

# 7 TIPS

for

Designing

# INCREDIBLE

# Board Games



# Joshua Michalik

# 7 Tips for Designing Incredible Board Games

Joshua Michalik

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# Prelude

I am a huge geek when it comes to playing and designing board games. My board game journey started out when I was very small, at the age of 3. My grandmother always played Scrabble with me from that young and precious age. Not only did I develop a love of games, but I also developed a love of learning. Over the years that followed, I continued to expand my horizons of boardgames and fell into a habit of playing Risk and Monopoly weekly with a local group of friends. Eventually, though my board game bonanza deflated as I lacked the desire to continue playing repetitive games as these. And then something changed my life forever.

My uncle went out of the country for a trip and returned with a most precious gift: The Settlers of Catan. This game sparked an internal revolution for me. Suddenly, I realized that all I needed were boardgames with strategy. More than simply a random card draw or endless dice-rolling, I needed the board-gaming platform for decision making. And Catan revealed this fundamental truth. Now, I began to bring this game with me everywhere I went, every friend I visited. I played Catan until the hex pieces eroded to circles and the cards tarnished into faded text. Enter [boardgamegeek.com](http://boardgamegeek.com) (BGG).

When purchasing my brand new second copy of Catan (3rd edition at this point), the FLGS owner showed me the BGG website. He had just been named the Ticket to Ride US champion and demoed the game for immediately. I came home with not only a new copy of Settlers of Catan, but also Ticket to Ride (US map), and the Carcassonne Big Box. My life had been altered. Fortunately, I had a solid group of gaming friends who adjoined my personal bandwagon with games like Puerto Rico and Stone Age and Dominion.

Fast forward a few years down the road and you find me working

as a Full-Time Software Developer for a large organization, developing web sites and applications. My curiosity in board game development (both physical and software) started to mount. Over the last few years, I've been contributing to web-based games using Angular + NgRx, Phaser 2/3, React, and boardgame.io. But now, I want to bring this to a larger scene.

# Introduction

Welcome to my first book *7 Tips for Designing Incredible Board Games*. My goal with this is to give you tips to help you design board games that people just can not walk away from. On the way, we'll consider real life examples of highly successful board games and consider the mechanics and creativity which brought them to where they are today. The pointers will be accompanied with practical exercises you can try out with your own game. My hope is that this book gives you the tools you need so you too can design extremely successful games.

## Book Overview

Here is a summary of the tips you will find in this book. I encourage you to read it cover to cover and thoroughly understand each step while designing your own game. Then use the book as a reference throughout your game creation process. I hope the high level summary below will help you when referring back to this book in the future.

## Section I: Designing the Game

### Tip 1: Establish the Objective

Why are you designing this game in the first place? Are you trying to capture a story telling element? Do you want your game to facilitate education? Or are you primarily going for entertainment? Is this game a glimpse into a much larger story or does this game

include the entire world? Will this game be a standard player-vs-player game, or will it be a team-building game, and will it support solo play?

## **Tip 2: Understand the Audience**

To begin with, ask yourself who you envision playing your game the most? Is it hard-core gamers who will play for hours or is it young children who will play the game for 5 minutes and then move onto something else? Will it be played by teachers with their high school students or will it be played at parties and the rules only loosely followed? Once you know this, it gives you a step towards creating the right game for the right people.

## **Tip 3: Prepare the Mechanics**

We need to take a look at the macro-mechanics of games in general to consider how key game mechanics can play a significant role in connecting your audience with the objective of the game. Team-based game mechanics operate differently from player versus player games. Party games usually encourage an everybody plays simultaneous approach, whereas critical thinking games are often very structured and turn-based. Once we have this idea, we can now look at the *micro*-mechanics that build on the theme. Most games have only one macro-mechanic, but will hold in some cases dozens of micro-mechanics. Expansion sets are often a composition of a handful of micro-mechanics used to tweak the game in some way, without fundamentally changing it. Think, vanilla Settlers of Catan versus playing with the Seafarer's expansion; small micro-mechanics are added to add variety and re-playability.

## **Section II: Playing the Game**

### **Tip 4: Be Adaptable**

Designing a game is a work of collaborative art. Just as the most successful businesses adapt to the changing needs of their customers, a great game adapts to its audience. During the prototyping process, a designer needs to gather feedback and test different versions of their game. Some tests may not even resemble the final product. Testing a micro-mechanic may involve a use of "mini-games". Testing the feelings of a team-work may be done by leaving out entire sections of the game to concentrate on just one aspect. Checking how necessary rules are may include reversing them or exaggerating certain rules to see what can go wrong. Adapting to feedback does not mean applying the exact suggestions your players make, it means listening to them and looking for the root problem.

### **Tip 5: The 80/20 Rule**

As a game designer, you will need to accept the game will never feel completely finished. Even years after your games are in the public eye, you will have this feeling that you want to make tweaks to rules, to the artwork, to the pieces. You will have ideas about when you can add mechanics to different parts of the game. In fact, because you create the rules, you may have the most difficult time playing your game at first because you "see" what needs to change. Realize that a game is like a painting, once your players are playing a nearly finished game, they have no idea what isn't perfect, only what's broken. Give yourself a deadline and follow the 80/20 rule and avoid diminishing returns.

## Section III: Finalizing the Game

### Tip 6: Play First, then Write Your Rules

In the beginning, spend more time playing your game and less time writing your rules. If you're being very adaptable, the rules will change every game, sometimes even during a game. After many play throughs, you will build an intuition for which rules are the ones most difficult to explain and that players tend to fumble over. After a few plays, put together a draft of some written rules. This way you explain the rules in the same way from game to game. Experiment with new rules before adding them to the rulebook. This is your Work-In-Progress rulebook. You should re-write the rules to make them as organized and succinct as possible before final production. In fact, I believe the best rules are written by someone who really enjoys the game and is *not* the designer. As the creator, you never had to interpret what you mean to yourself. A third party however has to understand your mind first and then derive enjoyment out of the rules. They are in a much better position to write the rules, or at least review yours.

### Tip 7: Finishing Touches

It is good to realize that your best feedback comes from having an "unfinished" look to your game. When people play a game that's made out of paper and sharpies, they have no trouble telling you how something should or should not look. In fact, they may be so comfortable telling how a card or game should look, that it sounds as if they are designing their own game. I suggest keeping this prototype feel throughout the design process. Use game pieces from your other games, print out very preliminary designs, use cardboard. But do NOT go and make custom pieces until you are essentially totally finished with your game. You don't frame a painting before it's finished. The color palette, the pieces, the

artwork, and the official rulebook are finalized at the end of the design process. Until then, consider them expendable and changeable anytime.

## **How to use this Book**

Use the points you find inside to enhance your game design. Some points will be more suitable for certain varieties of board games whereas other points may be more generalized. Overall, I've tried to keep the points usable for any platform and audience. If you are developing a game for the first time, I encourage you to use this book each step of the production process. If you are in the middle of developing one of your games, refer to the book at the stage that you are currently at. If you've already created several games, I recommend for you to read this book as an exercise in taking a retrospective review of your process to see what you would change for the next edition, expansion or entire game. Even if you never plan to design a game yourself, use this book to peer into the design process of board games.

# Section I: Designing the Game

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# Tip 1: Establish the Objective

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## Describing the Primary Purpose

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## Tell a Story

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## Educate on a Topic

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## Entertain

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## Considering Player Interaction

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### Player Versus Player

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### Team Play

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### Solo

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### Key Points

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# Section 3: Finalizing the Game

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## **Tip 6: Play First, then Write the Rules**

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# Tip 7: Finishing Touches

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# Conclusion

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