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DESIGNING A TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAME

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| The creation of a tabletop role-playing game is a relatively understudied subject in the realm of game design. The objective of this thesis was to create an understanding for the reader of the process for creating a simplified tabletop role-playing game, paying specific attention to the methods of evoking theme, emotion and immersion through game mechanics, and to ultimately create a tabletop role-playing game based on this knowledge.  

The thesis studied the history and definition of role-playing to gain an understanding for the foundation of the medium. It then looked at and analyzed a definition for role-playing games. After giving the reader a basic understanding of the medium through these two areas, the main bulk of the thesis talks about the author’s process for creating a tabletop role-playing game.  

The end result product for the thesis was a prototype for Invasion (working title), a tabletop role-playing game for four to six players. The game was not fully completed within the allotted time that was available for the writing of this thesis but got however very close to completion. Additional playtesting will be required, as well as time to further refine the mechanics of the game. The author will continue working on the game after this thesis is published, aiming to publish the game online. |

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1 INTRODUCTION

The author’s main interest in game design has always been tabletop role-playing games. This is because they offer something that video and board games often struggle with: unlimited possibilities for storytelling via games. Tabletop role-playing games give players the freedom to create the kinds of stories they themselves want to see.

Designing the game’s framework so that it enables these stories to be told in the best possible way is the challenge that all tabletop role-playing game designers face. This thesis hopes to illuminate the design process behind creating tabletop role-playing games. With tabletop role-playing games in their renaissance period right now, with an overwhelmingly wide variety of games available in the world, and more released every day, the times have never been more exciting for a tabletop role-player. However, this also means that the market is oversaturated, and in order to stand out a game needs to be excellent in all aspects. In this thesis the author will also be looking at the history of the modern role-playing game and analyzing their definition in general to form a rudimentary understanding of the modern role-playing game. Then, this thesis will detail the design process for a tabletop role-playing game.

This thesis attempts to answer the main research question: What is the process for creating a simplified tabletop role-playing game? The subsidiary research question is: How to evoke theme, emotion and immersion with game mechanics? The goal of this thesis is to produce a tabletop role-playing game.

2 WHAT IS A TABLETOP ROLE-PLAYING GAME?

Clearly defining what is, and what is not a role-playing game is an extremely difficult if not a downright impossible task. Different games that might be considered tabletop role-playing games by nominal and social definitions that depend on language and social conventions might not fall at all under the same real definitions that look for aspects that are essential to the object in question. The purpose of this chapter is not to try to offer a real definition, but to simply
introduce the common social conventions of what is considered to be a role-playing game, and how the modern role-playing game can also break those conventions.

2.1 The history of modern tabletop role-playing games

Before delving into defining role-playing games, and to breaking those definitions, it is important to understand the historical context of those definitions and how the modern tabletop role-playing game came to be. The following chapter is based on the papers of Christopher Sundberg (Sundberg 2016), John Kim (Kim 2004) and the articles of Curtis Carbonell (Carbonell 2016) and J.T. Evans (Evans 2013).

Even though storytelling is a core aspect of role-playing games, the roots of modern tabletop role-playing games lie in historical war-gaming. These were tabletop strategy games designed to recreate wartime strategies and enhance the tactical skills of commanding officers, and they have been around for centuries. However, these games were fairly marginalized in the public eye. In 1915, English author H. G. Wells published a book called "Little Wars", which offered a chance for the amateur war-gamers to enter the hobby due to its simplified rules. This book served as the basis for what would eventually become modern tabletop war-gaming.

Tabletop war-gaming continued to gather interest until the late 70’s, but it was in 1966 that the second important building block for modern tabletop role-playing games formed: The Lord of the Rings book series by J.R.R. Tolkien was released across the United States. By that point, the majority of war-gamers in the United States were middle class teenage boys, who were very much also a prime audience for Tolkien’s books. These interests started intermixing immediately, and soon, instead of historical battles, war-gamers wanted to start recreating the battles from Tolkien’s books. The interest in medieval combat increased, as did the interest in fantasy as a genre among historical war-gamers. In 1968, two games designers Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson were introduced to the early seed of role-playing games by a local gamer named Dave Wesley. Wesley had
added individual goals for some of the soldiers in a war-gaming army, giving them more character. Gygax and Arneson, seeing a potential in the market for a ruleset that would allow for role-playing within the war-gaming hobby, started working. Their game released in 1974 and was called Dungeons and Dragons (Gygax and Arneson, 1974). It is widely considered to be the first modern tabletop role-playing game.

Dungeons and Dragons started slowly gaining traction among players, and its popularity grew exponentially. Several other games such as Traveller (Miller, Chadwick, Harshman and Wiseman, 1977), and RuneQuest (Perrin, 1978) followed suit in the 70’s, and role-playing games as a genre started to form. By 1980, the genre had reached its early growth peak in popularity, and by the middle of the 80’s the growth slowed. It seemed the genre had been a fad, and the publishing of new games slowed to a trickle. However, this led to publishers experimenting with new designs. Role-playing games started to explore more of the genres other than just fantasy. There were games based on books and films, and rules systems that allowed for more individual expression for the player characters. Simpler role-playing games were released for younger audiences. Pre-made character templates and archetypes were introduced, and pre-made adventure supplements for different systems became commonplace. At the end of the 80’s the role-playing game industry had stabilized.

