day.
2. Join the community. There are amazing groups to be a part of. Don’t just leech within them. Try to always give more than you take.
3. Count the cost before you begin. The board game industry is starting to become saturated. Breaking into the industry is becoming a hard road that is not for the faint of heart. Be honest with yourself and decide if you are up for the challenge. If you have grit, you’ll do just fine. If not, there are easier roads to walk. As for me, I like a good challenge in my life!

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

Our emotions make an excellent follower but a terrible leader. I may feel overwhelmed or feel like quitting, but I have learned to let my head lead and my heart follow. Self-discipline has taken many years of conscious effort, but I'm so glad I chose to start down this path! Alternatively, I'll just watch Rocky or Gladiator.

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

If you self publish, then designing a good game is only 25% of the workload.

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

Care for others, work hard, and never stop learning. Those may sound cliché, but making them major priorities in my life has made all the difference. Dice Throne wouldn't exist and our incredible community group wouldn't be nearly as passionate as they are without these principles.

## Aron West

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

Game design is an iterative process and feedback from playtests (both positive or negative) should be fed back into the test loop.

### **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?**

Emphasize what is different or innovative in terms of gameplay mechanics. Pitch the intended audience of the game (party, casual, enthusiast) and the number of supported players. Do not emphasize the theme as a publisher may want to integrate the design into one of their existing product lines. Consider the amount of artwork the design may require as this can be a significant cost for a publisher.

A related point is to consider the cost of components and to minimize the number and type of components that are required. Injection molded plastic figures and custom dice are particularly expensive to produce.

Consider the publisher's existing product lines when pitching a game. For example, if a publisher focuses on fantasy games and the design being pitched has a dating theme (that is integral to the design), the pitch will probably be rejected.

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

Seriously consider not getting into game design. There are too many designers, too many publishers, and too many titles being released annually already. Many games are not getting an opportunity to be discovered and many are not getting a second printing.



If you choose to proceed, be realistic. Ensure you have a solid source of income on which to live and cover expenses because, in the vast majority of cases, game design alone is not going to be sufficient.

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

I wish someone would have explained the pricing structure for games distributed to retail (for the hobby market). Knowing this helps a designer understand the thin margins on board games that publishers experience and to manage expectations.

When offered to retail by a publisher, a game is discounted by 60% off the MSRP (manufacturer's suggested retail price). This is the margin that the distributor (less) and retailer (more) divide between themselves.

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## R. Eric Reuss

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

I don't tend to recommend a specific game so much as the breadth of play in the areas they want to design in. Seeing what else is out there is not just fun, but valuable as you can learn a lot from existing designs as well as building a knowledge of the state of the field. If an idea of yours overlaps strongly with an already-published game, it's good to know that as early as possible, so you can either differentiate your concept or choose to work on something else instead.

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

I rotate designs to my mental back-burner pretty frequently. Sometimes it's due to lack of time. It might want a larger overhaul than I can give it at that moment, or perhaps something else is demanding my attention for one reason or another. But sometimes I'll just let a design simmer in the back of my head for a while when I don't know what direction I want to take or if it's got a problem that I understand but don't know how I want to solve.

Walking away entirely is a different matter. I'll do that if I perceive that a problem with my design is essentially intrinsic (so fixing it is more or less making a new game). I walk away if I feel like I have a handle on the best possible experience/fun this design might offer and it's just not up to par or if the game's best course is so counter to my own tastes that practically speaking I'm unlikely to want to spend the time needed to make it into something good. In all cases, I try to figure this out as early as possible, so I can move on to something else.



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

Do whatever you can to make iterating on your designs quick and easy. Early on, this might mean scrawling stuff on notecards because it's not worth spending up-front time making templates before you know if the core of this idea even works. Later, it might mean creating easily editable files you can change and reprint quickly. Details will vary based on you and how you work, but the easier it is to change your game, the more freedom you'll have to explore possibilities and find out what works best, and the less the thought of "but then I'll have to re-print everything" will weigh you down.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

First: basic self-care. Get enough sleep, enough physical activity, enough food, etc.

Then: I'll pick up some cards or open a computer file and actually look at the prototype. That'll frequently solve the focus problem by getting my brain into "tinker with this" mode, and if not, it will at least get it pointed in roughly the right direction. If I'm still having trouble focusing, I'll either get organized by making a list of next-steps that need to happen or back-burner the design for a bit so my mind can take a break and chew on it subconsciously.

If the trouble is less about "doing what I know needs doing" and more about "figuring out what I even need to do," I'll grab a clipboard with some blank paper, sit down with a hot beverage, and start writing questions and then answers to those questions. (e.g. What am I trying to accomplish here? Why isn't it currently working? How does it currently feel, and how do I want it to feel? What are things that might accomplish that? Etc.) Sometimes answering might involve going back to an original source of inspiration

for the game. When brainstorming, I try to follow the principle of “come up with lots of ideas and only go back and judge them afterward,” but half the time, one or two of my answers will seize me before I’ve even finished making the list.

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

1. Designing board games is like writing in that it’s about getting something fixed into form and then iteratively refining it. Your first draft of a game does not need to be - and will not be! - excellent, nor even good. It just needs to have seeds that can grow into something awesome through time and work
2. It’s important to not agonize over every little thing - try something, see what worked, try again! Early design decisions which were, at the time, either arbitrary or exploratory can end up embedded in your design in ways that don’t really serve it but are just there out of inertia. It can be worthwhile every now and then to pause and reexamine your assumptions (both mechanical and thematic).

# Matůš Kotry

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

You know it is time to put it on a shelf when you can't get into the designing mindset or when you feel that designing your game is not enjoyable anymore. If you're just pushing yourself to work on it to get rid of it as soon as possible, why wait? Get rid of it right now! What prevents you from doing it? You won't finish it anyway with the mindset you have right now.

Remember that you are designing a game. You're designing something people should enjoy playing. That's the only reason they play games. If you don't enjoy it, others won't enjoy it either. Take a break. Maybe it'll become enjoyable again after some time. Or maybe not, and you will never return back to this design. But in that case, there's no need to grieve about it. It wouldn't be worth your time anyway.

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

Not really. As I realized recently, when it is difficult to get into the designing mindset, your body is telling you it needs a break. It is telling you it doesn't want to do creative work at all. By pushing yourself harder, you will only make it worse. By a break, I do not mean go check Facebook for thirty minutes and then try again. You should get the game you are designing out of your head completely for some time which may last several days.

Try to focus on something else during these days. Do stuff you have been neglecting during your intense work periods because you did not have time for it. Maybe your body is trying to tell you that you are neglecting something else.

After some time, ideas start to spark



in your head again, and you will start to have difficulty focusing on other things. You will have that itch that doing anything else is holding you back from designing your game. And that's the best moment to get back to work again.

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

First, you need to differentiate between two cases:

a) The group didn't like the game because this just isn't a game for them. In that case, there is no need to be disappointed. You will never make a game everyone will enjoy.

b) They enjoyed the game at first, but then something happened that ruined their experience. In this case, you should figure out what happened and fix it.

However, don't try to fix things immediately, no matter how hard the players are pushing you to do so. Good solutions usually require more time. They may say things like, "remove this element from the game, or it is obvious that THIS is wrong." But it may be painful for you because it is an element you like, or it has some importance for other elements in the game that the players don't see.

