



# WAYS TO BECOME A BETTER GAME DESIGNER

- 1 KNOW YOUR CUSTOMER AVATAR.**  
Who is your game for? How old are they? What's their normal day look like? What snacks do they eat before playing games? Do they have kids? Do they have 4 hours to play games or 30 minutes? Do they like math? What kind of experience are they looking for? The better you know the exact person you're trying to reach, the better your game will be. It may sound silly to come up with all of those details, but the more specific you are, the more likely you are to make a great game for that person.
- 2 KNOW YOUR WHY.**  
Why do you want to make this game? Why is it important that it get to people's tables? Knowing your why will keep you motivated to finish a design. Write your "why" down and keep it somewhere where you can see it.
- 3 DON'T CREATE A GAME. CREATE A FUN ENGINE.**  
Players should put energy in your engine and get fun out. This is another reason why knowing your customer avatar is so important. Fun looks differently to different people. Make sure the people playing your game are having fun. (That's what board games are truly about after all.)
- 4 CONCERN YOURSELF MORE WITH THE PLAYER EXPERIENCE THAN THE MECHANICS AND THEME.**  
How the players feel during your game is far more important than if the game is about Cthulu or if worker placement is your main mechanic. First, figure out what you want players to experience, and then build out your theme and mechanics to achieve that experience.
- 5 BEGIN WITH THE END IN MIND.**  
You don't have to know exactly how you'll get there, but at least know what you want the players to try to accomplish by game's end. Are they trying to escape the dungeon or defeat the demon king? Are they trying to build the best city or be the best at managing the city's resources? When you identify where you're going, it's a lot easier to actually get there.
- 6 EXPLAIN YOUR GAME TO SOMEONE IN 2 MINUTES OR LESS**  
If you can't explain it in less than 2 minutes, you need to simplify your game. This isn't about explaining the rules. It's about conveying what your game is all about.
- 7 LESS IS MORE.**  
Don't add something to your design just because it's cool or clever. Make sure everything in your game is necessary and adds to the experience.
- 8 DON'T ADD TOO MANY "NEW" THINGS TO THE SAME DESIGN.**  
Players can only learn one or two brand new mechanisms at a time. (That's why "gateway games" exist—to get people familiar with how certain mechanisms work.) If you've got a bunch of ideas that have never been done before, don't put them in the same game.
- 9 LEARN FROM EVERY BOARD DESIGN.**  
You're going to make some bad games. You're probably going to make some REALLY bad games. Just make sure you learn from each one. Why was it bad? Why did the playtesters absolutely hate it? Even the best designers make bad games, but they dust themselves off and keep going.
- 10 REUSE WHAT WORKS.**  
Don't throw a bad design in the trash. Put it in the recycling bin and reuse elements that worked well. And in the same way, don't disregard elements from a good design. Find ways to reuse and repurpose what worked. Many great designers have reused certain mechanics over and over again to great success. You should too.
- 11 GET OUT OF THE ECHO CHAMBER.**  
I know your best friend loves your game. It's the best thing he's played since Stratego. But please don't take his opinion as fact. Find people who disagree with you and engage in open and honest discussion about your game and games in general. You'll be a more well-rounded designer for it.
- 12 BE INVOLVED IN A COMMUNITY.**  
Find a group of other designers, and get to know them. It can be in real life or through the internet, but find people working through the same challenges you are. You'll be able to accomplish far more with a group than you could ever do on your own.
- 13 GO TO DESIGN CONVENTIONS AND MEETUPS.**  
Get out of your house, and take your game with you. Go to game design conventions and become a regular at game design meetups. (Don't have a meetup near you? Start one.) Meet people. Help them with their games. They'll help you with yours.
- 14 DON'T GET MAD IF YOU HAVE AN UGLY BABY.**  
I know you've put countless hours into making the greatest game that's ever been designed. It's your pride and joy. It's your baby. I get it. But don't get mad if people tell you that you have an ugly baby. Don't get offended. Don't get defensive. Try to figure out why they don't like it. Weigh the criticism and decide what's useful.
- 15 DON'T BEGRUDGE PUBLISHERS THAT REJECT YOUR GAME**  
There could be any number of reasons why a publisher says "no." Don't take it personally. And if the publisher is gracious enough to explain why they're not going to sign your game, listen intently. Don't try to convince the publisher that they're wrong. Don't get defensive. Learn from the experience.
- 16 SEEK TO UNDERSTAND.**  
Don't seek to be understood. Ask questions. Figure out why a person thinks a certain way. Explain that listening is not just waiting for your turn to talk. Take note of what information is being shared with you.
- 17 REALIZE THAT PERCEPTION IS REALITY.**  
When players open your game and read your rules, you aren't going to be there to explain what you were thinking or what you were trying to do with the design. Their perception of your design will be their reality. Design accordingly. Be clear. Be concise.
