

Building Blocks of Tabletop Design

Introduction

A game is a language.

In a way, when you sit down with someone to play Chess, or Poker, or Cosmic Encounter, you are beginning a conversation.

Each move you make in the game is a way for you to express yourself to your partner - a way for you to make meaning. Every reckless aggression and coy bluff, every greedy power grab and defensive stall for time - is a word, a phrase, a statement in the language of the game.

These conversations we have with each other, as we play games, can be awkward and confusing. Or deliciously cruel. Or wildly creative and unexpectedly beautiful. The kind of conversation that tickles parts of your mind that you didn't know were there, the kind of conversation that sticks with you, and turns acquaintances into bitter rivals, and later into the best of friends.

But a game is not just a language.

It's more complicated than that. The moves we make as we play is a language built on top of yet another language. Beneath the meaning we express through the moves of the game is a kind of hidden grammar.

You move a pawn, or pass a ball to a teammate, or maneuver your virtual avatar: all of them statements made through gameplay. But what are the structures that make *those* meanings possible? The rules that permit action? The blood and bones and spirit that animates the body of the game as it is played?

That - exactly - is the subject of *Building Blocks of Tabletop Games*. So prepare yourself. Between these covers lies the hidden grammar of games. The structures behind the structures. The DNA of fun.

This book is a dictionary for the secret language of games.

You see, although games and play are ancient human endeavors (the Egyptian game Senet is at least 5,500 years old), it's only in the 20th century that games shifted from folk culture to authored media. And as tabletop games, role-playing games, and videogames have become industries of their own, we've done our best to understand them.

If you are reading this book, you are likely to be a serious game player. Like many others, you play games, discuss them, dissect them, and sometimes even design new ones. And for many years, many smart designers, critics, players, and scholars have been searching for the right

way to talk about games, to understand how they work, and to figure out how best to approach the creation of new designs.

That's why *Building Blocks* is so significant. The incredibly detailed pages that follow, pages that crack open the inner components of tabletop games, constitute a kind of Rosetta Stone for game grammar.

Make no mistake. This book is a big deal.

Building on their own impressive accomplishments as designers, their relentless intellectual curiosity, and a seemingly limitless connoisseurship of analog and digital games, Geoff and Isaac have put together a tremendously rigorous, wonderfully insightful, and astoundingly accessible encyclopedia of the elements that make tabletop games tick.

Why is this project so important? As someone who has studied, designed, and taught game design for 25 years, this volume is the sort of book I realize now I always needed. A manual for game mechanics. A foundation for structural analysis. An inspiration for new ideas. A sourcebook for teaching design.

On its surface, *Building Blocks* might seem like a deeply geeky endeavor, an obsession with rules and structures. The kind of overly-formalist ludology that has (rightfully) gotten into so much trouble in recent years. And in part it is. But look deeper. In games, what seems like pure abstract structure is inseparable from human experience. Chapter four, on resolving game actions (those things players do to make meaning) begins in statistics and the mathematics of randomness. But then it moves into the thorny terrain of the prisoner's dilemma, engaging with psychology and diplomacy and even ethics - structures that help shape how people treat one another.

Reading any one of the dozens of modules in this book is like lifting up a big mossy rock in the forest. Underneath, there's an unexpected universe of complexity, a miniature ecosystem of moving parts, just waiting to be discovered.

The language of games is everywhere.

All of this gushing praise is well deserved. This book is a landmark in the study of games. But don't let that fool you. As enchanting as it is, *Building Blocks of Tabletop Games* is not a magic bullet that is going to suddenly let you understand exactly how every game works, become a tournament winner, or guarantee that your next design will be a hit.

The hidden grammars that this book describes, the structures behind the structures, are only part of the picture. *Building Blocks* doesn't investigate how games tell stories, or impact the lives of their players, or embody ideological values, or fit into larger cultural landscapes, or even how they might make a profit. That's just not what this book is about. And that's perfectly all right. Its titanic strength comes from its incredibly tight focus on the fundamental elements of games.

Despite these limitations - is this book still useful? Hell yes. I was recently trying to design a bidding structure for a game, and found myself jaw-droppingly enlightened, reading the chapter on Auctions, which details no less than SIXTEEN distinct bidding structures. Without a doubt, I will use this text in my classes. I am planning, for example, to assign a project by having each student turn to two random pages in this book. And then create a game that combines both mechanics.

But there's more. The insights and ideas in *Building Blocks* can be applied outside of games. How can we resolve an argument between two entrenched opposing positions? How should a winner in a multi-candidate election be determined? What economic incentives lead to the best distribution of wealth? What's the right way to ensure fairness for all? These are dilemmas of modern society. And they are also the kinds of problems with which game designers wrestle on a daily basis. Believe it or not, the answers to these deeply important questions might begin to be answered by looking at the structures within structures of this book.

Lastly: games are beautiful.

Don't get me wrong. I don't want to leave you with the impression that this book is valid only because it is useful. It doesn't matter that *Building Blocks of Tabletop Games* might be used to help teach classes, or even make society better. This book is important because it is a heartfelt and soul-enriching love letter to games.

It is a lens to help us see the games we adore with fresh eyes. An advanced seminar in the complexity of systems. A spell book filled with recipes for creative play. *Building Blocks of Tabletop Games* unpacks the mystery of how these nerdy, knotty, collections of rules - boxed up with cards, dice, and colorful tokens - produce something which is in fact the very opposite of rules.

For those ready to appreciate the beauty of games, the joy leaps off of every page. Isaac and Geoff have given us whole new ways to have conversations with the people and the games we love.

Happy reading.

- Eric Zimmerman, game designer & Arts Professor, NYU Game Center