Remember that you are not obligated to immediately apply the solutions they suggest. But don't understate the problems they refer to either. The best thing you can say is something like, "I understand the problem you are referring to. I'll keep it in mind and try to solve it, but I don't see an ideal solution right now." Maybe after some time, you will find an ideal solution that will fix the problem that ruined the players' experience, while not deviating from the original vision you had.

### **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?**

Imagine that you visit a large game convention with your friend. There are hundreds of games you can play together. But you want him to play your game. Try to forget the fact that this is YOUR game

for now, and treat it just as a game from an anonymous designer you just really want to play. What would you tell your friend to choose THAT game over the hundreds of other awesome games he can find at the convention? What makes that game different from others? Why do you think it is worth his time more than any other game?

# Grant Rodiek

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

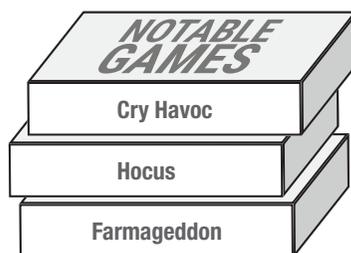
Take a step back from what was said and think about what you saw. What did people react positively to? What confused them? What frustrated them? Honestly, ignore the verbal feedback and focus on the body language. Use that “true” feedback to make your design better for the next test.

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

I stopped designing games to chase publication and instead focused on my inspiration and what I love. It has business consequences, but I think I’ve created more pure, unique experiences. I chose design for design’s sake, which I can do as this is my hobby and not my career.

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

Kaizen, which means continuous improvement. Don’t settle. Don’t accept. Keep pushing yourself to craft something beautiful and unique that you and others love.



# Daniel Peterson's Top 3 Tips for Attending a Publisher Speed Dating Event

**1)** Put your best foot forward. I cannot stress that enough. You really want to give me the best possible example of the best experience of your game. And so if you have to stack the deck to get to the exciting part first, that's really what you want to do.

I want to get an idea of mechanics or type of game to get a context of what the game is going to be like. And then after that, I want to hear what's unique, interesting, and different. If you can talk about where the magic is right away, that's exactly what I'm wondering. So just tell me what I want to hear.

**2)** Always have a backup plan. If I'm not looking for a two player game or an abstract strategy game, have something in the wings that you can show me.

I'm really looking for talent. I'm looking for designers, and even if the game isn't the right fit at this moment, I want to know who you are. I want to know what your style is and what you're working on.

**3)** If possible, have a quick demo. People are engaged if they play and if you can play part of your game in that short amount of time, that would be really helpful for publishers to get an idea of what the game's about.

# Antoine Bauza

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

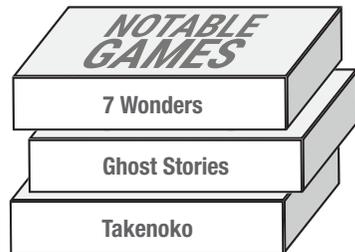
The Mind. I think it's the best game released in the past 10 years. It provides an extraordinarily rich playing experience with just some cards and a very simple ruleset. A true masterpiece. Every game designer, beginner or expert, should play it.

**What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

The Mind. For the reasons written before! And Game Designer Workshop by Tracy Fullerton is the best book out there.

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

That's a good sign. It means that you are able to admit that your work was bad. It's an important skill for an artist.



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

Design several games and don't waste all your energy on only one project.



## Kevin Riley

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

Games are most often a series of dead-ends and failed paths. Most designs have come out of failed previous designs. It's easy enough to design into a corner where the only way to improve the game is to trim away large parts of it and start fresh. A project I'm working on now that is a cooperative tiling game started as a competitive drafting game and through a long series of missteps, it's now almost ready to go to a publisher.

**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?**

Keep it simple, focused and short. Publishers are busy. Convince them that it's a special project they should care about early, provide the relevant information, and then let the game do the talking. Be organized, courteous, timely, and respectful.

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

Focus on iterating. Games are built in steps. Don't be afraid to start over. Every test is a learning experience. No matter what happens to your game, you need to grow your own understanding of the genre and what works/doesn't work.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

What is the point of this game? What are the constraints regarding the design of this game? Who are we trying to sell it for? What does our



target demographic want/prefer? If still feeling lost, talk to someone else or just take a break. Time away is necessary for good design.

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

Design for them, not for you. Playtest with more average/casual board game players. Make the game smaller and simpler.

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

Let's make tomorrow better than today. I don't need the next change to make the game perfect, I just need it to improve.

# Christina Ng Zhen Wei

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

I do not recommend any particular game. It is beneficial to expose yourself to many games in the market. It helps in the thought process as you become aware of the various mechanics and think about what works and what doesn't work.

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

From our first game, Three Kingdoms Redux, we have learned not to write out the whole rulebook before even testing the idea. It will be a waste of time to do that. In fact, my co-designer (Keng Leong) has written up a geeklist to share lessons we have learned as first-time designers after our first game: <https://www.boardgame-geek.com/geeklist/169153/lessons-learnt-first-time-board-game-designer>

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

During the design of our second game, Race for the Chinese Zodiac, we discarded numerous ideas after playtesting them. For some of the ideas, it was pretty straightforward because we did not enjoy the gameplay ourselves after trying them out. Those were easy to cut.

However, there were some ideas which we felt were worth pursuing, so we continued testing the ideas repeatedly with the same playtesters. Their reactions towards the game said it all. When they were not very engaged during the gameplay, that was a signal for us to walk away from certain ideas



even though we had spent quite a bit of time designing and developing them. Therefore, we have learned not to be too attached to any one idea and know when to walk away despite previous efforts and time spent on it.

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

I would tell the designer that he/she is making progress in the game design. The playtesting session probably highlights areas that need to be improved, and that is a useful session. The best sessions are with playtesters who can be honest to the designer about how they feel about the game. It will then be up to the designer to decide what needs to be changed in the game to improve the gameplay experience. Additionally, having a discouraging session is all part and parcel of the game design process. The final product comes from numerous alterations and improvements. Rome is not built in a day, neither are board games!

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

It is hard to make a living off board game design. Don't be over idealistic and think one can make big bucks off this. However, if you are doing this for the interest, go for it and be prepared to spend time and effort on the reiterative process of repeat playtesting. However, the intangible rewards come from knowing others enjoy and appreciate your game design! That is most rewarding and makes the effort worthwhile.

### **When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

I have to ask myself why I'm doing all this. I think I enjoyed the fact that the design of the second game gave me the opportunity to spend more time with my family. My parents played a major role in

the playtesting and have supported us through the whole process. In a later stage, my brother and his girlfriend also spent much time testing the game in different player counts so that we could make adjustments. I feel that motivated me to come up with a game that the whole family could play together for years to come.

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

I value time spent with family and friends. I enjoy the face to face interaction without interference from technology. That may be why we like to design games that are interactive where knowing what your opponents are doing is important. We hope our game designs also provide other gamers with fun and enjoyable memories with their families and friends!

# Yeo Keng Leong

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

There were some game mechanics that looked nice on paper but just did not work out during playtesting. For example, we wanted to include an element of espionage and sabotage in Three Kingdoms Redux, and that was present in the early versions of the game’s prototype. Alas, it just did not work out and we made the reluctant decision to remove it. I was a wee bit upset when we culled it, but that feeling soon disappeared because the game felt better after its removal.

**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?**

Be mentally prepared for rejection.