- 18 DON'T TALK BAD ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE**  
Speaking poorly of publishers, reviewers, designers, or gamers reveals a great deal about your character and will cause you great harm in the gaming industry. Board gaming is a fairly small place, so anytime you make incendiary remarks about others, it's probably going to get heard by people you would probably like to work with one day. **Don't burn bridges you haven't even come to yet by burning bridges you just stepped off of.**
- 19 BUILD AN EMAIL LIST.**  
The sooner you build a list of people interested in your game the better. Email is the #1 way to market to people and the most preferred means of communication for the majority of people. An email list is the most valuable resource you can have in marketing.
- 20 COMMUNICATE REGULARLY WITH THE PEOPLE INTERESTED IN YOUR DESIGNS.**  
Be consistent in your communication. Consistency leads to familiarity and then leads to trust. People are more likely to buy and play your games if they trust you. Plus, you'll be able to identify raving fans that can be invaluable resources in getting word out.
- 21 GET BETTER AT PUBLIC SPEAKING.**  
You're probably not going to have to speak in front of thousands of people or anything, but if you want your game to be signed by a publisher, you're going to have to talk to them. Saying "um" or "like" every other word isn't going to do you any favors. And being super awkward and nervous doesn't help either. Public speaking skills will also help you greatly when demoing your game. You want players to enjoy the full experience, and that includes the time you're explaining it.
- 22 GO PRO.**  
If you want to be a serious game designer, if you want it to be more than just some hobby you do every now and then, you have to go pro. You have to stop dabbling and only being interested. You have to commit to it. Take it seriously. Act like a professional and you'll become one.
- 23 GIVE MORE TO THE DESIGN COMMUNITY THAN YOU TAKE.**  
The more you give, the more you'll receive. The more you take, the less you'll have. As with anything else in life, it's the people who are quick to help and quick to give who receive the most in the end. I know your game is really important to you, but don't be selfish.
- 24 PLAY OTHER PEOPLE'S GAMES.**  
The best way to learn what works well in games is to play great games. Play as many different great games as you can. An author gets better by reading great books. A game designer gets better by playing great games.
- 25 PLAY OTHER PEOPLE'S PROTOTYPES.**  
You can learn a great deal about what works and what doesn't by helping people with their prototypes. Plus, it'll give you an opportunity to help someone else. And being part of someone else's game design process may very well spark inspiration for your own design.
- 26 WATCH OTHER PEOPLE PLAYING GREAT GAMES.**  
People will tell you everything you need to know about what they're thinking and feeling without even saying a word. Watch their body language. Look at how engaged they are. You'll notice a huge difference when they're playing a great game compared with an okay game. Now, figure out ways to recreate the good body language in your own game. What made them lean forward in their chairs or jump and high five? How can you install similar elements in your design?
- 27 READ WHAT DESIGNERS HAVE TO SAY.**  
There are lots of board game blogs out there with lots of insights and ideas. There are lots of game design journals in which a designer goes step-by-step through how a game came to life. Read as much as you can to figure out how great designers think and how they approach different aspects of gaming.
- 28 LISTEN TO WHAT DESIGNERS HAVE TO SAY.**  
There are lots of board game podcasts out there in which designers go into great detail about various topics. Listen and learn.
- 29 NEVER LET AN IDEA GET FORGOTTEN.**  
Never leave home without a way to record an idea. Whether it's an app on your phone or a napkin and crayon, make sure you always have a way to hold onto the ideas that pop into your head.
- 30 KEEP A DESIGN NOTEBOOK.**  
Get a notebook that's specifically for game design. Organize it so it's easy to find what you're looking for. It's common to write something down that you don't return to for six months.
- 31 LISTEN TO GAMERS' PROBLEMS WITH PUBLISHED GAMES.**  
Monitor forums and Facebook games that discuss published games. It's common for people to post about why they don't like certain games. Take notes. Learn from what gamers don't like.
- 32 WATCH GAME REVIEWS.**  
It's not possible to play all the games that come out, but you can still be familiar with the games you don't get to play through watching reviews. See what types of games are trending, learn about new mechanics. Figure out what makes reviewers happy. This is all invaluable information.
- 33 DESIGN WITH BUDGET IN MIND.**  
A game that costs a lot to print isn't likely to get published. Keep that in mind when designing a game that requires a ton of pieces or needs components that have to be custom made.
- 34 DON'T THINK TOO MUCH ABOUT THE BUDGET.**  
But at the same time, don't get caught up too much on how much a game will cost to make. If your game really needs that custom component, so be it.
- 35 MEET PEOPLE.**  
As with any other industry, it's important to the who you know. (Or more importantly, who knows you.) The more active you are in the design community, the better chance you have of people wanting to help you. So, go meet people. Meet other designers. Meet publishers. Meet gamers. It can really help you down the road.
