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Introduction & Types of games we design

Odd Statue Games (OSG) is a small, yet an up-and-coming company, focused on creating immersive board games that anyone can enjoy. The board game industry has increasingly embraced the principles of inclusivity and accessibility, recognizing that diverse and accessible design enriches gaming experiences for everyone. By integrating thoughtful features such as color-blind friendly components, tactile elements for visually impaired players, or simplified rules for those with cognitive disabilities, modern board games are becoming more universally enjoyable. In addition, the industry is making strides in representing diverse characters and cultures, fostering an environment where all players can see themselves reflected in the games they love. This commitment to inclusivity not only enhances social interaction and community building, but also supports educational and cognitive development through play, making board games an inclusive medium for engagement, learning, and entertainment.

Designing board games with inclusivity and accessibility in mind ensures that everyone, regardless of their abilities or background, can enjoy the game. Here's the methodological guide we at OSG have structured, and a detailed look at how we manage to incorporate these considerations when it comes to creating a new game project.

Inspiration for game ideas

1. Concept/Theme Development

- **Theme and Storytelling:** Establishing the overall theme, narrative, and setting of the game, is usually the first aspect that a game idea is based on. That's not always true, though, for there are occasions where a mechanism comes first (e.g. smaller/card games). Additionally, depending on the development's direction, there might be cases where you're going to have to make major concept/theme modifications, drastically changing the original idea. In general, a strong theme, well-tied to the core game mechanisms helps in engaging players through a compelling story and experience. When it comes to inclusivity, we try to create themes and narratives that represent a diverse range of cultures, genders, and backgrounds, ensuring that characters and stories do not perpetuate stereotypes. We make a conscious effort to include features that resonate with people from different cultural or social backgrounds, avoiding cultural appropriation and instead, aiming for authentic representation.

Brainstorming for concept, gameplay, game scenario

2. Identifying Goals

- **Target Audience:** Identifying the demographic and psychographic profiles of potential players is another important thing that we take into consideration in the very early stages of creating a game, in order to tailor the overall game experience and integrate inclusivity and accessibility features into the game, where possible. If the game refers to a broad audience from younger people to older adults, for example, we have to ensure that the game's theme is going to be appropriate and engaging for all ages. Designing with a wide audience in mind, including children, adults, and/or people with disabilities, requires understanding the needs, preferences, and challenges of the different player groups. For this matter, the community's feedback is a key element.
- **Community Research:** Engaging with diverse communities through surveys or even directly, helps us gather input and insights that may influence our designing approach, and ultimately, ensure that our game concept is both inclusive and appealing.
- **Educational Elements:** Another aspect you might consider during this first stage is selecting educational themes that promote understanding of various cultures, histories, and social issues. This can foster empathy and broader worldviews among players. Furthermore, crafting stories and/or characters that provide insights into different life experiences, can encourage players to think beyond their own perspectives. By carefully considering the target audience's needs and integrating educational elements, you can create a board game that is not only fun and engaging but also meaningful and inclusive.

Game design process

3. Game Mechanisms

- **Core Mechanisms:** One of the most important aspects of a game creation -if not the most important- is to determine the fundamental actions that players will take (e.g. resource management, worker placement, card drafting, dice rolling). As mentioned above, occasionally, a mechanism might be the inspiration for creating a game, but that usually applies to more simple games where the theme plays a secondary role.
- **Accessible Design:** Fostering accessibility, we try to develop mechanisms that are easy to understand and require minimal reading or complex mental calculations. This can help a lot of players with cognitive disabilities. Language independent games are a great example of emphasizing accessibility. Additionally, we aim to design rules that can be easily modified to accommodate different playstyles and abilities, or provide alternative rules for varying levels of difficulty. Implementing mechanisms that adapt in difficulty, based on the target players' skill levels, ensures that everyone remains engaged and challenged appropriately.
- **Educational Elements:** Just like in the phase of Concept/Theme Development you may also consider implementing interesting educational mechanisms that improve skill building, social interaction, teamwork, or even simulative learning. For example, you can focus on mechanisms that support the development of various skills such as dexterity skills, problem-solving, strategic thinking, and social interaction, or encourage teamwork and cooperation through game mechanisms that require players to work together toward common goals. If it's suitable for your theme, you may also offer diverse roles within the game that cater to different strengths and preferences, allowing all players to contribute meaningfully to the game's outcome. Another example are game mechanisms that simulate real-world scenarios, providing players with practical understanding and problem-solving experience in areas such as economics, politics, or social dynamics. There's a lot to explore in this area!
- **Rule Systems:** Using a clear and simple language even during the draft version of a rulebook is something we always take seriously, ensuring that instructions will be easy to follow even for non-native speakers. Following the same strategy, if a game should have a lot of card texts, we try our best focusing on using a clear language and fonts, suitable for players of various reading levels.
- **Balancing:** Another thing you have to keep in mind during this phase is "fair play for everyone". We design carefully to make sure that the game mechanisms do not unfairly disadvantage any group of players. This includes considering the limitations some players might have and designing balance around them.
Of course, balancing the game rules is finalized through playtesting and feedback, but making an effort to create a solid core from the early stages of a project increases the

