"IT'S NOT ALL FUN AND GAMES; SOMETIMES IT'S JUST GAMES:" CREATING VIDEO ESSAYS TO TEACH ETHNOGRAPHIC METHODS TO TABLETOP GAME DESIGNERS

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ABSTRACT

For this project, I created a series of video lectures to distribute on YouTube to teach basic ethnographic methods to tabletop game designers to supplement their game design processes. I developed my research methods using a communities of practice lens, uncovering how game designers leverage a combination of personal experiences, professional skills, and social relationships in their practices. Due to the social nature of playing tabletop games, their development is often a communal process of play, feedback collection, and iteration based on playtester experiences and reactions. In the San Francisco Bay Area, tabletop game designers attend public events where players test their prototype games. Playtesters then share their reactions and opinions about changes that the designer can make to their prototypes. For this project, I joined a community of designers as a researcher and an aspiring designer. I created my own games, playtested with other designers, and observed the testing and iterative processes that designers utilize. After I conducted research on the ways that designers develop and iterate games, I created my video lecture series based on the data I collected about designers and their methods. My videos focused on three primary ethnographic methods that I determined designers could learn quickly and that would supplement their existing design processes and practices. These methods include participant observation, focus groups, and community building. I discuss my reasons for selecting these methods and how designers can implement each of these methods into their playtesting and iteration techniques. I conclude by exploring the challenges of distributing content on video sharing platforms like YouTube and suggest ways that researchers can use video essays to disseminate their findings for a wider audience.

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Sorry to anyone else I missed – it's nothing personal, but I only have so much space!

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1.1 Project Overview and Goals

The goal of my project was to offer tabletop game designers useful techniques and practices from social science methodology and practice, with the intention of providing game designers new tools they could use in their design processes. In my initial research I found striking similarities between anthropological inquiry and game design practices, suggesting that a thorough study of game designers would be an excellent basis for assessing methods that designers would find helpful to their processes. The elements of effective game design share many similarities with other types of usability and user-centered design, such as paper prototyping (Snyder 2003), contextual design (Holtzblatt and Beyer 2017), and human-centered systems (Cooley 1999), all fields that also can benefit from social scientific approaches. With these similarities in mind, I developed a project where I assessed the design processes of tabletop game designers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Then I created a series of videos that show how tabletop game designers can apply ethnographic methods to game design. My fieldwork and research were designed to uncover what methods might provide the most pertinent information and practices that I could suggest as complementary to designers' current practices.

The videos I created for this project consist of an overview of tabletop game concepts and three video lectures about ethnographic methods, specifically participant observation, focus groups, and community building. I created these videos to show tabletop game designers that many of the techniques they use for playtesting and iterating on their game prototypes resemble formal anthropological methods and practices, and to explain how some of these techniques can supplement their own design processes. For example, game designers benefit from playtesting their prototype games with a wide range of people to simulate the experiences of consumers who

would eventually purchase and play those games at home. The game design community is highly homogenous, however, consisting primarily of white males between the ages of 25 and 60 years old. By reaching out to a wider range of people from different backgrounds, designers can get more diverse opinions about their designs in the early stages and identify issues with their games before they are released to a wider market or audience.

Playtesting with a more diverse audience can help designers identify their own biases and unquestioned assumptions and might, for example, help to avoid creating games with problematic themes. The popular board game *Catan* (formerly *Settlers of Catan*) was one of the games that led to the explosion of popularity of tabletop games in the early 2000s (Woods 2012), but it also reinforces Colonial narratives of 'unsettled lands' and the unquestioned good of expansionism and competition (Faidutti 2017). Likewise, many white European designers utilize thematic elements that misrepresent Asian, South American, or other so-called "exotic" cultures (Faidutti 2017), potentially creating unwelcoming experiences for player whose cultures are depicted in those games, who might view such artistic and gameplay choices as demeaning or disrespectful. Identifying these issues before a game is released is just one potential benefit of incorporating systematic observation and other ethnographic techniques to the design and playtesting of tabletop games.

My advisor, Dr. Jan English-Lueck, suggested the social theory of learning as a framework for this project, namely communities of practice as developed by Etienne Wenger and Jean Lave (Lave and Wenger 1991). Viewing practice as a social process enabled me to study the various facets of tabletop game design firsthand. Game design is a process that includes individual design efforts, communal testing and iteration of game systems and mechanics, documentary research, systems thinking, and many other conceptual and practical skills. Once I

conducted my fieldwork and extensive documentary research on tabletop game design, as well as working on my own game designs, I analyzed my data to determine the best way to create deliverables that could potentially benefit not just my host community, but the wider tabletop design community as well. I identified the best methods that I could suggest to designers to supplement their current design practices, then developed a series of four video essays for the online video sharing platform YouTube. In this report, I recount the fieldwork I conducted with the local Bay Area tabletop design community and the creation of those video essays.

1.2 Brief Description of the Community

The Bay Area tabletop game community that I worked with was primarily composed of white males aged roughly between their late 20s and early 60s. Rarely, a small number of attendants at the events I conducted fieldwork at might be people of color – generally of Asian or Middle Eastern descent – or, even more rarely, female or nonbinary. While the makeup of this group decidedly does not represent the overall diversity of the wider San Francisco Bay Area and its surrounding regions, it does align with tabletop game player and designer demographics, among who white males are overrepresented compared to U.S. and Canadian demographics (Booth n.d.; Pobuda 2018).

The lack of representation in gaming is due in part to factors such as media portrayals and aggressive gatekeeping by certain communities of game players. Since at least the 1980s, the homogenous portrayal of young, mostly white, and predominantly male gamers has dominated media, both in fiction and the popular imagination. Films like *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* and television shows like *Freaks and Geeks* and *Strangers Things* tend to reinforce these stereotypes, only occasionally featuring characters other than white males enjoying games or interacting

positively with those who play them. Additionally, tabletop games of the 1980s and 1990s often were highly gendered, reinforcing strict divisions between popular "boy's games" – featuring themes of war and battle – and narrowly focused "girl's games" like *Girl Talk*, a game where players earn points by answering gendered and primarily heteronormative questions about their ideal husbands or domestic ambitions (Muller 2017). The gendering of tabletop games created the impression these games were, by and large, designed for male players. The content of tabletop games has also reinforced dated race, sex, and gender stereotypes since at least the 1970s, for example, limiting the capacity of female characters in games compared to their male counterparts or assuming that white characters are the default in fantasy settings (Trammell 2016). While nonwhite, nonmale players may have enjoyed tabletop gaming since these games' earliest days, the environments and attitudes around games have historically lacked representations of norms and values that did not fit into a narrow vision of European patriarchal society.

More alarming are concerted efforts by white male gamers who use harassment and exclusion specifically to prevent other groups from participating in gaming. The backlash against feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian is just one striking example of these campaigns of harassment, including Sarkeesian receiving death and sexual assault threats and having her personal information leaked online after she released the video series *Tropes vs Women,* which examines games through a feminist lens (Valenti 2015). Additionally, the events surrounding "Gamergate" – an online harassment campaign targeted against women and minorities in gaming (Valenti 2014) – reveal the underlying views and attitudes that have contributed to the lack of representation among people who are shown in media to play video and tabletop games, and to the hesitancy of more diverse groups to associate themselves with gaming. Sexual assault and

misconduct at gaming conventions and by people working in the industry also contribute to the hostile environment that pervades the gaming industry (see for example: Hall 2018; Mann 2019). Pobuda (2018) explores how exclusionary attitudes and behaviors have led to nonwhite, nonmale gamers either hiding their identities or opinions to avoid harassment, or even giving up gaming altogether because of the toxic environment that sometimes surrounds games. Booth (n.d.) argues that we need more data to understand the experiences of nonwhite, nonmale gamers and the issues they face in tabletop gaming communities.

In spite of the history of exclusionary attitudes and practices in gaming, in recent years the predominance of white males in the spotlight of gaming culture has lessened, as popular media personalities such as Vin Diesel, Terry Crews, and Deborah Ann Woll have embraced gaming as a hobby. In addition, gaming enthusiasts have given rise to their own celebrities, especially via web series, such as the cast of *Critical Role* - where voice actors play *Dungeons & Dragons* - and guests on Wil Wheaton's *Tabletop*, where the former *Star Trek* actor plays tabletop games with his friends. Additionally, multimedia websites like Geek & Sundry – founded by Felicia Day and Sheri Bryant (Graser 2014) – and BoardGameGeek.com have increased the visibility of marginalized players through their live-play and learn-to-play videos focused on tabletop games.

Even with these shifts towards more inclusive tabletop gaming communities, however, during my fieldwork it was common for practically all participants at smaller events to be white males, and even in larger groups, for there to only be one or two nonwhite and/or nonmale participants. This issue extends well beyond gaming communities, however; while the San Francisco Bay Area's demographics would make the lack of diversity in this community seem like something of an oddity, the reality is that a many of the region's most prominent companies

share a similar lack of diversity. Many of the high-tech companies in Silicon Valley have historically been founded and staffed primarily by white males, a trend which has only begun to change in recent years (Rangarajan 2018), while still at a much slower rate than the actual ethnic and gender diversity of the region might indicate.

Despite my efforts to connect with a more diverse group of informants, all my primary informants were white males between the ages of 20 and 60. One Asian American designer I met during my fieldwork was initially open to being one of my informants, but later expressed concerns about participating because he was not a native English speaker. I also met a Middle Eastern American designer at an event, but I did not see him afterwards at any other designer meetups and was therefore unable to invite him to participate in my research.

Despite the lack of diversity among game designers, I do not mean to imply that the community I worked with actively participated in excluding designers who were not white males. In fact, several of my informants expressed a desire to create inclusive environments and to remove individuals who made designer spaces unwelcoming to different groups of people. One designer told me that he and other event organizers were planning to draft a code of conduct for playtesting events, asking designers to consider the audience of their games when testing game prototypes with sensitive content, encouraging the use of people's preferred gender pronouns, getting parental permission before playtesting with children under 18 years old, and to take other efforts in creating inclusive environments at events.

1.3 Attending Playtesting Events

I used both Meetup.com and Facebook Groups to connect with tabletop game designers who attend various weekly and monthly design events that designers and people interested in game design could attend. The events I conducted my fieldwork at all took place in public places, such as game stores, restaurants, and cafés, or at tabletop gaming conventions with paid admission. These events are held regularly in cities around the region, and are either hosted directly through the host business (usually in the case of businesses directly connected to the tabletop game industry, such as game stores or game cafés) or with or without agreement with management at restaurants and cafés. Additionally, tabletop game designer groups often organize designer spaces at the annual gaming conventions in the area. I conducted research at two such conventions, as well as attending weekly designer meetups around the Bay Area.

My informants included people with varying levels of involvement in the tabletop gaming hobby: players who were interested in design and who were just getting started creating their own games, lifelong hobbyists who had been creating games and rules for years, published designers with well-known titles on the shelves at game stores, and many more in-between. During my fieldwork, I also worked with a friend to co-design games as a hands-on exercise and so that I could fully participate with the design community as a playtester and amateur designer, which allowed me to conduct participant observation within the community. Tabletop game designers can fill a variety of roles in the design process and the tabletop gaming industry: they create rules variants for existing published games; conceptualize, create, test, and iterate their own games; and test and refine other people's design prototypes (often called development), among other design practices. Furthermore, designers have different goals in terms of the publishing and marketing of games: whether a designer is primarily interested in selling their

designs to publishers, in self-publishing games via crowdsourcing platforms like Kickstarter, or in other means of distribution, the way that designers go through the steps of bringing a game from the conceptual stages to eventually reaching their target audience can change from individual to individual and from project to project. There is no singular version of the "tabletop game designer" in terms of the work they do, and the individuals I conducted fieldwork with spanned a wide range of positions within and involvement in the industry, with some working as full-time designers, others designing games part-time, and still others trying to design a game that would be their first to publish in hopes of building a name for themselves among tabletop game players.

The relative accessibility of tabletop game design allows for practically anyone to try their hand at the game design process, as there are few special skills or equipment necessary to design tabletop games. While basic graphic design talent or knowledge of word processing templates can help, the nature of tabletop games means a person can create functional paper prototypes with sheets of paper or notecards, writing implements, scissors, and perhaps a few dice and plastic bits. It is easier to create a functioning tabletop game prototype than, say, a video game prototype, which requires some amount of specific technological training such as programming skills and access to visual art assets. On the other hand, while a finished, published tabletop game might include sophisticated pieces and professional art, the initial prototyping stages might just consist of hand-written text on flashcards and other hand-made or home-printed components, or might just require a rulebook, dice, and the players' imaginations such as in the case of many roleplaying and storytelling games. Because of the variety of games that are called "tabletop game," I tested a wide range of games that took many shapes, and with participants at all levels of design experience. The games I tested with my community were primarily board,

dice, and card games with various themes and mechanics, which I discuss in-depth in the following chapters.

1.4 Project Deliverables

When I originally conceptualized this project, I intended to create audio-only podcast episodes to be distributed for free online, in which I would present my findings to my community and to designers more generally. My audio series would have included brief overviews of game design concepts, longer discussions of social sciences methods and practices that designers could apply to their process, and, possibly, interviews with designers. As I carried out my research, however, I decided instead to create a series of video-style lectures that would help to illustrate the concepts and lessons I wanted to present to game designers through visual as well as audio means. Presenting my lectures in video format allowed me to improve accessibility by showing visual examples of the methods I covered, use slideshows to aid learners, and provide easy transcription for viewers via subtitles.

After considering the best platform on which to distribute my deliverables, I decided to create videos for the online video-sharing platform YouTube. Designers can watch these videos for free, leave comments, and learn valuable techniques that might improve their design process. I created a series of video essays titled “Anthropology for Game Designers,” along with a YouTube channel called AnthroView, with my spouse, Chelsea Halliwell, a recent graduate of the SJSU applied anthropology master’s program. In the future, we plan to use the AnthroView channel to create videos that explain what social science is and how people can use it in their daily lives and careers, aligning with the intention of my series for game designers.

For this project, I created four video lectures with a combined runtime of 79 minutes and 4 seconds. The videos are divided into topics based on social science methods and concepts: participant observation, focus groups, and community building, as well as an introductory video that explains the basics of tabletop game design and how anthropological methods will be applied throughout the series. The content of these videos is based on my observations of tabletop game designers and an analysis of what methods they can apply to their practice following the short explanations I provide in each video. In the videos, I use slideshow-style lectures and video footage to explain how various social science methods can be used in the game design process, with the understanding that many of those practices are already being used by tabletop game designers in some capacity.

1.5 Project Significance and Areas of Inquiry

Games engage players mentally and/or physically, can teach through formal and informal methods, are used as stress relief or as opportunities for social interaction, and have a variety of other social applications. Likewise, game design is a wholly anthropocentric process that focuses on human behavior and borrows from multiple disciplines. While games are often primarily considered a form of entertainment, they can also develop greater meaning for individual players. Games that appeal to multiple facets of players' interests can have a major impact on those players' lives, providing more than simple entertainment. Game play experiences can lead to the creation of unique and memorable experiences and facilitate bonds between individuals. Given these qualities, it seemed worthwhile to lend anthropological insights to tabletop game designers who might be interested in finding new ways to appeal to players and to create new experiences for those players.

A variety of the methods that designers were already using are recognizable to practitioners in the social sciences, although the comparisons might not be readily obvious to the casual observer. For example, game designers often use documentary research to connect their designs to historical and modern events, employ iterative design methodologies when creating and refining their projects, and conduct playtests – which are effectively akin to focus groups – to test prototypes and collect feedback for potential improvements. Among designers, these methods might not be known by their social scientific names, but the methods are often analogous. Moreover, like social scientists, game designers benefit greatly from multidisciplinary practices (Fullerton 2014) with many designers taking on a bridging role between other practitioners: graphic designers, artists, programmers, marketers, and the various other team members necessary for bringing a design from its initial concept to a final product.

Designers, however, do not necessarily have the benefit of social science training, or experience with formal practices such as research design, focus group facilitation, or ethnographic inquiry, but these methods can improve the process of playtesting and iterating game designs. By conducting research on game designers and uncovering a deeper understanding of both game design and the experiences designers hope players have during play, I structured my video lectures to demonstrate how social science methods could aid designers in their practices. After determining which research methods game designers could benefit from learning, I created a series of videos to teach relatively straightforward ethnographic research and data collection to aid tabletop game designers' design processes.

The research questions that helped me uncover the best recommendations I could suggest to the design community through my project deliverables are:

- What are the methodological similarities between game design and ethnographic inquiry?
- In what ways are game design and anthropological inquiry significantly different?
- How do game designers use their designs to elicit the types of responses they want from players?
- What role does the greater game design community play in affecting the outcome of a finished game?
- Are there useful lessons that game designers can learn from anthropological methods?
- What obstacles might exist that would make it difficult for game designers to incorporate anthropological inquiry into their design process?

1.6 Report Map

In Chapter 2, I elaborate on the features and qualities of tabletop games, defining the types of popular games that fall into this designation and the various forms they take. I then discuss the importance of the shared physical spaces in which these games are played and iterated and the relatively low bar of entry for designers to start creating their own tabletop games. Following that, I briefly explore the scholarship related to tabletop games, before going in-depth to the community that I worked with. I discuss the social context that my informants come from and the design methods of these designers. Finally, I look at the ways that iterative design and community feedback influence designers' practices and choices in design and community building.

In Chapter 3, I explain my research background, design, and the execution of my project. I discuss the events where I conducted my research, and my method of conducting participant-observation with the local game design community and shadowing informants to uncover how

they make up a community of practice. In this section I also speak more in-depth about my key informants and how we worked together on games, before concluding with a recounting of my own attempts at tabletop game design with my friend and co-designers.

In Chapter 4, I share the findings and insights about game design that I gained through my methods of participant observation, interviews, and co-designing games. I identify the features of effective games that my informants look for when playtesting and iterating their designs and explore how they determine if their prototypes are satisfying their design goals.

In Chapter 5, I take a closer look at the creation of my deliverables. In this section, I explain how I determined which ethnographic methods would be best suited to present to the game design community through my deliverables, and how each of these methods - participant observation, focus groups, and community building - can aid in the game design process. I then discuss how the AnthroView YouTube series was conceptualized and created, and the process of writing, recording, and editing videos for the YouTube platform. I also discuss the qualities of video essays as well as the challenges I faced in creating my deliverables so that future researchers who are considering this kind of deliverable can do so in a more effective manner.

Chapter 6 is the conclusion of this report. In it, I explore the uses of YouTube as a teaching tool, the goals and limitations of my video series, how the game design community uses YouTube, and why YouTube might not be the best platform for the type of content I created. I share potential avenues for future research, explore the lessons I learned in its execution, and finally, I discuss the limitations in my research and in this project overall.

Chapter 2 – A Pack of Cards: Tabletop Games and the Bay Area Design Community

2.1 What are Tabletop Games?

The term "tabletop games" is overly broad, so it is important to establish what types of games my informants create. The categories "board games" and possibly "card games," "dice games," and "roleplaying games" might be more familiar, and while these categories give a decent impression of the games that the designers I worked with make, they do not provide a complete picture. Tabletop games can refer to a wide swath of loosely related mass market media that can take dramatically different shapes. These games sometimes closely resemble other games of their ilk, and at other times might seem like completely different products altogether, yet they are all generally considered to be at least tangentially related by tabletop gaming communities.

The games that designers and players refer to as "tabletop" include a wide variety of familiar and niche products, from board games like *Monopoly* and chess, card games like poker and *Uno*, and roleplaying games like the ubiquitous *Dungeons & Dragons*. What constitutes a tabletop game has varied widely over the years, and it can be challenging to provide a useful taxonomy of games in this designation. For example, the games *Risk*, *Go Fish,* and *Fiasco* can all be called tabletop games, but to an outside observer, the play of each of these games might look nothing alike. Therefore, classification of the structures and features of these games will help to understand the types of games that get created at design events like the ones where I conducted my fieldwork and will highlight the diversity of creative content designers produce. Note that even within specific categories of games, wide variation can exist, and that many designers intentionally or unintentionally might break with the established features of other games within a given category.

Finding meaningful commonalities between all the types of games that tabletop game designers make can be challenging due to the countless forms that these games can take, but there are features and aspects that many of these games share. For the purposes of my research, I operationally define *tabletop games* as game systems that use physical components as the main artifacts of play, where players are physically present in the same space together, and in which the rules and systems of the game are carried out by players. This definition warrants closer examination of key terms and concepts, however, since it relies on some familiarity with these types of games.

What are "game systems"?

Game systems are effectively the primary aspect of games that tabletop game designers create. These are the interrelated rules and mechanics of a game that make it a functioning whole. Every game has rules and mechanics that define how players interact with the game and with each other. For example, *Monopoly* includes a printed rulebook that tells players how to setup the game, and the game's mechanics: what to do on each player's turn, and how players are allowed to accumulate paper money, move their pawns, buy and auction property in the game world, and so on. Taken together, these make up the game system. Often the system is explained either through a rulebook or pamphlet included in the game box, or comes in book form, which is often the case for roleplaying games.

What are "physical components" in tabletop games?

Nearly every tabletop game requires at least a few physical pieces - called components - that aid in play, although the form they take can vary widely. These can include dice, cards, boards, miniatures, and many other bits of material culture. Tabletop games can include just a few components - such as dice, sheets of paper, and pencils used in *Yahtzee* – or might require a

plethora of artifacts - like in the fantasy game *Gloomhaven*, which comes in a 20 pound box filled with plastic miniatures, cardboard map tiles, hundreds of cards, and more. The function of these components also changes between games. Some games use dice to roll random numbers, whereas others might involve stacking them or flicking them at other components. In spite the many differences between various tabletop games, however, the inclusion of at least a few components is effectively what makes a game "tabletop."

Where are tabletop games played?

Traditionally, tabletop games are ones that people play in the same room or area and - unsurprisingly - around a table. Players generally purchase or otherwise procure the components necessary for play, get together, and play around a designated space. While modern technology can greatly alter the forms these games take (online "tabletops" now exist, to say nothing of play-by-mail chess which has been played for decades), these games generally are designed with the intention that they can be played with players in close physical proximity to each other, and require a surface to setup the game and to play cards or roll dice on.

How do the "rules and systems" play out in tabletop games?

The final key concept in understanding tabletop games is the need for players to understand – or at least to have working knowledge of – the rules and to execute game functions themselves. Designers create a system of rules and mechanics, but the end-user needs to know how these things interact. Going back to our example of *Monopoly*, the player cannot simply roll the dice and expect the game to physically move their pawn across the board: the player calculates the sum of the dice and must understand that they are then required to move their pawn exactly the same number of spaces as the result: no more, no less. It also helps to understand that every game has its own unique rules and mechanics: games other than *Monopoly*

might call on the player to roll then move their pawn, but might not require that they move the exact number of spaces rolled. That is because these games require a degree of interpretation and mutual understanding; it behooves every player to know the rules and how things interact in the game space, since they will need to execute game functions themselves, instead of relying on a digital input and automatic results. There are also distinctions between the rules as intended by the designer and the rules as interpreted by the player, as well as house rules that players create that change the game in ways the designer did not intend, but these are beyond the scope of this report. The important point here is that tabletop games require a degree of interpretation to be played.

There are games that are exceptions to even these general descriptions. For example, a roleplaying game might require players to procure their own components rather than including them in a complete box, and there are now board games that require a digital application that determines game functions or produces results that the players will interact with in the game. However, this definition provides a solid basis for understanding the types of games I will be discussing. My definition intentionally leaves out games such as video or computer games - though many digital variations of these games are now being produced, including licensed replications of popular tabletop games - and sports games played on fields or courts. Gambling or casino games such as poker or craps occupy an interesting space in tabletop game discussions, as they do effectively constitute tabletop games, and they certainly influence designers (see for example Ernest 2011), yet mass market tabletop games are not generally designed to be played for financial stakes the way casino games are.

2.2 Why Game Design Matters: The Social Significance of Tabletop Games

In recent years, tabletop gaming has experienced an explosion in popularity, growing into a nearly $10 billion industry (Graham 2016; Griepp 2017) – expected to grow to $12 billion by 2023 (Cision 2018) – and spawning cafés dedicated to playing these games. Tabletop gaming has grown alongside other geek culture phenomena such as fantasy, sci-fi, and comic book and graphic novel-inspired cinema and television, and the ceaseless expansion of various high-tech industries. While an increased emphasis tends to be placed on high-tech gadgets, A.I., and digital imagery in our culture, so-called "analog" games also have proliferated to a previously unimagined degree. Aided by technological advancements while still holding on to the decidedly tangible aesthetic of boards, cards, and dice, the tabletop gaming industry has grown thanks to increased connectivity between players via online networks and through crowdfunding platforms such as Kickstarter.