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

My answer to this is from an Asian perspective. Game designing in Asia is not profitable, so if the new game designer is looking to make money out of this, then it is not going to happen. If however, this new game designer is prepared to work in Europe or the USA, the chances of success may be higher.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

We work very slowly (4 years on average per game). Part of the reason for this is we sometimes walk away and don’t touch an idea



for months on end because of our day jobs, but we often find that when we come back and revisit the initial idea, we have fresh perspectives and new improvements that can be made to that idea.

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

That we were likely to incur losses on our first board game.

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

I have more than one core philosophy, so I wrote them up in a geeklist on BGG: <https://boardgamegeek.com/geeklist/235042/our-board-game-design-guiding-principles>

## Scott Rogers

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

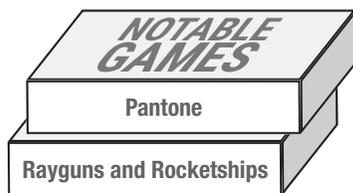
I teach a class in board game design and over the course of the semester, I have my students design one dice game, one card game, one party game, and one board game. While I try to have the students play as many games as possible to give them a strong foundation to build upon (I find that new game designers have a tendency to copy the gameplay of the first game they play) there are four games that I always come back to in my curriculum: Qwixx for a dice game, Quiddler for a card game, Werewolf for a party game and Betrayal at House on the Hill for a board game. All four of these are easy to teach, have a slight twist to them that makes them memorable, and are just good games.

### **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

The best purchase I made last year was for \$8.99 - the ALEX A4 Paper Cutter Portable Guillotine Paper Trimmer. While I'm sure I will eventually upgrade to a heftier cutter in the future, this little guy has been pretty trusty so far.

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

I wouldn't call it a failure as much as an oversight, but recently a designer friend of mine, who has successfully run several Kickstarters, was helping me streamline my game for a possible Kickstarter campaign. The goal was to reduce shipping weight and component cost. He did something really smart which was to determine



how many tiles and tokens would fit on a sheet by lining them up on the top of the prototype game box in order to get an idea of the punch sheet size and how many tiles and tokens would fit on one sheet. Then he made a stack of the tiles and placed those in the box to help me determine how much room it would take up. A very simple trick that was very useful!

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

In a perfect world, it would be when every publisher on the planet said “no” to the design. However, that isn’t a realistic option. I think that you should never show it to the same publisher twice (unless they ask to see it again) and you never want to enter it into more than one or two contests where publishers will see it. A year or two is a good life for a design pitch. If it doesn’t find a home in that time, you should either revisit it or rework it for later or just shelf it for good. Sometimes knowing when to quit is more important than being tenacious.

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

I find that rituals tend to turn quickly into crutches and excuses, so I try to avoid them. “I can’t design because I don’t have my lucky pen with me” or some such nonsense will slow you down creatively. There’s a great quote that goes “Inspiration is for amateurs” meaning that a professional game designer should be able to start designing at the drop of a hat.

I always carry a notebook around with me in case inspiration strikes, so at least I can capture any ideas or draw “table layouts” of potential designs. My friend, Seth Johnson (Heroclix, Spymaster), goes one step further and carries around a mini-game design kit with him including dice, pawns, blank cards, and winks. We’ve talked about a game design at lunch and by dinner, he’s created a playable prototype! That, my friends, is a professional at work!

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

An extremely valuable skill for a game designer to have is to grow a thick skin and separate the work from themselves. Sure, it sucks to have someone not like your game, but it's even more important to learn WHY they didn't like it. It's easy for people to complain about something, but getting them to express why they didn't like it is a skill.

Develop that skill. Become a “feedback archeologist” who can dig past the “I don't know why I don't like it” to the actual reasons.

I once had a player complain that they didn't like how few actions they got during the game, but it was because they rolled a d6 to determine actions, and they were rolling mostly 1's. The problem was less about how many actions they got and more that the die needed to be customized to give them a minimum of actions so they could still feel like they were doing something on their turn.

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

I've learned to slow down and evaluate each new game design idea more in-depth. In the past, I leaped on every game idea I had, no matter how simple or dumb, and built a prototype for it. This is great from a playtesting perspective, but I've found it leads more often to dead ends and misfires.

I realized that I like to think longer about a game in the concept stage and “play it in my head” to get an idea of where things can go wrong and prevent them even before I build the game. That way, I can spend more quality time solving problems that pertain to the players and their interaction because I've solved many of the problems of the game's systems ahead of time.

## **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?**

Contrary to popular opinion, I think that when you have a game

design that is ready to be pitched to a publisher, it SHOULD be a nice and presentable looking prototype. I'm not advocating spending lots of money on original art and components, but your game should be something that gets a passer-by excited to see it.

I've sold games on the strength of the appearance of a prototype because the publisher didn't have to imagine what the final product would look like. I had done that for them already. And don't worry about using art from Google. A publisher knows it's just placeholder, and it will change in the final product. Also, have your "elevator pitch" ready, and be prepared to leave rulebooks and sell sheets behind with the publisher.

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

This is the advice I give all of my game design students. Don't wait for anyone to "invite you to the party." You really don't need a publisher or anyone else to make your game. Just make it. Then play it, and expect it to be broken. But don't get discouraged. All games break.

Pay attention to the players' feedback because they are telling you what they don't like for a reason. And if enough people (usually a half-dozen) tell you the same thing, then it's a real problem that you will need to fix.

As for advice not to follow, I always tell designers that not all feedback is good feedback. You need to know what advice from playtesters (and even publishers) you need to reject. Ultimately, you want the player to play the game the way YOU want them to play it. Anything that distracts from that should be ignored.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

When I get stuck, I tend to write down my thoughts about the

game, make lists about which projects I want to make, and sometimes even recopy down my old notes to help me review them. I will draw out what I call “table layouts” of the game in process to help me visualize what are the essential things I need to create to play the game. Playing other published games often helps me recharge and get new ideas, and of course, I have a great peer group of other professional game designers that I often turn to for advice. I don’t always follow what they tell me, but I always listen to it.

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

I wished someone told me earlier that designing board games was an actual profession I could do. In the back of my head, I’m sure I realized that someone was designing these things (back in my day, they were known as “inventors”), but I didn’t think I could be one of them. I made my first run at the board game industry back in 2006, and I wish I had been a little more persistent about it. If I had become a published designer back then, I might be a full-time tabletop game designer by now (or at least working for a board game publisher...or a Kickstarter millionaire!).

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

I have come to realize that my main focuses as a game designer are to create something that people can enjoy - both gameplay wise and visually - and to create something that has significance to me and my interests.

I designed Rayguns and Rocketships because I loved 1930’s sci-fi, and a good friend told me to “make my own Star Wars” rather than trying desperately (and in vain) to get a job making a Star Wars game for some huge company.

I designed Pantone the Game out of my experience of creating 16-bit art for video games and watching friends and family struggle through games of Pictionary. I wanted to ease their discomfort

Scott Rogers

in the act of creation and just get them to focus on the fun parts of the game. I think one of the greatest things in life is to give others joy, and if you can fulfill your own creative needs as well, that's even better!

# Ian Zang's Top 3 Tips for Designing Great Experiences

1) Know the four main categories of experiences: idea, people, object, tactile.

Idea: lots of imagination, reading, and analyzing.

People: lots of interaction with others.

Object: lots of visuals.

Tactile: lots of ways to touch and manipulate components.

Gamers typically have a primary experience that they prefer followed by a secondary experience and often a tertiary. Understanding the gamers you're designing for will help you create the experience they most enjoy.

2) Design games that you would like to play because you're going to have to play them a lot to make them good. Understand the type of experience you enjoy, and go from there.