- 36 GO TO CONVENTIONS.**  
The best places to meet people are conventions. Don't be a bother or anything, but get out there and introduce yourself. Don't pitch your game. Just get to know people. Then, when the time to pitch comes along, you'll already have a foot in the door.
- 37 LEARN HOW TO DEMO A GAME.**  
Watch how the pros demo a game. Take notes. How do they explain the rules? What methods do they use to keep players engaged? Apply what you learn to your own demoing opportunities.
- 38 VOLUNTEER IN PUBLISHERS' BOOTHS.**  
One of the best ways to get to know people is by volunteering at publishers' booths at conventions. It's mostly grunt work, but it might get you a discounted ticket to the con, and you'll get a chance to have conversations with people in the industry.
- 39 TAKE ONE BITE AT A TIME.**  
When you start designing a game, especially a meaty game, it can be daunting to make it perfect, it'll never get finished. You have to know when to stop and be proud of what you've created. Then, send it out the door, and start working on what's next. (And get ready to work on the FAQ for all the issues gamers are going to find that you would have never seen anyway.)
- 40 BORROW FROM OTHER GAMES.**  
Board games are where they are now because of the board games that came before them. There are very, very few new concepts or ideas in gaming. Most great games just take ideas from the past and change them in interesting ways. Don't steal someone else's design or anything, but always feel free to borrow ideas from what has worked in other games.
- 41 F.O.C.U.S. – FOLLOW ONE COURSE UNTIL SUCCESSFUL.**  
Most game designers have "shiny object syndrome." Whenever they get a new idea, they jump headfirst into it and leave the game they were working on behind. But if you really want to become a better game designer, you have to finish what you start. Write down the new idea, so you can come back to it later, but stay focused on the task at hand.
- 42 OR DON'T...**  
There's also value in working on more than one game at a time (just maybe not 10 at a time). Sometimes you get stuck on one design and working on something else can help you get unstuck. You'll have to figure out what works best for you. Just don't keep bouncing to new projects and never finish anything.
- 43 KNOW WHEN TO WALK AWAY.**  
Sometimes, you get to a point in a design and things are just not working out. Maybe it's gotten too convoluted or maybe playtesters just don't think it's any fun. Whatever the case may be, it's important to know when to walk away from a design. Sometimes you have to pull the plug and go try something else.
- 44 KILL YOUR DARLINGS.**  
Never fall in love with an idea or mechanic to the point that you refuse to kill it. If something isn't working, get rid of it. Maybe it'll work in a different design.
- 45 JUST SHIP THE THING.**  
There's no such thing as a perfect game. If you keep tinkering with it and keep trying to make it perfect, it'll never get finished. You have to know when to stop and be proud of what you've created. Then, send it out the door, and start working on what's next. (And get ready to work on the FAQ for all the issues gamers are going to find that you would have never seen anyway.)
- 46 NICHE DOWN.**  
A game for everyone is really a game for no one. This is another reason why it's important to know who your customer avatar is. If you cast too broad a net, you won't catch anything. You'll end up with a mediocre game that's for "everyone" as opposed to having a great game that's for someone specific.
- 47 DON'T WORRY ABOUT THE ART.**  
Art is for the end. It's for when the game is done. For now, just go to Google images and take what you need to get your point across. And stop wasting time trying to find that perfect image. Just get something that does the job for now. It doesn't make nearly as big a difference as you think.
- 48 QUIT TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THE PERFECT TITLE.**  
Let it flow naturally. You might get 6 months into a design before you find the right title. Don't force it. And don't waste time on it. Put your time and energy into making a great game. The name will come.
- 49 QUIT ASKING FOR PRICE QUOTES.**  
If your design isn't 90% done, you don't have any business on manufacturers' websites. Asking for price quotes is just an easy way to feel like you're accomplishing something while you're actually just procrastinating. Go work on your design.
- 50 SCHEDULE YOUR DESIGN TIME.**  
The difference between professionals and amateurs is that the pros don't wait for inspiration to strike. They schedule when they're going to design. What gets scheduled gets done. It's just a fact of life. So, start scheduling your designing at specific times, and stick to it. Eventually it'll become a habit, and your productivity will skyrocket.
- 51 WORK ON YOUR GAME EVERY DAY.**  
Even if it's just one tiny thing, do something toward your design every single day.
- 52 FIX ONE THING AT A TIME.**  
All new designs have problems. Lots of problems. But don't try to fix everything at once. There's a good chance your "fixes" will actually create more problems. Be methodical in your approach.
- 53 LEARN HOW TO MAKE AN AWESOME SELL SHEET.**  
Publishers are incredibly busy. They don't have time to listen to your 20 minute explanation about how your game is the next Ticket to Ride. Your only interaction with them could be a sell sheet. It's your game's first impression. It's your opportunity to show a publisher why your game is great and why they should offer you a contract. You can have an amazing game, but if your sell sheet doesn't convey that, you'll likely miss out.