It should come as no surprise that physical games are experiencing this uptick in popularity, considering the influence tabletop gaming has had on many pop cultural icons and creators. The most well-known fantasy roleplaying game, *Dungeons & Dragons* (*D&D*), in particular, was a proving ground for many of the creative thinkers that influenced popular culture in recent decades. The video game *Doom* – which heralded the explosive growth of the video game industry – was conceptualized while its creators played the ubiquitous roleplaying game, and personalities such as Elon Musk, Stephen Colbert, and Vin Diesel are confirmed fans of *D&D*. *D&D* also has been featured in media dating back to the 1980s with films like *E.T. The Extra-terrestrial*, and more recently featuring prominently in the hit Netflix series *Stranger Things.* Tabletop gaming has even begun to create its own celebrities, through web series like *Critical Role*, and reinvigorated the careers of others, such as actor Wil Wheaton. To list all the

films, shows, and books overtly and subtly inspired by *D&D* over the years, however, would take pages just to scratch the surface. With the increased popularity of gaming, it is no wonder that tabletop gaming has become so important today.

This is not to say that tabletop gaming is only now becoming an important aspect of people's lives. The types of media we now call tabletop games have existed for millennia. A limestone board dated to around 5870 B.C.E. that might have been used to play a game like mancala was discovered by Gary O. Rollefson in 1989 (Rollefson 1992). Romans played tabletop games by at least the first century C.E., and likely spread their popularity around Europe (Hall and Forsyth 2011). And archaeological evidence has also confirmed accounts from the Icelandic sagas that Scandinavians played board games in the Middle Ages (Martin 2003). Many of these games simulated war or skirmish-style conflicts, reflecting these cultures' focus on armed conflict and open displays of physical force. After all, media tend to reflect the values and attitudes of the cultures that produce them.

Looking at more recent examples of popular tabletop games, then, it is little surprise that games like *Monopoly* and *Risk* have been some of the most popular and long-lasting titles in tabletop gaming in the U.S. since the mid-20th century, as their themes revolve around rampant capitalism (*Monopoly*) and warfare (*Risk*). It is also telling that the creation of *Dungeons & Dragons* followed the popularity of fantasy literature that sprang up around J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth books such as *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Ewalt 2013). Perhaps that is why games like these have had such staying power: they capture the popular imagination and reinforce values that are familiar and timely for their audiences. Interestingly, recent scholarship has unveiled that the concept for *Monopoly* was actually lifted from a game called *The Landlord's Game*, designed by Elizabeth Magie and trademarked in 1903 (Pilon 2015).

Monopoly 'designer' Charles Darrow appropriated Magie's design and inverted its message, as elements of *The Landlord's Game* were meant to critique the capitalist systems that *Monopoly* lionizes. Perhaps the modern tabletop games that will leave a lasting impression on future generations are ones such as *Pandemic*, a cooperative game where players attempt to cure viral infections that are breaking out around the globe, or *Bloc by Bloc*, a game designed in Oakland, CA., which simulates collective resistance against systemic injustice and police brutality.

While reflecting cultural attitudes and mores, tabletop gaming also nurtures skills and ways of thinking that are critical to numerous industries outside of entertainment. The social skills needed to play games in physical spaces with others and to learn and play can teach cooperation and teamwork (Halliwell and Mockel 2017). The logic and systems thinking necessary to understand rules and to execute game functions are akin to those used by computer program and artificial intelligence creators. Unsurprisingly, a few of the most well-known tabletop game designers come from user experience and programming backgrounds, like Matt Leacock, who created *Pandemic*.

2.3 The Anthropological Significance of Tabletop Games

Tabletop games provide fertile ground for social scientific studies. By their very nature, tabletop games are social experiences. They require close human interaction to function, and the players influence each other's behaviors in fascinating ways. Game scholar Clara Fernandez-Vara (2015) argues that games are interesting because of the conversation they facilitate between game designers, players, and the game itself. Player interactions are central to these games because players are required to understand the rules and carry them out over the course of play. For that reason, people can play tabletop games in unintended ways, and even create new games with relative ease. Without players, these games cannot function in any tangible way. While

digital games can be programmed to move objects around the screen without any human input, this is not true of board games: they require human hands to move pieces around, and human brains to interpret the rules.

Tabletop games are anthropologically significant in part because of the inherently social nature of their play. Many digital games allow individuals to play by themselves. And while multiplayer online games place players in a shared game world and have their own style of sociality between players that has been studied ethnographically, tabletop games create unique types of interactions and also reveal other types of human behavior over the course of their play. Even the creation of these games is a highly social endeavor, as I learned firsthand during my fieldwork. Because tabletop games typically require players to share the same physical space during play, these interactions can be examined through an in-person ethnographic framework, rather than a new media approach relying on online interactions, which is more common in studies of digital gaming communities. Tabletop games are also familiar to many people across cultures. Whether it be *Monopoly* in the U.S., *Go* in Japan and China, or *Catan* in Germany and Czech Republic, many households around the world contain at least a tabletop game or two that families and friends will occasionally play together. Tabletop games mirror aspects of people's other daily activities, while also structuring those interactions within the framework of play, and that makes them fruitful areas for ethnographic inquiry.

2.4 Project Background and Social Context

The San Francisco Bay Area has an active tabletop game design community made up of a variety of formal and informal groups. Established tabletop game designers and publishers attend weekly meetups with newcomers and longtime hobbyists to conceptualize, design, playtest, and

iterate games in group settings. People's level of involvement in the tabletop game industry run the gamut of tasks, roles, and opportunities, with individuals drifting between groups, becoming more involved or less involved at certain times depending on current projects and life circumstances, and other considerations.

If effect, there are as many roles that a tabletop game designer might take on as there are designers. During my fieldwork, I met a wide range of people with different levels of involvement in tabletop gaming, including: full-time designers working on content for a specific game system or on multiple games at a time; part-time designers who have had their games published by larger game companies but who were not making their living designing games; developers who worked on other people's designs as well as their own; tabletop game publishers who attend design events to meet new designers and to look at games they might want to acquire to publish; novice and experienced designers who had not yet published any of their own games but who were working on games they hoped to publish either themselves via crowdfunding or personal funds or with an outside publisher; artists and graphic designers who create visual content for games; and hobbyists who were interested in games and design but were not necessarily looking to enter the tabletop game industry. Tabletop game publishing also includes tasks for technical writers (editing and clarifying rulebooks and text on game components), package designers, logisticians, quality assurance and customer service specialists, distributors, and a slew of other positions. In some cases, the designer of a game might take on many or all these jobs, especially those who self-publish games through crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter (see for example Yu 2011; Childes and Johnson 2019). Yet even in those cases, tabletop game designers benefit from the social practices of playtesting and iteration with different groups of players.

While a handful of designers work on games full-time, many design as a side job or in hopes of breaking into the industry, and other participate mostly because they are interested in tabletop games in general and want to create something new and contribute to the gaming community. While most designers have at least a selection of their own original designs, they might also do game development, using their expertise and social connections to make improvements to other designers' games. Even designers who are working professionally have somewhat unique roles depending on their circumstances and the projects they are working on at the time: a designer may be focused on a particular game that is their main product for a given period of time or they could be designing multiple games that they are hoping to sell to publishers. Conversely, a designer might be working to self-publish their games or could be doing development work on other people's games. Most designers combine these functions, and many of these roles can change regularly, as was the case for a few of my informants.

2.5 The Cast of Characters: Board Game Designers

Based on my observations, quite a few of the attendees at tabletop game design events and who exhibit their games at design-specific areas of gaming conventions in the Bay Area are white males in their 20s through 60s. When Chelsea attended events with me, she was often the only nonmale participant present. Besides events that Chelsea attended, on a handful of occasions at the larger design events female playtesters would be present, but I did not personally observe any women running playtests of their own prototype.

I did not ask my participants about their socioeconomic backgrounds or status, though I did learn that many of informants come from careers in technology, programming, or user experience which are common in the region. While a few of my informants were making a living

from board gaming, others design due to their interest in games or to establish a position in the industry. Attire at design events tends to be casual - jeans and khakis, polos and t-shirts - and since many come to these events directly from their day jobs, an observer might think that they are simply seeing a gathering of coworkers meeting up for a post-work meal, if not for the array of board games and bags of components, flashcards, and notebooks spread around the area.

While conducting fieldwork, I met many designers, played their prototypes, and gave them feedback based on my own knowledge and experience with games and design. After attending my first few events, I got to know the familiar faces that I would see at many other design events, as well as usually meeting new folks at almost every event. Once I had established myself within the community, I started to identify potential key informants, based in part by getting to know individuals from my interactions with them and also by asking other designers who in the community might be a good source of design expertise and information. When certain names started coming up frequently, I made note, especially when they were designers I had met during my earliest fieldwork experiences.

During my time with these designers, I conducted formal and informal interviews to develop a clearer picture of their design styles and processes, the games they design, their history with tabletop games, their role in the industry, and what skills they found helpful to improve their design work. I have included a copy of my interview instrument in Appendix A. In the case of informal interviews that I conducted at designer events – usually while my informant was preparing to playtest a prototype or after the other playtesters had finished up playing – I would ask modified versions of these questions during my observations, weaving these inquiries into the course of our conversations.

Over the course of my fieldwork, I made closer connections with eight designers who were willing to become my key informants and to let me sit with them through their playtesting and interview them about their design experiences and processes. These include:

- Sam, my co-designer and long-time friend. Over the years, Sam and I have played tabletop games and discussed ideas creating our own games. When I mentioned that I was working on a project about tabletop games, Sam expressed interest in pursuing design in earnest. From the initial stages of my research design, Sam and I attended playtesting events together, created, tested, and iterated game prototypes, and worked through the initial steps of tabletop game manufacturing. Working firsthand with a co-designer gave me new insights into the design process and allowed me to conduct observations of my own game designs from a variety of perspectives.
- "Ray,"[i] a computer programmer and friend of a friend who helped me connect with the tabletop design community. Ray told me about the designer groups before I began my fieldwork, provided contacts with other designers, attended a handful of the events I went to, and sat down with a one-on-one interview with me.
- "Cameron,"[ii] a videographer and recently published tabletop designer who attended practically every event I attended. Cameron is a regular attendee and organizer of local design events who allowed me to conduct participant-observation while he tested his prototypes, met with Sam and I for personal playtesting and coworking sessions, and introduced me to other designers in the community.
- "Ben,"[iii] a former user-experience designer who now designs and develops tabletop games full-time. Ben is well-known in the community; when I mentioned my project to anyone, they would immediately suggest I talk to him. He attends and organizes

numerous design events in the area. He allowed me to conduct participant-observation while he tested his prototypes, introduced me to other designers in the community, and invited me to his house to see how he designs games and does the various kinds of tasks for his development work.

- "Edward,"[iv] a user-experience designer who has been designing games since around the age of 8. Edward attended many of the design events I did my fieldwork at, and created games that simulate programming, AI, and mechanical operations. He allowed me to conduct participant-observation while he tested his prototypes and agreed to be interviewed about his design experience.
- "Stanley,"[v] a full-time game designer who created and continues to design content for a popular series of games. I met Stanley while he was testing a new version of his game at one of the game stores where I conducted fieldwork. He allowed me to conduct participant-observation while he tested his new prototype and agreed to be interviewed about his design experience.
- "Peter,"[vi] an aspiring designer who mainly attends events in the South Bay. Peter allowed me to conduct participant-observation while he tested his prototype and shared his design documents with me to use as part of my research.
- "Charlie,"[vii] a theater director who designs games in his free time. Charlie attended events at the Berkeley game cafe I conducted fieldwork at. He allowed me to conduct participant-observation while he tested his prototype, and also asked me to set up an informal test of his game with a few of my acquaintances so that he could get feedback from testers on a new version of his design.

2.6 How are Tabletop Games Designed?

Because of the shifting nature of the designer's role in tabletop gaming, it is challenging to define the core elements of what makes one a "tabletop game designer" – much as it is somewhat confounding to define what constitutes tabletop games – and this is further complicated by the fact that not everyone who works in the tabletop game industry or who attends playtesting events is a designer. However, some generalities will help to understand the qualities of designers as I defined them for my project and my participant selection. Broadly speaking, a tabletop game designer is an individual who creates or modifies tabletop game systems through an iterative process of testing and refinement. While broad, this definition helps to encapsulate the highly individualized nature of designers' approaches and techniques.

Pinning down what game designers exactly *do* is difficult in part because every designers' process and approach are specific to them, based on their individual experiences and preferences. Much like any creative design endeavor, how one designs a game is a very personal process and can change quite a bit from project to project. The wide variety of practices designers use in creating games also is related to the diverse nature of the games themselves, and the fact that designing board game rules and mechanics requires very little in the way of specific skills or knowledge. Unlike designing video or computer games, for example, an individual can create basic tabletop games with no knowledge of computer coding or visual art skills. In addition, tabletop game prototypes tend not to require 3D modeling or metal or plastic fabrication, at least not in the initial stages. After all, young children often make up rules for make-believe games (Rodgers 2012; Upton 2015; Bogost 2016), and the components of tabletop games are often easily-acquired - such as dice and cardboard tokens - or makeable at home - such as printed cards and rulebooks.

The primary qualities necessary for creating preliminary game designs, then, are often a combination of general game knowledge, creativity, and logical thinking, although all three of these are needed in varying degrees. For example, one designer might play and design a wide range of games while another is focused on specific experiences and styles. Likewise, a designer can begin a design with a theme they want to explore, such as Medieval fantasy or science-fiction, or might come up with a game mechanic they want to implement, like a new trading rule or an interesting way to use dice results. Some designers begin by creating their own rules or variants for existing games while others are hit by a spark of inspiration to create something totally new. This is all to say that there is no singular, common experience or quality or specific process or approach that would be familiar to all designers; their experiences are highly personalized.

While each designer has their own process and practices, there are still common practices that each designer carries out in their own ways. For example, all the designers in my project attend public designer events to test and iterate their designs. The community's reliance on playtesting at public events might be partly owed to the fact that one of the few truisms in all game design is that a thorough and robust iterative design process is the best practice for any game project (Fullerton 2014; Looney 2011; Morningstar 2017; Stegmaier 2019; Valens 2019). Because of this widely accepted practice, tabletop design events like the ones I conducted my fieldwork at exist, allowing designers to get feedback on their in-process designs, make changes based on that feedback, and meet other designers. Designers form a semi-informal community around the play and iteration of game prototypes, creating a system of reciprocity where group members can share their games and insights with an active community, get advice, and see what

is working and what is not in their designs, and in turn they play other people's prototypes and offer feedback and advice in kind.

Understanding the widely used practices for how designers create, test, and iterate their prototypes allowed me to begin my fieldwork with a sense of the methods I might observe designers using. While the general outline of playtesting and design follows this create-test-iterate pattern, the flexible, adaptive nature of my informants' processes would shift to suit the needs of a given design or playtesting scenario. Next, I elaborate on the methods I used to collect data on designers working at the playtesting events I attended.

2.7 Setting the Scene: Playtesting Events

Because of the scheduling and organization of tabletop game design playtesting events, and the fluid nature of many designers' involvement in games - few are able to design games as a full-time career, so they often attend events after work or during other off-hours - I conducted my fieldwork at a variety of locations and during irregular times, based on when and where these events took place. In total, I attended monthly playtesting events at seven different businesses around the San Francisco Bay Area - primarily Berkeley, Oakland, San Jose, and Santa Clara - and at two tabletop gaming conventions. I also scheduled individual meetings with informants and conducted participant-observation and did coworking at restaurants and cafés, and at one of my key informant's homes. Despite the relative distance between locations and the frequency of events, a handful of individuals attended practically all of these events during the time of my fieldwork, and I asked those frequent attendees to participate in my project.

All the events where I conducted my fieldwork were either held in public businesses or at conventions, and were specifically targeted to designers and advertised via social media or

through direct invite, or were part of gaming conventions where local designers put together playtest areas for prototype games. The regular meetups were held either weekly or monthly in specific places such as restaurants, cafés, or at game stores with designated play areas, and were organized by individual members of the tabletop design community or sponsored by the business in the case of stores and cafés catered towards tabletop gamers. I used Facebook Groups, Meetup.com, and (once I had established myself with the community) word-of-mouth to find these events, which were free for designers to attend, exhibit their prototypes, and play others' prototypes. Generally, these events would consist of a group of designers and (occasionally their non-designer friends and acquaintances) around a designated area of tables, playing prototypes, chatting about games, and chatting about design in general.

The monthly events I attended throughout my project took place at a cafe in Berkeley, a game cafe in Berkeley, a pizza restaurant in San Jose, and a game store in Santa Clara. I also conducted fieldwork at game stores in Berkeley and Oakland, and a game museum in Oakland, but these events were either irregular or else stopped being hosted during my fieldwork, so I only went to them a handful of times. The two game conventions where I did participant-observation are annual events that take place in Burlingame and San Ramon, and which have official *protospiel* (tabletop gaming prototyping) rooms for which designers sign up to exhibit their games but which are open to all attendees. I also attended talks and seminars by designers at these events.

In the case of certain restaurants and cafés, designers would have a pre-established relationship with the management and an understanding of how the space was being used (occasionally with the promise of the group spending money on food and refreshments) though at other times it seemed no such agreement existed, and designers would simply show up, select

a few tables to use and greet familiar faces as they came, though even in these cases, people often utilized the restaurants' services for food and beverages, especially considering that many of these events start in the early evening, around 6 and 8 P.M., after designers get off work at their day jobs and likely during their regular meal times. When social media were used to plan events, hosts or organizers might use responses from attendees to determine how much space they would need, or to post quick updates about where the group was in real time for those coming after the start time. Smaller monthly events might consist of between five and ten designers, while larger groups - especially at the longer events at the San Mateo game store and the San Jose pizza restaurant - might include twenty or so designers and non-designer playtesters coming and going during the duration of the event.

Based on the behaviors and attitudes I observed while attending playtesting events, participation at these events is self-selected and generally open to anyone who is a designer, interested in design, a friend of a designer, or who sees the event taking place or finds out about it on social media and signs up to attend. In general, it seemed that the primary prerequisite for participation was the desire to participate, although different sized events had their own levels of visibility and inclusion. For example, at café events, practically every participant was either a designer or an aspiring designer who had found the group on social media. If other customers stood nearby to watch or ask what was going on, one of the designers would usually greet them and explain that we were testing new tabletop games. This explanation was sometimes enough to spark a brief conversation, but usually the onlooker would simply shrug and walk away. At these informal café meetups, I never witnessed a customer who was not there specifically for the event join a playtest.

On the other hand, at the locations that were specifically held at businesses that are targeted towards tabletop game players – those held at game stores and game cafés – customers who were there to play other games would occasionally ask specific questions about the prototype games designers were exhibiting and possibly even join in the playtests. One night at a game store, Sam and I showed up for a scheduled playtesting event, but it was being held the same week as a local gaming convention, and no other designers ended up attending. We had already set out our game, however, and wanted to try to get any feedback we could. Luckily, a customer who was there to play *Dungeons & Dragons* began chatting with us and we asked if he would be interested in playing our prototype. He agreed to join us while he waited for his friends to arrive, and tested our game for about 30 minutes, then gave us feedback on our design before his friends showed up. People who are interested in board games tended to be at least passingly interested by the sight of people playing games. Because games are often designed with the intention of eventually selling them, getting feedback from anyone who is familiar with games can be a valuable source of insight into practically any prototype. In fact, based on what my informants told me, while playtesting with designers is often a great way to iterate and develop a prototype, the goal is usually get a prototype ready to be exhibited with a more general gaming audience at larger events like conventions, which are not specifically aimed at designers but at tabletop gamers more generally.

To get a greater degree of public feedback, at the larger public events such as those at game cafés or at the South Bay pizza restaurant, the event organizers would invite non-designer tabletop gaming enthusiasts who they knew through either through work, friendships, or mailing lists who would come to test games alongside the designers. I also observed that at gaming conventions many people come to play games as part of their participation at the event; at any

given time in the convention space there could be dozens or hundreds of games being played in designated spaces or wherever people can sit down, even on the floor. To tap into this segment of the tabletop gaming public, prototyping areas at contentions are set up so that any convention attendee can come play new designs along with designers.

The impression I got from going to design meetups was that one could attend simply by showing up at the designated place and time and introducing oneself to the designers there. The acceptance of new members perhaps relates to the relatively open, fluid nature of tabletop game designers' processes and roles; since there are no set criteria by which one can call themselves a game designer, the groups I worked with do not attempt to "vet" attendees or to check their credentials in terms of verifying their level of experience or involvement in tabletop gaming. For example, I was able to attend my first event without knowing any other attendees and, while I was asked about the types of games I wanted to design, did not even need to run a playtest to be welcomed or invited back. An interest in design was usually enough to participate. One could come to an event with or without a prototype, sit with a group of playtesters, play prototypes, offer feedback, and - if they have a prototype of their own - find a group of willing players to test their games. This is not to say that tabletop game designers are a diverse group in terms of ethnicity or gender, however.

Tabletop game design is a niche in an already niche industry, even if the popularity and visibility of these games has increased in recent years. While players at game stores and attendees at conventions might include a higher amount of nonwhite, nonmale people, many designers are white males. Pobuda (2018) conducted an examination of the designers of the top-rated 200 tabletop games listed on BoardGameGeek.com and found that 93.5 percent of those

games were designed by white males, with only 7 games designed by women and 12 designed by people of color. My observations at playtesting events seems to correlate with Pobuda's findings.

Ben confirmed that tabletop game designers are primarily white males and acknowledged the lack of diversity in design and gaming more broadly. He said that there actually are more diverse designers in the Bay Area, but that they rarely attend public design events due to a variety of factors that he seemed uncomfortable sharing. He quickly changed the subject to efforts to alleviate this lack of diversity, saying that he and other members from the local design community were doing what they could to make events more inclusive, including creating a code of conduct for events that he organizes. This code of conduct requests that designers consider the audience of their prototypes and the people who playtest them, for example, getting consent from all playtesters before testing a game with potentially sexual content, and ensuring that any testers under the age of 18 have the consent of their parents before testing a game.

Convention events are more regulated, but only marginally so. If someone wants to show off their prototype in the designated playtesting area, they usually were expected to sign up and to be given a space and time slot by the organizers, and there might be a published list of designers and their games at the entrance to the designated room or at each table. Participation was still open to any convention attendee, which increases the potential appeal to designers, as they can get a wider range of players and feedback from non-designers who might be interested in their games.

Despite the more organized playtesting rooms at conventions, the nature of tabletop gaming conventions is such that practically every open space at the convention could be somewhere to exhibit one's prototype, as at any given time hundreds or thousands of people are

using every surface imaginable to play whatever games they like. More experienced designers often use sell sheets in plastic holders with basic information about their games and “Players wanted!” in large text to tell passersby that they have a prototype they would like them to try. That was the approach Sam and I used when we decided to attend a gaming convention last-minute; we were not able to get a table and timeslot to show off our prototype in the designers’ room, but we did find playtesters in the general play area who were willing to try out our game.

Now that I have established a foundation about tabletop games, their designers, and my primary informants of my project, I will move on in the next chapter to elaborate on the methods I used to uncover communities of practice among tabletop game designers.

Chapter 3 – Joining the Party: Methodologies for Studying Tabletop Game Designers

3.1 Entering the Bay Area Tabletop Game Design Community

Throughout the rest of this report, I use the term *designer* as a general expression both for people who created a given game and for developers who were exhibiting a prototype for playtesting purposes. A number of my informants would bring games to events that they had not personally designed but which they had an agreement with the designer - and possibly a contract and the promise of monetary compensation for their work - to develop their prototype by getting more playtesters to try it out and/or to test the game in a different locality, and then suggesting changes and improvements based on that feedback. For example, Ben is both a designer and a developer, and would usually bring a selection of his own prototypes and those of other designers to events. Because of this sometimes-complicated relationship among designers, developers, and other people working in the tabletop gaming industry, I use *designer* when referring to the people who presented the prototype that I played or observed, because tabletop game development requires the same skills that one uses when designing new games.

My initial introduction to the Bay Area tabletop game design community was through a friend who I knew was connected to game designers. I asked if he could put me in touch with any designers, and he connected me to Ray via email. I had met Ray previously and had played tabletop games with him a few times, but I did not know he was designing games. It turns out, at the time he was working on a card game with a co-designer and had been attending meetups with other designers in the local community. He linked me to the Facebook and Meetup.com groups and explained that they were open to new designers joining and attending events. I had already

been studying design and working on a prototype card game for a class project, so I was prepared to start attending events and participating in the prototyping process.

I signed up to participate in a designers' meetup at one of the Berkeley cafés, a bustling bakery and eatery that served diner food and pastries, with a generous floor plan and sections with sufficient tables in a backroom for a group of designers to spread out their games and snacks. The event took place in the early evening, to allow designers to arrive after work, get a meal, and show off their prototypes. Ray said he might attend but ended up unable to come. At my first event, however, I met three other designers who would end up being my informants: Cameron, Ben, and Edward, as well as an assortment of others who I would see regularly at events.