3) The feedback that you receive should be tempered with what experience preference the person playing likes. So, if they like social games and they're playing your euro game, keep in mind what they are saying as completely true because if a social gamer sits down and plays your game, this is what you should expect them to understand and what they will like and what they won't like. So, if you frame it in that sort of realm you end up with a way to approach feedback from it.

## Daniele Tascini

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

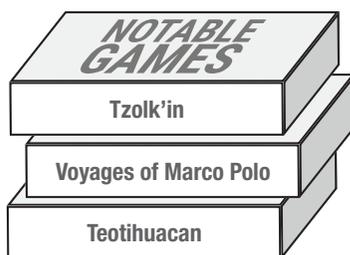
I start a new game from a mechanism idea. I try the mechanism either in an abstract way or by building up a raw game structure to test it. If I find the mechanism is interesting, intriguing and, enjoyable to play, I'm pretty sure I will make a good game out of it, and work until the final success. If I find it is boring, or not working as I thought, or not interesting enough, I drop it immediately.

### **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?**

Be sure that the game is ready to be presented. Self-criticism is the most important thing to achieve good results.

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

You need to do what you are most talented at. Do not force yourself to do something you are not able to do just because you would like to or someone else told you to do it.



# Juma Al-JouJou

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

Play the majority of the top 50 games on Board Game Geek. These games are quite successful, so their designers must have done something right.

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

I struggled to find a decent and fulfilling job as an employee. The fact that I "failed" in finding it kind of forced me to self-publish games which turned out to be quite successful.

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

When I am not in love with the game, despite good feedback from playtesters, I know that it is lacking something. It happened to Clans of Caledonia. I hadn't touched it for nine months and then, without playtesting it, I had the breakthrough idea on how to significantly improve it. Then, I worked on it frantically for four months and the game was basically ready.

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

Nope, I design games wherever I am and at any time. I can mentally visualize game mechanics quite well and imagine certain combinations of mechanics and playtest them in my mind. Often, I can disregard certain combination of mechanics merely from imagination. That is what I like about game design. I can work on game design while walking in the forest or cycling through the city.



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

I started using nandek to design cards. It saves a good deal of time.

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

Even if you fall in love with your game design, always assume that it is not perfect. Then, find out how you can improve it. There are so many games out there that just being “good” is not good enough.

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

This usually happens if a certain fuzziness discourages me to focus on the task. I then try to understand what bugs me and try to split the big question into several smaller questions that are easier to answer. Structuring the problem both helps my brain understand it better and encourages me to focus on the task.

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

Educational games are not successful because there is no demand for them. I assumed they are not successful because often educational games are simply not good games. When I published Green Deal, I experienced first hand that the theme was preventing the game from being more successful.

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

In games, you can explore math formulas in a playful way. These mathematic principles form our reality. Through playing you understand these mathematic relations and thus our reality better. You get closer to finding the truth.

# Christian Martinez



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

Do not despair! That's what playtest sessions are for--to reveal problems. It can be discouraging to realize that a whole part or a fundamental aspect of your design does not work at all or as intended. But that's exactly why you playtest. So enter the session thinking, "Ok, what will we discover this time?" You should worry when an early playtest does not reveal anything!

Take notes. Note what testers say. Don't feel compelled to answer or justify every point raised, or even to discuss it right now if you don't feel like, but note it and think about it. Accept every remark with a "yes," not necessarily as in "I agree," but as in "ok, that's what you feel; I respect that."

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

I think one of them is the will to keep things simple. When confronted with a choice in design I try to go first with the simple option. Most of the time it works. If it doesn't, then I dig further.

I try to see the different elements of a game in two groups: those I want and those I need. I think it helps to identify the core of a game and what can be easily changed or disposed of.

It helps me a lot to explain my design to others, family, or friends, especially when I'm blocked. Sometimes just by exposing and expressing it in a clear way (or at least trying to), I find a solution.

And I use a trick given by Reiner Knizia: try to solve two problems at once (in the same game of course). It's surprising how it can really work!



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

Play! Know what games do today. But don't just play! Import ideas from other fields of experience, other media, other expressions, other art forms and disciplines, etc.

What do you want to express with your game? What is the real theme? What is your game about? What do you want the people playing your game to experience? What mindset? What feelings? Find the answers to these questions and keep them in mind. You will use them later to help you to make decisions in your design process.

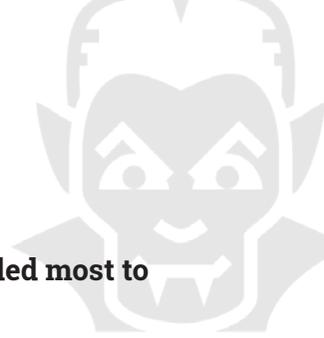
Ask yourself what is special about your game? What is the twist? Is that twist interesting enough given the initial premise?

**When you feel overwhelmed or unfocused or have lost your focus temporarily, what do you do? (If helpful: What questions do you ask yourself?)**

I put things to rest when necessary. If I'm stuck on a specific problem, it's no use to bang my head on it. I know that when I've given it enough thought it's better to let things go, do something else entirely, take a walk, take a nap, and let my unconscious mind do some work! And then come back to it later.

Also it helps me to note what I want to do with a game, specific things on a specific level. Of course I suppose we all take notes about different things in a design, random ideas, pieces of mechanisms, etc. But here I talk about, at diverse steps in the process, noting in active form some small incremental things to do with the game. It helps me when I'm feeling overwhelmed and don't know where to begin a specific task in the design.

# Peter C. Hayward



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

Circle the Wagons, from Buttonshy Games. I believe that every designer should try to make an 18-card game at some point. It's not only a fun, inspiring design challenge, but it'll also teach you a lot about streamlining your larger designs.

Circle the Wagons is the best 18-card game I've played. It's endlessly replayable, it's full of magnificent design choices, and it doesn't waste a thing. There's an impressive amount of content packed into those 18 cards.

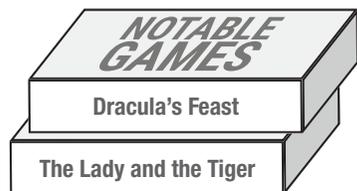
## **What purchase of \$50 or less has most positively impacted your game designing in the last year? This could be a tool, a book, an app, etc.**

I finally got sick of making people with short fingernails suffer and bought some punchboard and sticker paper. It's not a lot of money, but it's a significant quality-of-life improvement for your playtesters.

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

I carry my notebook (actually an iPad + Apple Pencil, but a notebook works just as well) everywhere - if I'm standing in line or arrive at a meeting early, I'll start jotting down ideas. After a workout or a long walk, I'll sit down and spend some time writing out all the thoughts that have been building up.

The zone, for me, is identifying a specific problem: "no good end condition", or "these mechanics don't integrate into the rest of the game well enough. Once I have a



brain-puzzle to chew on, my mind won't let it rest until I have at least one idea. Then I'll sit down and play around with the ideas until I have one that feels right, or that solves multiple problems at once, or that ties particularly well into the core mechanic/theme of the game.

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

Why was it discouraging?

If players weren't engaged, strip your game down to the basics. Does it have a core mechanism that's interesting in some way? There are only a few, really, (games tend to bounce off the same basic ideas) so work out which one fits your game, and make sure everything else leans into it.

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Did the players feel agency?

If there's too much randomness, too much chaos, too much downtime, or too few interesting decisions, your game needs to work out how to make the players feel like they're the ones in control.