During the 90’s, many new role-playing games’ focus shifted to cinematic, linear action. The themes of the games were generally darker, and more marketed towards adults. As a counterpoint, the 90’s also saw some interesting experimental dice-less role-playing games that focused more on dream-like storytelling and less on mechanics. However, by 1997, many role-playing game companies had gone bankrupt, and smaller companies were bought out and merged, as the audience of role-playing games was being taken away by the rising success of card and board games. Contemporary industry leader in role-playing games, TSR, the original publisher of Dungeons and Dragons, was bought out by Wizards of the Coast, the publisher of the most popular collectible card game Magic: The Gathering.
The revival of the role-playing game scene and genre came in the year 2000, when Wizards of the Coast published the Third Edition Dungeons & Dragons, and released its core mechanics under a free license. This allowed for third-party companies to publish their own supplements for the game, which proved to be beneficial for the sales of the original. By this time, independent role-playing games started being released and sold over the internet. These games started to revolutionize further the world of tabletop role-playing games, focusing on more individualized and evocative settings, and never-before seen mechanics. Around 2005, the main role-playing game industry had hit another slump. It lasted until Paizo Publishing released Pathfinder in 2009, which revitalized the public interest. From that point on the industry has grown steadily, and many indie role-playing games have become big names in their own right. The release of Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition cemented the place of role-playing in contemporary popular culture. Many older games have been revitalized and given new, improved editions. Indie role-playing games are being funded and released through crowdfunding services over the internet in large numbers, and role-playing games are being played in hugely popular internet broadcasts. Right now, there is a veritable renaissance period of tabletop role-playing games underway.

2.2 Analyzing the Hitchens and Drachen definition of role-playing games

Now as the author has briefly introduced the history of the modern role-playing game, this thesis will now look at how a roleplaying game might be defined, and analyzing that definition based on real-world examples of modern tabletop role-playing games.

In their paper “The Many Faces of Role-Playing Games”, Hitchens and Drachen offer a definition of a role-playing game (Hitchens and Drachen 2009, 16). This definition by Hitchens and Drachen comes quite close to how role-playing games are generally socially viewed. There are however many exceptions to each of these subsections in the definition. In order to introduce the varied world of contemporary modern role-playing games, the author will now analyze each subsection and provide examples of role-playing games that break these
definitions. The purpose of the author is not to try to provide another definition, but to use the definition of Hitchens & Drachen as a means to discuss the different forms of tabletop role-playing games.

1. Game World: A role-playing game is a game set in an imaginary world. Players are free to choose how to explore the game world, in terms of the path through the world they take, and may revisit areas previously explored. The amount of the game world potentially available for exploration is typically large.

While most role-playing games are certainly set in an imaginary world that the players can explore, some do not follow that same path. For example in the role-playing game Microscope (Robbins, 2011) the players collectively create the game world and its timeline as the main part of the game itself. In The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen (Wallis, 1998), players take on the roles of characters around a table, telling each other stories of their astonishing adventures. The characters themselves however stay around the table for the whole game.

2. Participants: The participants in the games are divided between players, who control individual characters, and game masters (who may be represented in software for digital examples) who control the remainder of the game world beyond the player characters. Players affect the evolution of the game world through the actions of their characters.

The Hitchens & Drachen definition is very strict in the manner that it divides the people playing a role-playing game between players and game masters. While most role-playing games certainly have this divide, an increasing number of modern role-playing games do not. The aforementioned Microscope (Robbins, 2011) is a prime example. In it, there are no game masters, and each player has an equal amount of control over the creation of the game world. Another example which follows a slightly more traditional approach to tabletop role-playing games but has no game master is Goblin Quest (Howitt, 2015). In Goblin Quest, the players take on the roles of newly-spawned goblins out on a quest. The players collectively formulate what this quest might be and how the characters go about fulfilling that quest. Each player has equal narrative power, and players can freely
control and narrate the game world beyond the player characters. Another such game that also defies the Hitchens & Drachen definition is Fiasco (Morningstar, 2009). In it, players collectively create narratives with their interlinked characters. There is no games master, and each player has an equal potential in altering the narrative.

3. Characters: The characters controlled by players may be defined in quantitative and/or qualitative terms and are defined individuals in the game world, not identified only as roles or functions. These characters can potentially develop, for example in terms of skills, abilities or personality, the form of this development is at least partially under player control and the game is capable of reacting to the changes.

Characters are a very integral part of tabletop role-playing games. There are still a few examples of role-playing games without characters to be played by the players, at least not in the sense of defined individuals that the Hitchens & Drachen definition suggests. In Microscope (Robbins, 2011), there are no characters to be played unless the players create them into the game world. How To Host a Dungeon (Dowler, 2008) is a role-playing game for a single player, who oversees the creation of a 'dungeon' which is an adventuring environment most often found in older fantasy role-playing games and is typically an enclosed, labyrinthine space. In the game, the player does not directly control any character, although there are characters within the game itself.

4. Game Master: At least one, but not all, of the participants has control over the game world beyond a single character. A term commonly used for this function is “game master”, although many others exist. The balance of power between players and game masters, and the assignment of these roles, can vary, even within the playing of a single game session. Part of the game master function is typically to adjudicate on the rules of the game, although these rules need not be quantitative in any way or rely on any form of random resolution.

As established in section “2. Participants”, the need for a game master in a tabletop role-playing game is not absolute, as Hitchens & Drachen would suggest. When a game master is present in a tabletop role-playing game, the Hitchens & Drachen definition is accurate.
5. Interaction: Players have a wide range of configurative options for interacting with the game world through their characters, usually including at least combat, dialogue and object interaction. While the range of options is wide, many are handled in a very abstract fashion. The mode of engagement between player and game can shift relatively freely between configurative and interpretative.