When I arrived, I followed the advice from the Meetup.com post that said the group would be "somewhere in the back." Seeing a group of people with games and components spread out on tables, I was confident I was in the right place. I approached the group self-consciously, unsure what to expect, and asked if this was the group I was looking for. I was instantly greeted by all the assembled designers, who asked variations of the question that I would continue to hear whenever I met a new group of designers: 'what games are you working on?' While I was shy about my novice design work, I explained that I had been creating a card game partially based on blackjack but with a more complicated set of mechanics, which had the theme for goblin businesspeople ruthlessly vying for the top position of a marketing department in a fantastical company. People nodded and asked a few follow-up questions. Then we divided the group into tables based on the player count of each prototype and people's interests in various games.

This general scene would play out at practically every designer event I attended, aside from the convention events which were a bit more structured: the group would meetup, say hi, then settle into playing prototypes that interested them or that had space for more players. At semi-regular intervals a few groups would finish the game they were testing, then the group might split into new groups to play another person's prototype, or one of the players in a group would ask the people who just played someone else's prototype to check out the one they had been working on. Often, designers would express a desire to both play as many new prototypes as they could, and to get as many people to test their designs as possible, though on occasion, a few regulars would come simply to playtest other people's prototypes and give feedback even if they themselves did not currently have a prototype to playtest.

3.2 Playtesting and Iteration

The natural starting point for my observations was to take note of the types of interactions and feedback that took place during playtesting. I did not know what to expect going into the playtesting process. Unsurprisingly, every designer has their own style and manner of running a playtest and collecting feedback, though generalities exist. The first step to any playtest is to teach the rules of the prototype to all testers, or to have the playtesters read a rulebook, if one exists and is relatively short. In the vast majority of playtests I participated in, the designer or person conducting the playtest explained the rules of the game orally, though on occasion Cameron, Ben, and a few other designers would have prototypes with short rulebooks that the playtesters could read, simulating the experience they would have with a game they purchased for personal play.

Tabletop games run the gamut of complexity and familiarity. Some games can be taught in a few minutes, using familiar references from other well-known games that provide the designer with inspiration (many games share key mechanics and concepts that can be recognized by experienced players); others might require significant explanation of concepts and rules before a proper test can play out. Cameron's games were often relatively straightforward, and he could teach them in 10 minutes or less. The cards in his games had little text and the interactions were easily explained. Meanwhile, Charlie's prototype comprised multiple systems, cards with a great deal of text, and the choices that players made had a large impact on the other players. Even after a thorough explanation, we would often have to ask Charlie clarifying questions. With games that are further along in the design process, the designer might ask players to read and interpret a draft of the rulebook themselves because a finished game purchased in a store will not come with the designer to teach players how the game works. This was relatively rare for the events I attended, however, as many prototypes were either in earlier stages of development or would take more time to read the rules for instead of having them explained by the designer.

Once the playtesters have an idea of how the game plays, testing can begin. Playtesting looks similar to the play of any other tabletop games, with players making choices, executing game mechanics, bantering back and forth, and so on. The main difference lies in the feedback that designers ask playtesters to give, and the fact that untested games might include issues that cause games to grind to a halt while the designer considers scenarios for which they had not prepared. When Sam and I were trying a new system for playing combinations of cards, one playtest group uncovered a critical flaw that prevented the game from continuing until we made some quick adjustments to the text on the cards, which reinforced for us the importance of thorough playtesting. In my experience, designers prefer to observe while others play their

prototypes but will play along with other testers if they want to see how the game works with specific numbers of player or if there are not enough players available to fit the minimum number needed for play.

Likewise, depending on the state of the game and the goal of the playtesters, a designer might be open to rules questions or might prefer to see the players make their own interpretations based on the information provided on the game components and in the rulebook (when one is available). Because of the complexity of our prototype, for example, Sam and I often would have to explain the rules and mechanics of our games a few times before playtesters were comfortable playing them out without our assistance. Conversely, Ben often explained the rules and answered clarifying questions at the beginning of a playtest but preferred that playtesters figure out as much as they could on their own during the actual play of the game. During one playtest he conducted that I participated in, Ben had to step away for a few minutes, and told us, “if you have to figure out anything on your own, keep track of it and tell me when I come back.” While some designers ask questions of testers during a playtest, others like Ben stay mostly quiet during the actual playtesting, asking most of their questions after the play session is complete.

Whether a designer explains the rules of a game orally or prefers playtesters to consult a rulebook can change depending on how far along the prototype is. Even though many designers prefer to intervene as little as possible during a playtest – as this more accurately simulates the experience of consumers who will eventually buy the game – with newer prototypes, or ones that recently went through significant changes, sometimes more clarification and interventions are necessary, especially if there are misprints or vague rules that the designer has not yet corrected in the game system or on components. For example, on occasion Cameron would ask playtesters to read a short rulebook he had drafted for prototypes that he had been working on for a while; in

these cases, if we asked him what to do in certain situations, he would say, “see if you can find it in the rules.” Cameron was not to be dismissive or unhelpful, but rather to determine if he had done an effective job in writing, editing, and formatting the rules. By comparison, Sam and I never had a formal rulebook prepared for any of our prototypes, and so we had to explain the rules to any new group and remind playtesters about how certain situations in the game should be played out.

After a game is finished, or when the designer has determined that they have seen enough of the game to get as much information as they can from the test, there is a debriefing period where the designer asks the players questions about their experiences. Some designers have a script that they follow for most games, while others just ask whatever comes to mind. Also, when the designer of a prototype is new to the practice and more experienced designers are testing a prototype, the other designers at the table will step in and ask the rest of the group questions that they ask in their own tests to help out the novice designer. Edward, Cameron and Ben did this on a few occasions when I was testing my prototypes and did not know what questions I should be asking to elicit the best feedback. These debriefings serve multiple purposes. For example, designers might want to find out about game mechanics a tester found innovative or confusing, to see what else is working well, and what needs work.

A designer might also directly ask less talkative testers if they have suggestions for components or rules clarifications. Cameron, Stanley, and Ben often probed people who did not speak up to share their thought. Cameron also helped Sam and me with this technique. For example, when we were testing one of our prototypes with a non-designer playtester, Cameron shared his thoughts and the other tester did not seem to have much to say. “What did you think of

the combat system?" he asked. This direct attention got the other playtester talking about the features of our game that he enjoyed.

After every playtester has had a chance to contribute, usually someone at the table will either ask if people are willing to test their prototype, or else will head off to another table to test another prototype that caught their eye. This cycle of fusion and diffusion is especially common for events with enough participants that multiple games can be tested at a time. Most tabletop games can seat as few as two and maybe as many as six players – occasionally even more, in the case of certain party games, but these are rare and tend to be relatively short games. So, at events with 10 or more designers present, there can be a few games happening at once. There are also periods of downtime for participants, when they might linger around a table where a prototype they want to play next is being finished up, go to get food, or just chat with other designers, but there are always games being played at these events.

3.3 Learning Design from Designers

Despite the game design theories and advice I picked up from my documentary research, I knew that I would need to spend a great deal of time in the field to see what local designers were actually doing in their practice at these events. Thankfully, I found the designers I met to be friendly and, most importantly, open to discussing their experiences and to participating in an anthropological study of game design. When I first posted about my project on social media to look for willing participants, one of the group organizers even said that they might be interested in having me give a talk on my findings eventually. This openness extended to my actual fieldwork sites, as well. Anytime I sat down with a group to playtest a prototype, I would introduce myself, briefly explain my project, and ask for everyone's consent to have me make

notes about both the prototype itself and people's behaviors and reactions. On every occasion, all testers would give me consent to do so, possibly after asking a few clarifying questions and getting my assurance that I would not be sharing any details about their prototypes in my report.

All the designers I met early on were excellent sources of data about the process and were willing to share their insights with me even though I was a complete amateur. For example, as I stated before, I met Cameron, Ben, and Edward at the first designer event I attended, and all three were happy to tell me about their experiences and how they tested their prototypes. Moreover, they let me sit in on their tests as an observer instead of as a tester, though I would often transition between observation and participant-observation, especially at events with less attendees where every tester counts. Through both kinds of interactions, I learned key lessons about the process these designers use and uncovered a few of the tenets of the design philosophy of this community, which I synthesized into specific categories for my project and video deliverables, which I discuss in-depth in the next chapter.

A large part of learning design practices from designers came from my observations of how they conducted prototype playtesting; paying attention to the games they created; the questions they asked playtesters; and the style of questioning, observation, and iteration they used in their own practice. As a participant-observer at design events I would join playtests, inform all participants of my project and let them know that I would like to observe their playtest session and take notes, and ask if they had any questions. I would try to do this as quickly and unobtrusively as possible, so as not to distract from the designer and their prototype. Once I was known among the community, I would occasionally join groups where everyone was familiar with my research, in which case I would simply ask if it was all right for me to take notes for my project during the playtest.

It turns out that the creation and rules writing portions of game design can be rather difficult to study holistically in the field, however, in part because creating a game is a relatively long, drawn-out process that does not occur in a single space or context. When I attended playtesting events, I was usually observing prototypes that have already been through the initial stages of design elsewhere, such as by the designer in their private home or office. The social aspects of design that take place at playtesting events are an important part of the design process and provide opportunities to observe the social interactions and behaviors that tabletop game play and iterative design provide. On the other hand, initial game design steps like system development, rules writing, and component creation are harder to observe because it is often a solitary practice that occurs either when inspiration strikes or else in the sparse free time that designers utilize to work on a game. A designer might have to do these steps in the evening after their kids are asleep, as Charlie explained he did, or during downtime at their jobs, as Cameron told me he sometimes did while waiting for his video projects to render.

While full-time designers might have more regular schedules for when they plan their design efforts, many of my informants squeezed in whatever time they could to create new games, work on prototypes, and iterate. The fact that my informants tend to design in their free time or when inspiration strikes them made it difficult to schedule observations during my informants' creation of prototypes. A few of my informants had more open schedules or could make time to work on designs together. On a few occasions, Cameron would meet me and occasionally Sam at a café to work on our designs together and to discuss tabletop game design in general. Because Ben and Stanley are full-time designers, I was able to visit Ben at his home and spend a day observing his usually-solitary design work, and I was able to meet up with Stanley to help him research published games that he wanted to play for inspiration for his own

design work. Finding time to work with my other informants outside of scheduled playtesting events, however, especially if they primarily worked in other industries.

Because initial design and iteration are often solitary endeavors for my informants and are done at irregular times, my best source of information and observation of game mechanics and system development, rules writing, and component creation came from my codesigning with Sam. Sam came up with the initial idea for our card-based action game and we started developing a paper prototype using hand-written cards we cut from plain paper and index cards. Drawing inspiration from arcade games like *Street Fighter* where players create more powerful attacks by inputting combinations of buttons, Sam wanted to see if we could design a game where players had a variety of cards they could play together to create more powerful actions. From our initial idea, Sam and I spent dozens of hours talking and texting about potential game mechanics and ideas for characters. We likewise spent a great deal of time creating computer templates, printing and hand-cutting components, and bringing our prototype to playtesting events. This hands-on approach was elucidating, as it gave me a sense of how my other informants might develop their games as well as providing me with the opportunity to observe how Sam, as an aspiring designer, worked through the process of creating, playtesting, and iterating a game, as well as lending me insights developed from my own design practice.

Each designer's individual design processes and methods are unique to their individual style of testing and feedback collection and can vary to fit the needs of their current prototype. Ben usually had small collection of professionally-printed prototypes with semi-final art and components – both his own designs and those of his development clients – at any given event, while Sam and I made our own prototypes from home and reused pieces from published games. Even if a particular game design begins with rough ideas on paper and hand-cut cards, when a

designer wants to bring a prototype to a design event, there is usually a process of component creation and prototype preparation, when designers print cards, gather dice and game pieces, and try to at least replicate a semi-professional looking prototype, both to attract the attention of potential testers and to make the iterative process faster and easier.

On rare occasions a designer might bring their rough prototypes to an event, but before long it benefits them to make computer templates of their games, both to increase the clarity of the writing on components (handwritten text can be hard to read and cluttered) and to make iteration quicker. At a couple of events, Edward would bring components he had designed with no actual rules or mechanics prepared and asked the other designers to play with them and see if any game ideas came to mind for how they could be part of a game system. When Sam and I made prototypes we would create templates for cards that we could easily print and cut out, and which we could edit after a series of playtests to easily produce a new set of cards with any changes we wanted to bring to the next prototyping event.

The more social aspect of design is the playtesting process. The work of creating and refining systems and components can be a solitary effort if one is designing a prototype by themselves. At the early stages of design, the process can be more akin to writing or handicrafts, where the creator or creators work on their design, creating rules and systems and testing basic game mechanics without input from others, playtesting and iteration are generally considered to be best done with others, after the earliest stages of prototyping at least. There are several reasons why playtesting is better done with people other than the designers themselves.

First, when one is testing their own design, it is difficult to tell if the rules and systems are clearly communicable to other players who are not intimately familiar with one’s own design

intentions. While a designer might be able to create a game system in their head and execute game functions themselves, it is vitally important to the playtesting process that they are also able to clearly communicate these rules and systems to others. For this reason, tabletop games rely on concise, well-written rules and consistent rules to function properly. Misunderstandings and misinterpretations of game rules can result in long stalls in play, as players are forced to look through rulebooks or debate their reading of particular concepts. Because of the difficulty of interpreting tabletop game rules, BoardGameGeek.com forums often contain dozens of message threads where players ask for clarification or argue for their reading of a designer's intended meaning for a given rule or interaction in the game. Because of this high level of engagement with the tabletop gaming public, practically every designer I worked with, and countless others in online forums and in books on design, argue that the design stage of any tabletop game should include extensive testing with a wide range of players to attempt to discover and correct unclear writing, complicated interactions, and unintended consequences that spring up due to the text on table components and in the rules (see the compiled volumes: Selinker 2011; Barrett 2019).

Second, most tabletop games are inherently social experiences where player interactions are central to every aspect of the game.[viii] Extensive playtesting allows designers to observe these interactions firsthand, determine if they are generating experiences that players enjoy, and to refine their game systems to create more satisfying experiences for players. Sam and I wanted to evoke the feeling that people playing our games were having experiences similar to the action movies and arcade games that inspired us. Stanley wanted to design a game that used the mechanics established in other games in new ways and which required players to work together to win against the game system. Peter wanted to replicate the concepts of economic trading and investments management in a fantasy setting.

To determine if their design goals are achieved through a given prototype, designers ask playtesters about the impressions and reactions to various elements in the game. When Peter taught us to play his prototype, he asked which of us playtesters had played a popular resource management game that partially inspired his design. I had not played the game he asked about, but other playtesters were familiar with it, and this reference point helped them understand the reasoning behind Peter's design choices. It also helped playtesters understand the experience that Peter wanted players to have during the game and gave clues about how they were expected to act in the game space. In Peter's prototype, the driving force is aggressive accumulation of resources through trade, negotiation, and combat. Unlike the games Sam and I designed, where players work together to defeat the game itself, in Peter's game it was everyone for themselves.

By explaining these elements of the game, Peter let us know what he was hoping to learn about his game: Did we feel like ruthless mercenary leaders defeating our foes and acquiring wealth? After testing, Peter asked the group questions like, "Did you like being able to fight in skirmishes to gain more gold?" Playtesters' answers to questions like this let Peter know if the experience he is aiming to facilitate is getting through to players. When I spoke with Peter a few days later, he told me that the feedback he got from our playtest had already led to new changes he was excited to try out in his next iteration.

Tabletop game players also have varied tastes, and there are countless genres and styles of game within the medium, so getting feedback from many people lends valuable insights to designers' processes. For example, testers who are familiar with set collection games[ix] might have specific feedback to give to designers creating games with set collection, but so might players who are not familiar with set collection games but who do play deckbuilding games[x]. Cameron played Sam and my prototype in several iterations and helped us identify confusing

mechanics, areas where we could improve player interactions, and other sticking point. But he added a caveat: "I don't play a lot of cooperative games[xi] though, so someone more familiar with them might be more helpful."

Understanding things like playtesters' tastes in games and the intended audience of a prototype helps to understand how much weight to give a particular playtesters' feedback when iterating on a design. As an experienced designer who has played many games, Cameron's feedback is valuable even if he does not necessarily play many games in the same genre or with the same mechanics because he understands how games function and what is working and what is not on a technical level. But he also understands that different audiences look for different things in games, and that no single game will appeal to every tabletop game player. Establishing an understanding of the types of games a playtester prefers and is most familiar with helps the designer determine how much weight to give that playtester's feedback on specific things such as theme, mechanics, or playstyle.

Finally, related to how different playtesters' preferences can influence the feedback that they give, many games are predicated on the uncertainty of potential outcomes, and for this reason it is difficult for designers to test their prototypes in isolation. My first prototype was based partially on blackjack, a game that relies in part on the players being unaware of what cards the other players are holding. This uncertainty in play forced me to always test each iteration with others after the initial design phase, and it was not until I had played with more experienced designers like Ben that the flaws in my design were illuminated. While a solitary designer working on a game inspired by this kind of hidden information could hypothetically deal multiple hands of cards to simulate other players' hands, they would be at an impasse: knowing all the information about every players hand means they would usually know the best

answer to any given situation, and they would always have an optimal strategy. It is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to test games with hidden information without multiple testers and the uncertainty that will exist in the actual play of a game. Because it is challenging to get a real sense of whether a game with hidden information is working when playing alone, when uncertainty is a core element of a prototype, it is practically a necessity to test these games socially, beyond the general fact that all games benefit from thorough playtesting with people who are not the principle designers.

Once I had a firm grasp on the benefits of prototyping and of my informants' testing processes, I began a closer inspection of their behaviors and practices at the events I attended. These initial observations led me to consider how the tabletop design community might constitute a community of practice, where each member of the group brings key knowledge, skills, and resources to the group, which are shared between members in an informal system of exchange. In the next section, I explore this concept in detail.

3.4 Uncovering Communities of Practice

Lave and Wenger (1991) and Wenger (1998) examine the social aspects of learning, viewing the accumulation of skills, knowledge, and resources that we utilize in our regular activities (whether work, play, hobby, or otherwise) as a process of social interaction and exchange between members of a community. When we are part of a community, we leverage the knowledge, skills and resources of others in that community, and in turn the community leverages the same from us. Learning a practice like game design is a social activity not just because playing games is often a social experience, but because the knowledge and experience of other designers helps both veteran and newbie designers develop new skills through this social

process of learning. Due to this relationship between game design and the social theory of learning, I designed this project with communities of practice in mind as a guiding lens for how I would examine designers' behaviors and offer suggestions to aid their processes.

A community of practice is an informal collective of people with shared interests, disciplines, jobs, or hobbies, who also share knowledge, skills, and resources with each other. Wenger (1998) argues that communities of practice are often invisible parts of participants' lives, but that articulating social learning helps to increase the analytical utility of the perspective. So, while we all unconsciously participate in multiple communities of practices in our daily lives, a closer examination lends useful insights that can improve our practices. Wenger (1998) identifies four components in the social theory of learning: meaning, practice, community, and identity. These components help researchers understand and identify communities of practice, and they are foundational to my examination of the Bay Area tabletop design community. I used these four components as a lens for uncovering how the Bay Area tabletop game design community constitutes a community of practice, and in turn my findings guided me in creating my video series. A closer examination of these components reveals how I applied this lens to the creation of my deliverables.

Meaning

Meaning, as it relates to communities of practice, refers to the experiences of community members and how they negotiate the duality between what Wenger (1998) calls participation and reification. Rather than the philosophical definition, Wenger is concerned with practical applications of meaning. In this case, it refers to the intersection between what people do (participation) and what they create (reification), both physical creations and how they

conceptualize and interpret the world around them. In tabletop gaming, meaning covers a fairly wide range of concepts, and hence can be applied to many facets of designers' practices, including how they think of play and what constitutes games, how their experiences influence their games and their design practices, and the starting points of their design process, i.e. whether or not they begin a project based on mechanics, themes, player experiences, or so on.

To understand meaning for tabletop game designers, I conducted participant observation at designer events and designed games to explore how designers experience and design games. Like any other creative endeavor, inspiration for a prototype can come from a wide range of places. Sam and I wanted to replicate arcade games using the systems and mechanics of a tabletop game, and we were inspired by the play style where combining certain inputs on a controller created different actions in those game, but translating those experiences into nondigital games required us to consider how other tabletop games create abstractions for behaviors.

In tabletop games, the text on a card or the result of a dice roll often stand in for actions in the fiction of a game. For example, in the comic book-themed card game *Sentinels of the Multiverse*, each player takes on the role of a superhero, and has a deck of cards that represent their hero's superpowers and other capacities. When a player plays a card, it might represent their hero gaining super-strength or firing lasers from their eyes.[xii] Tabletop game players understand these actions and their meaning in the game space, and how the text on various game components stands in for behaviors and actions in the game. When Sam and I wanted to represent actions in our game world in a card game, we made cards with names like "Punch" and "Kick" that players would understand meant that their character was making an attack against a foe in the fictional space of the game. Tabletop games often take inspiration from elements of

fiction, representations of real-world actions and behaviors, and established mechanics and systems from other games to create a functioning whole.

After I played Peter's fantasy-themed resource acquisition skirmish game, I asked him about the influence of his design and his process of designing a prototype. He explained that he had begun by trying to recreate certain mechanics and experiences from the game *Acquire*, a game that thematically replicates business ownership and stock exchange. Peter usually collects his ideas on paper, transfers them to a digital database, and then creates components and rules using database as a foundation. Likewise, Ray explained how a popular competitive card game was the foundation for the design he was focusing on. He started with a simplified version of that game's systems and then modified the rules and mechanics of his prototype to create his own design throughout dozens of iterations, until he had a version he was ready to test with fellow designers. Using an existing game as a reference point for a new design is a common practice. Designers know that simply reskinning an existing game is not only looked down upon in the industry (and in copyrighting), however, but that originality and innovation are necessary to create a game with which people will want to engage. A good design eventually will evolve beyond its inspiration and meld tried-and-true systems with new ideas. Experienced players can identify inspirations from existing games (Garfield 2011), but unique twists and mechanical alterations can lead to new, enticing play experiences.

For designers, creating something novel out of familiar concepts is a major part of design. After all, if a game already exists that fills a particular niche, many players will simply play that, but there are also players who prefer specific genres or families of game mechanics and will gravitate towards those. Also, the nature of learning and playing tabletop games is such that familiarity with at least the core concepts and playstyle help alleviate the difficulty of learning

new games (Garfield 2011). Because tabletop games rely on players' knowledge of the rules and understanding of how the systems work to be played as intended, designers must find a balance between what is familiar and well-known for their audience and while also adding unique experiences that make their games stand out. And that is where the intersection of participation and reification plays a significant role for designers. Striking that balance requires a designer's unique experiences and perspectives as well as tabletop game communities' shared ideas about what works for games, and in this space we can observe a practical application of meaning, as Wenger would describe it.

The relationship between the tabletop games that my informants create and the world of digital games creates interesting dynamics, due to the sometimes-uncertain line between what constitutes tabletop and digital games. What constitutes tabletop versus video or computer games can be a complicated subject. Edward's work in user-experience and his interest in logic games are interrelated. He told me how his tabletop designs are often inspirations for computer games he would like to make. For Edward, the line between physical and digital games is fluid; while he mostly designs physical prototypes, his long-term goal is to incorporate his designs into electronic media. In fact, Fullerton (2014) proposes a similar technique of using paper prototypes to conceptualize systems for video and computer games. Still, Edward considers himself a tabletop designer, at least as it relates to his place in this community.

Ray was also working on a physical prototype for a design he wanted to release digitally. Having a physical prototype allowed him to get feedback from designers at these events before beginning the long process of translating his game into an electronic medium. Similarly, Cameron told me how he often creates mockup ideas for digital versions of tabletop games and is interested in designing video and tabletop games. And Stanley discussed how an upcoming

digital version of his game was providing him with a new design space to create content that would be much harder to implement in physical games that lack a computer to track and enforce rules and mechanics. For comparison, Ben, Charlie, and Peter expressed little to no interest in designing digital games. Still, all these designers can easily communicate and test games together in a shared space, lending insights and knowledge to help improve each other's practice.

Practice

Wenger (1998) views practice as a framework for understanding how our social relationships and our practical experiences result in shared learning. Practice leads to practical results and satisfying experiences. Wenger notes that his use of the term *practice* synthesizes knowing and doing rather than viewing them as separate concepts, and includes historical and social context:

> It includes the language, tools, documents, images, symbols, well-defined roles, specified criteria, codified procedures, regulations, and contracts that various practices make explicit for a variety of purposes. But it also includes all the implicit relations, tacit conventions, subtle cues, untold rules of thumb, recognizable intuitions, specific perceptions, well-tuned sensitivities, embodied understandings, underlying assumptions, and shared world views. Most of these may never be articulated, yet they are unmistakable signs of membership in communities of practice and are crucial to the success of their enterprises (Wenger 1998, 47)

This definition intentionally includes behaviors, actions, thoughts, skills, knowledge, and so on. In that way, practice can be viewed as what designers do when they design and playtest games.

As such, my observations at design events and my interviews with designers inform my understanding of their practice.