chances of reaching the best possible outcome, and is also going to save you a lot of time.

Testing and evaluation

4. Prototyping

Once the main rules are set, creating prototypes for playtesting comes next. It is important that you do not spend your energy on creating finalized components or graphics and that you focus only on making the game functional for the playtesters. Otherwise you might end up spending unnecessary time recreating stuff later, if major changes need to be applied.

- **Physical Prototypes:** We create our basic prototypes using simple, reusable or recyclable materials to test mainly core concepts. A tangible version of your game is the most important tool to test the playability and game flow.
- **Digital Prototypes:** While physical playtesting is the best way to understand the game flow, player interaction, and the overall feel of a game, designers are commonly using digital playtesting as well, in order to get the most feedback for their designs. Use software tools (e.g. platforms like TableTop Simulator or Tabletopia) to simulate the game for easier iteration, remote playtesting, and engaging with diverse player groups that you could not otherwise reach.

5. Playtesting

- **Internal Playtesting:** Your first playtesters must always be you! Gather feedback from within the design team to refine core game mechanisms and/or basic rules. Your primary goal from these first few playtests should be to understand any major issues and if the game is worthwhile overall.
- **External Playtesting:** This is where you introduce your idea to the world. Now you have to involve a handful of various playtesters external to the team, to get unbiased feedback. You can also conduct playtesting sessions with a diverse group of people, including players of different ages, backgrounds, or specific disabilities, to identify potential inclusivity issues and gather valuable feedback on accessibility as well.

This phase usually includes less major design changes, yet very essential for the game's progress. During these types of playtesting, we aim to ensure that the game gets a clearer shape/identity and that it becomes more balanced, trying to avoid dominant strategies and to provide equal opportunities for all players. We listen carefully to the players' experiences and we actively seek for feedback related to inclusivity and accessibility. In this stage, based on the feedback you collect, make as many adjustments

as it feels necessary, but do not forget to always consider the target audience and the direction you have set for your game.

Finalization of the game

6. Iteration

Iteration is a critical process in the design of board games, also being one of the most time-consuming phases. It involves repeated cycles of testing, feedback, and refinement to enhance the game's development, overall quality, and replayability.

- **Feedback Integration:** Use the insights gained from playtesting to make informed development changes and/or game-experience improvements. Make small, iterative changes and retest, this time involving more dedicated playtesters, to ensure improvements are effective. Repeat the cycle of playtesting until the game meets the desired quality standards.
- **Surveys and Interviews:** Depending on the game's demands, you may use structured methods (e.g. google forms) to gather detailed and more specific feedback from players; especially during digital playtest sessions where collecting all the details gets tougher. We find these tools very helpful during the late stages of testing, as they help navigate your audience's input. The playtesters provide more efficient and to the point feedback, and simultaneously, you show them that you respect their time and you value their opinions.
- **Observing and Recording:** Another useful method is to host playtesting sessions while you only play the role of the observer. Dedicating your energy just to watch how different players interact with the game or with each other, will help you identify any usability or engagement issues. Additionally, you can always document the sessions through video/audio recordings to analyze player behavior and gauge their level of engagement and enjoyment later, in your own time frame.
- **Player Input:** Encourage players to share how they felt or experienced the game and how it could be improved to better meet their needs; be specific with your questions, if needed. Keep in mind that their suggestions might not be the ultimate solutions, but they will surely highlight the weak spots, which should be more than enough to inspire improvements.

Furthermore, we also try to focus on feedback related to inclusivity and accessibility such as language clarity, component usability, and rule simplicity. Many players are great at identifying such development issues and enjoy contributing with creative suggestions.

- **Refresh Playtesters:** From our experience, it is important that every few sessions you have at least a couple new players at the table. A fresh look always has valuable

feedback and insights to offer. Digital playtesting or joining various board game conventions/events might help a lot on this matter.