The players have a wide range of options for interacting with the game, but it is not always through their characters, as shown previously. As Hitchens & Drachen say, the interaction usually includes at least combat, dialogue and object interaction, but this is not always the case. For example, Golden Sky Stories (Kamiya, 2014) is a role-playing game about helping others and becoming friends, completely without any combat interaction.

6. Narrative: Role-playing games portray some sequence of events within the game world, which gives the game a narrative element. However, given the configurative nature of the players' involvement, these elements cannot be termed narrative according to traditional narrative theory.

Exactly what Hitchens and Drachen refer to as “traditional narrative theory” is unclear. Narrative seems to be a key ingredient of all contemporary tabletop role-playing games in some form or another. It is always present, whether it is downplayed or put into the center focus. It could be argued that if all forms of narrative were to be removed from tabletop role-playing games, they would be reduced to collections of mechanics without purpose. Even in the more unconventional role-playing game Microscope (Robbins, 2011), the world-building that the players construct as themselves without characters is fitted on a defined timeline. This timeline defines the start and the end of the world that the players are creating, and everything the players add into the world fleshes out this timeline, slowly forming the narrative of how the world in question bridged the gap between the starting point and the ending point on the timeline.

As discussed above, modern tabletop role-playing games are very varied in their settings, systems and types of play. Now that a rudimentary understanding of
modern role-playing games has been formed, the thesis will focus on the design process of a role-playing game.

3 THE DESIGN PROCESS FOR INVASION (WORKING TITLE)

The design process for Invasion (working title) started with the desire to make a role-playing game with a certain kind of feel. This feel was paranoia mixed with inevitability. The game went through two quite different iterations, with the common thread being this feeling. In this chapter, the author will outline the design process for both.

This desire for such a role-playing game came about when the author began to think about creating a role-playing game based on a certain mechanic in a live-action role-playing game saga that the author attends regularly. This live-action role-playing saga is called Life Beyond (Life Beyond Tiimi, no date). Life Beyond is a fictitious world based on contemporary times. In it the world is separated into the world of Logic which we regular humans perceive, and the world of Magic which lies beyond something called The Veil. The world of Magic beyond The Veil is a dangerous place, but one can enter it by crossing The Veil via magical means. Once there though, a person will slowly fade further away from the world of Logic, losing their humanity in the process. This 'fading' was the first preliminary idea for the main mechanic of the role-playing game created as part of this thesis. The purpose was to make a game where the player characters had unknowingly crossed over The Veil and had started fading away into the world of Magic. It seemed that this setup was the perfect candidate for a game of paranoia mixed with inevitability.

Firstly, the purpose was to make sure that the idea and feel for the game suited the ideas and feel of others that had played in the live-action role-playing games of Life Beyond. This was done via an online query shared within the Facebook group of the players of Life Beyond. The query consisted of two sections. The first was: “Name three themes or aspects from Life Beyond-games that are most important to you.” The second was: “List all of the things that you can think of that might happen to a person as they fade.” Twelve responses were received, and
these shaped the preliminary idea to match more with what the players of Life Beyond thought that the game embodied.

After that the author started work on a design document to map out the scope of the game. When writing a role-playing game, it is easy to get lost in a wild array of ideas. This is why it is important to start out with a design document that has a clear goal for the game. This way the ideas can be formulated to fit with the concept of the game, instead of the concept of the game mutating to fit the varied ideas for it, although the designer should not be afraid of mutating the concept of the game either if they think that will be beneficial. According to role-playing game designer Epidiah Ravachol (2018), a role-playing game designer should be playful, and play around with different aspects of the design process, such as the rules, the form the game might take in the end, and the voice and tone that the game is presented in. In conclusion to this point, Ravachol writes:

“You don’t have to play with everything, but you have to be willing to do so. You have to be willing to consider that maybe your game doesn’t need this or could really use that. My best work is based on playing around with things I previously believed immutable.”

The design document was started with a one sentence summary of the main idea: ‘A tragic journey to inevitable oblivion’. This was perhaps the most important part of the design document, for everything else added to the document was made with that sentence, and the feel of the game, in mind. Next, the scope of the game was decided. From the start of the design process the author wanted to design the game to be played from start to finish during one session of play. This decision was made because the author wanted the game experience to focus mostly on the feeling of paranoia and hopelessness, and on how regular people react when faced with an extraordinary situation. They also wanted the game master for the game to be able to run the game for the players in a multitude of different settings. All in all, choosing just one session of play as the scope for the game eliminated the need for a fixed, expansive game world and long-term
character development, and could focus mainly on the originally intended feel of the game.

As the summary of the main idea and the scope of the game was ready, work started on filling out the design document and fleshing out the game. Tabletop RPG Design Primer (2015) was utilized as a guideline, and the rest of this chapter is based on it.

Firstly the idea of the game was expanded on with the help of some questions: What is your game about, how does your game do this, how does your game encourage or reward this and how do you make this fun. Answering these questions gave the author the basis of the game’s concept, which was then expanded on further with more questions that can be found in the Tabletop RPG Design Primer. The most important ones of those questions were: How does your setting (or lack thereof) reinforce what your game is about, how does the character creation of your game reinforce what your game is about, how are the responsibilities of narration and credibility divided in your game, what does the game do to make the players care, what are the resolution mechanics of your game like and how do they reinforce what your game is about, do the characters in your game advance and how does that reinforce what your game is about, what sort of effect do you want the game to produce in or for the players and where does your game take the players that other games cannot or will not. The document includes a wide range of questions, and although not all of them are listed here, they were very important for this preliminary phase of role-playing game creation. These questions make the designer think a little more about how they can actually implement their perhaps vague and general main idea into an actual game that represents that idea. Many of the questions in the Tabletop RPG Design Primer had the phrase ‘how does this reinforce what your game is about’ as a part of a question. This reminds the designer to keep in mind their main idea, which in the author’s case was ‘a tragic journey to inevitable oblivion’.