For tabletop game designers, practice is a complicated amalgamation of their experiences that includes their inspirations, the other games they have played and designed, their interactions with other designers and playtesters, and how they learned to design and to iterate based on testing and feedback. To understand how the concept of practice contributes to designers' methods, I asked them questions designed to uncover their history with design, the inspiration for their games, how they developed their design and playtesting methods, and so on. Because of the many different ways that designers create and develop games, however, establishing a firm understanding of tabletop game design required me to create a composite model of the design process, with the understanding that each designers' approach will deviate from the general pattern in at least a few ways.

The general outline of design that I observed was:

1. The designer begins with an initial inspiration, whether it be a mechanic, a theme, or another idea they want to explore and bring to life in game form.
2. They create a paper prototype and test the game systems either alone, with a co-designer, or with household members or close gaming friends.
3. After a few rounds of personal playtesting and iteration, the designer brings a prototype of their game to designer meetups to get feedback on what is working and what is not.

4. The feedback gained from playtesting with designers at meetups leads to new changes and iterations. This stage in the process can vary greatly in time, from a few months to many years, especially for larger, more complex games.
5. After they have a fairly complete prototype, they begin focused playtesting intended to examine specific game features in detail. Again, this stage can take months or years.
6. The process continues until the designer has a version of the game ready to publish or they decide to discontinue work on the design.

This is a broad strokes version of the game design process, omitting many specific steps and details that go into tabletop game development and production. Still, it provides a general outline of the process that most or all my informants follow in creating their designs.

Tabletop game design often begins with an idea; whether it is a mechanic, an experience, or a world that the design wants to create, what inspires those ideas can change from designer to designer, and even from game to game. Peter and Ray both created games by using published games as inspirations, then redesigning around that; Charlie wanted to create a game based on a novel; and Stanley wanted to create a game that reimagined a popular mechanic. Once the initial idea for a game is established, the next steps involve creating a playable model. Again, this can start with a variety of steps, but a common one is paper prototyping (Snyder 2013), which involves creating mockup components that allow the rules and systems that the designer creates to be played or at least simulated.

Cameron walked me through his process when we met at a local coffee shop for an interview and design work. He had a stack of cardboard boxes with hole-filled dividers between

them that another designer had given him to possibly develop a game with. The idea was these boxes would form a tower that dice could be dropped into creating a variety of results and outcomes. Sometimes dice would get stuck inside and be knocked out in subsequent rolls, or the dice would spill out at various angles and distances, and so on. We also had cards with different numbers and colors, and seven sets of colored polyhedral dice. Cameron had been tasked with imagining variant games that could be included along with the designer's existing game without adding any new components, just a page in the rulebook, and wanted to brainstorm ideas with me to see if we could design something he could present to the original designer of the game. Oftentimes a designer will create components themselves to accommodate their design, but outsourcing development work like this is not uncommon, and provides interesting opportunities and challenges unique to the requirements and assets provided.

Cameron and I spent a few hours coming up with ideas to try out, including laying out the cards and seeing if we could guess where the dice would land on them, stacking the dice as fast as possible, then rolling them once we had them piled up in a race to get the most dice into the playfield, and using dice to represent monsters that might exit the tower or that got stuck inside. We went back and forth discussing ideas, offering suggestions and changes, and considering mechanics from other games that might lend us new insights. When one of us had an idea, we would try it out and then consider if it seemed fun or useful for a design. In the end, we were unsure if we had anything we felt strongly about. "I don't know if there's a game there," Cameron said after a few hours of trying things out. When I asked him if he often had many experiences where he worked on a design that he would eventually shelve or discard because he was not feeling confident in it, he said that he did. "It's not all fun and games; sometimes it's just games."

Spending time on uncertain game content is a common occurrence for designers, as one can spend hours creating rules, systems, and components that will either be changed or scrapped at some point along the process (as I will explore more in the next section about my codesign efforts). It is difficult to know if one has the "right answer" to a design question – if such a thing can even exist in the highly subjective world of entertainment products – and usually requires not just the initial design efforts, but countless iterations based on playtester feedback. Even after testing, a designer might not have solutions for the issues that come up from feedback or may even disagree on the nature of the issue. It is common for testers at events to give ideas for how the elements of a prototype might be improved. Playtesters do not likely know the scope or underlying intentions of a prototype as intimately as the game's designer, however, and therefore might make suggestions that do not fit well into the overall goals of the prototype. Still, any suggestions must be considered and interpreted by the designer, who will invariably reinterpret any feedback, and might even find completely different inspiration that leads to unsuggested alterations.

Cameron brought several prototypes to our meeting - components and rules in plastic bags - that he had started but done little work on recently and that he was unsure if he would continue working on. He had recently released one of his very first game designs through a self-publishing website to gauge interest and to have a finished product to show for his efforts, but he was skeptical that he would even sell a single copy. Cameron was undeterred by the thought that he might not make any sales, however. He was more interested in feeling like he had "completed" a game, by bringing a design from its initial stages to playtesting and finally producing what he considered to be a version of the game in its most complete form.

On the other hand, Stanley told me that one of the main things he looks for when testing with other players is that his designs are doing what he intended. Since his series of games has been in publication for years already and the core of its mechanic already established and unchangeable, he was less concerned with opinions than he is with seeing that his choices are working. “I’m looking for balance,” he told me. “I want to know if this content is close enough now. The base game is already published; I can’t change it.” With an established audience, Stanley was less interested in trying to appeal to every players’ taste and more interested in making sure his new designs function and do not throw off the core concepts he has already established. Conversely, as a developer, Ben was establishing relationships with other designers that may want to hire him to create content for their games, as well as testing his own designs to see if there is interest in any of them. When he speaks to potential clients, they might go over a list of games they are working on to find one that Ben would be a good match for developing.

Community

Wenger (1998, 73) breaks up the concept of community into three interrelated parts: “mutual engagement,” “joint enterprise,” and “a shared repertoire.” Mutual engagement refers to the people who are engaged with a practice and what they do, whether they directly know each other or share common ideals or not. Joint enterprise refers to the collective connection to an individual community member’s practice, not to any shared values or singular way of doing something. And a shared repertoire refers to the commonalities that can be found in a community of practice, whether in methods, terms, behaviors, or so on, but can also vary widely between members of said community of practice. *Community* for my project, then, is the relationships a designer has with other designers, as well as the qualities that allow individual designers to

communicate ideas to each other. I uncovered elements of this aspect through my participant-observation and my interviews.

Participant observation, interviews, and documentary research were my primary methods for exploring community. In fact, uncovering game design communities was integral to every stage of my research. From my first foray at designer events, my goal was to examine how community ties and relationships formed the basis of tabletop game design. In my interviews with designers, I asked my informants who they go to for design advice and what their relationships with other designers are like in non-design contexts. These methods lent me insight into the social networks that underlie the wider design community and helped me to identify potential key informants, those individuals who were highly regarded in the community and who could provide me with a detailed, nuanced view of design practices. I also established social relationships with a few of my informants outside of designer events, usually involving playing non-prototype games, since we all share an interest in tabletop games more broadly than just as designers.

Community is central to tabletop game design, both in the terms Wenger describes and in the broader social sense. When a tabletop designer joins a design community, they gain access to the most critical game design resources: playtesters and expert feedback on prototypes. It is impossible to overstate the fact that game design relies on other people to identify issues with prototypes, to ask clarifying or mechanical questions that the designer might not have considered on their own, and to help the designer understand the experiences that players other than the design team will have during play. Social scientists might think of community playtesting as an extensive peer review process. Designers have a hypothesis: That their game functions as intended and could even be fun, but to substantiate the validity of their hypothesis they need to

let other players spend time with their game and provide valuable feedback that leads to revisions and iteration on their design. Because of the need for feedback, reactions, and opinions from others, community is a key component of game design.

Most of my informants already had an existing concept of community with other members of the various designer groups in the region. They spoke directly about their appreciation for other designers and the vital role that their compatriots play in their own design practice. Ben was extremely forthright about his desire to build up communal ties and to pay back the community for helping him in his earlier forays in game design: when I asked him about his relationship to other designers, he told me "I want to give back to the community that has given me so much help." Likewise, Stanley discussed how he connects with players of his game on online forums, but that he also uses playtesting events as an easier way to build connections to the community and to players. He expressed that social connections to players are important to him and he wants to feel like the people who play his game know him and can connect to him in some way. He then aptly connected my research to his efforts to establish a relationship with players: of my participant-observation, he said "This is what I was talking about: we're building a connection." After this interaction, Stanley and I met up to play games for his research into published games that fit a similar niche to his own game and discussed the merits and issues with each of them. I established a similar relationship with Cameron, with whom I still get together to hang out, play games and prototypes, offer suggestions to each other, and so on.

The sense of community among designers also can result in professional courtesies. For example, Ben told me about how he is happy to give local designers advice that he generally charges clients for, in part because he was afforded that kindness in his early days of design.

Cameron is also well-known among local designers for being willing to test a prototype multiple times and to brainstorm for longer periods of time to try and help a designer improve their game, as both Ray and Ben pointed out to me, as well as Cameron doing the same for Sam and I as we worked on our designs.

In fact, designers in the Bay Area are quite generous with their knowledge and resources. At one of the monthly events I attended, the host and other designers would purchase pizza and salads for testers, as well as donating games towards a raffle that attendees could win simply by being there. When I met with Charlie to test his prototype at the game cafe, he purchased snacks for the table as a thank you for our feedback. The exchange of resources - whether material goods, food, intellectual, or temporal - is an informal but important aspect of the tabletop design community's complex ecosystem that plays out during any playtesting instance, even if it is just a tester offering a designer their time and insights in exchange for continued connection to the wider community.

The shared repertoire of game designers is most apparent in things like the themes, mechanics, rules, and systems that many designers can speak about and instantly understand each other. Someone who does not play a wide range of tabletop games would be understandably confused about the differences between a deckbuilding and a card drafting game, or what distinguishes one game as team-based and another as cooperative. Tabletop designers know these shorthand terms and categories, can instantly conjure up examples, and know the underlying qualities - and the design benefits and challenges - to each of them. Yet there is no consensus about which mechanics are best or what genres work well for each. In fact, some designers specifically eschew certain gameplay elements while others design exclusively around

them, yet all members of the community acknowledge each other as doing effectively similar work as designers, even if the products they create might look and feel drastically different.

Identity

According to Wenger (1998), identity relates to each of the other aspects of the social theory of learning. Because identity is both individually and communally constructed and negotiated - therefore highly personal but also determined by one's community - it is inexorably linked to any community of practice. It includes both what individuals participate in and what they do not, whether due to preferences or constraints. Here I will use Wenger's (1998, 5) definition of identity as "a way of talking about how learning changes who we are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities." In the context of tabletop game designers, identity relates to the roles they take on in their design communities and in the tabletop game industry, such as being designers, developers, playtesters, publishers, self-published, or published designers, and so on. Identity also includes a designer's unique experiences and perspectives that they bring to the community from their other fields, their educational background, their families, and such. What any individual can contribute in terms of offering design advice and encouragement is based on their own thoughts, backgrounds, and the knowledge they bring to the tabletop, whether related to games or not.

Due to this rather personal and conceptual definition, uncovering identity for designers mostly occurred in my discussions and interviews with informants. I asked questions about the types of games they create, their previous and recent experiences in design, how their interests outside of games influence their work, and so on. The answers I got to these questions reinforce a rather broad, highly fluid definition of what it means to be a tabletop game designer. While a

handful of designers tend to focus on particular types of games or families of mechanics to design around - such as Stanley, whose primary focus is designing for his popular published game - practically everyone seeks a wide range of games to playtest and learn from.

Ben described himself as “an okay designer” but noted that his experience in UX made him “good at running playtests.” As a tabletop game developer and designer, Ben’s role in the community is especially broad, as he works on his games as well as helping refine others’ prototypes. He told me he was busy enough with development work that he was not looking to self-publish. Likewise, Cameron has tried his hand at a variety of game styles, and occasionally attempts to design a prototype around a particular concept or mechanic based on his broad interest in games rather than any theme or outside interest. Indeed, when a publisher asked Cameron to change one of his designs from a Medieval fantasy theme to a sci-fi-inspired game, he was happy to oblige, as he views many of his designs more from a mechanical perspective rather than as closely tied to a theme. He enjoys doing development work with designer friends and has a few games being published, but for Cameron, design is not currently a career so much as an interest he enjoys spending time pursuing. Stanley, by comparison, was deeply focused on his full-time work designing for his published game, and was not seriously considering any other games, just on releasing content for the one that pays his bills.

Life experience and their ability to participate and work in the tabletop design community vary greatly from individual to individual, yet design plays a major role in all my informants’ lives. But these experiences and a designers’ role in the tabletop game industry are also quite fluid, due in part to the nature of the industry and the semi-professional status of many designers. For example, while Ben was making at least a temporary living doing development, Charlie ended up mostly stepping away from design over the course of my project because he received a

significant promotion at the theater where he works, which meant he was unable to dedicate much time to his design work. Likewise, while Stanley works on his series of games full-time, Cameron still maintains his day job outside of the tabletop industry even with a few of his games signed to be published. And Ray was shifting between focusing on tabletop and video games as freelance and self-publishing work depending on what opportunities presented themselves, trying to gain a foothold with one of his own designs.

I do not mean to define designers in terms of their economic lives, since whether one is making a full-time living designing or has never even completed a single design seems to have no influence on whether members of the community view them as a designer. Still, it is difficult to uncouple economic considerations from a practice that often seeks to create and produce consumer products. Additionally, not every game design is intended to be sold – a designer might make game available for free online, whether to gain exposure for their design career or simply because they made a game and wanted to share it - or to be financially profitable for the designer. One designer I met was designing a game to promote environmental awareness, and, as I state above, Cameron released a game that he basically expected no one to purchase on a self-publishing platform.

Based on my interactions, the only prerequisite is that one occasionally designs and tests games. Even if someone is coming to their very first event with a rough, untested prototype, they are embraced as at least a temporary member and a legitimate designer. This might be due in part to the difficulty of ‘making it’ in game design and the relatively open view of what defines a designer, since many of the individuals I met were aspiring designers doing design part-time or as a hobby. It might also be related to game designers’ reliance on playtesters and feedback throughout the design process, since allowing anyone with an interest in games to participate

widens the pool of potential playtesters at events like the ones I attended. In general, tabletop game designers also seem to intentionally make themselves available to the tabletop gaming community in a multitude of ways, as many – including my informants like Ben and Stanley – use the forums on BoardGameGeek.com and other social media to answer questions about their games and to help players interpret rules. The lines between enthusiasts and designers is a good deal fuzzier in tabletop gaming than in other creative industries, due to factors like these and the relative ease of tabletop game players trying their hand at design and even becoming published designers. Getting published certainly does not assure one can make a living doing tabletop game design, however.

The uncertain line between formal and informal work in the tabletop games industry creates a complicated picture of what designers do and how they form an identity within the community, yet much of this goes unspoken among community members. While designers often discuss their projects, their roles, and their aspirations for working in the industry with the community, they rarely avow specific titles that give themselves inflexible positions within the world of design. Designers like Ben, Stanley, and Cameron transition freely between designing, developing, and iteration; likewise, designers often experiment with a variety of game genres and families of mechanics depending on what they are currently working on. Few designers can be easily categorized as a "area control asymmetrical game designer" or a "hidden movement pickup-and-deliver developer." Roles shift and change, and identity among designers maintains a fluidity that adapts to the individual's current interests and projects and can be easily redefined when a new project or prototype comes along. The main through line is the desire to create games that might someday be released to wider audiences.

3.5 Becoming a Designer

I realized early on in my fieldwork that the best way to conduct participant observation would include designing my own prototypes to test with designers. Participant observation allows researchers to study group organization and behavior patterns and to situate their perspective within the culture they are studying, providing a more complete picture of everyday life within a given cultural context (Schensul and LeCompte 2013; Sunderland and Denny 2007). Contrary to Schensul and LeCompte's argument that, "for the most part, observers are not full participants in community life" (Schensul and LeCompte 2013, 84), however, it is also possible to conduct this form of research within one's own communities, which is a common practice in design (Zeisel 2006). In fact, in many ways, this project would have been impossible to carry out in a meaningful way if I had not taken on the role of game designer myself. There is no way to truly conduct participant observation with game designers without the key component of participating in the design and testing process. The insights that I was able to acquire from this process helped me along every step of my journey and gave me new perspectives into my informants' work and processes.

My initial design endeavors constituted a handful of very simple, derivative games that I created as part of a game design class, though my experience with creating game mechanics and systems goes back farther, particularly to my years of playing tabletop roleplaying games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder*. Without going into agonizing detail on the structures of these games, suffice to say that these games are extremely open to the creation of new rules and systems by players in the attempt to increase their verisimilitude, and over the years I have dabbled in writing rules and making new content for those games. Designing games from the

ground up is a fairly different, much more intensive experience, however, even though many designers start out by creating alternate rules and materials for existing games.

Learning to design a tabletop game from scratch was, for me at least, a series of trials and errors. My first attempt in earnest was the blackjack-based card game I described earlier. I have no real interest in blackjack or similar gambling games but beginning with a relatively simple structure and building on it is an easy way to try out the design process. I used the familiar concept of four suits of cards from a basic set of playing cards but adding an admittedly complex series of combinations that allowed players to choose a variety of outcomes based on the cards they played. The point of the game was to either win a certain number of "money" tokens from a common pool, or to reduce one's opponent's "trust" tokens to zero, giving players a few different strategies for victory.

Naturally, my initial design went through numerous iterations and varying levels of changes and revisions in the few weeks I developed it. I also created a physical prototype by printing and cutting out unique cards and by appropriating tokens from other games, a common practice that many of the designers I eventually met and observed also used. Once I had tested my design with classmates, family, and friends, I attended my first tabletop game design event, bringing along this prototype. While designers expressed interest in playing it, however, I lacked the nerve to playtest it at the time, and spent that whole event playing other people's designs. While there, however, I learned of another event that was coming up, at which I ended up attending and testing my design.

As I recounted earlier, my design was met with gentle and thoughtful critique from Ben and another designer, who asked me thought-provoking questions about my intended design

choices and the experiences I wanted players to take away from my game. I admittedly had been overconfident before testing with experienced designers that my prototype might be more polished than it was, and I was initially surprised to hear that it was, in fact, rather poorly balanced and lacking in significant player choices. I was far from disheartened, however, upon receiving this assessment. If anything, their friendly demeanor and encouraging response made me feel like I would be able to participate in this community and integrate myself without needing a great deal of previous experience designing games. Newcomers and inexperienced designers are allowed practically instantaneous membership among Bay Area tabletop game designers, and I began to consider my options for changes to my design.

3.6 Working with a Collaborator

After this event, I was discussing game design with Sam. We had fantasized about designing games together for years and had even attempted to design preliminary prototypes in the past, but we never put in much extended effort. Sam was instantly inspired, though, and wanted to try again to codesign a game, this time in earnest. I figured that this would be an excellent way for me to further integrate into the tabletop design community, and asked Sam if he would be willing to design games together as part of a case study for this project. He agreed, and we proceeded to spend the following year and a half designing games and testing them at designer events. Over the course of our partnership, Sam and I did extensive design work, playtesting, and iteration on two games inspired by arcade action games. The design concept we followed was to replicate the fast-paced action of a video game but in a tabletop game. In the first prototype, we used cards to represent actions like punches, kicks, and defensive maneuvers, and players could create combinations of actions to perform more powerful actions in the game world. Our second design took the same idea of recreating action video games but used dice

instead of cards. In that prototype, players would roll dice we created with customized faces to represent the number of hits that each attack landed.

At that point, tabletop games and design took over much of my life. Sam and I would spend hours imagining mechanics, discussing changes, running paper and digital prototype tests, and creating rules and components so that we could playtest our games at events. We typically used Google Hangout text chat to convey our ideas and to keep a written record of our process and to track our changes. We also maintained design documents and updated components on spreadsheets and card and token templates. We also would play published games with similar genres and mechanics for inspiration and analyze their systems and rules to see what we could glean from them, and what we might be able to integrate into our designs. Oftentimes we would put aside other work to dedicate our efforts to iteration, and at one point we even contacted a tabletop game manufacturer to inquire about the process of self-publishing one of our designs using the crowdfunding website Kickstarter. This process was informative, making us realize that our design was likely too ambitious to bring to life in the form it was in, as it required many custom game components for a game that was relatively simple, meaning it would be expensive to produce without offering much in terms of novel play experiences. As of this writing, our project is on-hold until we can dedicate more time to playtesting and iteration.

3.7 Playtesting with the Community

During my participant observation, I integrated the processes I was learning from other designers and the insights I discuss above both for the design of our games and for testing them with the community. Sam and I attended events together to get feedback on our latest iterations, sometimes rushing to integrate last-minute changes to components and rules so that we could get

helpful feedback from the community. Conducting participant observation provided me with several benefits. First, I was able to see firsthand how the design and iteration process works, and to fully participate in the community. Second, I was able to observe playtests from a variety of perspectives: as a player, as a designer, and as an observer. On some occasions I would teach our prototype and run playtests, or we would teach and run them together while I played with other testers, and sometimes I would sit to the side and observe as Sam taught the game.

Working with a co-designer who was at a similar experience level to myself allowed me to view game design through my own perspective while also observing another new designer who was learning how to be a better designer and how to make better games from the local design community. Codesigning helped me to develop a holistic view of the design process that would have been difficult to achieve otherwise. Because of the irregular hours many designers hold to do their rules, systems, and component creation, I rarely observed these parts of the practice. By codesigning with Sam I experienced the whole process from beginning to end, more or less (excluding the actual publication and release of a game to the retail market), which afforded me insights that would greatly aid in the creation of my video deliverables.

My fieldwork and participant observation as a game designer and playtester, combined with the literature on game design, design anthropology, and the social theory of learning provided a foundation for understanding how designers create, playtest, and iterate their prototypes. In the next chapter, elaborate on how I uncovered the practices of designers and what they look for in effective games. The findings I discuss in Chapter 4 illustrate how I decided on what topics to cover in my video essays.

Chapter 4 – Assessing the Board: What Designers Look for in Game Prototypes

4.1 The Elements of Good Game Designs

In this chapter, I explore the information I uncovered about tabletop game designers' design processes and how they prototype and iterate their games. I also examine the underlying themes of what makes good games based on my observations and fieldwork with designers. Then I describe the categories I used when creating my video deliverables, how I determined what lessons and interventions to suggest to the community and provide an outline of the content of my videos. These data are the foundation of the scripts I used when creating my video series. Appendix C includes the transcripts of my videos, including timestamps.

Balance is the goal (sort of)

When playing tabletop games with designers for any amount of time, the idea of *balance* will inevitably come up. In tabletop terms, *balance* refers to game systems and mechanics that ostensibly give every player a relatively equal chance of victory (familiarity of the game notwithstanding). *Balance* can mean a number of things in design terms. For example, it might mean that players have relatively equal odds of drawing a certain card or might have a common pool of resources they can select from, and so on. The concept of balance is highly variable between and even within genres and games. Players want to feel like they are on equal footing and that they can affect the outcome of a game with well-played choices. The desire for agency is one reason why *Monopoly*, a game of mostly random outcomes and runaway victories, is commonly regarded as a prime example of bad game design (Howell 2011; Moriarty 2017), although some designers argue that designers can learn a great deal from *Monopoly* or that it is well-designed because of the features that others dismiss (Garfield 2011; Kay 2019). Often, what

constitutes balance is subjective rather than quantifiable in the mathematical balance of numbers and advantages and disadvantages in games. When a player chooses an advantageous option in a game they might suffer a hindrance to balance the advantage. For example, getting to take the first turn in a game round gives a player the largest selection of available options, but it might mean paying more in-game resources for the 'first player' status, and acting first prevents them from being able to easily respond to their opponents' actions in the same game round.

The reality that many designers know, but might only allude to, is that actual mathematical equilibrium is less important than the *illusion* of balance. In fact, a game that is 'perfectly balanced' game might lead to endless stalemates, as no player can ever gain an advantage over their opponents or the game system. What is truly desired is that players feel agency, that their choices matter – a point that Upton (2015) argues is true in all game playing. For example, while I was testing one of my own game designs, Ben and another player were serving as playtesters. They took turns playing cards, which allowed them to gain in-game resources or force their opponent to lose theirs, but after about 10 minutes, they were both practically at the same place they started. "We're not really getting anywhere," Ben finally said. "Any progress I made is too easy for [my opponent] to counter." Arguably, I had created a well-balanced system, but not a satisfying one; no one could progress towards the win state. Ben suggested I focus on one type of balance or another: either each player working to gain resources, or each player attempting to remove their opponents' resources. Doing both made the game Sisyphean and uneventful.

In virtually all my playtests, by the debrief at least, balance would always come up, if not during the actual play, then as testers discussed the merits of particular actions providing set amounts of resources, or how much damage an in-game unit could sustain before being removed

from the board. These seemingly simple concepts underlie nearly all discussions about tabletop game design, and balance was of utmost importance to the designers I worked with. What balance means might change from person to person or from game to game, but the general idea is that designers want players to feel like the game is fair and that they have a chance to win for as long as possible, to keep the game engaging throughout the play session.