Are your players struggling to understand how to achieve their goals? Remove the math, remove the unnecessary mechanisms, remove the clutter. Work out what players want to do, and make it easier for them to understand the path to their goal.

Are your players struggling to understand their goals? Make your victory conditions more transparent. The best games ever made have single-sentence victory conditions.

Was there too much downtime? Work out how to make everything move faster, how to get players engaged in each other's turns, or give them little puzzles that they can work on even when other players are active.

No idea why the playtest was so miserable? Put the game on a shelf for a while, and come back to it later. Or don't. You'll make some games just to learn how to make games. Not everything you make will be publishable, and that's okay.

Did the game break? Don't sweat it. That happens to the best of us. Constantly. Figure out why it broke and rebuild it - stronger, faster, better.

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

Almost all of the world's most popular games feature strong ludonarrative assonance: as a player, you understand what your actions are. You understand what you're doing within the world of the game, and the effects and costs make sense within that world.

**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?**

Work out why your game would be a big hit. Not just "a fun game" or "people like it" - why will it be a BIG HIT? Publishers, understandably, want to publish big hits. They're not going to say no if you bring them a game with the potential to make them a ton of money.

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

Design ten games. Then, design the game that lights a fire in your soul. If you have ten games that light fires in your soul, design them all now.

You'll get better after each and every game you design, but your biggest hits will be the ones you can't stop thinking about.

People will tell you to publish your own game on Kickstarter. Don't do this, especially if it's one of your first ten. If NO publisher will pick it up, there's a reason for this. If someone experienced

in making money from games doesn't think they can make money from your game, you're not likely to be able to. Instead, you're likely to waste a lot of time and money on a game that simply isn't good enough to warrant it.

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

Blind playtest, blind playtest, blind playtest. The blind playtesting process improves my games more than everything else put together.

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

Follow your instincts, make mistakes, course-correct, improve. Fail fast, learn fast.

# James Hudson's Top 3 Tips for Getting Published

**1)** Do speed dating events. You get a lot of exposure to a whole lot of publishers, and you can hone your pitch as you're going around showing off your prototype or your sell sheet or whatever you brought, and you also get to hear a lot of valuable feedback from those publishers.

If you get to sit down for five minutes with twenty different publishers, and they tell you that your game won't work for some reason, you'll make your design better because you're starting to understand what publishers are looking for out of a game. And that's very important.

There's nothing wrong with having a vision and sticking to your vision, but it's also very important that you make your vision marketable because if we can't sell your game, we can't sign it.

**2)** Make your prototype eye-catching. I don't want you to spend a bunch of money on your prototype, but you can use clip art and professional services like Kinko's to make things look good.

Don't show up to a job interview in sweatpants, so to speak. Don't come up to a publisher with post-it notes on a big science project board. That's not going to get anybody's attention. The better you can make it look, the more serious we're going to take it.

**3)** Go to conventions and see people face to face. However, don't go up to somebody at a convention when they're busy at their booth. If they're swamped at the booth you have to wait. You may have to hover a bit. You may have to time it when there's not a conversation going on. You may have to just shake a hand, give a card and a sell sheet, and say hey.

And don't just go around handing out stuff to every single booth. Do your research and tell the publisher why you think it would be good for their lineup. Then, follow up with an e-mail or a phone call the next week.

# Games Recommended by the Designers

*(#) indicates the number of times the game was recommended.*

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## #

10 Minute Heist  
504

## A

Acquire (2)

## B

Battle for Moscow  
Betrayal at House on the Hill  
Blokus  
Bohnanza  
Brass

## C

Can't Stop  
Carcassonne (3)  
Catan (4)  
Chess  
Citadels  
Cities and Knights  
Civilization  
Codenames  
Coloretto  
Concordia (3)  
Cosmic Encounter (4)

## D

Dominion (3)

## E

El Grande

## F

Flip Ships

## G

Go

## H

Hanabi (2)  
Hanafuda  
High Society

## I

Ingenious  
I'm the Boss

## J

Jaipur  
Jenga

## K

Kingdom Builder  
Kingdomino

## L

Libertalia  
Love Letter

**M**

Magic: The Gathering  
Modern Art

**Z**

Zooloretto

**N**

Neuroshima Hex!

**P**

Patchwork  
Pickomino  
Poker  
Puerto Rico

**Q**

Quantum

**R**

Ricochet Robots  
Risk

**S**

Sagrada  
Santorini (2)  
Splendor  
Star Realms  
Star Wars Rebellion  
Stone Age  
Strike Force One  
Sushi Go!

**T**

Taluva  
Telestrations  
The Game  
Through the Desert  
Ticket to Ride  
Time's Up

# The Top 10 Episodes of the Board Game Design Lab Podcast

The Board Game Design Lab is a weekly interview show that talks to designers, publishers, and industry insiders about specific topics in board game design. Episodes come out on Wednesdays, and bonus content is released on Fridays.

My top 10 most popular episodes, as of April 7, 2018, are listed below.

All 70+ episodes can be found at [boardgamedesignlab.com/category/podcast/](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/category/podcast/) and all the bonus content can be found at [boardgamedesignlab.com/category/bonus/](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/category/bonus/)

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1. (Ep 1) What I Wish I Would Have Known before I Got into Game Design with Jamey Stegmaier  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/jamey](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/jamey)*
2. (Ep 3) How to Create the Perfect 2 Player Experience with Rahdo  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/rahdo](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/rahdo)*
3. (Ep 20) How to Playtest like a Pro with Rob Daviau  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/rob](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/rob)*
4. (Ep 18) Lessons Learned from Playing 5000+ Games with Tom Vasel  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/tom](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/tom)*
5. (Ep 46) A Day in the Life of a Pro Game Designer with Jamey Stegmaier  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/jamey-2](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/jamey-2)*
6. (Ep 28) Keeping a Design from Getting out of Hand with Gil Hova  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/gil](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/gil)*

## Board Game Design Advice

7. (Ep 36) How to Design a Solo Game with Hermann Luttmann  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/hermann](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/hermann)*
8. (Ep 41) Going from Game to Sellable Product with Randy Hoyt  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/randy](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/randy)*
9. (Ep 45) THEME! And How to Bring It Out with Evan Derrick  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/evan](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/evan)*
10. (Ep 30) Designing a Good AI System with Richard Launius  
*[boardgamedesignlab.com/Richard](http://boardgamedesignlab.com/Richard)*

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Gordon Hamilton .... 111	Joris Wiersinga ..... 213	Peter C. Hayward ..... 369
Jacques Bariot ..... 113	Jason Matthews ..... 221	
Ben Rosset ..... 117	Stephen Glenn ..... 227	