The next area of focus for the game creation was setting context. Setting context is hugely important because it creates restrictions both in terms of the game’s
own mechanics and player interaction within the game, allowing the game to focus on its core idea and feel. In the design process for Invasion (working title), the decision was made to try to make the setting in the design such that it would work in any timeline, with a central focus in each game on folklore, mythology, supernatural or ‘new weird’. This would later turn out to be a setting that was too wide and unfocused to work properly with the idea of the game, but this will be further explained later on in the thesis. The original intention was to write example modules for the game master to use, where different examples of groups of people in different environments would be outlined to be used as a starting point, as well as outlining possible threats that the game master could introduce during the game. These modules would eventually find themselves into the finished game, although in a more concise, focused form.

The following area of focus after setting context was meaningful choices. This is also an area which is of utmost importance when designing a role-playing game. Giving players the ability to make meaningful choices within the game gives them agency and encourages their creativity. When these choices become personally relevant, they encourage a deeper level of immersion. Thus it is important to consider where these choices are presented in your game. Early on in the design process for Invasion (working title) the author struggled with adding meaningful choices within the game. The player were offered much freedom at character creation, and it was later realized that it is actually often contextual limitations that offer the most meaningful choices in any given situation in a role-playing game. This realization was then implemented into resource management mechanics within the game. In the first iteration of the game, time-management and the usage of out-of-character resources (abstract resources that the players could use that would affect gameplay) represented by poker chips in the prototype version were where the most meaningful choices would come into play.

Next this thesis will discuss resolution systems. These are the systems that determine the course of action in a role-playing game when there is disagreement or uncertainty about what should happen in a given situation. These systems are often at the very core of the experience. The three most
common approaches are chance, choice and certainty. With chance, some randomly generated factor will decide what happens, or at least guide the decision. This is most often achieved with different types of dice. Sometimes cards or other suitable things are also used. Choice allows one or more players or game masters to choose what happens, based on restrictions or some set procedure. This could mean spending resources or reciting certain phrases. In certainty, the conflicts in the game are resolved with fixed values, with the higher value always being successful. For Invasion (working title), a mixture of chance and choice was utilized. The main resolution mechanic for the first iteration of the game was a pool of ten ten-sided dice that would slowly transform into a pool of ten-sided dice of a different color, simulating the “fading” of the characters. These dice would then accelerate that process even further. This process was something that the players in the first iteration of the game would want to either slow or accelerate themselves depending on how they wanted to play their character. This is where the element of choice came into play within the first iteration of the game. If the players wished to slow the acceleration process, they would use their limited resources to reroll the dice that would have otherwise transformed. If they wanted to instead accelerate the process and not reroll those dice they would get access to new abilities for their characters earlier, but also risk their characters fading into oblivion sooner. In the first iteration of the game there were also systems in place for tracking damage, and the effects and healing of said damage. This was also tied to a time management mechanic where certain doom would reach the characters if they took too long healing the damage they had received.

Next, the Tabletop RPG Design Primer briefly discusses currency. Currency in this case refers not only to monetary currency, but to anything in the context of the role-playing game that can be received for specific behaviors and then spent to affect the narrative. The most common examples of these in role-playing games are hit points which allow your character to survive damage and which can be regained by resting or healing, gold which can for example be received from non-player characters as a reward and spent on equipment and services, and experience which can be acquired via various means of playing the game,
and is usually spent on improving the character in some manner. The first iteration of Invasion (working title) used currency in two different forms. Firstly, there was a form of damage and healing, wherein the character could receive damage and would have to rest to heal said damage. However, the players had a limited amount of times they could decide that the characters would heal, effectively making healing that damage a currency within the game. Another more apparent use of currency within the first iteration of the game was something called ‘Fate Chips’. Fate Chips were a currency in the game where the players could decide to spend them and gain either a reroll for their dice if they so wished, or by spending a larger number of Fate Chips the player could gain narrative control over from the game master for a short time. The players would start with a set number of Fate Chips and would gain more as they reached different goals set by the game master. The reasoning for these two currencies to be included in the game was to affect gameplay so that it would reflect more of the intended mood and feel of the game, which was paranoia mixed with inevitability. The limited amount of times the players could heal was meant to evoke both of those feelings within the game: inevitability since the players knew they would eventually run out of times that they could stop and heal, and paranoia since the players did not know what would happen if they did, only that it would be something very bad for their characters.

The final design section before moving on to playtesting was creativity. The Tabletop RPG Design Primer outlines three key components to creativity within the context of role-playing games. These are pillars, walls and webs. The author found this to be a critical issue in the first iteration of Invasion (working title), and a great improvement on the second iteration of the game. The author will now introduce each of these concepts and briefly discuss their use in the first iteration of the game.

According to the Tabletop RPG Design Primer, pillars are nuggets of information without context which can be interpreted during play to build some kind of cohesive context. In other terms, it is a small, descriptive statement that introduces the player or game master to the themes, moods and motifs of the
setting. Since in the first iteration of Invasion (working title) the author wanted to give the game master the freedom to choose their setting for the game completely by themselves, writing pillars that would describe the game without being specific to any setting was difficult. Instead it was decided that different modules for the game would be written for the game master to base their game session on, and the game itself would be more vaguely described. This would later turn out to be a problem, since in playtesting the game didn’t feel defined enough.