Interaction makes games better

A related concept to balance – though one that is less frequently referenced directly – is that of player interaction. When designing a tabletop game for multiple players, it is generally considered a good idea to have the choices one person makes affect the choices of other players, so that the game does not feel like all parties are simply playing their own games with shared components. If one player takes an action that gives them a benefit, other players want to feel like they have the opportunity to react to that in the game space and counter or otherwise impact that player (this is another reason why *Monopoly* is often decried for its design, as there are few direct actions players can take to impede an opponent with a significant lead). Also, like balance, the amount of player interaction that is desirable changes quite a bit between games, but many designers express a preference for at least some exchange between players and meaningful choice in reacting to what others do in a game.

While still subject to player preference and the needs of a given design, however, the concept of interaction is less fluid than that of balance. While I state above that balance is more of a feeling for players than a mathematically provable equation, whether players can interact and affect each other in games is more concrete. Balance helps dictate how much change one player can change on another, but interaction is more about making sure that the game state is

dynamic and that players feel like they are playing a game communally. In the same playtest I mentioned above, Ben elaborated on another deficiency of my design: “There isn’t really any player interaction,” he told me in his friendly but matter-of-fact way. “The cards I play and what [my opponent] plays don’t really impact any of my decisions.” Ben was right, of course. My design could have been played by a single player playing against randomly selected cards, and it would have made no difference. None of the choices that testers were making hinged on what was happening in the game; rather, what card to play was akin to a guessing game.

If players are making seemingly random or meaningless decisions in the course of play, they are unlikely to stay engaged with the game. Players want a sense of agency, a feeling that they are rewarded for clever choices or for learning to select specific combinations of abilities (Koster 2013). As such, suggestions by playtesters to designers were often in service to removing unnecessary randomness[xiii] or to increase or emphasize players’ abilities to make meaningful choices in the game. When testing one of Sam and my prototypes - a cooperative dice-based action game where players combined dice results to generate different effects - testers would often express a desire for options to mitigate poor rolls. They would comment that we should allow players to alter their dice results in some way, possibly looking to similar published games that allow players to reroll or manipulate dice in various ways so that their turn did not leave them without much to do or with no ability to impact the game state.

It is common in design and playtesting to reference examples from other games that designers might know or have access to find inspiration from, using the shared vocabulary and experiences of the community to create cultural touchstones for designers to leverage and learn from. These referents can help designers improve the level of player interaction in their own designs without having to start from scratch. Player interaction is not only about individual

choices, however, but how all players interact with each other and the game as well. Systems that allow for player interactions buttress each other. If players can make more significant choices, then ideally, that will impact the choices available to every other player. Stanley pointed out that his game revolved around these interactions, and that a big part of his design goal was to require teamwork and strategic thinking. He told me, "My game is a co-op [cooperative game]; if you aren't working together, you should lose." Stanley designs with the goal that players' choices impact each other and the team's odds of success or failure. His design encourages both communication and consensus building during play, building an experience where interactions are necessary if the players want to win the game.

Simplicity in execution

Another popular maxim among game designers I worked with was "Can this game be streamlined?" or a variation of that phrase. As I learned firsthand during my design and fieldwork, game designers might try to incorporate many ideas into a design, especially in the early stages of development, but eventually these options are likely to be simplified or removed from the design completely. Including discreet rules and systems for a multitude of scenarios might seem to improve the verisimilitude of a game, creating the impression that the designer is giving players a wealth of options and different choices to make, but during play too many variables and things to remember become a determent to players. For example, in Sam and my action card game, we wanted to include rules and systems to replicate the choices that exist in the video games we were inspired by. In our prototype, players could move their characters around the board, and punch, kick, grapple, and defend using the various cards in the game. We also had cards for items players could use to heal their character, to help their team, hinder their enemies, or to complete objectives. Moreover, we had systems that determined the behaviors of the

enemies on the board with a deck of cards that randomly determined events that fought back against the players. Each of these systems had subsystems as well. For example, at various stages of development, punching and kicking functioned differently from grappling. We added events like explosions and obstacles that did different things depending on the conditions of the game. The logic of how enemies function also changed with nearly every iteration, often requiring Sam and I to spend hours finetuning mechanics that might only last one or two playtests.

In a video game, many of these functions are automated, with players generally responsible only for controlling their own character and understanding the basic elements of the game to begin with. Video games can include complicated systems that require mastery, encouraging players to engage in high-level strategy and testing their skills and reaction time, but the automation of many game functions make them easier to pick up and play at a basic level at least. In a tabletop game, however, the players must collectively execute every game function, know the rules and how they are supposed to function, and understand how rules interact with other systems in the game, assuming that they care to play these games in a way similar to what the designer intended. By teaching and playtesting our prototype with designers and other tabletop game players, Sam and I learned that the level of verisimilitude we wanted to create was far too much for playtesters to carry out effectively in our game. Our game required too much memorization for players to ever fully comprehend the rules and included too many systems designed to replicate real world physics to play in the relatively short amount of time playtesters had to engage with our game. After a few playtests with designers, we began to parse our game systems. We cut extraneous rules, simplified mechanics, and created clearer user interfaces on cards and components. Our game got simpler but better. We started getting playtime down to the intended length – about an hour – and reduced the time it took playtesters to learn how to play.

Cameron, who played our game in multiple iterations, noted the improvements: “It’s still not the kind of game I usually enjoy, but you are getting a lot closer to a good game.”

The designers I worked with strive for elegance and functionality, even if they might include overly complicated game elements early on, as Sam and I did. Part of the difficulty here is that many games attempt to simulate various real-world actions and behaviors, and there is a drive to do so in a way that tries to represent those actions and behaviors rather than simply referencing them. *Monopoly* actually gets part of this right; there is a reason that the economics represented in *Monopoly* basically just amounts to “you have this much money and the values are all addition or subtraction,” rather than taking into account real world financial concepts like interest, inflation, or subprime mortgages. *Monopoly* takes the concepts of currency and real estate and simplifies them to a collection of game mechanics that young children can grasp. Early in the design process, however, this kind of streamlining can slip the designers’ mind.

One of Peter’s prototypes, a fantasy-themed game where players hired mercenaries, bid for contract-like quests, and enacted military skirmishes on a large, modular hexagonal grid map, was an example of a good design that needed streamlining to make it easier to play. Too many in-game actions required calculations of currency, dice rolls with variable modifiers, and extensive reading of cards. The game worked, for the most part, but the playtesters, including myself, were confused about certain rules and mechanics, which Peter had to explain multiple times. Turns also took a long time, leading to players having to wait before they could do anything in the game. After playing for around two hours, the testers made a variety of suggestions for modifying Peter’s game. These suggestions included simplifying the math that gets added to dice rolls and using symbols and other shorthand to reduce the amount of text on cards.

Like any good designer, after playtesting, Peter took notes on the feedback we gave him and thanked everyone, telling us he would take all our suggestions into consideration and start working on a new iteration of his game incorporating the ideas we brought up. Responding to feedback without taking criticisms personally is a good approach for any design effort, even if the designer does not intend to use the suggestions people give them, as it encourages everyone at the table to be open and honest. In the end, of course, the designer has creative license and final say to take or leave any advice they get from testing, a point I make in my video deliverables. The goal of playtesting is to make sure testers will give you the most thorough and complete feedback they can, which you can then choose to implement, iterate on, or ignore, based on your own knowledge of your game system.

Similarly, Sam and I often were sent back to the drawing board after testing our designs because we had made overly complicated, convoluted, or simply unnecessary design choices. As I described above, an early iteration of our card-based action game included systems to represent various forms of martial arts, unique rules for striking or grappling, a defense system, the ability to interact with the game environment, complicated A.I.[xiv] for automatically determining the actions of the in-game environment, as well as a list of conditions that could affect player and nonplayer characters and items that could be used in-game for various effects. All these rules and mechanics were quite a bit for people to remember and keep track of during play, and we would regularly get feedback about parts of the prototype that either confused playtesters, or which they simply felt the game would function perfectly well without. When we got feedback that identified issues with our prototypes, we would return to our design documents and spreadsheets to discuss potential changes, what we felt strongly about keeping, and what we could parse or cut for the sake of a more streamlined design. By the later stages of our design for this prototype, we

had cut the amount of content and game systems significantly, resulting in a prototype that was easier and faster to play, which was met with positive responses from testers who had played the previous iterations of our design.

The experience matters

When tabletop game designers discuss the *experiences* players have while playing a game, they are referring to several interrelated factors that result from the act of playing. Experiences can be varied even during the same game, and different players often seek out different kinds of experiences. Whereas some players prefer games with narrative elements, others might prefer strategic decision-making during play, or might just like rolling dice and reacting to the results. Individual player preference can overlap. A player might enjoy narrative games with plenty of dice-based randomness, while others prefer an emphasis on narrative with more strategic decision-making. Player preferences do not fit into tidy categories, and there is overlap between player types and their interests. The wide range of players and their favored types of games are one of the reasons why so many games exist, and why there is still a reason to design new games: certain games facilitate certain types of experiences more than others, and appeal to different players in various ways.

Because player preferences vary to such a great extent, when designers consider the experience that their games evoke for players, they are considering many factors, both overt and subtle ones. How a tester responds to a prototype is influenced by their tastes and preferences. If a playtester is especially fond of a design, or conversely if they are not very interested, the designer likely will ask what types of games they usually play to gauge the interest of that player for the type experience the prototype facilitates. After all, a player who especially prefers

deckbuilding games like *Dominion* or the *Legendary* series might have particularly insightful suggestions for those types of games, but one who generally dislikes them will have different reactions. Getting feedback from many types of players is useful, whether they love, hate, or are indifferent to a particular type of experience or style of game. Knowing more about each testers' preferences is a useful way to determine how the designer can best use such feedback.

Another part of experience in games is how well a given game replicates or represents various situations or genres. While some games are largely abstract, with mechanics that are not representative of other things – think of poker or blackjack, where suits, numbers, and face-cards have no deeper thematic meaning to the action of the game itself – many tabletop games include themes where the action of the game represent another concept, behavior, or activity. For example, a popular theme for tabletop games is Medieval fantasy. In these games, players might take on the role of knights, wizards, priests, and rogues. Mechanics and behaviors represent actions in the game world. Rolling a die might simulate swinging a sword or casting a magical spell to battle monsters. When designers ask about experiences in games with more elaborate themes, they are also asking how well the game represents these actions and create a sense that they are taking part in the game world.

Stanley's game features fantastical illustrations of heroes, monsters, weapons, and relics which players interact with during play. The art of his game evokes certain feelings in players, and helps to explain what cards do; a gigantic creature with red eyes and sharp fangs is likely an opponent that must be defeated, whereas a card that depicts a hero shooting tendrils of fire from their fingertips signals to the players that the card will improve their arsenal and damage their foes. But Stanley recounted a time when he was designing a new version of his game and created a prototype that featured no art on the cards and components, and testers did not react well to it.

He told me, “People didn’t like the table presence,” referring to the overall look of the game during play that gives players a sense of the action and scope of the game. For his future iterations, he used placeholder art from his earlier game, and started getting rough sketches and basic graphic design to use on components. Using placeholder art improved testers’ experiences and gave them a better sense of what everything meant in the game space.

The ways that designers determine what experiences are being evoked, and even the degree to which these experiences matter, can vary quite a bit from designer to designer and even project to project, but regardless, it is an important consideration for creating compelling games that fulfill unique niches in the industry and among players. Ben told me on numerous occasions that uncovering player experiences is of utmost importance to effective iteration, and he asked targeted questions to testers of his designs for this purpose. He might ask testers, “What was exciting in the game?” or, “Would you play the game again?” or, “ What would you change about the game?” (all questions I heard him ask at various events). From the answers, he can piece together information about the players’ preferences, what they enjoyed about the game, what they disliked, and how playing made them feel. In other words, what their experience of play was like.

Fun is most important of all

Common wisdom would dictate that people play games primarily for a specific reason: because they are fun, and people want to have an enjoyable experience. Of course *fun* can mean different things for different people, even among gamers (see for example Koster 2013; Fernandez-Vara 2015; Bogost 2016; Consalvo and Paul 2019; Sharp and Thomas 2019), and that makes it challenging to pin down a single way to determine whether or not a given prototype is

fun for a larger number of people, assuming that a game is even intended to be fun. Yet designing fun games – whatever that means for the given context – is important to designers for a variety of reasons, not least of which being that most of the games being tested at the events I attended are being created with the intention of selling them to the public, though this is a complicated topic.

Whether designers were looking to self-publish their games, find a publisher to manufacture and distribute them, or to bring them to the market in another way, practically all of the prototypes I played during my fieldwork were for games that the designer wanted to turn into a consumer product, which means that they want to create games that at least a portion of gamers will consider to be fun. This desire comes with an implicit interest in potentially making a profit from the sale of the game, though making a living strictly as a tabletop game designer is considered a rarity, and even among my informants there were not many making their living designing games. The long design process, high overhead costs of production, and relatively niche nature of tabletop gaming means that designers often pursue their interest in creating tabletop games as a passion rather than a potential career. That being the case, fun is often both the implied purpose of a game and the driving factor for designers to continue making new games.

The core challenge to designers uncovering what constitutes fun is that it is a subjective concept with no quantitative measure (Fernandez-Vara 2015) and so, much like experience, whether or not a game is fun must be determined by asking the right questions and testing with as many people as possible. As a matter of taste, fun can mean different things to people who like roleplaying games and those who like set-collecting games. And while not every game is actually intended to be fun – some are created to teach lessons or morals, evoke other emotions,

or even for rehabilitation (see for example: Fernandez-Vara 2015; McGonigal 2011; McGonigal 2015) – by and large the games I tested and observed were intended to be fun experiences that might be able to eventually become consumer products that people would want to buy and play.

Designers might ask testers directly whether or not a game was fun, though this can be considered a vague or even loaded question, and further it can be difficult for testers to make this determination from an early prototype with a lot of potential but also underlying issues. On several occasions, Cameron would state that a game was not 'for him,' but that he could see the strengths of the design elements and how it might appeal to other players. Cameron often pointed out that he was hard to please in terms of genuinely enjoying a game, but for him the fun is in the act of playing and testing games, more than in the actual content of the games themselves. On the other hand, when I was playing Charlie's game, I was decidedly having fun, even if some of the systems and mechanics still needed to be refined. His prototype implemented a few features I enjoy in other games, and the theme of liberating a space colony from an oppressive government was extremely appealing to me. After my initial enthusiasm for the design, Charlie asked me if I would be willing to gather friends to play a new iteration of his game, and these non-designers seemed to enjoy playing it even in its unfinished state.

Contribution is key

While the above factors mostly relate to topics of the creation and testing processes for games, there is another important element of design that my informants either alluded to or spoke to directly: the role of community and one's fellow designers in these processes. As I stated above, tabletop games are by and large social activities, and effective design always requires a great deal of testing and iteration with feedback from people other than the core designers. The

fact that tabletop games are inherent social was not lost on the designers I worked with. Ben, for example, was very open about his appreciation for other designers in the community: “I want to give back to the community that has given so much to me.” He explained to me that, while attending local events, he often gives out advice that he would regularly charge for in his professional career as a developer, rather than withholding such feedback to try to get hired to develop a game. In a similar vein, Cameron will occasionally go to events even if he has no prototypes to exhibit, to meet people, play their games, and talk about design and games in general. The designers I worked with tended to find community contributions useful or at least informative, whether feedback, advice, or access to games or components that can be incorporated into designs which people sometimes bring to hand out at events.

Contributions to the community are part of the system of exchange that designers create through these events: everyone contributes to the community's assets, skills, knowledge, and resources in various ways, without the need to exchange money or feel like one is ‘owed’ anything. Designers have a general interest in games, and intentionally or unintentionally do things that will establish goodwill with the community, such as when Cameron attends events just to play other people’s prototypes, or when Ben offers professional feedback and advice for free. In this community, knowledge, expertise, and resources often are exchanged freely, which creates a stronger feeling of connection between designers, and seemingly the only expectation is that each member will offer the same access to their knowledge and opinions when the opportunity arises for them to play another designer’s game.

In fact, in all my fieldwork, I never witnessed a designer coming to an event only to test their own prototypes; everyone would play the prototypes of others when the opportunity was presented. Certainly, at times a group of testers might split up when multiple options for

prototypes were presented, but when given the chance to test someone else's games, every designer would graciously accept. Indeed, there seemed to be an expressed interest in trying out as many people's designs as possible, whether for strictly altruistic purposes, in hopes of getting more players to test their own prototypes, to gain insights into their own designs, or so on. Except in the case of convention settings where specific designers were given designated time slots to exhibit their designs, practically every playtest I participated in ended with the designer whose prototype we had just played asking, 'all right, who has something else they want to test?" (assuming time and circumstances allowed, of course). This desire to provide feedback to other designers reveals the interest of the community to help each other and to build relationships through the expected reciprocal exchange of the skills and knowledge that playtesting facilitates.

By identifying the elements and features of what my community considered to be well-designed games and effective methods of playtesting and data collections, I was able to synthesize these data into interventions and suggestions for designers who want to build upon their design processes by implementing ethnographic methods into their practice. These elements and features of good game design were brought up and discussed repeatedly at the events I attended, in both direct and overt ways. In the next chapter, I will explain how I developed my series of video essays, from writing video scripts to the filming and production and finally distributing my videos on YouTube.

Chapter 5 – Playing my Hand: Creating the Anthroview YouTube Series

5.1 Bringing It All Together: Turning My Data into Practical Suggestions for Designers

While I was familiarizing myself with the local tabletop design community and seeing how members designed, playtested, and iterated their prototypes, I was also considering how I could turn my observations into useful suggestions to both the community I worked with and to tabletop designers more broadly. Specifically, I wanted to know if social science research methods could possibly help designers expand their toolkits of data collection and observation methods that are common in anthropology. Based on the data I collected in my fieldwork, I determined that I would make suggestions to the community based on three key methodological practices: participant observation, focus groups, and community building. From the behaviors and interactions I observed during my fieldwork, these interconnected concepts were the best fit for practices that designers could integrate into their design and testing processes with the least disruption and without needing extensive or formal training to leverage their advantages. After discussing how I decided what methods to include in my video essays, I discuss the creation of my videos specifically, the lessons I learned in making them, and YouTube as a platform for disseminating information about tabletop game design. The ethnographic methods I covered in my videos and their key concepts and applications for designers are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: key ethnographic concepts that my videos were based on

Ethnographic Method/Concept	Key Concepts	Applications for Designers
Participant Observation	• Structured, systematic observation • Qualitative research • Objective distance • Questions, not assumptions	• Plan playtests to maximize data collection • Feedback provides impressions and opinions; the designer decides how to use it • Don't take feedback personally • Know what questions you want answered
Focus Groups	• Group dynamics and interactions provide valuable data • Get multiple opinions at once • Workshopping ideas • Creating visual representations • Using questionnaires	• Group playtesting replicates actual gameplay • Guide the conversation but let playtesters share freely • Give everyone space to share • Use mind maps/note card word association •
Community Building	• Reciprocity • Everyone can access communal resources • Contributing to a community helps all members	• Effective game design is a communal effort • Being part of a playtesting community improves your designs in multiple ways • Use your skills/knowledge to create resources for others

5.2 Creating the Video on Participant Observation Methods

One of the first methodological affinities I discovered between anthropology and game design was one I was already using in my research: participant observation. Simply through the act of conducting my fieldwork, I was instantly a part of the design process, not simply observing but indeed participating in a very real, tangible way. I played prototypes, provided feedback, shared my own knowledge, and in return I was given the opportunity to design and test my own games. As I stated above, participating in the game design community is tantamount to becoming a designer; I quickly became part of the community through the process of conducting my research. From that, it was relatively clear from the earliest days of my project that formal participant observation methods could benefit designers. In fact, participant observation would be my first example to show designers how formal social science methods resemble many of the techniques they were already using in their practices.

For all my suggested methods for designers, however, it was important to determine what they would need to learn to best supplement their practices, and what aspects of social scientific methodology would be unnecessary or extraneous for my audience of game designers. For example, where an anthropologist might take extensive notes on their surroundings and the social context of a field site (Schensul, Schensul, and LeCompte 1999), this level of observation is more detailed than designers would benefit from. Likewise, information about participants' style of dress, speech patterns, or non-game interests (Schensul and LeCompte 2013) are mostly beyond the scope of what designers would need to observe. The level of participant observation ideal for designers focuses primarily on testers' tastes and opinions of games in general, and their reactions and responses to the prototype they are playing specifically. Additionally, I determined that it would benefit designers to collect playtester feedback without justifying their design

choices to playtesters or taking feedback too personally; in effect, I suggested they try to maintain a degree of objectivity in their playtests, as much as is possible.

When social scientists use participant observation for the purpose of writing ethnography, we are often interested in uncovering the values, morals, beliefs, and behaviors of the groups we study and potentially finding solutions for underlying problems or social issues (LeCompte and Schensul 2010). Participant observation is already a staple in other areas of design (Zeisel 2006), as a means of fully immersing designers into the cultures surrounding the objects, services, or experiences they design. For designers using participant observations for design purposes, however, the primary goal is to uncover opinions, tastes, and reactions to games. Zeisel (2006) notes that designers might already occupy positions within a community before they begin using structured observation as part of their design methodology; to be a "full participant" a designer must be a member of the community in which they are observing the behaviors and actions they want to understand.

Tabletop gaming has its own culture, with language, traditions, values, shared histories, and other elements that might be inscrutable or invisible to those outside of the culture. Terminology and an understanding of the terms and concepts I introduced in Chapter 4, for example, are partially rooted in my long-term engagement with the culture of tabletop gaming. To study tabletop game designers and to design games using participant observation methods, researchers benefit from an understanding of tabletop gaming culture and its features, such as game genres like fantasy and sci-fi, mechanics like deckbuilding and set collection, and ideas like balance and player experience. Therefore, designers who want to effectively utilize playtester feedback benefit from the full participation that Zeisel describes, because

understanding a given tester's preferred play styles or genres helps the designer understand how that playtester reacts to a given prototype and how to value their feedback.

Designers want to get as much playtest feedback as they can, but they also can determine how much weight to give certain reactions based on their knowledge of a tester's familiarity with the mechanics or game systems they are testing. A tester's tastes and knowledge of other games impacts their reactions to a prototype. For example, Cameron told Sam and me that he did not particularly enjoy our action card game when he first played it and he found several of our design choices to be confounding due to his lack of familiarity with the systems in prototype. He pointed out, however, that he was not necessarily familiar with the arcade games that inspired our design, and therefore he could not assess how well we were evoking those games with our design. By comparison, several testers recognized the intention of our prototype immediately and expressed an appreciation for the genre of games we were emulating. They generally had an easier time understanding our mechanics, which were based on the mechanics of those games. This feedback was important, and Cameron still was able to provide plenty of valuable insights that guided our design in terms of the balance and mechanics. For determining if we were achieving the thematic experience we wanted from our design, however, we gave more weight to the opinions of players who enjoyed the games that inspired us, because they would be the ones more likely to purchase and play a published version of our design.

Another use of participant observation for designers is observing players' physical and verbal reactions to a prototype and using those data to build a more complete picture of testers' play experiences. Observing playtesters' nonverbal communication and tone of voice can help designers ask the right questions to get the best information they can from testing. When I observed Stanley testing his game, the random results of card draws were leading to an overly

difficult experience for the testers. Players clearly were getting dejected and losing interest in continuing to play. They expressed frustration at the difficulty of the game, sighing audibly when their A.I. opponent attacked them, and said that victory seemed hopeless. Although from a designer's point of view, whether playtesters win a prototype is not necessarily a prerequisite to the playtest going well, sometimes testers – myself included – invest themselves in prototype play as they would in other forms of game playing, and how well they do can affect their perception of the game and the feedback they give. One of the playtesters asked Stanley, "Do you usually lose this fast?" Realizing that the players might be less engaged due to the difficulty, and therefore might be less inclined to engage with the game and give constructive feedback, Stanley drew cards and adjusted their order during the next round to give the players a chance to catch up and to give them a reason to keep playing. By identifying his testers' concerns, Stanley helped to ensure that he would get more detailed feedback than testers simply observing that the game was too hard.[xv]

When I spoke with Stanley after this playtest, he explained that he was far along enough in testing the current expansion for his game that he was not looking for feedback about the overall difficulty of the game, which will not change since the core system already exists in the retail version, but that he needed to know specifically what testers thought worked well and what did not. Because he was not looking for feedback about the overall difficulty level, he adjusted the draw of the cards to benefit the players and prevent them from focusing on feedback that he was not looking for. In games like Stanley's, the order in which cards are played from a shared deck have a large impact on the challenge of the game experience. For example; the game system getting to take a particularly strong action against the players at the right moment can lead to defeat. A difficult play experience might be fine for people playing the game at home, but

in playtesting, controlling the experience often provides more opportunities to get valuable feedback.