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

Jamey Stegmaier ..... 16	Jacques Bariot ..... 113	Jason Matthews ..... 221
Rob Daviau ..... 21	Leo Colovini ..... 119	Alan Moon ..... 233
Matt Leacock ..... 25	Morten Pedersen ..... 121	Ignacy Trzewiczek ... 240
Richard Launius ..... 29	Jon Gilmour ..... 133	Reiner Knizia ..... 242
Tom Lehmann ..... 35	Seth Jaffee ..... 137	Virginio Gigli ..... 253
James Ernest ..... 37	Alf Seegert ..... 149	Tim Eisner ..... 255
Don Eskridge ..... 43	Ted Alspach ..... 157	Tim Fowers ..... 263
Bruno Faidutti ..... 47	Richard Breese ..... 159	James Hudson ..... 266
Donald X. Vaccarino... 49	Phil Walker-Harding.. 163	Brady Sadler ..... 275
Grant Rodiek ..... 55	Matthias Cramer ..... 167	Curt Covert ..... 282
Alan Emrich ..... 59	Vital Lacerda ..... 169	David Turczi ..... 296
Sen-Foong Lim ..... 69	Richard Garfield ..... 172	Erica Bouyouuris ..... 303
Jay Cormier ..... 73	Sébastien Pauchon... 177	Nate Chatellier ..... 335
Jerry Hawthorne ..... 77	Rüdiger Dorn ..... 181	Kevin Riley ..... 350
Luke Laurie ..... 84	Jacob Fryxelius ..... 185	Christina Ng Zhen Wei ..... 353
Martin Wallace ..... 89	Hermann Luttmann... 187	Yeo Keng Leong ..... 355
Mac Gerdts ..... 95	Chris Kirkman ..... 195	Scott Rogers ..... 357
Mike Selinker ..... 97	Steve Finn ..... 199	Juma Al-JouJou ..... 365
Tom Jolly ..... 99	Glenn Drover ..... 205	
Gordon Hamilton ..... 112	Daryl Andrews ..... 209	

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	16	Kane Klenko .....	153	Reiner Knizia .....	242
Rob Daviau .....	21	Ted Alspach .....	157	Jason Tagmire .....	249
Matt Leacock .....	25	Richard Breese.....	159	Flaminia Brasini.....	251
Richard Launius .....	30	Phil Walker-Harding..	163	Tim Eisner .....	256
Tom Lehmann.....	35	Isaac Childres .....	165	Tim Fowers .....	264
James Ernest .....	38	Matthias Cramer.....	167	James Hudson .....	267
Don Eskridge.....	44	Vital Lacerda .....	169	Adam Sadler.....	272
Bruno Faidutti.....	47	Richard Garfield.....	173	Carla Kopp .....	290
Grant Rodiek.....	56	Sébastien Pauchon...	177	Mike Keller .....	294
Alan Emrich .....	59	Simone Luciani.....	179	Michael Schacht .....	297
Ryan Laukat .....	63	Rüdiger Dorn .....	182	Matt Tolman .....	299
JT Smith.....	65	Jacob Fryxelius.....	185	Erica Bouyouuris .....	304
Edo Baraf .....	67	Hermann Luttmann..	188	Samuel W. Bailey.....	309
Sen-Foong Lim .....	70	Hisashi Hayashi.....	193	Sami Laakso .....	311
Jay Cormier.....	74	Chris Kirkman.....	195	Ole Steiness .....	314
Jerry Hawthorne.....	78	Philippe Keyaerts.....	203	Behrooz Shahriari ...	323
Luke Laurie.....	84	Glenn Drover .....	205	Vlaada Chvatil .....	330
Martin Wallace .....	89	Geoff Engelstein.....	207	Nate Chatellier.....	336
Mac Gerdts .....	95	Daryl Andrews .....	209	R. Eric Reuss.....	341
Tom Jolly .....	100	Joris Wiersinga .....	213	Matúš Kotry .....	344
J.R. Honeycutt .....	104	Alexander Pfister .....	215	Christina Ng Zhen Wei.....	353
Jacques Bariot .....	113	Jason Matthews .....	222	Scott Rogers .....	358
Ben Rosset .....	117	Jeroen Doumen.....	225	Daniele Tascini .....	364
Leo Colovini .....	119	Alan Moon .....	233	Juma Al-JouJou .....	365
Morten Pedersen.....	122	Nikki Valens .....	234		
Jon Gilmour.....	134	Isaac Vega.....	237		
Seth Jaffee .....	137	Ignacy Trzewiczek ...	240		

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	17	Seth Jaffee .....	137	Flaminia Brasini.....	251
Rob Daviau .....	22	Cédric Chaboussit ...	141	John Coveyou .....	259
Matt Leacock .....	25	Alf Seegert .....	149	James Hudson .....	267
Richard Launius .....	30	Kane Klenko .....	154	Adam Sadler.....	272
Tom Lehmann .....	36	Richard Breese .....	160	Josh Carlson .....	277
James Ernest .....	38	Phil Walker-Harding..	163	Elizabeth Hargrave..	278
Don Eskridge .....	44	Isaac Childres .....	165	Carla Kopp.....	290
Bruno Faidutti .....	48	Matthias Cramer ....	167	Michael Schacht .....	297
Donald X. Vaccarino..	50	Vital Lacerda .....	169	Matt Tolman.....	299
Grant Rodiek .....	56	Richard Garfield .....	173	Erica Bouyouris .....	304
JT Smith .....	65	Sébastien Pauchon ..	177	Samuel W. Bailey.....	309
Sen-Foong Lim .....	70	Simone Luciani .....	179	Sami Laakso .....	311
Jerry Hawthorne .....	78	Rüdiger Dorn .....	182	Ole Steiness .....	314
Luke Laurie .....	84	Jacob Fryxelius .....	185	Rob Dougherty .....	320
Martin Wallace .....	89	Hisashi Hayashi .....	193	Behrooz Shahriari ...	323
Bruno Cathala .....	93	Chris Kirkman .....	195	Matúš Kotry.....	344
Mac Gerdts .....	95	Philippe Keyaerts ...	203	Scott Rogers .....	358
J.R. Honeycutt .....	104	Glenn Drover .....	205	Juma Al-JouJou.....	365
Gordon Hamilton ....	112	Daryl Andrews .....	210	Peter C. Hayward ....	369
Jacques Bariot .....	114	T.C. Petty III .....	217		
Reiner Stockhausen ..	115	Jason Matthews .....	222		
Leo Colovini .....	119	D. Brad Talton Jr .....	229		
Morten Pedersen .....	123	Isaac Vega.....	237		
Jon Gilmour .....	134	Reiner Knizia .....	243		

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	17	Seth Jaffee .....	138	Virginio Gigli .....	254
Rob Daviau .....	22	Cédric Chaboussit ..	141	John Coveyou.....	259
Matt Leacock .....	26	Gil Hova .....	143	Tim Fowers .....	264
Richard Launius .....	30	Alf Seegert .....	149	James Hudson .....	268
Mike Fitzgerald .....	33	Kane Klenko .....	154	Kelly North Adams ..	270
James Ernest .....	38	Ted Alspach .....	158	Brady Sadler.....	275
Andrew Looney .....	41	Richard Breese .....	160	Josh Carlson .....	277
Don Eskridge .....	44	Phil Walker Harding ..	164	Elizabeth Hargrave..	278
Bruno Faidutti .....	48	Isaac Childres .....	165	Curt Covert.....	283
Shem Phillips .....	53	Matthias Cramer .....	167	Mike Keller .....	294
Grant Rodiek .....	56	Vital Lacerda .....	170	David Turczi .....	296
Alan Emrich .....	60	Richard Garfield .....	173	Michael Schacht .....	297
Ryan Laukat .....	63	Sébastien Pauchon ..	178	Matt Tolman.....	299
JT Smith .....	65	Jacob Fryxelius .....	185	Erica Bouyouuris .....	305
Edo Baraf .....	67	Hermann Luttmann ..	189	Ole Steiness .....	314
Sen-Foong Lim .....	70	Chris Kirkman .....	196	Rob Dougherty .....	320
Jay Cormier .....	74	Steve Finn .....	201	Behrooz Shahriari ...	323
Jerry Hawthorne .....	78	Philippe Keyaerts ....	203	Vlaada Chvatil .....	330
Colby Dauch .....	81	Geoff Engelstein .....	207	Paul Dennen.....	333
Luke Laurie .....	85	Daryl Andrews .....	210	Nate Chatellier.....	336
Martin Wallace .....	90	Joris Wiersinga .....	213	Aron West .....	339
Bruno Cathala .....	94	Alexander Pfister ....	215	Matúš Kotry .....	344
Mac Gerdts .....	96	T.C. Petty III .....	217	Grant Rodiek.....	347
Mike Selinker .....	97	Jason Matthews .....	222	Antoine Bauza .....	349
Tom Jolly .....	100	Jeroen Doumen .....	225	Christina Ng Zhen Wei.....	354
J.R. Honeycutt .....	105	Stephen Glenn .....	227	Christian Martinez..	367
Jacques Bariot .....	114	D. Brad Talton Jr .....	229	Peter C. Hayward .....	370
Reiner Stockhausen ..	115	Isaac Vega.....	238		
Ben Rosset .....	117	Reiner Knizia .....	243		
Leo Colovini .....	119	Corey Konieczka.....	247		
Steven Aramini .....	127	Jason Tagmire .....	249		
Jon Gilmour .....	134				