- **Modular Rules:** At this stage, when the core game feels solid and balanced enough, we also provide optional rules and game elements that allow players to customize their gameplay experience according to their preferences and needs. This will increase the game's replayability, and might also make it more accessible to certain groups of people (e.g. players that were not satisfied with specific basic rules).
- **Final Adjustments/Refinements:** Once most of the issues are resolved, conduct extensive playtesting involving fresh playtesters to fine-tune the game and gain some valuable insight for its overall table presence. Incorporate any final adjustments to ensure you end up with a quality game which is both fun and accessible to a broad audience.

7. Component Design

- **Aesthetics and Table Presence:** Considering your game's theme and all the collected feedback, design appealing and functional game components and graphics that enhance the player's overall experience. The presence of your game is going to tell the players half of the story of what you have created, before they even sit to play the game! No doubt you have to ensure that it delivers the correct message.
- **Inclusive Artwork:** A game's artwork is like a glue that unifies all the other aspects of a board game, and it is this that will attract new players to the table, inspiring them to play your game. Fostering inclusivity, we try to commission artwork that reflects a variety of ethnicities, ages, and abilities, making everyone feel represented in the game. Through inclusive and appealing illustrations, we make a great effort to deliver games that include a compelling story that enhances the given theme while, at the same time, captivating a broad group of people (e.g. Riverbed Hunt or Punch 'em All).
- **Accessible Graphics:** This phase is of great importance as it is going to define how easily players can understand and engage with the game as soon as they start playing, and ultimately, their will to play it again or not. During these graphic design stages, we at OSG try to make sure that all text on cards and boards is legible, using high-contrast colors and large/clear fonts to aid players with visual impairments. We also create game components that are easy to handle, and use patterns, textured pieces or shapes in addition to colors to distinguish game elements, ensuring that color-blind players can easily differentiate between them.
- **Abilities or Disabilities:** Furthermore, try to account for players with different cognitive or physical abilities. This includes designing elements that are accessible to people with disabilities. You may also consider offering alternatives for physically challenging components, like cardholders or large-print cards.
- **Accessibility in Learning:** When you design the final rulebook's layout, remember to break down complex instructions into simpler, step-by-step guides to help players of all levels understand the game progressively while enjoying the process.

Conclusions/recommendations for our target audience

Designing board games with inclusivity and accessibility in mind not only broadens their appeal but also enriches the gaming experience for all players. As the board game industry continues to support diversity and representation, designers should strive to employ adaptable mechanisms, accessible components and graphics, and themes that are universally relatable, encouraging cooperation, empathy, and inclusiveness. Engaging with diverse communities for understanding player needs and gaining feedback, in order to incorporate rule/component alternatives, or simplify instructions, are essential steps in this journey, as well. Here is a list of some additional practical advice to keep in mind:

- Ensure that your characters or concepts reflect diverse genders and abilities.
- Avoid stereotyping your players or when you represent women and ethnic minorities.
- Use gender-neutral text in any written material.
- Be careful about your game's duration, or if possible, make games where people can drop out easily, without breaking the game.
- Be respectful of different cultures and identities.
- Last but not least, make games that you'll still be able to use as you age. Accessibility isn't just about morality or cost; it's about creating something you and others will be able to use for a long time.

Ultimately, by prioritizing inclusivity and accessibility, designers can create games that not only captivate but also welcome all kinds of players, fostering understanding and connection among them.

Further resources

Studies and reports from organizations like **AbleGamers** and **Meeple Like Us** indicate an increasing awareness and effort from board game designers and publishers to create more inclusive and accessible experiences. Research findings show:

- **Inclusive Design Trends** – Many new board games are being designed with features such as color-blind friendly components, tactile elements for visually impaired players, and simplified language for cognitive accessibility.
- **Diverse Representation** – There's been a significant push towards diverse character representation lately, both in terms of gender and ethnicity, within modern board games. There are quite a few cases in the industry where designers put in the extra effort to include both male and female versions of player boards or characters.

Additionally, games like "**Spirit Island**" for example, are often cited for their diverse and accurate representation of characters.

- **Community Feedback** – Board game companies are increasingly engaging with communities representing various disabilities to gather input and feedback during the design process. This engagement has led to more games considering accessibility from the ground up.
- **Awards and Recognition** – There are dedicated awards recognizing the effort towards inclusivity and accessibility in board games, such as the "**InnoSPIEL**", which focuses on innovative game concepts, including those advancing inclusivity.