It is important for designers to know what types of feedback will benefit them when they go to test a prototype, because the time they have with any group of testers will be limited, and they do not want players to get caught up focusing on parts of the game that are already functioning as intended, such as the overall difficulty of Stanley's game. The suggestion to know what the designer is looking for in a given playtest is not just for designers far along in their design, though. When Sam and I prepared to test our prototypes, we often would discuss key mechanics and systems we wanted to test, like particular rules or characters that we felt would benefit from testing with new players. Just as an ethnographer benefits from planning what they will observe when they enter the field (Schensul and LeCompte 2013), a designer should know what stage they are at in their design and prepare for the level of observation that would best suit them.

Werner and Schoepfle (1987) lay out three approaches for conducting different levels of participant observation, which translate well to levels of observation that designers can adapt for playtesting. First is "descriptive observation," the 'first steps' for a researcher in a new field context, where the observer is familiarizing themselves with the culture or setting they are studying. The first stage is where the researcher is trying to record anything and everything they can about the broad context of the setting (Schensul and LeCompte 2013). In tabletop design, descriptive observation is what designers do with a new, mostly untested design; they want to get people's opinions of and reactions to the core elements of the game. The designer might want to know if the design has potential, if the mechanics and themes are clear and well-represented, and just get initial feelings from players. Components are usually handmade or made with basic

templates and printed at home. At this stage, the designer realizes very little is known about the prototype, and a playtest session might not even get through an entire game. Here, the designer might determine that they have seen enough after a few rounds and that further development will be necessary to make the game playable and fun. Edward often would have a few prototypes at the descriptive observation stage of development. He would have bags of components he printed and handmade, and ideas for how they might interact and how a game might overlay on them, but wanted to know if other designers thought they were fun. When Edward tested these prototypes, he would tell testers that he had rough ideas for systems and mechanics but wanted to see what could be done to make them into a game system. We would play for a while, then stop to answer his questions about what worked and what did not, if the core gameplay was fun, and so on.

The next level is focused observation (Werner and Mark Schoepfle 1987). After spending time in the field, the ethnographer begins to understand what is important, what details might be significant, and where their efforts are best spent to collect the data they are looking for (Schensul and LeCompte 2013). For designers, focused observation is the point where they have a prototype that mostly works, that usually can be played from start to finish, but still is not complete or working fully as intended. The components usually have placeholder art to suggest the theme of the game, and the system has gone through multiple iterations and rounds of testing, but nothing is set in stone. Designers at the focused observation stage want to ensure that the game is functional, that there are not mechanics that lead to confusion or which prevent the game from continuing, and they are testing the balance of different systems and choices.

The focused observation stage is still a point where a game can go through significant changes, however, whether to the core mechanics, the theme, components, or any other features.

During my fieldwork, Cameron was testing a game with a Medieval theme that he had been developing for around a year. His prototype was a stable game system and that worked mostly as he intended, but when a publisher asked him to change it to a science fiction game, he was able to quickly make the necessary changes without needing to spend excessive time rewriting rules or mechanics. Many of the changes he made had little impact on how the game played, but he needed to tweak a few elements to fit the new theme. He knew the game worked before, but he had to make sure that the new changes did not interfere with other game systems. Focused observation would be helpful for Cameron at the stage in his prototype's development when he was asked to change the game's theme: he already had a good sense of how his game worked, but he just needed to be sure that the change of theme did not break his game in unexpected ways.

The final stage of observation is selective observation (Werner and Mark Schoepfle 1987). Selective observation is when a researcher has already completed the previous two levels and is looking at specific aspects of a culture in detail (Schensul and LeCompte 2013). For designers, this is the fine-tuning stage of game development, and is often the precursor to submitting a final draft of the game to a publisher or tabletop game printing facility. For the most part, a game at the selective observation stage should be fully playable and mostly free of interactions that grind play to a halt.[xvi] What designers are looking at in the selective observation stage is how specific mechanics interact with each other, such as how a card compares to others of its kind or if a character is balanced in terms of their abilities to attribute scores. Stanley's game was at the selective observation stage. With his core game already published and widely released, he knew there were many things he could not change, and was therefore looking specifically at how the new designs he created measured up to previous content. He had new

characters, monsters, and cards for his existing system, and wanted to make sure that they worked as he intended. What he was doing was akin to selective observation, focusing specifically on key elements because he already had a thorough understanding of the rest of his game after years of development.

Besides an understanding of these levels of observation, the other aspect of participant observation that I determined would be helpful share with designers was the attempt at viewing feedback and testing from an objective perspective. LeCompte and Schensul (2010, 59-60) state that, in ethnography, "objectivity means that researchers must control their own biases and prejudices about the events and people involved and avoid interfering with the study community, participants, and setting until the study is complete." It is often the goal of social scientists to withhold value judgments in ethnography and to present data in a way that does not attempt to sway the reader into believing something about the subject of the study; that is to say that the researcher often wishes to appear neutral in stating their opinions about the people they study. Maintaining as much neutrality as possible can be confounded in applied anthropology, however, where intervention and collaboration with community partners are commonplace (Kedia 2008). Nevertheless, it is often useful to maintain a degree of distance between the researcher's opinions and the analysis of data, even if true objectivity is impossible to achieve; the actual goal is to reduce the influence our biases have on our analysis of the data in front of us (Trigg 2005).

Preventing a designer's biases from impacted how they collect and interpret playtester feedback is complicated by the very nature and purpose of games. For example, what players consider to be fun is anything but objective (Koster 2013; Fernandez-Vara 2015; Sharp and Thomas 2019), and any attempt by a designer to create an objectively "fun" game would be impossible considering the wide range of tastes, opinions, and biases among game players.

Additionally, game design is an art as well as a science and a highly social activity; the experience of players can be affected by their interest in a game's systems and mechanics, its themes and art style, and by the people they play with. Some playtesters take games very seriously, even when playing them as prototypes. Conversely, other playtesters do not take them seriously at all, and these attitudes and behaviors of other players can impact those of testers. After Chelsea attended a design event with me, she recounted an experience with another player who was incredibly distracting during testing, which disrupted Chelsea's experience and frustrated the designer. Chelsea told me how the other player was having trouble understanding the rules of the game, asking the same questions repeatedly and making distracting comments, and the designer would become guarded, covering his face and staring at the player then carefully choosing his responses. The playtester's erratic behavior distracted the designer from being able to take notes, and he seemed to have difficulty recovering from having to explain the rules repeatedly.

For the purpose of my suggestions to designers, I use *objectivity* to mean maintaining a dispassionate attitude when given feedback about one's designs. As a creative endeavor, game designs can be incredibly personal and meaningful to their designers. A designer might dedicate hours of labor into creating a prototype and feel very strongly that it is a fun, well-designed game with few flaws, but this is rarely the case, at least insofar as any design at the prototyping stage will have issues that can be mitigated through extensive testing and iteration. Moreover, every tester has their own opinions and tastes, and many have ideas for how to change or improve any given game. While a high degree of enthusiasm about one's games might benefit a designer, there are pitfalls and challenges, as well. For example, overabundant praise without critical

feedback tells the designer little about what still needs work, while overly harsh criticism can deflate their mood.

Many designers advise not to take feedback personally (Nephew 2011; Fullerton 2014; Dauch 2019; Hamilton 2019; Hargrave 2019; Konieczka 2019; Vega 2019), which relates to my suggestion of maintaining objectivity. Much in the same way that anthropologists benefit from appearing nonjudgmental and unbiased while studying a culture, a designer is best served by withholding their opinions about why they chose a certain rule or designed a mechanic a certain way. Getting defensive likely will lead to testers no longer wanting to share their thoughts. What I suggested to designers in my deliverables is to record as much as they can of what testers tell them and not attempt to justify their choices. When they go to iterate on their design, they can decide what feedback to value and incorporate and what to ignore, without needing to explain their choices to testers. Of course, determining what needs to change can be difficult due to the passion many designers feel for their work. Early on in our playtests, Sam would take on an argumentative tone when a playtester did not like one of our mechanics or if they had a suggestion that he did not agree with. Later I would remind him that we were the final arbiters of what would and would not become part of our games, but that getting the most complete picture of testers' opinions would benefit us more than trying to explain why we made the design choices we did.

5.3 Creating the Video on Focus Group Methods

Faas (n.d., 5), building on Stewart and Shamdasani (2014), describes a focus group as "a semi-structured interview of a group of participants that elicits collective feedback on general concepts or situations in the interest of identifying basic study domains." One of the primary

strengths of focus group research is that it provides researchers with the opportunity to collect data from a group of people in a dynamic, conversational setting, with the facilitator or moderator guiding the discussion towards specific goals (Faas n.d.). Sunderland and Denny (2007) discuss the use of focus groups primarily for market research, pointing out that focus groups inherently place everyone involved into performative roles. Respondents in focus groups are representing the tastes of a broader community, while the researchers have their own goals and need to keep the group on-task.

People on both sides of a focus group - those conducting the research, and the participants who are being researched - are also influenced by each other's behaviors and reactions, so what the researcher says often will affect how the respondents react and what they are willing to say. As social experiences, focus groups are highly susceptible to the moods and behaviors of participants; one participant's behavior can alter the behaviors of others in the group, and how each member of the group responds to a situation can impact the entire experience.

Sunderland and Denny (2007) also argue that focus group data collection requires great attention to the meaning of words being said by respondents. Broadly used shorthand expressions that are common in marketing like *convenience*, *luxury*, or *sleek* might get tossed around, but what these terms mean might vary from speaker to speaker. Because of the uncertainty of meaning, Sunderland and Denny advise caution when one or two people dominate group discussions, try to sway others to agree with them, or assume everyone knows what they mean when they use vague buzzwords. To combat one or two individuals dominating discussion and confusion that arises from respondents' nonspecific language, researchers should pay attention to what is being said, and try to probe respondents about what they mean when using certain words,

and to engage all participants as much as possible to get the most complete and robust amount of responses possible.

From the beginning of my research, I realized that tabletop game playtesting often resembles other forms of focus group research: a group of people come together to share their feelings, opinions, and reactions to a series of questions or prompts; and game designers take on similar roles to focus group facilitators, guiding the experience but also reacting to and adapting to the feedback they receive. Moreover, tabletop playtesting shares similarities to market research since it is focused on people's reactions to what are most often entertainment products intended for the consumer market. Because of the existing similarities between focus groups and playtests, I knew that focus group methods would be relatively easy for designers to learn and seamlessly integrate into their design processes. The methods would be familiar enough to anyone who regularly conducts playtests, and the techniques for eliciting more detailed responses from participants would help generate more valuable, high-quality feedback from testers. My expectation was that designers could easily alter their practices following the methods I provided, treating them as tips more than a complete reimagining of their testing processes.

Based on my observations, I knew that two interrelated suggestions to the design community would be methods for preventing a few people from dominating the discussion around a prototype and getting quiet testers to share their thoughts. During tests of games with higher player counts, it was common for a couple of playtesters to speak more than others, though not necessarily as an attempt to control the conversation. Some players might simply have more to say about their opinions and reactions to a particular prototype, especially if they are familiar with similar games or are experienced designers. Of course, it is important to get as

much feedback from as many playtesters as possible, regardless of their knowledge of games. Cameron takes plenty of notes when he tests other people's designs and often has quite a bit to say, though he is aware of this and will often refrain from guiding the discussion for too long, stating for example, "I have more to say, but I will wait until someone else has a chance to speak."

Likewise, Ben is highly regarded as a successful developer and friendly voice in the community, and testers occasionally will defer to his opinions or wait until he shares a thought and then 'second' it, though he shows no outward signs of encouraging this behavior, and like Cameron he will probe the playtesters of another designer's prototypes on the designer's behalf. And on the other hand, a few playtesters might simply not have much to say, or may sit idly without speaking unless they are asked direct questions, whether due to shyness, unfamiliarity with the systems of a game, or another unspoken reason.

To help lessen the impact of these issues about respondents' willingness to speak, I advised that designers running playtests pay close attention to who speaks and who stays silent during a testing session, and to adjust their questions accordingly. For example, if they are hearing that a particular mechanic is not working well from one person, ask if anyone else has thoughts about that mechanic. And if there are testers who are not speaking up, then ask them directly what they thought about the game to try and get them talking. Because these techniques require close attention to the people at the table – already a challenge considering the myriad things designers need to focus on while running a playtest – I advised designers to begin by developing the participant observation methods I laid out before implementing these techniques, and ordered my videos accordingly.

Another suggestion I made to the community was to avoid taking the terms that testers use at face value. For example, as I stated previously, *fun* is an ephemeral term which can mean different things to different people. For me, tabletop games are fun when I am working together with other players and when game systems are relatively straight-forward in terms of the strategies and decisions players can make; other tabletop gamers are having the most fun during highly competitive games with complex mechanics and tons of potential paths to victory. What people mean when they say a game element is *fun* or *balanced* or *fiddly* can vary greatly from person to person.

Because of the misunderstandings I described earlier about game concepts like *balance*, *experience*, and *fun*, it is vitally important for designers to know what playtesters mean when they use these terms to describe their reactions and opinions, lest the designer spend time unnecessarily 'fixing' a mechanic that was not actually causing testers any problems, or making modifications that do not address the underlying issues. Sometimes the feedback Sam and I got from playtesters trying out our prototype would confound us, especially when we did not take adequate time to organize our playtesting process around answering key questions. When a playtester playing an early iteration of our action card game told us, "the language on the cards is confusing," we did not ask the right follow-up questions to learn what exactly was confusing them. As a result, when we went to correct the problems with the game's verbiage, we had little to base our changes on besides the issues we could find, rather than the specific issues that the playtester had with the wording on cards.

Of course, getting clear definitions of terms can be challenging, especially since many testers might not be able to clearly articulate their feelings after only spending 30 minutes or an hour with a prototype. That is why organization and planning on the part of the designer are an

important part of the prototyping process. Morningstar (2017) argues that effective organization of information is critical in communicating information to players via player-facing information (handouts, cards, reference sheets, et cetera), and shares methods for playtesting in a focus group-like setting to determine the usability of a given piece of game ephemera. These techniques make it easier for the designer to ask pertinent questions and to ensure that the data they are collecting from testers is robust and meaningful. Morningstar recounts that during the prototyping phase of his aerial combat game *Night Witches* he created over 20 versions of player handouts for testers that he designed to communicate a wide range of rules and specific game information. He made new iterations of the handouts weekly, then observed what information testers could glean from them. The feedback he received from playtesters informed the overall design of *Night Witches*, such as the removal of game elements that testers rarely referred to on the handouts.

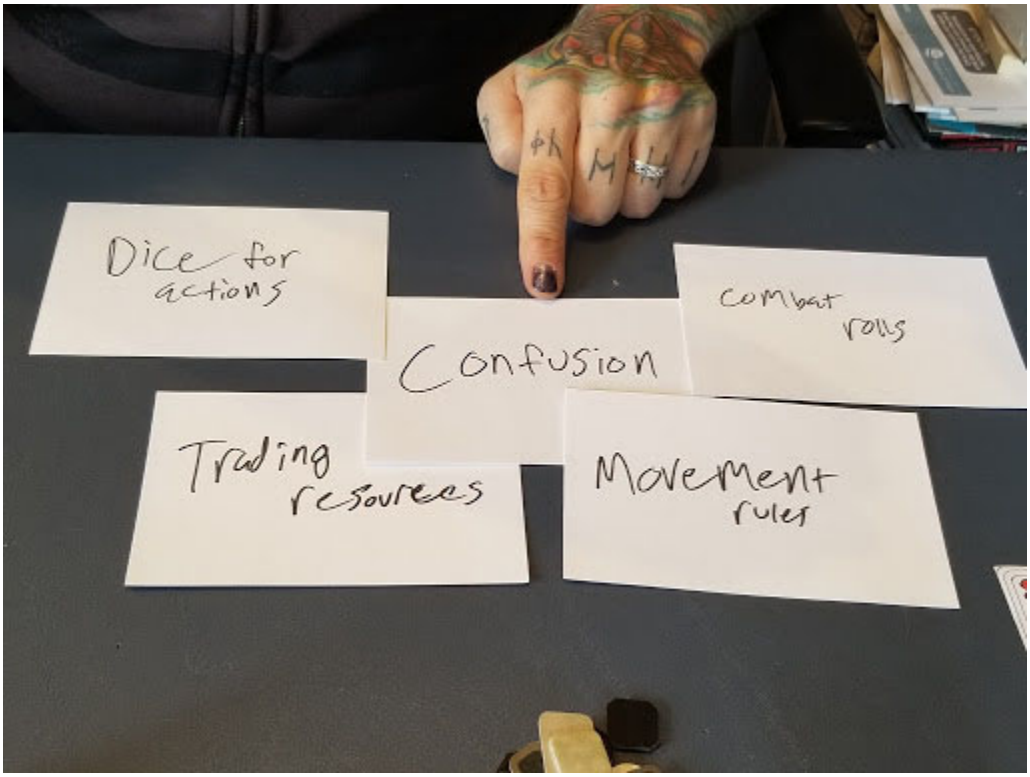
While Morningstar's level of preparation takes time, it is critical to getting the best feedback possible during testing, and the efforts are well-worth the initial time spent, since the time a designer gets with designers is much more limited than the amount of time they will need to dedicate to the creation of systems and components for a prototype. Getting the highest grade of feedback from testers requires having the best possible version of a prototype and being able to quickly explain the game and get people playing it. Ben often had prototypes that included placeholder or even finalized art and sophisticated component layouts and came prepared with a list of questions that he or his development client wanted answered for the game he was asking people to playtest.

By having prototypes that resembled published games and knowing what he was looking for, Ben was able to get high grade feedback, and knew how to ask probing questions to get to

the bottom of playtester responses. Following a playtest Ben led that I participated in, he asked us about specific parts of the game that felt unclear, anything that was exciting or especially fun, and how we might play the game differently if we played it again. These questions helped him get focused feedback and identity specific problem areas, rather than eliciting vague replies that would give him little to work with when he went to iterate on the design.

Building on Morningstar's methods of iterative handouts, I included examples in my videos of how designers could utilize a form of freelisting (Faas n.d.; Quinlan 2005) in their feedback collection processes. Freelisting is a method for semi-structured data collection where the researcher asks participants to write down lists of things that fall into a given domain (Quinlan 2005), such as listing mechanics in a tabletop game prototype or games that a prototype reminds playtesters of. I suggested designers use notecards (a common resource in any designer's prototype supplies) to record responses from playtesters. Using this method, a designer writes a large title on one notecard, for example "combat mechanics" or "character options," then creates cards with playtester reactions to that topic and places those cards near the associated title card to create a visual reference of the feedback they receive – see Figure 1 for an example. Using visual aids for playtesters also creates a record of replies for the designer, who can keep the cards that they create during one playtest and use them during the next test for more players to build upon. For example, a designer could take photographs of the cards that playtesters create in the layout they placed them to include with their notes and to guide the development of their next iteration, and also bring the same notecards to later playtests to build a more complete picture of playtester feedback by adding to the existing categories.

Figure 1: example of using index cards as visual aids for playtesters



Another suggestion I made to designers was to try and find a friend to help them teach players how to play their prototypes and run playtests so that the designer can focus more on the feedback that players are giving - or if they have a co-designer, to have one designer focus on running the test and the other on observing - rather than dividing their attention between observation and teaching and answering questions about the game. Many consumer and market research focus groups feature a facilitator who guides the discussion and a backroom - usually people behind a two-way mirror - who are recording data (Sunderland and Denny 2007). While the use of facilitators and backroom are not necessarily feasible at the kinds of events I attended, the idea can work if the designer has a partner or friend to run the actual test. Having a friend or colleague helping to conduct a playtest frees up the observing designer to pay close attention to players reactions and formulate questions to ask about the prototype during the debrief. The

primary difference between my suggestion to have someone else conduct a playtest and the more formal market research focus groups is that the designer is present and can still communicate with testers, but the same benefits of using separate facilitators and data collectors are still available.

5.4 Creating the Video on Community Building

Because communities of practice and the social theory of learning guided much of this project, I knew that exploring the concept of community and suggesting ways that designers can build relationships and engage with other designers would be an important part of my deliverables. The applied anthropology literature is filled with examples of community-based research and interventions designed by committee, with anthropologists serving as bridgers or advisers to local groups (see for example Austin 2004; Hampshire, Hills, and Iqbal 2005; Kedia 2008; Messerschmidt 2008; Schensul 2010; Fast et al. 2013; Jessee, Collum, and Schulterbrand Gragg 2015). Being effective bridgers and advisers is due in part to anthropologists' flexible training and skills as cultural brokers (Kedia 2008), which allow us to serve various communities and uncover the social dimensions and nuances of interactions between community members. Because anthropologists – especially applied anthropologists – are intimately familiar with the benefits of community engagement and participation, I knew I would be able to provide actionable suggestions to the tabletop design community rooted in these types of community projects. As I have stated throughout this report, tabletop games are social experiences, and effective tabletop design practices effectively require communal playtesting and collaborative processes, and hence anthropologists are uniquely suited to lend insights to designers. Those

insights can allow designers to see how their roles in their communities aids their design practice.

One of the primary ways that community building occurs in tabletop design communities is through collaborative design efforts. Forlano and Smith (2018, 280) lay out the role anthropologists can play in assisting designers: "While design is future-oriented, action-oriented and making-oriented, anthropology is typically concerned with using ethnography to describe, document and make sense of the rituals, processes and lived experiences of people and the ways in which they understand their everyday lives." A few of the designers I worked with explicitly stated that community was important to them, as I recounted early in Stanley and Ben's overt statements about the benefits they have reaped for their participation in the community and their wish to engage and give back to other designers. But the role that community plays in design is occasionally underappreciated or taken for granted in individualistic societies like my own in the U.S., and I made it one of my goals to help those having trouble integrating into their design communities learn steps they can take to engage with other designers.

Not everyone knows the steps involved in entering a community like that of the designers I worked with. My own introduction was fortuitous, since I had a friend who knew a member of the community – who I had already interacted with on several occasions – and could connect me to him.[xvii] But not everyone who wants to try out tabletop design will know where to start or what testing communities might exist near them, if any. Because aspiring designers might not know how to establish or join playtesting communities, I determined that it would be a valuable lesson to designers to learn techniques for connecting with designers and engaging with playtesting groups. My intention was to provide a view of communities that is nuanced and flexible rather than fixed and unchanging. After all, communities often change relatively rapidly

and shift depending on circumstances and context (Fast et al. 2013). The strategies I suggested to the community were divided into general steps for beginners for finding and entering a design community and more focused steps for designers already engaged with a community to build relationships and leverage community resources, and advice for growing existing communities.

For aspiring designers wanting to enter design communities for playtesting and support, my suggestions were rooted in my own personal experiences more than literature or other sources. I encouraged designers to reach out at local game stores, to attend conventions, and to use online resources like BoardGameGeek and Meetup.com or Facebook groups to find playtesting events, and to bring their prototypes even if they do not know anyone at these events, since I had found that designers and tabletop gamers in general were often happy to test and give feedback on in-progress games. When Sam and I attended tabletop gaming conventions, we would bring whatever prototype we were working on. We also followed Cameron's advice and made a placard that read "Looking for playtesters!" in large print. Invariably we would get a few interested testers – even if they were not part of the design community – and they would give valuable feedback on our game systems. We would also comb the designer areas to meet people and see their prototypes, establish connections, learn about local design events from the people who attend them, and see how other designers test their games by participating in playtests. Fairly straightforward steps, but the key takeaway is that we always had our prototypes ready to play, and we would test every other designer's game that we could to become better designers and more active members of the community.

During my fieldwork, I became acutely aware of designers' efforts to build cohesive communities, to help each other wherever possible, and to connect with new people at events. Whenever I met new designers, they were quick to ask me about myself, the designs I was

working on, and my interests in tabletop gaming. As a participant observer trying my hand at tabletop game design, I also benefited from excellent advice and feedback about my prototypes from experienced designers, and I was given the opportunity to give my own suggestions and opinions of their games.

To encourage other designers to take on similarly community-minded practices, my video on community building includes reasons and actionable suggestions for viewers to participate in communal design practices like the ones I took part in. Sean Plott, a game design and online community manager, stressed the important role giving back to one's community plays in strengthening that community through increased access to knowledge, skills, and resources in his 2014 Game Developers' Conference talk on maintaining community through active engagement. He explains how he managed a thriving community for five years almost entirely on free contributions from community members, emphasizing how building a community requires providing that community with resources, knowledge, and assistance (Plott 2015). Likewise, the reciprocal exchange of knowledge and skills is essential to the design and playtesting process, as Ben illustrated for me when he told me that he wanted to give back to the community that had helped him establish his livelihood in design.

Tabletop game design communities revolve around the type of mutually beneficial exchange that occurs when designers come together to test their games and give feedback, with the assumption that other designers will provide feedback to them. To help designers think of new ways that they could help each other, I also suggested that they consider their own unique skillsets and how they could allow other designers to utilize them. Like practically any other entertainment industry, the creation of tabletop games can involve a wide range of skills, knowledge, and resources. Throughout the development and publication process of a given

game, besides the actual design of rules and game systems, any given design will also require many of the following: templates for component creation; art assets and graphic design; technical writing to ensure the clarity of rulebooks and textual components; creative writing for theme or narrative game content; access to game printers and component creators; advertisers for published games; programs, applications, or other digital components; website design; packaging and shipping logistics; and much more.