Walls are creative constraints, limiting the scope of play. They are restrictive limits to what is and is not appropriate to any given game, and they focus the attention and creativity of the players into a certain headspace. In playtesting, this would prove to be the greatest downfall of the first iteration of the game. In making that iteration of the game intentionally very broad so that both the game master and the players would have a lot of creative freedom, especially in choosing the setting and creating their characters respectively, these design decisions had effectively removed most of these walls, these creative constraints that would define what the game was focusing on. As a result, that iteration of the game could not focus well on the intended feel of the game, since there were no creative constraints to guide play into that direction. That game had left the responsibility for guiding play into such a direction solely in the hands of the game master, which did not work very well. This will be explained more thoroughly in the chapter concerning the first playtest.

Webs are occasions where the game participants, the players and the game master, combine several elements of fiction and see how they interact. Including possibilities for doing his organically within a role-playing game can lead to a deeper, more interesting and immersive experience. In the first iteration of the game, the author focused on trying to combine the traditional tropes of survival horror with mysticism, magic, folklore and the supernatural. In practice, this would come into play in situations where the characters had a chance to explore whatever setting the game master had chosen, as well as when the characters ‘faded’ enough to be affected by the magic prevalent in the world. Since in the
first iteration of the game the author had neglected to take into account the need for a more focused and restricted scope of play, these two elements never quite came together organically in playtesting, but this will be explained in greater detail in the next chapter.

3.1 The first playtest

This chapter will first explain what playtesting is in the context of role-playing games and introduce the different methods of playtesting. Lastly the first playtesting process for the first iteration of the game will be described. This chapter is based on the Tabletop RPG Design Primer (2015) and interview emails with Grant Howitt, Chris Taylor and Epidiah Ravachol (2018).

Tabletop RPG Design Primer calls playtesting “the essential activity of game design”. What playtesting means in practice is that the designer tests a mechanic, procedure or an entire system with other people, often called the playtesters. This means that the designer usually gets feedback from this playtesting session, either straight from the playtesters themselves or just by observing the session. Usually designers opt to conduct multiple playtesting sessions over the course of a game’s design, redesigning and reiterating the game’s mechanics and concepts based on the feedback. However, there are many approaches to playtesting and many things to keep in mind as playtesting is conducted. Finding the right playtesting process suitable for a game is arguably as important, if not more important, than the playtesting itself.

There are four general types of playtests that Tabletop RPG Design Primer lists, each for a different purpose and requiring different mindsets, both from the designer and the playtesters. These types are:

Concept testing: This is the first stage of playtesting, and is usually in very small scale and with some friends. This test tries to find if the core mechanics of the game are functional, and to get a general sense of the structure of the game.
Internal testing: Once the core mechanics and structure of the game are in place, most of the playtesting will be done in this stage. This type of playtesting attempts to identify problems in the mechanics and to eliminate the parts of the game which are not fun or engaging for the players.

External testing: Once possible issues have been dealt with and the game offers the desired experience, external testing is called for. These are playtests where the game is played by strangers, usually at conventions or online. This allows for feedback that is not biased by any expectations of gaming style that might come with a group of friends.

Blind testing: In blind testing, copies of testing materials such as rules, character sheets and possible other materials are handed off to groups with no other additional instructions. These groups then try to run the game based on those instructions, and give feedback on their experience. If possible, it is helpful to have either and audio or video recording of these sessions to better identify possible problems.

According to Tabletop RPG Design Primer, determining what to focus on for each playtest is a skill acquired over time, and that it is vital to clearly communicate that focus of each test to the participants. The participants offer feedback on their own subjective experience of the game, and although it is recommended to always record and give serious consideration to any feedback given by the playtesters, it is also important to avoid taking any criticism personally. Tabletop RPG Design Primer also states that many playtesters are also likely game designers in their own right, and that this presents both advantages and disadvantages; the advantages being that they can identify mechanical problems and that the best will find disconnects between the rules and the context of the setting. The disadvantages are that some might want to try to introduce new mechanics into your game to fix perceived issues. Writing down the feedback is very important for future reference, and if possible, so is recording the actual playtesting session to better keep track of the context of any possible issues that might arise, and to better understand these issues. Being the game master for
the session and trying to identify and process the problems that might arise in the
design can be very challenging, so it is better to separate those two things.
Tabletop RPG Design Primer also instructs the designer to keep their core
mission statement, their summary of the main idea in mind when improving the
game and to be critical of any mechanics that do not reinforce this. It also
instructs that when a problem is detected, trying to find a solution that removes
something rather than adding something is preferable. Lastly, Tabletop RPG
Design Primer states that playtesting often requires an audience with no previous
knowledge of the game, and that the closer someone is to the game, the more
assumptions they will make and the less productive they will be. According to the
paper, this especially applies to the designer themselves, since they will
subconsciously patch over problems that they encounter.

For this thesis, three professional role-playing game designers were also
interviewed: Grant Howitt, Chris Taylor and Epidiah Ravachol. The following
section of the chapter analyzes what they had to say on playtesting. Howitt and
Taylor (2018), when asked how they process feedback from playtesting, describe
that they try to separate playtesting feedback into sections of what would be a
personal problem unique to the playtester, and what would be an actual issue of
the game. According to Howitt and Taylor this is not easy, so it is important for
the designer to get more than one set of feedback. They also mention their
differences in regard to playtesting; Howitt’s preferred method for playtesting is
seeing how a group reacts to the game, and asking questions along the way,
seeing the game as a whole that should be as enjoyable as possible. Taylor on
the other hand is more interested in the mechanical side of the game and seeing
whether the mechanics actually work, trying to notice if there are any ways to
abuse the system or if the mechanics seem unimpactful.