- 54 SELL YOURSELF.**  
A publisher isn't just signing your game. They're also signing you. Be aware of that in all of your interactions. They don't have to sign your game. Remember that you need them more than they need you. There are a lot of great games out there after all. But the more a publisher likes you, the better chance you stand.
- 55 DON'T EXPECT ANYONE TO CARE ABOUT YOUR GAME.**  
Thousands upon thousands of games come out each year, all vying for attention. So, don't be disappointed when people don't care about your game. It's not their job to get excited. It's your job to excite them. The burden is on you to design a great game and make people aware of it. No one is going to have as much passion for your design as you. You have to figure out how to transfer that passion into sales.
- 56 DON'T SPAM FORUMS.**  
Please don't show up to a game design forum or Facebook group just to tell everyone about your game or kickstarter project and then expect them to care. They won't. They might even be a little hostile towards you. They aren't bad people or anything. They're just tired of discussions doing this. Please join forums. Please contribute to people and engage in the community. But please don't show up out of the blue, spam everyone, and then expect good things to happen.
- 57 DON'T CONSIDER KICKSTARTER UNLESS YOU WANT TO START A BUSINESS.**  
I realize that Kickstarter is really appealing. Simply post your game and then all sorts of strangers will open their wallets and give you all the money you need to fund your campaign. But please understand that running a Kickstarter design means you're starting a business and you get to deal with everything that goes along with that. Accounting. Project management. Customer service. Logistics. Etc. If you're not ready to handle all of that, you're not ready to run a campaign.
- 58 DON'T DO A KICKSTARTER UNLESS YOU'RE FAIRLY CERTAIN IT'LL FUND.**  
Kickstarter requires an incredible amount of time, effort, and money to do it right. If you haven't built up a following, built up an email list, and been an active engager in the gaming community, you're probably not going to be successful. There's always outliers, of course, but don't go in planning to be the exception to the rule. If all you're doing is "hope marketing"
- 59 DON'T ASK FOR FREE SERVICES.**  
The whole "it'll be great for your portfolio" thing is a bunch of garbage. If you aren't prepared to pay for people for their services (art, graphic design, etc), you aren't actually committed to the project. Don't waste people's time with a game you're only just interested in. Come back when you're committed to what you're working on.
- 60 DON'T BE A CHEAPSKATE.**  
Pay people what they're worth. Don't expect people to respect your craft if you don't respect theirs.
- 61 FAIL FAST.**  
The more you work on a design, the faster you'll find out what works and what doesn't and the faster you can get it in front of playtesters to find out what really doesn't work. Fail early and often. The more you fail, the more you learn. And the more you learn, the better your designs get.
- 62 PLAYTEST.**  
The best thing you can do to become a better designer is to playtest your game over and over again. (And over and over...)
- 63 PLAYTEST WITHOUT SAYING A WORD.**  
Hand players the box and step back. Watch as they go through the rules and figure the game out. Don't say anything when they play a rule wrong. See what happens. Watch their body language. Take copious notes as you observe.
- 64 PLAYTEST EARLY AND OFTEN.**  
Get your idea in front of people as quickly as possible. Change some things, and playtest again. Repeat.
- 65 LISTEN TO PLAYTESTERS.**  
Let their voices be heard. They were gracious enough to play your unfinished game; listen to their thoughts. DO NOT DEFEND YOUR GAME. Ask questions. Seek to understand.
- 66 DON'T LISTEN TO PLAYTESTERS.**  
It's your game, so never feel like you have to change it just to make someone else happy. Weigh all criticism and only change the things you truly think need to be changed. Listen more to why a playtester feels a certain way and less to their ideas on overhauling your design.
- 67 PLAYTEST WITH DIFFERENT GROUPS.**  
Find different types of gamers to play your game. Get differing opinions and viewpoints. Constantly put new eyes on your design.
- 68 PLAYTEST WITH PEOPLE WHO DON'T KNOW YOU.**  
I know your mom and second cousin think you've created the best game in the world, but their opinions are a tad bit biased. Find people who won't feel bad about tearing your game apart. These are the most valuable people in your game design process. They separate the mediocre from the outstanding.
- 69 USE A GREAT PLAY TESTER FEEDBACK FORM.**  
Playtesting is useless if you don't capture and record it. Use a feedback form that's concise and not overwhelming.
- 70 VIDEO THE PLAYTEST SESSIONS.**  
To really go pro, record your playtest sessions and go back and watch them. This allows you to focus on different things at different times. You can watch one player's reaction to a game event, rewind, and watch a different player's reaction. Video is the best way to analyze your game's player experience and allows you to hone in on making a great game.
- 71 PLAYTEST.**  
Over and over and over again.