Because game designers often come from (or still work in) other industries, and many have diverse interests and training, I encouraged members of the community to offer their other skills and knowledge to their colleagues in design. For example, technical writers could offer to read rulebook drafts, while those with extensive knowledge of Medieval weaponry could advise a designer working on a fantasy game on the combat systems in their game. Coders and web designers can create apps and templates for designers to use in the creation of game components or promotional websites. And people in other areas of production can help designers with their connections to logistics packaging companies. The major point I made to designers was that leveraging their other skills and knowledge – aside from their game design expertise – gives their communities access to new and novel resources. These resources strengthen designers' communal bonds and improve access to valuable skills and knowledge for the local and wider game design communities. If anyone in the community is looking for ways to increase their engagement and enhance their credibility in the tabletop games industry, creating resources for other designers gives community members a relatively easy way to use their own skills, knowledge, and resources in a meaningful way.

5.5 Why I Created Videos for YouTube

At the outset of this project, I intended to create a series of podcasts to disseminate my findings to my community and to tabletop game designers at large. I wanted to create deliverables that designers could access for free and that were easy to find and consume for anyone with internet access, and podcasts seemed like they would fit these criteria. Podcasts are somewhat limited in their presentation, as they are traditionally strictly an audio format. Effectively, many podcasts resemble radio programs in one way or another; they can be focused on nonfiction, news, or education (among practically any other topics), and allow for hosts to share their thoughts and opinions and even interview professionals, but they generally do not have the added benefits that visuals can provide, such as subtitles, visual examples, and so on. When I set out to create my deliverables, I quickly realized that a strictly audio format would not adequately accommodate the learning objectives of my project. Visual elements and slides would be important means for providing examples and additional information for designers.

Over the course of my research I started watching many video essays on YouTube on a wide range of topics, and these videos inspired me to change my deliverables over to an audio-visual form. Many of the video essayists that I enjoy cover topics like social science, philosophy, and criticism, especially related to pop culture such as films and television. For example, the channel Renegade Cut (Thomas n.d.) looks at movies and shows through the lens of philosophical theories and perspectives, while ContraPoints (Wynn n.d.) discusses gender, sexuality, and morality in modern American society. Channels like these and others inspired my decision to use YouTube as an audiovisual platform that would be a more flexible, dynamic means of teaching techniques and practices to my audience. At the time I was preparing to create these videos, I also believed that YouTube would be one of the best online platforms for

reaching the widest audience, though I may have been mistaken, as I will discuss later in this chapter.

Using videos allowed me to use visual examples of what I was sharing, slideshows to present ideas and topics, and subtitles for ease of accessibility. These visual aids benefit viewers by making the lessons easier to follow and more accessible to a wider audience who might have different needs or preferences for how they consume educational topics and professional training. In total, I created four videos and posted them to a channel that I made with Chelsea Halliwell, my spouse and a SJSU applied anthropology alumna.

5.6 About the Critical Lens Series on YouTube

To post videos on YouTube, the first step is for potential creators to make a YouTube channel where the videos are organized and linked to a specific account, whether for an individual, company, or other collective. For a few years, Chelsea and I wanted to create a YouTube channel to post videos about anthropology, primarily for people interested in the discipline but new to it, and for people in other fields who want to learn and incorporate social science methods into their practices. To this end, we started the channel AnthroView, and created a short video to introduce ourselves and our plans for the videos we would create.

We decided to create two types of videos for different audiences: Explore, which would be videos for a general audience who want to learn about topics in anthropology; and Critical Lens, in-depth videos that focus on a particular field or area of study and view it from an anthropological perspective. The video series I created as part of this project, Anthropology for Game Designers, falls under the Critical Lens designation, since it is a focused exploration of anthropological concepts specifically aimed at tabletop game designers.

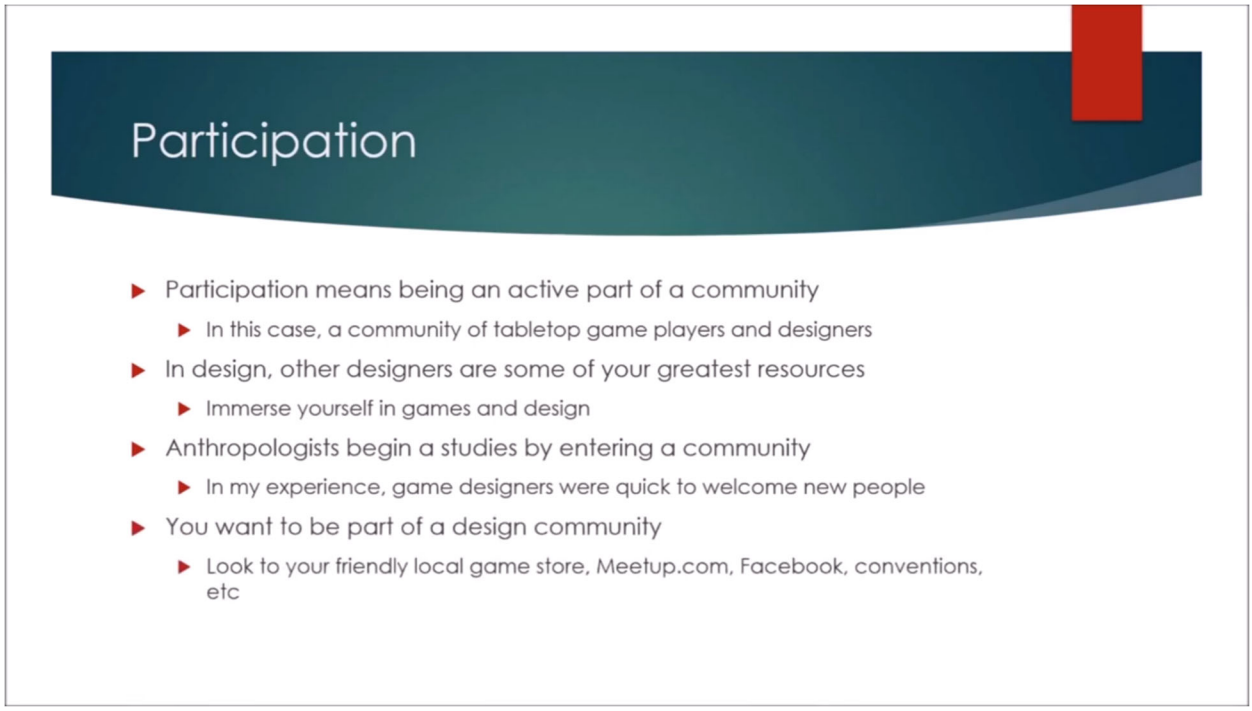
5.7 About the Video Series *Anthropology for Game Designers*

All my video deliverables share general features in their form and presentation. Each video begins with a title card (see Figure 2) and short introduction that shows me speaking to my computer's webcam (see Figure 3) and explaining the basics about the topic I cover in that video. After that, the bulk of each video features my voiceover of the script for that episode and a PowerPoint slideshow that I created which highlights key concepts, quotes, and other important information that I wanted to emphasize for the viewer (see Figure 4). In these sections, I provide an overview of the social science method I used to develop my suggested strategies for designers, and provide quotes, techniques, and examples to illustrate each idea or lesson. Interspersed with the slideshow are video clips - both stock footage and footage that Chelsea shot of me playtesting games - that show visual examples of the methods I discuss and break up the on-screen text. At the end of the video, I briefly summarize the main points of the topic, and mention what the next video covers. Once each video was posted, I used YouTube's automatically generated subtitles as a basis for subtitling them, but then went into their video editor to correct incorrectly generated words, add punctuation, and so on.

Figure 2: a title card for one of my videos

Figure 3: a "talking head" shot from one of my videos

Figure 4: a slide from one of my videos



5.8 YouTube as a Platform for Tabletop Design Advice

At the outset of creating my videos, I took for granted that YouTube is becoming a ubiquitous platform for entertainment and knowledge-sharing, being the largest social media platform in the world with two billion monthly users (Cooper 2019b). Lange (2019) argues that, despite YouTube's popularity and cultural influence, few researchers or news outlets have shown adequate understanding of the platform, as they still believe YouTube is a place primarily for cute or humorous videos, and not a space for learning or other forms of social engagement. Still, given the broad appeal and use of the platform, and the relative ease of access for most people - especially in the U.S. and Europe, where many designers live and work - I believed that I could reach a wide audience with videos on YouTube. My belief that YouTube was a good platform for reaching game designers may have been misguided, however, based on key factors that I discuss below.

5.9 The Challenges of Using YouTube to Disseminate Findings

One of the primary challenges to designers finding and accessing my videos did not become apparent to me until after I had already created and published my series: that members of the local design community do not necessarily use YouTube specifically for design purposes. Following the release of my videos, I created a survey using Qualtrics to gauge designers' uses of the platform. I collected 35 responses from designers and tabletop game enthusiasts, and I was surprised to find that only seven respondents reported that they regularly watch game design videos. While I hardly got a representative sample, it does seem to provide a basis for understanding the relatively low number of views my series has as of this writing. The most viewed video is the introductory video, Game Design 101, with 54 views. The next two videos have just over 20 views each, and the final one only has six views. That being said, at least one designer in the community I worked with posted a comment on a video's comments section saying that he was planning to use one of the techniques I describe in my videos.

Another issue for designers finding and viewing my videos is how the YouTube algorithm that guides users to videos works. Before undertaking this project, I had not considered the fact that a consistent release schedule greatly improves the odds that a given channel's videos will appear in searches (Jaffari 2019). Regularly posting content is not the only factor in determining if one's videos will show up when users search for videos to watch; other things like titles, description, keywords and tags, and so on matter as well (Cooper 2019a). The reality, however, is that videos from creators producing content regularly and who use multiple platforms to promote their videos generally reach a wider audience. More views snowball into having particular videos get recommended more often, and with the huge amount of content being released on YouTube every minute - 500 hours of video or more (Hale 2019) - it is

difficult to stand out in the sea of videos on YouTube. These challenges are further exacerbated by the continually shifting nature of the platforms, its rules and terms of service, and the tastes and behaviors of users and content creators. On the challenges of studying the platform, Lange (2019, 228) notes “Rapid change rendered it difficult to contextualize how alterations impacted the environment for social video sharing.” What YouTubers do one day can be quickly altered due to the shifts in YouTube’s algorithm, its terms of service, and users’ tastes and habits. YouTube’s constant state of flux confounds efforts to pin down what one must do to reach an audience and establish a viewership.

While the long term goal of AnthroView is to eventually create more consistent content - which could potentially lead to my Anthropology for Game Designers series to show up in more searches - creating a new channel and having these videos be the first pieces of content on the channel was not have been the ideal method of reaching the wider design community. Of course, a podcast might have faced similar difficulties, or be even more difficult to distribute, since it would effectively rely completely on individual shares and word of mouth. Still, online platforms are beneficial to my intention of distributing my videos to the largest number of potential designers. I am pointing out these issues to illustrate that distribution through YouTube does not ensure viewership or eliminate the need to create awareness of projects with similar intentions to my own. Indeed, creators must take additional steps to inform potential viewers about the availability of videos on YouTube, and greater online engagement is necessary to reach the intended audience. The specifics of those methods are beyond the scope of this report, though I will discuss them briefly in the Limitations and Future Steps section in the next chapter.

Creating these deliverables was an illuminating process that required me to utilize many skills, both ones I was familiar with and new ones that I had not previously implemented in my

anthropological study and research. Game designers and anthropologists have a great deal to share with each other, and the methods of each discipline can inform the other in fascinating ways. In the next chapter, I will conclude with a discussion of how I believe social science research and games share interesting affinities beyond those I have discussed throughout this report, the lessons I learned throughout the processes, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 6 – Endgame State: Conclusion

6.1 Summary

Anthropological methods and practices can inform tabletop game designers in several key ways. As a highly social design process, the creation of card, board, and roleplaying games already resembles social science fieldwork and research as a designer has informants (playtesters), a theory (does their game work as intended), and they use their observations to test and refine that theory. The game design process requires players to observe, is iterative, and benefits from careful attention to detail and asking the right questions of informants. While a designer might conduct the bulk of their design work in isolation, it is difficult to determine if a game is working as intended - or if it is fun - without the input of playtesters, but many game designers do not come from social scientific backgrounds. Many designers learn design practices informally or on an ad hoc basis, usually through a combination of reading design texts, attending playtesting events, and through trial-and-error. I set out to create an accessible resource for game designers who wanted to implement a few of the more formal observation and data collection methods that social scientists use in research because I immediately noticed the similarities between the way game designers playtest and iterate their games and how anthropologists conduct fieldwork in social settings. I did not set out to ‘fix’ any perceived problems with designers’ methods; the methods that designers use in their playtesting work quite well for their purposes, but some might want to alter their practices to get the most benefit out of their playtests. What I created is a supplemental resource for those who want to add to their toolkit of observation and testing techniques and practices. I decided to create videos to post on YouTube, aiming to teach designers techniques and methods they could easily apply to their existing design processes.

My goal for this project was to determine how tabletop game designers might be able to utilize social science methods in their design practices, identify which methods I could teach designers in short video essays, and to create a series of videos for YouTube aimed at teaching those methods. To meet these goals, I used participant observation fieldwork and interviews to assess the needs of tabletop designers and to understand their design priorities and the elements of their local culture which could inform my video deliverables. I conducted fieldwork at tabletop game design events around the San Francisco Bay Area and focused on how designers constitute a community of practice. The design events I attended are hosted by an informal collection of local designers, effectively open to anyone but advertised via social media. These events take place in cafés and restaurants, at game stores and other businesses, and at tabletop gaming conventions. Designers bring games in various stages of prototyping to these events and get feedback from designers and tabletop game enthusiasts about the state of their prototypes: whether they are fun, if they can be played as intended, if they are easy to understand, and so on. I also interviewed designers about their design processes, how they learned to design games, the methods they use for testing, and what they are looking for when they conduct playtests.

Based on my interviews and observations, I identified common game elements that designers consider to be part of good game design, as well as the concerns that designers look for in the testing and iteration of their prototypes. These include an emphasis on easy to understand rules and mechanics; giving players a sense of autonomy and choice within their games; creating play experiences that allow players to feel as if they have the chance to win the game and be part of a narrative or to feel clever; and that their games are fun. Additionally, the designers I worked with sought to create flexible, well-informed communities with shared skills, knowledge, and resources that benefit both their local groups and tabletop game designers more generally.

By conducting participant observation, interviews, and documentary research, I wrote scripts and developed videos to teach game designers how to incorporate social science methods into their design work. Observing how designers design, test, and iterate their games was especially helpful for uncovering how designers' practices could be supplemented with anthropological methods, specifically methods that aid in data collection and the observation of behaviors and attitudes. After considering the best options for relatively straightforward methods that could be taught in basic ways in 20-minute videos, the main ethnographic methods I focused on in my videos were: participant observation, focus groups, and community building.

With my scripts ready, I began the process of recording voiceover, filming, creating slides, and compositing videos, along with my spouse, Chelsea Halliwell. We edited the audio and footage into finished videos, including examples we filmed and that we selected from stock footage, and rendered the videos for posting them to YouTube. After we had created the videos, I wrote descriptions for each video, created subtitles, and took all the necessary steps to post them to the YouTube platform. Once I posted each video, I announced it to the local design community on social media and took steps to promote the videos to my designer friends and acquaintances.

6.2 Limitations and Challenges

The key limitation of this project was that I was not able to get feedback from the community before writing this report. Creating videos was a time-consuming process, especially for someone like myself who had very little prior experience making videos and posting them to YouTube. As a result of the time constraints, combined with writing this report, I have not been able to assess how designers might respond to the content I created. Feedback from the target

community would be beneficial for a project like this that is intended to teach new practices, but unfortunately, I will have to conduct that additional research in the future.

Moreover, as a first-time YouTube creator, I did not necessarily understand the steps that content creators take to gain exposure and increase the viewership of their videos. Cooper (2019a) shares techniques for reaching a wider audience, but these steps include being a content creator for a longer period of time and regularly posting content, both tips that I was not able to utilize as a first-time YouTube creator. Additionally, based on a survey of tabletop game designers I conducted, only 20 percent of respondents regularly watch game design content on YouTube, a fact I did not know before beginning this project. Factors such as these might impact the ability of my videos to reach the wider game design community, and hence I will need to take additional steps in the future to help my intended audience find my videos.

Creating videos like the ones I made for teaching ethnographic methods to tabletop game designers is a long, involved process. At the outset of this project, I had no idea the amount of time and effort that would be necessary to produce what would be about an hour and a half of video content on methods that designers could use in their practice. Future researchers who wish to create YouTube content for their community should be forewarned that there is quite a bit more to consider than simply creating videos and posting them, especially if researchers desire to reach a wider audience with their videos. While it is easy enough to provide direct URL links to members of a community, reaching a wider intended audience is difficult considering the tremendous amount of content on the platform and the need to constantly stay engaged with users, to post videos regularly so that YouTube's algorithm promotes one's content, and so on. For these reasons, I advise caution to any future students who wish to use YouTube to disseminate their interventions or suggestions to their community, unless they are already

experienced content creators with prior knowledge of the ins and outs of the site. The additional time necessary to learn how to create video content and to distribute it to people – again, unless one intends to only reach community members with direct video links – makes creating videos like mine a time-intensive process. Making sure that viewers can find the videos once they are posted also requires steps well beyond even the ones I outline in this report.

6.3 Applications

Despite the challenges I faced, in carrying out this project, I uncovered valuable information about game designers and the design process. Creating videos for online platforms is a time-consuming process, but also provides opportunities for viewers who could benefit from social science research to access said research and interventions. My desire was to create a series of instructional videos that were valuable, useable, and accessible for my community and for designers more broadly. In that regard, I consider my project a success. The videos I created will exist for designers to use for the foreseeable future – presuming that YouTube continues to exist as a platform for free online video hosting – and I will continue to share my videos with designers via social media and my future game design efforts. Researchers who wish to create videos for YouTube as a way to inform their host communities about interventions or to share their findings can use the format I used in my videos as examples for their own videos, as well as using the methodology I established in their research endeavors.

I would like to return to this project in the future with the knowledge I have acquired through my research on YouTube to see how the videos I have created can be distributed to the tabletop game design community and possibly improved or expanded upon. Other researchers who are interested in the potential for using online video sharing to disseminate knowledge

should find this report useful for understanding the benefits and challenges of creating content for YouTube and similar platforms. While researchers should use caution when attempting to create multimedia deliverables in their research, the fact remains that a great deal of information can be found on video sharing platforms, and it seems likely that users will continue to seek knowledge and skills from content creators on sites like YouTube.

Additionally, the methods I lay out in this report could easily be adjusted to conduct ethnographic research in a variety of design contexts. Because all forms of design require user feedback to create effective, usable items, communities of practice and the social theory of learning can help uncover practices, beliefs, and values that researchers can use to aid designers in their work and practices. Uncovering the aspects of design communities that can benefit from mixed methods approaches will allow design anthropologists and ethnographers to better serve those communities, and a deeper understanding of design practices will help reduce the development time of a wide range of products and services that serve wider communities.

Perhaps the most fascinating conclusion I came to over the course of this project, however, is that games have a tremendous potential to teach. My greatest desire is that this project inspires others to view games through the lens that they can be used to impart knowledge, teach skills, improve social cohesion, and so on. Designing research on game designers and carrying out this project has inspired me to combine my anthropological training and my research into game design, and in the near future I would like to begin work on a game for teaching social science concepts and methods. I encourage others to take up a similar goal, since games are integral parts of human interaction and many modern societies, and their popularity makes them excellent vessels for reaching wider audiences.

As an avid YouTube user and someone who believes I have learned a great deal of valuable information from content creators on the platform – as well as a passionate tabletop gamer – I was excited to work with my local game design communities and to create something that they might find useful for years to come. While games are primarily elective entertainment, I still believe they contribute a great deal to the lives of players. Tabletop games in particular provide countless opportunities to study human interaction and to teach things through play, besides being excellent sources of social bonding and stress relief. But most importantly, games are fun. That is why I wanted to study the people who spend their time creating fun experiences for the rest of us, because there is great value in providing spaces for people to enjoy themselves.

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Appendix A – Interview Questions

1. What is your history with tabletop games?
2. How did you become interested in game design and development?
3. How did you learn to design games?
4. What do you think are the most important skills for game designers to have?
5. What do you think are the most important tools or resources for designers?
6. How did you become involved with the Bay Area game design playtesting community?
    a. Do you feel like your participation in group playtesting has improved your design work? If so, how?
    b. What is your role in your game design communities?
7. Who are the other members of the community you go to for advice?
    a. Do you have game designer friends who you stay in touch with for non-design purposes? (Social friendships or acquaintances)
8. In what ways would you like to improve your game design process?
9. What advice would you give to someone who is starting out as a game designer?

Appendix B – Technical Information for Creating Videos

Recording and Editing

Once I had a script written for each video, I began the video creation process by recording voiceover based on the script and creating the PowerPoint slides that I would feature in the video. After the first script, I would usually create the slides for each script as part of the writing process, once I had an outline that I was happy with. I recorded my voiceover on a Blue Microphone's Yeti Blackout USB Condenser mic mounted on a boom arm over my computer desk, using Windows' Voice Recorder program to capture the audio in .m4a format. To display my script for voiceover recording, I tested a variety of free and trial computer teleprompter apps, eventually settling on using Teleprompt.me, which allows users to copy their text into their web browser and 'listens' to where the speaker is in the script to automatically advance the text for ease of reading. Once I had recorded the audio, Chelsea and I would edit the track in Adobe Audition, removing bad takes, long pauses, and other errors that occurred in the recording process.

My introductory 'talking head' segments were recorded on a Logitech C922x Pro Stream Webcam and captured using OBS Studios, a free video capture program that was suggested to me by video editor friends with whom I make short films. OBS Studios has a variety of options for recording both camera footage and computer display outputs and allows users to overlay footage, change resolutions, and do many other video recording tasks. There were some initial issues I faced which I will discuss later, but in the end, I was able to capture the footage I needed to create my video lectures. OBS Studios is flexible and allowed me to capture both the introductory segments and the slideshows I created, and gave me options for the video file format. All my videos were initially recorded .mp4 files.

I also captured the slides for the main sections of my videos by setting OBS Studios to record my computer display output. To time the transitions of the slides, I would highlight my script to show when each transition should occur and put the slideshow on my monitor in full-screen mode, then with Chelsea's assistance we would play the voiceover and Chelsea would indicate to me when I should advance the slide in PowerPoint while OBS Studios recorded my display. Despite the extra effort we put into getting the timing correct, however, it still needed to be corrected in post-production. To create video examples to intersperse with the slides, Chelsea

would use her Samsung smartphone to capture footage of me playtesting games and showing some of the techniques I described in each script. She also collected stock footage from a variety of clips from free-to-use Creative Commons websites.

Post-Production

Once we had all the requisite files - introductory video, edited voiceover audio, slideshow video, and example and stock footage - Chelsea would set to editing clips and assembling all the content together in Adobe Premiere. I created most of the content in a relatively linear fashion: I began with a title card with the name of the series and video (see, then recorded the introductory 'talking head' video, then recorded then the main segment voiceover, and finally the slideshow. After I had recorded all these segments, Chelsea and I would go through the example clips and stock footage and decided where each should go in the final video. During editing we would overlay those examples onto the slideshow, keeping the same voiceover track playing for the duration of the video. Once these clips were all assembled, we would select music from Creative Commons to play as background music throughout the video, adjusting them to a low enough volume so they would not dominate the audio. Finally, Chelsea would then render the video in .mp4 format to be uploaded to YouTube.

Uploading videos to YouTube requires completing some additional steps before finalizing and publishing to the platform. After we uploaded the videos to our AnthroView channel, we would give each video a title and description, confirm that the footage did not include any minors and that the videos were not intended for children, select a thumbnail image to display for the video, and add tags that would help the video come up in searches on the platform. Then I went through the videos and transcribed the subtitles, using YouTube's automatically-generated subtitles as a basis. With all these steps completed, we could post the video publicly. I would then post links to the videos on the Facebook Group that members of my study community are part of.

Production Challenges

I had previously had very little experience with editing and post-production of videos, though I was familiar with writing voiceover scripts, appearing on camera, and I was

comfortable learning new skills such as how to use programs like OBS and devices like my microphone and webcam. I enlisted Chelsea's help with the video editing process in part due to an earlier project we did for Nissan's Parking Matters project for our ANTH232 Applications Core graduate class, for which Chelsea and I created a video together. I knew that she had an excellent eye for shots and was comfortable using editing software, and she graciously offered to help me put together my videos for this project. Still, even with her tremendous efforts, I faced a few issues in creating the files she would need to compile to make appealing videos.