The viewpoints of Howitt and Taylor seem to be along the same lines as Tabletop
RPG Design Primer’s advice, but also advise the designer to be critical of
feedback given by the playtesters. It also highlights the advantage of having two
game designers who have thorough knowledge of the game being tested but who
also have different viewpoints on game design overlooking the playtesting
process and being able to draw different things from it. Ravachol (2018), when asked the same question, argues that playtest feedback is mostly useless since the playtesters do not know what the vision for the game is, and as such cannot accurately say whether the rules fit or not but will do so regardless. According to Ravachol, the perceived desire for feedback from the playtesting process itself empowers the playtesters to provide feedback where none is necessary, thus creating a large noise to signal ratio. Ravachol also considers that the feedback process is affected by the tendency of the human brain to constantly remake and reshape the memories of different experiences, especially memories of imaginary events, making it an unreliable tool. They also note that playtesters bring with them many assumptions that are counterproductive if the game being tested does not fit a currently accepted paradigm.

According to Ravachol each of these problems requires a response from the designer within the design and presentation of the game, but that nothing in these response will make the design or presentation inherently better. Ravachol calls this “the paradox of playtesting”, considering playtesting to be useful in a very limited scope but seeing that it is often applied much more broadly. When playtesting Ravachol prefers observed play; watching playtesters play their game as if it were already, or was about to be, a published game. According to Ravachol it is important that the players feel they are playing a complete game that is not looking for feedback specifically. It is then the job of the designer to look for problems within the design. Ravachol does most of this type of testing in person, teaching the game as if it was a demo of a game soon to be released, and then plays with the playtesters. On occasion they have had the opportunity to just watch a full group play a game. They say that both methods are helpful; the first one exercising and testing the rules, and the latter testing the text and presentation.

These statements by Ravachol echo the same mentality of being critical of the playtesting feedback received, but in an even stronger way. Ravachol sees the feedback from playtesting as mostly useless, although not the playtesting itself which is an important distinction to make. Rather than receiving feedback in a
playtesting session from the playtesters themselves, Ravachol prefers to observe the session of play and draw the necessary conclusions themselves.

The author conducted the first playtesting session for the first iteration of Invasion (working title) following the lead of Tabletop RPG Design Primer and Howitt and Taylor’s email, since the author did think of themselves as a competent enough designer yet to have an almost fully formed game for others to test. In essence, the first playtest for the first iteration of the game was a concept testing session done among the author and three of the author’s friends, where the core mechanics and the structure of the game were in focus. The session also had elements of and internal testing session within it, since other elements and mechanics were already present in addition to the core mechanics. Figure 1 shows the table prior to the game, Figure 2 shows some ten-sided dice used in the game, and Figure 3 shows a character sheet prototype at the end of the playtesting session.
Figure 1. Table before the first playtest (Virtanen 2018)
Figure 2. Dice used in the first playtest (Virtanen 2018)

Figure 3. A character sheet prototype at the end of the first playtest (Virtanen 2018)
As expected, the first iteration of the game was not yet particularly fun or engaging. That version of the game did get commendations on its character creation mechanics which the players found engaging, along with the game’s mood of fear and paranoia. The players also enjoyed the ability to be able to build their own dice pools for every throw, which encouraged creativity. The unanimous critique from all players focused on the lack of a cohesive structure to the game. In its effort to offer a varied, wide setting the game had effectively focused on nothing, which left the players unsure as to how to play their characters as there was no clear pointers for them to act in accordance to the game’s setting. From this playtesting session the main problem had been identified to be this lack of a structure, and a completely new iteration of the game was decided on, an iteration that would keep the feel of the original mission statement for the game (A tragic journey to inevitable oblivion), but one that would be better suited structurally to be played from start to finish within one session of play.

3.2 The second iteration of the game

When asked about the overall design process for a tabletop role-playing game, Epidiah Ravachol (2018) points out that instead of making games, a game designer’s job is in fact rejecting games, thousands of games. Ravachol advises the designers to see when a game should be abandoned (at least for the time being), so that the project doesn’t end up just stuck in place for months. Ravachol adds that the designer can always return to these projects later to see them in a better light, but tells them not to hang on to the games when they are not going anywhere.

After the first playtesting session of the first iteration of the game, the author took some time off from the project, where they intentionally did not work on or think about the game. Afterwards, they returned with a fresh perspective to see what worked and what didn’t, having shaken the preconceptions about what was essential for the game. When asked about what is the most important part of their process for creating a tabletop game, Grant Howitt and Chris Taylor (2018) firstly
mention collaboration, but secondly and more poignantly for this situation, iteration:

“We're not afraid of throwing out ideas that don't really work and building on ideas that do; we look to reinforce the tone through mechanics and tweak the fine details whilst staying true to the "feel" of the game. “

The author looked at the original mission statement that had been made for the game: “A tragic journey to inevitable oblivion”. They tried to see in what ways this statement was being furthered or hindered in the first iteration of the game. What was noticed was that the mechanic that had been thought essential to the game (‘fading’) was actually one of the main hindrances for the feel of the game, in addition to the missing story structure. The mechanic was simply too slow to be used in a game that was supposed to be played during a single session. In ‘Life Beyond’-games (Life Beyond Tiimi) ‘fading’ is something that is a constant threat in the world, but one that is always in the background and very rarely in the forefront. In ‘Life Beyond’, the games are annual, multi-day events during which the live-action role-players interact with the world and other players in-character. In those situations even if a character ‘fades’ even somewhat drastically, that usually takes place over several days, if not several annual games. Trying to fit that into a single tabletop role-playing game session made that whole process simply too rushed and thus effectively destroyed the slowly simmering mood of despair that the mechanic otherwise induced in ‘Life Beyond’-games. Taking that into consideration it was decided as the very first action in making a new iteration of the game to completely drop the ‘fading’ mechanic from the game, and with it the connection to ‘Life Beyond’-games.