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

Jamey Stegmaier ..... 17	Seth Jaffee ..... 138	Jason Tagmire ..... 250
Rob Daviau ..... 22	Cédric Chaboussit ... 141	Tim Eisner ..... 256
Matt Leacock ..... 26	Ted Alspach ..... 158	John Coveyou ..... 260
Richard Launius ..... 31	Richard Breese ..... 160	Tim Fowers ..... 264
Mike Fitzgerald ..... 33	Phil Walker-Harding .. 164	Adam Sadler ..... 272
James Ernest ..... 38	Vital Lacerda ..... 170	Brady Sadler ..... 275
Don Eskridge ..... 44	Simone Luciani ..... 179	Josh Carlson ..... 277
Bruno Faidutti ..... 48	Rüdiger Dorn ..... 182	Elizabeth Hargrave.. 279
Shem Phillips ..... 53	Jacob Fryxelius ..... 186	Carla Kopp ..... 290
Grant Rodiek ..... 56	Hermann Luttmann .. 189	Manuel Rozoy ..... 295
Alan Emrich ..... 60	Chris Kirkman ..... 196	Erica Bouyouuris ..... 305
Ryan Laukat ..... 64	Steve Finn ..... 201	Sami Laakso ..... 311
JT Smith ..... 66	Philippe Keyaerts ... 204	Ole Steiness ..... 315
Edo Baraf ..... 67	Glenn Drover ..... 205	Behrooz Shahriari ... 324
Sen-Foong Lim ..... 71	Daryl Andrews ..... 210	Nate Chatellier ..... 337
Jerry Hawthorne ..... 78	Alexander Pfister ... 216	Grant Rodiek ..... 347
Luke Laurie ..... 85	Jason Matthews ..... 222	Scott Rogers ..... 359
Morten Pedersen ..... 123	Isaac Vega ..... 238	Juma Al-JouJou ..... 366
Steven Aramini ..... 127	Ignacy Trzewiczek ... 240	Christian Martinez.. 367
Jon Gilmour ..... 134	Reiner Knizia ..... 244	Peter C. Hayward ..... 371

**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?**

Jamey Stegmaier .....	18	Cédrick Chaboussit ...	141	James Hudson .....	268
Rob Daviau .....	22	Gil Hova .....	144	Kelly North Adams ..	270
Matt Leacock .....	26	Alf Seegert .....	150	Curt Covert.....	284
Richard Launius .....	31	Kane Klenko .....	155	Carla Kopp.....	291
Mike Fitzgerald .....	33	Ted Alspach .....	158	Michael Schacht .....	298
James Ernest .....	39	Richard Breese .....	160	Erica Bouyouuris .....	305
Don Eskridge .....	45	Phil Walker-Harding ..	64	Samuel W. Bailey.....	310
Grant Rodiek .....	56	Vital Lacerda .....	170	Sami Laakso .....	312
Alan Emrich .....	60	Richard Garfield .....	174	Ole Steiness .....	315
JT Smith .....	66	Sébastien Pauchon ..	178	Darwin Kastle .....	319
Sen-Foong Lim .....	71	Rüdiger Dorn .....	182	Behrooz Shahriari ...	324
Jay Cormier .....	74	Chris Kirkman .....	196	Vlaada Chvtil .....	330
Jerry Hawthorne .....	78	Philippe Keyaerts ...	204	Nate Chatellier.....	337
Colby Dauch .....	81	Glenn Drover .....	206	Aron West .....	339
Luke Laurie .....	85	Daryl Andrews .....	210	Matúš Kotry .....	344
Mac Gerdts .....	96	Alexander Pfister ...	216	Kevin Riley .....	350
Tom Jolly .....	100	Jason Matthews .....	222	Yeo Keng Leong.....	355
J.R. Honeycutt .....	105	Stephen Glenn .....	227	Scott Rogers .....	359
Gordon Hamilton ....	112	D. Brad Talton Jr .....	230	Daniele Tascini .....	364
Reiner Stockhausen ..	115	Isaac Vega.....	238	Peter C. Hayward .....	371
Ben Rosset .....	117	Ignacy Trzewiczek ...	241		
Randy Hoyt .....	131	Reiner Knizia .....	244		
Jon Gilmour .....	134	Corey Konieczka.....	247		
Seth Jaffee.....	138	Tim Fowers .....	265		

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	18	Alf Seegert .....	151	Brady Sadler.....	275
Rob Daviau .....	23	Kane Klenko .....	155	Elizabeth Hargrave..	279
Matt Leacock .....	26	Richard Breese .....	160	Curt Covert.....	287
Richard Launius .....	31	Phil Walker-Harding ..	164	Manuel Rozoy.....	295
Mike Fitzgerald .....	33	Isaac Childres .....	165	Michael Schacht .....	298
James Ernest .....	39	Matthias Cramer .....	168	Matt Tolman.....	300
Andrew Looney .....	41	Vital Lacerda .....	170	Erica Bouyouuris .....	306
Don Eskridge .....	45	Richard Garfield .....	174	Wei-Hwa Huang.....	308
Bruno Faidutti .....	48	Rüdiger Dorn .....	182	Samuel W. Bailey.....	310
Shem Phillips .....	54	Jacob Fryxelius .....	186	Sami Laakso .....	312
Grant Rodiek .....	57	Hermann Luttmann ..	190	Ole Steiness .....	316
Alan Emrich .....	61	Hisashi Hayashi .....	193	Darwin Kastle.....	319
Ryan Laukat .....	64	Chris Kirkman .....	197	Rob Dougherty .....	320
JT Smith .....	66	Philippe Keyaerts .....	204	Vlaada Chvatil .....	331
Edo Baraf .....	68	Daryl Andrews .....	211	Paul Dennen.....	333
Sen-Foong Lim .....	71	Joris Wiersinga .....	213	Nate Chatellier.....	337
Jay Cormier .....	75	Alexander Pfister .....	216	Aron West .....	339
Jerry Hawthorne .....	78	T.C. Petty III .....	218	R. Eric Reuss.....	342
Colby Dauch .....	81	Jason Matthews .....	223	Antoine Bauza .....	349
Luke Laurie .....	86	Jeroen Doumen .....	225	Kevin Riley .....	350
Martin Wallace .....	90	Stephen Glenn .....	228	Christina Ng Zhen Wei.....	354
Mike Selinker .....	97	Isaac Vega.....	238	Yeo Keng Leong.....	355
J.R. Honeycutt .....	106	Reiner Knizia .....	244	Scott Rogers .....	360
Reiner Stockhausen ..	115	Corey Konieczka.....	247	Juma Al-JouJou.....	366
Leo Colovini .....	119	Flaminia Brasini.....	251	Christian Martinez..	367
Morten Pedersen .....	124	Virginio Gigli .....	254	Peter C. Hayward .....	371
Steven Aramini .....	128	Tim Eisner .....	256		
Randy Hoyt .....	132	John Coveyou .....	261		
Jon Gilmour .....	135	Tim Fowers .....	265		
Seth Jaffee .....	139	James Hudson .....	268		
Cédric Chaboussit ..	142				