After that an approach the original mission statement was started without the limitation of trying to fit it in with ‘Life Beyond’, and with the intention of giving that mission statement the necessary constraints of story so that its structure could work as a single session game. This meant that this process would firstly need context from which to start building the game. This was found in the film 'Invasion of the Body Snatchers' (1978). The film involves regular people who discover that
humans are being replaced by alien duplicates. This encapsulates well the desires of the author to both involve the characters as regular people in extraordinary situations, and to evoke the feelings of paranoia and inevitability. Since the author did not want to repeat the mistake of trying to stay faithful to the source material, the film’s premise was simply chosen as a starting point for the game’s context and everything else would be later altered as needed.

Tabletop RPG Design Primer’s questions were again utilized, this time answered whilst especially focusing on the mood, context and setting of the game which had been missing from the first iteration. Elements of character creation were integrated from the first iteration of the game, as this aspect had been commended by the playtesters, but this was done selectively and only the elements thought absolutely necessary were chosen. This procedure was applied to all the necessary mechanics that were transferring over from the first iteration of the game. When asked about their process for creating a tabletop role-playing game, Epidiah Ravachol says that their early drafts for games have a lot of elements in them, but that there needs to be a point in the process where elements that do not serve the goal of the game are thrown away. According to Ravachol, some of those elements might end up back in the game later, particularly if the game text has room for optional or expanded rules, but most of it goes away to perhaps be used again in some other game.

This statement mirrored the author’s design process for the game as well. Mechanics were altered from the first iteration of the game, some mechanics were cut altogether and a new one was introduced, all so that they would better serve the feel of the game. When asked about how they design mechanics for a particular setting or mood, Grant Howitt and Chris Taylor say that they integrate a particular setting or mood with the mechanics from the ground up. They consider the mechanics to be so closely intertwined with setting, mood and story that it becomes difficult and fruitless to try to separate them. In their game Spire (2018), Howitt and Taylor wanted to write a game about loss and sacrifice, so they focused mechanics around player resources, and the impact that player actions would have on those resources, even on a very granular level and “giving
mechanics to things that many games would leave entirely up to GM fiat”. They also wanted to convey the state of the setting and dark elf culture within the setting by designing each of the character classes to illustrate a particular facet of the world.

When talking about their game Jason Statham’s Big Vacation (2018), a game that is very different to Spire in its mood and setting, Howitt and Taylor explain that they wanted a quick, easy and fun game that people could play without preparation. It included a very simple rules and gave most of the more “difficult” rules to the game master. This meant that the players could just turn up and say what their characters do whilst having fun. Injury and stress are very abstracted in the game and most of it focuses on Jason Statham in various daft situations for which Howitt and Taylor even created a simple dice generator for.

When asked how they decide which mechanics to keep and which not when designing a game, Howitt and Taylor state that the big question is whether a mechanic is fun to play or not. According to them, all mechanics should be fun, or in a case where a designer might be writing a game that is not supposed to be fun, then the mechanics should evoke the desired emotion. According to Howitt and Taylor, the biggest issue with mechanics is whether or not they are easy to use. The use of mechanics should not interrupt the flow of the game. In their games, Howitt and Taylor say they always try to avoid over-complicated rules for the sake of simulationism.

As these notions from Howitt and Taylor illustrate that the connection between mechanics, mood and setting is inseparable. All of those facets of the game affect one another, and are effectively what makes the game work as a whole. As for the mechanics, according to Howitt and Taylor, ease of use and making sure the mechanic evokes the desired emotion are the most important qualities. Following this advice, all of the alterations that were done on the mechanics for the second iteration of Invasion (working title) focused on the two main themes that the author wanted this game to encapsulate: paranoia and inevitability. The author also made sure that those mechanics were simplified as much as possible, whilst still retaining their function. Some room was also left for some cut mechanics to be added back in later on if necessary, as Ravachol wrote in an
earlier quote. What this meant in practice is further detailed here with a few examples:

The first iteration of the game had a system in place for character creation that would be communal at the start of the session. It had several different facets of the character to establish that did not have a mechanic tied to them and as such were basically only for roleplaying purposes. Some of the ones that the author thought were not essential to the game were cut, and some key mechanics were tied to the rest of them so that the characters and their different personalities would be more at the center of the game. This served to also fix what had been amiss in the first iteration of the game. That iteration had not had enough focus on the characters, but rather on the environment of whatever setting the game master had chosen. This did not serve to bring forward the main themes, paranoia and inevitability. This time, the setting and the mood of the second iteration of the game are there to serve as a backdrop for a story focused on the characters.

The dwindling resources mechanic from the first iteration was transferred to the second but tied to the character traits in a much smaller scale to make the game faster to play. Damage and healing mechanics were removed altogether, instead replacing them with an infection mechanic. This mechanic was such that a player character might get infected and secretly turn against the other player characters. This mechanic was also designed to induce paranoia within the players. There were many smaller mechanics that received minor changes, but the last major change was the introduction of a rigid story structure to replace the structurelessness of the first iteration. This was perhaps the most important change made between the two iterations because it addressed the single biggest, unanimous critique from the playtesters of the first iteration, which was that the game had no structure to it to guide play into the desired direction. This introduced story structure attempted to solve this problem put forth in the critique by driving the player characters into increasingly more desperate situations and into feeling that the demise of those characters was eventually inevitable, and that at no point would the characters be completely safe from harm, thus inducing
the feeling of paranoia. In order to guide play even further, the game instructs the game master to be open to the players about the structured nature of the game, so that all participants can focus fully on creating a shared narrative within the limits of the game.

3.3 The second and third playtests

Two more playtests were organized for the second iteration of the game, this time moving from concept testing to internal testing. The author organized these playtests amongst friends, the first one with the same three people that had tested the first iteration with and the second playtest with another group of four friends.

Both playtest groups found that the game reflected its theme of paranoia and inevitability well and both groups also reported enjoying the somewhat unusual mechanic of player characters secretly turning against each other during the game. The group of the second playtest expressed some initial confusion as to the rigid story structure of the game, but managed to grasp the concept halfway through the session. For the third playtest group a simple visual aid in the form of a timeline was constructed to help with this matter, which seemed to work since this group had no problems with the story structure.

Between playtests two and three some minor mechanics were tweaked to better fit the theme and feel of the game, most notably the resolution mechanic and the resources tied to character traits. In the resolution mechanic the earlier version was that a player could lose dice by chance, thus diminishing their dice pool randomly up to a certain limit. This was changed to a mechanic where all players would inevitably lose dice at the same time and thus be forced to eventually work together despite not trusting each other. This worked well to enhance the themes of the game. The other notable change came to the resources tied to character traits. Previously the uses of those resources did not differ whether the player used them through a positive or a negative character trait. This was changed so
that if the player used a negative character trait, their character could not work together with other characters for that particular roll. For the third playtest, this proved to enhance role-play and it also combined well with the previous change to the resolution mechanics. Figure 4 shows a character sheet prototype used in the second iteration of the game.

![Character Sheet Prototype](Virtanen2018)

Figure 4. A character sheet prototype used in the second iteration of the game (Virtanen 2018)
4 CONCLUSION

This thesis attempted to answer the main research question: What is the process for creating a simplified tabletop role-playing game? During the writing of this thesis the author came to the conclusion that there is no universally applicable answer to this question but rather a multitude of ways to approach making a role-playing game. What matters most in the process is keeping in mind the kind of game being made, building certain mechanics and cutting others to best suit the themes and ‘feel’ of the game. How an individual arrives to these decisions is up to them. During this thesis the author utilized pre-written questions from Tabletop RPG Design Primer (2015) to aid in defining the themes, goals and setting for the game, and the advice given in interview emails by industry professionals.

The subsidiary research question was: How to evoke theme, emotion and immersion with game mechanics? It was found that in a role-playing game all of these things are so interconnected with mechanics that it becomes a futile effort trying to exclusively analyze different facets of different mechanics for potential use as building blocks for a certain theme or mood. Rather, it is much more efficient to look at the game or the prototype for the game as a whole, seeing which of the mechanics inserted into the game work to enhance or further the theme of the game and cutting the ones that do not, until the game functions as intended.

The answers to both of these research questions can be summarized with this quote from Ravachol (2018), as it was exactly the experience the author had with creating the game:

“In my experience, the process for creating a tabletop role-playing game is probably more accurately described as the process of never quite creating one until you do. I spend most of the time just playing with ideas, testing them by myself or with my gracious friends. Or toying with the ideas in other ways. Playing with parts until I can see how they fit the whole or I can see the whole is not going to work.”
The difficulties during planning and information acquisition for this thesis mostly came down to the lack of academic research on the subject of tabletop role-playing games and more specifically the creation of such games, but as the results of this thesis might show the academic approach to making role-playing games is not necessarily a fruitful one. A role-playing game is unique and more than the sum of its parts, and the analysis of how a certain game works might not benefit someone working on a game of a different kind.

The results of this thesis simply indicates that the process for the creation of a role-playing game is a process of playing around with different ideas until they make up a coherent whole. As such, the designer is aided if they have a large pool of ideas and tools to utilize in this process, but as this thesis shows it is equally important to be able to constrain these tools and ideas to fit into the game as functions that enhance the theme of the game. Hopefully these results are of use to people interested in creating a tabletop role-playing game.

The reliability and generalizability of these results rests mostly on the fact that the author’s personal experience matches the near-identical advice given by three industry professionals in two interview emails that were conducted independently from each other.

The goal of this thesis was to produce a tabletop role-playing game. This was partly successful, since the author has a working prototype for a game that they are very happy with. Eventually the author ran out of time to playtest the game before having to finish this thesis, but plans to continue playtesting the game as needed, and to eventually publish the game online.
REFERENCES


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LISTS OF FIGURES OR TABLES

Figure 1. Table before the first playtest. Virtanen, M. 22 June 2018.

Figure 2. Dice used in the first playtest. Virtanen, M. 22 June 2018.

Figure 3. A character sheet prototype at the end of the first playtest. Virtanen, M. 22 June 2018.

Figure 4. A character sheet prototype used in the second iteration of the game. Virtanen, M. 4 September 2018.