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	18	Steven Aramini .....	128	Corey Konieczka.....	247
Rob Daviau .....	23	Jon Gilmour .....	135	Tim Eisner .....	257
Matt Leacock .....	27	Seth Jaffee .....	139	Adam Sadler.....	273
Richard Launius .....	32	Cédric Chaboussit ...	142	Elizabeth Hargrave..	280
Mike Fitzgerald .....	34	Gil Hova .....	145	Carla Kopp.....	292
James Ernest .....	39	Alf Seegert .....	151	Erica Bouyouris .....	306
Andrew Looney .....	42	Kane Klenko .....	155	Sami Laakso .....	312
Don Eskridge .....	45	Richard Breese .....	161	Ole Steiness .....	316
Bruno Faidutti .....	48	Phil Walker-Harding ..	164	Rob Dougherty .....	320
Donald X. Vaccarino ...	50	Vital Lacerda .....	170	Behrooz Shahriari ...	326
Shem Phillips .....	54	Richard Garfield .....	175	Vlaada Chvatil .....	331
Grant Rodiek .....	57	Sébastien Pauchon ..	178	Nate Chatellier.....	338
Sen-Foong Lim .....	71	Chris Kirkman .....	198	R. Eric Reuss.....	342
Jerry Hawthorne .....	79	Philippe Keyaerts ...	204	Kevin Riley .....	350
Luke Laurie .....	86	Glenn Drover .....	206	Christina Ng Zhen Wei.....	354
Martin Wallace .....	90	Daryl Andrews .....	211	Yeo Keng Leong.....	355
Mike Selinker .....	98	Joris Wiersinga .....	214	Scott Rogers .....	360
J.R. Honeycutt .....	107	Jason Matthews .....	223	Christian Martinez..	367
Leo Colovini .....	120	Nikki Valens .....	235		

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	19	Gil Hova .....	145	Elizabeth Hargrave..	281
Rob Daviau .....	23	Alf Seegert .....	151	Mike Keller .....	294
Richard Launius .....	32	Richard Breese .....	161	Manuel Rozoy.....	295
Mike Fitzgerald .....	34	Vital Lacerda .....	170	Matt Tolman.....	300
James Ernest .....	39	Rüdiger Dorn .....	182	Erica Bouyouuris .....	307
Don Eskridge .....	45	Geoff Engelstein .....	208	Samuel W. Bailey.....	310
Grant Rodiek .....	57	Daryl Andrews .....	211	Behrooz Shahriari ...	326
Alan Emrich .....	61	T.C. Petty III .....	219	Nate Chatellier.....	338
Sen-Foong Lim .....	71	Jason Matthews .....	223	Aron West .....	340
Jerry Hawthorne .....	79	Nikki Valens .....	235	R. Eric Reuss .....	343
Luke Laurie .....	87	Corey Konieczka.....	248	Kevin Riley .....	352
J.R. Honeycutt .....	108	Tim Eisner .....	257	Yeo Keng Leong.....	356
Randy Hoyt .....	132	Tim Fowers .....	265	Scott Rogers .....	361
Jon Gilmour .....	135	James Hudson .....	269	Juma Al-JouJou.....	366
Seth Jaffee .....	140	Adam Sadler.....	273	Peter C. Hayward .....	372
Cédrick Chaboussit ...	142	Brady Sadler.....	276		

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

Jamey Stegmaier .....	19	Jon Gilmour .....	135	Elizabeth Hargrave..	281
Rob Daviau .....	23	Seth Jaffee .....	140	Curt Covert.....	289
Matt Leacock .....	27	Cédrick Chaboussit ...	142	Carla Kopp.....	292
Richard Launius .....	32	Alf Seegert .....	152	Mike Keller .....	294
Mike Fitzgerald .....	34	Richard Breese .....	161	Manuel Rozoy.....	295
James Ernest .....	40	Vital Lacerda .....	170	Matt Tolman.....	300
Andrew Looney .....	42	Richard Garfield .....	175	Erica Bouyouuris .....	307
Don Eskridge .....	46	Sébastien Pauchon ....	178	Wei-Hwa Huang.....	308
Bruno Faidutti .....	48	Simone Luciani .....	179	Ole Steiness.....	317
Donald X. Vaccarino ..	50	Rüdiger Dorn .....	183	Rob Dougherty .....	321
Shem Phillips .....	54	Hermann Luttmann ...	191	Behrooz Shahriari ...	328
Grant Rodiek .....	57	Chris Kirkman .....	197	Nate Chatellier.....	338
Alan Emrich .....	61	Philippe Keyaerts ....	204	Grant Rodiek.....	347
JT Smith .....	66	Glenn Drover .....	206	Kevin Riley .....	352
Sen-Foong Lim .....	71	Daryl Andrews .....	211	Yeo Keng Leong.....	356
Jay Cormier .....	75	Jason Matthews .....	223	Scott Rogers .....	361
Jerry Hawthorne .....	79	D. Brad Talton Jr .....	230	Daniele Tascini .....	364
Luke Laurie .....	87	Nikki Valens .....	235	Juma Al-JouJou.....	366
Mike Selinker .....	98	Isaac Vega.....	239	Peter C. Hayward .....	372
J.R. Honeycutt .....	108	Reiner Knizia .....	245		
Jacques Bariot .....	114	James Hudson .....	269		
Leo Colovini .....	120	Brady Sadler.....	276		

# What did you think of Board Game Design Advice?

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Thank you for purchasing this book! In today's world, there is an overwhelming number of things you can spend your time and money on, so please know how much I appreciate you picking up a copy of my work.

I hope it added value and quality to both your life and game designs, and if so, it would be awesome if you could share this book with your friends by posting to Facebook and Twitter.

And it would be amazing if you could take a few minutes to **post a review on Amazon**. Your feedback and support will help me to greatly improve my writing for future projects and make this book even better.

Good luck with your designs, and I truly hope Board Game Design Advice has helped you along in your game design journey.

—*Gabe*

## About the Author

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Gabe Barrett is the creator of the Board Game Design Lab—a podcast, website, and community that focuses on helping people design great games that people love.

He spends most of the year in Honduras teaching English at a high school. During the summer, he runs the M25 Mission Camp—a ministry in Atlanta, GA that empowers high school students to serve the homeless and impoverished.

Gabe is married to an amazing woman who is also his chief playtester and beats him at his own games 97.4% of the time. They have three children.

You can follow him on Twitter @BGDesignLab

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Third, a big thank you goes to all the people who backed the crowdfunding campaign for this book. You helped me make it the best it could be.

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