For starters, many of the programs and applications I used in creating content for my videos require either training or a willingness to self-teach their use. For example, OBS Studios has a relatively steep learning curve, at least for a complete novice to video recording and editing. After I got some of the initial options set and my camera connected, I had some issues that required me to take a few hours working with settings, testing and troubleshooting options, and using Google to search for advice from professionals to get the results I wanted. One of these issues was that the widescreen resolution that output from my webcam to OBS Studios was a different aspect ratio than the one in Windows' Camera program. Another challenge was that OBS Studios requires users to set up each input differently and then link them in the program, so I had to learn how to capture audio from my microphone instead of my webcam while recording video through the webcam. Overall, though, the flexibility and utility of OBS Studios likely saved me time, as I was able to use it to record both video and screen output from my computer without having to learn multiple programs.

I also had trouble finding a good teleprompter application for recording voiceover. I found that my initial attempts at reading off my computer screen while recording audio resulted in distracting clicking sounds throughout the recording from my mouse and keyboard. Moreover, for segments where I recorded video of myself reading from the screen, it was apparent that I was reading from a script, my eyes darting back and forth across my screen. To remedy this, I began looking for a functional teleprompter application. After trying a few options which did not suit my needs for a variety of reasons, I settled on using Teleprompt.me. This free online teleprompter app was the only one I found that could automatically scroll text while I spoke. This feature did not work perfectly, however, and I would sometimes get hung up when the text failed to scroll, but in most cases, it worked well enough for my relatively limited use.

Creating the ‘talking head’ style introductory segments also created unique challenges. When I started filming them, it was instantly apparent to me that lighting would be an issue, as the light at my desk where I shot the footage was uneven and cast a shadow on half my face. To remedy this, I purchased stick-on LED lights, and would film myself with a white screen on my computer to illuminate my face more evenly. I also had to train myself to look at my camera instead of straight ahead at my computer screen to engage with the viewer. Moreover, it would sometimes require multiple takes since I decided to do these introductions unscripted so as to avoid having my eyes darting around and belying the fact that I was reading the words. As a result, some of this footage took an unnecessarily long time to shoot since I did not want an extraneous number of cuts in the video. After seeing the results of one video introduction that still ended up needing some cuts after spending so much time on it, I realized that these quick cuts did not greatly impact the overall quality of the footage, and that I could have more confidently filmed my extemporaneous introductions.

Appendix C – Video Transcripts with Timestamps

Video 1: Game Design 101 – URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u627N1luQIA

0:00:05.260,0:00:11.889
Hello friends, and welcome to AnthroView
I'm Jameson Mockel, tabletop gamer and

0:00:11.889,0:00:17.230
fan of all things anthropological. This
video is the first part of our special

0:00:17.230,0:00:23.170
series on tabletop game design where I
am going to show you some useful methods

0:00:23.170,0:00:28.539
for improving your game design process
by using social science research methods

0:00:28.539,0:00:32.860
and theory. Before we get into that
though, I thought it would be a good idea

0:00:32.860,0:00:37.780
to lay out some important concepts, define some terms, and tell you
why

0:00:37.780,0:00:43.180
tabletop games are great to study from
an anthropological perspective. So let's

0:00:43.180,0:00:49.270
get to it. Even though I've studied
anthropology and played games for years,

0:00:49.270,0:00:54.250
until I started looking at game design, I
hadn't really put the two together in my

0:00:54.250,0:00:59.410
head in any significant way. Now I can't
help but see the connections whenever I

0:00:59.410,0:01:05.560
think about games. For starters, tabletop
games are filled with human interaction

0:01:05.560,0:01:10.950
and fascinating behaviors. If you play
tabletop games you've certainly

0:01:10.950,0:01:16.870
experienced many kinds of players:
aggressive ones, passive ones, people who

0:01:16.870,0:01:21.240
spend too long strategizing and ones that
do things seemingly at random.

0:01:21.240,0:01:26.530
How people act during play might offer
some insights into their values, beliefs,

0:01:26.530,0:01:30.490
and lifestyle outside of gaming, and
while those things aren't necessarily

0:01:30.490,0:01:35.410
the focus of this study, they are going
to come up when we talk about observing

0:01:35.410,0:01:41.470
player behaviors as a way to design
better games, so stay tuned for that. For

0:01:41.470,0:01:46.180
now, suffice it to say that a play
session of a board game can be a rich

0:01:46.180,0:01:51.550
source of anthropological data. The other
thing that makes games anthropological

0:01:51.550,0:01:58.060
is that they need humans - anthros if
you will - to make them, well, games. Now I

0:01:58.060,0:02:02.200
don't just mean that humans have to
design games - though there is that - but

0:02:02.200,0:02:07.330
more that, without people to play them,
games are just pieces in a box. When we

0:02:07.330,0:02:11.590
open that box, however, and start rolling
dice, reading cards, and moving pieces,

0:02:11.590,0:02:17.049
that's when the components and systems
become a game. Moreover, the vast majority

0:02:17.049,0:02:22.300
of games are heavily based around
interactions between players. Even when

0:02:22.300,0:02:26.470
you're playing a cooperative game with
challenges controlled by the game system,

0:02:26.470,0:02:32.050
you are still to some extent playing
against another player: in this case, the

0:02:32.050,0:02:37.780
designer of the game. Humans influence
every aspect of gameplay: in design, in

0:02:37.780,0:02:42.520
play, and in the discussions around games.
Tabletop games are especially

0:02:42.520,0:02:47.500
interesting because they don't even have
a way to do anything without humans

0:02:47.500,0:02:52.780
manipulating them. In a video game, if you
don't push any buttons, things can still

0:02:52.780,0:02:56.230
affect your character in the game; in a
tabletop game

0:02:56.230,0:03:01.390
someone has to control every moving part,
and the computations all take place in

0:03:01.390,0:03:05.320
the players' heads. It's no wonder that
scholars and researchers of human

0:03:05.320,0:03:10.440
behavior have taken an interest in games
for years.

0:03:14.780,0:03:20.960
Tabletop games are full of things we can
examine under a social science lens: they

0:03:20.960,0:03:26.240
revolve around social interactions and
influence our behaviors in certain ways.

0:03:26.240,0:03:31.280
And I'm far from the first person to
make this connection. The field of game

0:03:31.280,0:03:36.459
studies is often called ludoogy. One of
the earliest examples of a sociological

0:03:36.459,0:03:44.060
examination of games - more broadly of
play - is Johan Huizinga's 1938 book Homo

0:03:44.060,0:03:50.209
Ludens: an oft cited text that explores
the role of play in human culture.

0:03:50.209,0:03:55.489
Huizinga identified the "Magic Circle" of
play: the space where all the players of

0:03:55.489,0:04:01.340
a game are temporarily transformed into
something other than themselves for the

0:04:01.340,0:04:06.350
duration of the game: brave warriors in
Dungeons and Dragons, ruthless

0:04:06.350,0:04:11.900
capitalists in Monopoly, and so on.
Anthropologically speaking, this is the

0:04:11.900,0:04:17.780
ritual of games: the way players take on
new roles while they play. In Homo

0:04:17.780,0:04:23.030
Ludens, Huizinga basically argues that
play is foundational to human life, and

0:04:23.030,0:04:29.419
we can include games in this. You see, as
infants we start playing before we can

0:04:29.419,0:04:34.870
even comprehend other parts of culture,
such as language or acceptable behavior.

0:04:34.870,0:04:40.820
Even animals play without any human
influence. Play is something that we do

0:04:40.820,0:04:46.390
naturally, according to Huizinga, and
that makes it worth studying seriously.

0:04:46.390,0:04:51.650
More recent game studies have explored
things like the role games play in

0:04:51.650,0:04:56.450
education and rehabilitation, how they
teach us to persevere in spite of

0:04:56.450,0:05:01.330
failure and adversity, how they make us
better artists and critical thinkers, and

0:05:01.330,0:05:07.340
even how games can subvert expectations
and challenge social norms. Do I think

0:05:07.340,0:05:12.710
that games are awesome just because they
can be fun? Absolutely. But I also think

0:05:12.710,0:05:17.900
games are great sources of information
platforms for teaching and rich veins of

0:05:17.900,0:05:23.150
social and cultural knowledge. And I
don't just mean tangential learning - the

0:05:23.150,0:05:26.990
process of learning about things that
appear in games - though I did learn a lot

0:05:26.990,0:05:30.080
of my vocabulary
from playing role-playing games as a

0:05:30.080,0:05:32.320
kid

0:05:34.889,0:05:39.870
No, what I mean is that games tell us
something about ourselves and our

0:05:39.870,0:05:45.810
cultures *through* play. We can explore
our values and our interests in our game

0:05:45.810,0:05:50.580

selection, and tabletop games in
particular are fascinating petri dishes

0:05:50.580,0:05:55.400
of human behavior: how we sit around the
table, how we interact with players and

0:05:55.400,0:05:59.550
components, and how we celebrate
victories and lament defeats are

0:05:59.550,0:06:04.860
culturally coded. All this is a long way
of saying, games are as much a source of

0:06:04.860,0:06:10.379
anthropological data as are weddings,
funerals, and your local bar. And that

0:06:10.379,0:06:15.029
means that game designers are valuable
brokers of cultural knowledge: they

0:06:15.029,0:06:18.300
influence audiences and our behavior in
interesting ways,

0:06:18.300,0:06:23.279
by giving us a space to play and to
interact, and as such they are well-suited

0:06:23.279,0:06:27.560
to benefit from the practices and
methods of social science research.

0:06:27.560,0:06:32.550
That's what this series is all about: I'm
going to do my best to teach game

0:06:32.550,0:06:36.300
designers how they can tap into
anthropological techniques to make

0:06:36.300,0:06:40.979
richer or purposeful games that will
capture players imaginations and

0:06:40.979,0:06:45.330
possibly even convey some deeper
meanings, and hopefully they will be fun

0:06:45.330,0:06:48.210

as well,
since at the end of the day, if a game

0:06:48.210,0:06:52.910
isn't fun, most people won't want to play
it, anyway.

0:06:52.910,0:06:58.380
Before I get into the real body of my
research, however, I want to make sure

0:06:58.380,0:07:02.190
that we're all on the same page with
some of the things I'll be talking about

0:07:02.190,0:07:08.460
in this series, especially game and design
terminology. The anthropological stuff

0:07:08.460,0:07:13.949
I'll be talking about will be covered in
detail in the following videos.

0:07:13.949,0:07:18.772
So let's get started by defining some game terms and concepts.

0:07:18.772,0:07:20.639
The word game might seem

0:07:20.639,0:07:25.259
straightforward, but in reality a great
deal of space has been dedicated to

0:07:25.259,0:07:30.870
defining just what games are. Salen and
Zimmerman collected eight different

0:07:30.870,0:07:36.330
definitions of "game" and "play" from
scholars in a range of fields, to try and

0:07:36.330,0:07:41.009
create a cohesive definition, then they
wrote a definition based on those other

0:07:41.009,0:07:45.750
definitions, and even their combined
description can be argued with.

0:07:45.750,0:07:50.039
That being said, I'm going to use their
definition for this project because it

0:07:50.039,0:07:55.620
does a good enough job for our purposes
here. Salen and Zimmerman define games

0:07:55.620,0:08:01.860
as, "systems in which players engage in an
artificial conflict, defined by rules,

0:08:01.860,0:08:07.050
that results in a quantifiable outcome."
So you've got players playing the game;

0:08:07.050,0:08:12.240
you have the artifice of the situation;
rules that govern what you can and can't

0:08:12.240,0:08:17.520
do in the game; and an unambiguous
conclusion. Now, some of you are surely

0:08:17.520,0:08:22.740
thinking of examples that defy this
definition, and that's great, because even

0:08:22.740,0:08:28.169
Salen and Zimmerman knew that their
definition was not beyond reproach. But

0:08:28.169,0:08:31.860
this definition gives us a solid
starting point to understand what games

0:08:31.860,0:08:37.050
are, and like any good art or science, the
devil is in the details.

0:08:37.050,0:08:41.909
Good designers know how to bend and
break these rules, and when to leave well

0:08:41.909,0:08:47.220
enough alone and stick with what works.
So this definition will guide us, but my

0:08:47.220,0:08:51.329
research specifically relates to a
subdivision of games - although it's a

0:08:51.329,0:08:57.360
fairly broad one - and that is tabletop
games. Tabletop games can refer to board

0:08:57.360,0:09:02.820
games like Risk or Pandemic, to card
games like Uno or Dominion, to

0:09:02.820,0:09:05.870
role-playing games like Dungeons &
Dragons or Fiasco,

0:09:05.870,0:09:10.339
and to a range of other games that
are often played around the table or a

0:09:10.339,0:09:15.529
similar surface. The general qualities
that I'll note for the types of games

0:09:15.529,0:09:19.520
we'll be discussing here are: that they
are typically played in person,

0:09:19.520,0:09:24.560
using some kind of physical components,
and follow printed rules. So we aren't

0:09:24.560,0:09:28.850
talking about digital games like video
games, or sports games played on actual

0:09:28.850,0:09:33.800
fields. If you want to see examples of
what I'm calling tabletop games, the

0:09:33.800,0:09:38.810
website BoardGameGeek is a great
resource. The range of games you can find

0:09:38.810,0:09:45.279
there will give you a sense of the types
of games the people I worked with design.

0:09:48.360,0:09:53.910
Speaking of design, designers are people
who make things, but since I'm going to

0:09:53.910,0:09:58.619
use the word "designer" a lot in this
series, I'm just going to point out here

0:09:58.619,0:10:03.509
that I'm talking about tabletop game
designers, unless I specifically make

0:10:03.509,0:10:08.220
exceptions, such as graphic designers or
industrial designers. I'm primarily

0:10:08.220,0:10:12.809
concerned with the people who make the
games I defined a minute ago. In my

0:10:12.809,0:10:17.879
research I worked with designers in the
San Francisco Bay Area, whose experience

0:10:17.879,0:10:23.730
and involvement in the tabletop game
industry spans a fairly wide range: some

0:10:23.730,0:10:26.429
are amateur designers just getting
started

0:10:26.429,0:10:31.230
some are published designers working
full-time in the industry, and many were

0:10:31.230,0:10:36.029
somewhere in between. Regardless of their
experience and involvement, these folks

0:10:36.029,0:10:40.889
were my primary sources of information:
my informants for this project. Though

0:10:40.889,0:10:44.850
I'm also building off of a wide range of
literature on design and game studies,

0:10:44.850,0:10:49.454
and my own anthropological training, of
course.

0:10:49.454,0:10:52.589
Now for the stuff that games are

0:10:52.589,0:10:58.199
made of. Physically, tabletop games are
made up of components which can take

0:10:58.199,0:11:04.230
many forms: boards, cards, dice, tokens, and
miniatures are some of the most common

0:11:04.230,0:11:08.610
ones that most people are familiar with.
Tabletop games can include a few

0:11:08.610,0:11:14.459
components - say some dice, scorecards,
and pencils in Yahtzee - or hundreds like

0:11:14.459,0:11:20.610
in Gloomhaven - which includes multiple
decks of cards, map tiles, tons of tokens

0:11:20.610,0:11:24.760
and elaborate miniatures, as well as boxes
inside the game box

0:11:24.760,0:11:28.160
with new content that gets added as you play.

0:11:28.160,0:11:31.400
Basically, the components of games are the material

0:11:31.400,0:11:34.900
culture you need to play them.

0:11:34.900,0:11:38.000
Besides
the physical components, you also need

0:11:38.009,0:11:43.519
the knowledge of how the game works, and
that is referred to broadly as "the rules."

0:11:43.519,0:11:48.869
The rules typically come on a sheet or
in a booklet and they can run the

0:11:48.869,0:11:54.439
gamut of brief, basic pamphlets in
quicker, smaller games like Hex, to literally

0:11:54.439,0:11:58.619
thousands of pages of ever-expanding
content in some of the larger

0:11:58.619,0:12:03.270
role-playing games
like Pathfinder or Dungeons & Dragons.

0:12:03.270,0:12:08.680
Meanwhile, a system is how all the rules,
components, and players interact and

0:12:08.680,0:12:14.440
influence each other. Our friends Salen and
Zimmerman think of systems as, "contexts

0:12:14.440,0:12:19.870
for interaction, which can be spaces,
objects, and behaviors that players

0:12:19.870,0:12:25.480
explore, manipulate, and inhabit." It's all
the stuff that turns the individual

0:12:25.480,0:12:30.790
pieces and bits of knowledge into a game.
The system is the complex whole that

0:12:30.790,0:12:34.960
brings all the other stuff together, and
makes a game something bigger than the

0:12:34.960,0:12:40.810
constituent parts. Think of monopoly, even
if it's painful to do so: on the one hand

0:12:40.810,0:12:45.130
you have a board, and dice, and a little
silver piece that represents you, and a

0:12:45.130,0:12:49.960
pile of worthless paper money; and on the
other hand you have the rules that tell

0:12:49.960,0:12:54.460
you how to move, and when you can spend
your paper money, and when random chance

0:12:54.460,0:12:59.620
has determined who wins, and who flips the table.
The connective tissue of those

0:12:59.620,0:13:05.470
things is the game system: I roll dice, I
calculate the total, then I pick up my

0:13:05.470,0:13:09.430
little silver racecar and move it that
number of spaces clockwise around the

0:13:09.430,0:13:14.260
board. If I land on an unowned property, I
can either buy it for a set price -

0:13:14.260,0:13:18.670
meaning I take my paper money and give
it to the bank then receive a deed to

0:13:18.670,0:13:25.090
show my ownership - or I send it to
auction. If I land on an owned property I

0:13:25.090,0:13:30.310
have to pay rent to the owner, and before
long I don't want to play anymore. That

0:13:30.310,0:13:34.930
is the system of Monopoly - well not
wanting to play anymore is a symptom of

0:13:34.930,0:13:40.920
Monopoly, but that's neither here nor
there. In tabletop gaming and design

0:13:40.920,0:13:45.990
mechanics are one of the core subjects
that gets discussed most frequently.

0:13:45.990,0:13:50.830
Mechanics can be viewed as a part of the
game system, but they're also touchstones

0:13:50.830,0:13:56.530
that reach between one game and
another. While I hate to use Monopoly for

0:13:56.530,0:14:01.690
more examples, most of us are familiar
with the game, and if you are then you're

0:14:01.690,0:14:05.740
already familiar with some game
mechanics, such as the "roll-and-move"

0:14:05.740,0:14:11.470
mechanic: you grab some dice, roll them,
get the total, and move that many spaces

0:14:11.470,0:14:14.890
across the board.
This mechanic has been used by tons of

0:14:14.890,0:14:21.760
other games, though, such as Clue, Talisman,
and Zombies!!! to name a few. Mechanics are

0:14:21.760,0:14:25.480
kind of like genres in film: they tell
you something about the experience

0:14:25.480,0:14:29.400
you're going to get based on your
knowledge of other examples in the medium.

0:14:29.400,0:14:34.180
In this series you're gonna hear
me talk a lot about these last two terms,

0:14:34.180,0:14:39.790
and they are closely related, so I'm
combining them here. These are "prototypes"

0:14:39.790,0:14:47.230
and "playtesting." A prototype is any game
in its design stage. Every game starts as

0:14:47.230,0:14:51.850
a prototype: a basic model of mechanics,
components, and rules that will

0:14:51.850,0:14:56.260
eventually become the game system. You
can start a prototype from a number of

0:14:56.260,0:15:00.670
angles, too. Some designers start by
designing a core mechanic; some are

0:15:00.670,0:15:04.840
inspired by a type of player interaction
they want to encourage; and some begin

0:15:04.840,0:15:09.520
with a theme they want to explore, like
fantasy or sci-fi. Because of how the

0:15:09.520,0:15:14.680
design process works, prototypes can come
in any form: from a pile of handwritten

0:15:14.680,0:15:19.890
cards, to a sophisticated package that
resembles a published game. Basically,

0:15:19.890,0:15:24.730
prototypes are games with kinks to work
out, and they can change a lot from one

0:15:24.730,0:15:27.540
stage to the next,
through the process of iteration.

0:15:27.540,0:15:32.590
Iteration is the process of designing
something, testing it, and then making

0:15:32.590,0:15:38.680
changes based on those tests. The best
iterations come from playtesting, which

0:15:38.680,0:15:43.360
is when you take your prototype to get
feedback from other people about how the

0:15:43.360,0:15:48.760
game could be better. A playtest is any
session of play intended to learn how

0:15:48.760,0:15:53.230
the game can improve. Early playtests
might not even get through one whole

0:15:53.230,0:15:58.990
game, or might include tons of tweaks and
adjustment done on the fly. Later stages of

0:15:58.990,0:16:03.490
playtesting hopefully are just to iron
out some wrinkles, check that the text on

0:16:03.490,0:16:07.210
the cards is as clear as possible, and
that the rules are functioning as

0:16:07.210,0:16:12.010
intended. And of course, that the game is
fun. We're going to spend a lot of time

0:16:12.010,0:16:15.940
covering these concepts more in depth,
and getting into how they all work

0:16:15.940,0:16:20.110
together, but this should at least get us
all on the same page in regards to the

0:16:20.110,0:16:24.190
big ideas I'll be covering. Next time
I'll start looking at our first

0:16:24.190,0:16:27.900
anthropological technique
should help you design some fun games:

0:16:27.900,0:16:34.080
participant observation. Until then, may
knowledge guide you.

Video 2: Participant Observation for Tabletop Designers – URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MQz8AUXnaK8&t=16s

0:00:00.500,0:00:06.810
Hello tabletop game designers and
enthusiasts! I'm Jamieson Mockel, and this

0:00:06.810,0:00:10.069
is AnthroView.

0:00:14.429,0:00:20.080
Today I'm going to be presenting our
second video on anthropology for

0:00:20.080,0:00:24.220
tabletop game design, though this is the
first video that really gets into the

0:00:24.220,0:00:28.180
methods and the meat of what we're going
to be talking about. The first video was

0:00:28.180,0:00:33.040
more of just an introduction. If you
haven't watched that yet and you want to

0:00:33.040,0:00:37.750
get kind of a baseline idea of some of
the game design stuff that we'll be

0:00:37.750,0:00:41.530
talking about, if you're not totally
familiar with it, or even if you are and

0:00:41.530,0:00:45.400
you just want a little refresh, I'm gonna
put the link in the description down

0:00:45.400,0:00:51.129
below so you can check out that video.
But other than that this is gonna take a

0:00:51.129,0:00:56.650
look at participant observation. Now
participant observation is a social

0:00:56.650,0:01:02.229
science practice that has been part of
the disciplines in the social sciences

0:01:02.229,0:01:07.869

since their earliest days. It's been practiced for over a hundred years in

0:01:07.869,0:01:12.869
sociology and anthropology, it's something that you'll learn about in any

0:01:12.869,0:01:17.800
introductory class, probably in some of the first days you'll start learning

0:01:17.800,0:01:23.650
about participant observation. The idea might seem kind of simple, but believe me

0:01:23.650,0:01:28.780
it's a lot more than just going and observing a group of people and making

0:01:28.780,0:01:34.230
some notes about it. It's a systematic, focused approach that helps you answer

0:01:34.230,0:01:40.480
research questions in a really useful way. It lets you get a lot of really good

0:01:40.480,0:01:45.970
detailed information out of any research endeavor that you're doing, and part of

0:01:45.970,0:01:50.560
the play testing process is basically research; you're researching your game

0:01:50.560,0:01:54.190
and your design to see how you can make it better. So I think participant

0:01:54.190,0:01:59.130
observation is a really great way to flesh that out and to learn some new

0:01:59.130,0:02:04.000
methods that you can use to make some great designs. So let's get to it and

0:02:04.000,0:02:10.520
start talking about participant observation.

0:02:12.910,0:02:18.610

Let's start with a definition. For our purposes we'll define participant

0:02:18.610,0:02:25.510
observation as: "the process of learning through exposure to or involvement in

0:02:25.510,0:02:31.830
the day-to-day or routine activities of participants in the research setting." If

0:02:31.830,0:02:36.640
you want to know about a group of people, your best way to collect that

0:02:36.640,0:02:42.460
information is, well, to meet with them and interact. My favorite description of

0:02:42.460,0:02:46.510
participant observation comes from anthropologist Clifford Gertz: he

0:02:46.510,0:02:52.480
describes it as, "deep hanging out," or being as fully integrated as possible

0:02:52.480,0:02:57.400
into the community you're studying. This helps to better understand people's

0:02:57.400,0:03:03.010
behaviors, values, beliefs, and so on. If you're involved in a community of

0:03:03.010,0:03:07.660
designers and playtesters, you're probably already doing some form of deep

0:03:07.660,0:03:13.120
hanging out: you're playing games with people, talking about design regularly,

0:03:13.120,0:03:17.590
and keeping up with what's happening in the board game industry. Which is to say

0:03:17.590,0:03:21.940
you are deeply engaged with your fellow board game players and designers. And

0:03:21.940,0:03:26.470

that is very much what participant
observation is about: you meet up with

0:03:26.470,0:03:31.030
people, chat, interact, and learn about one
another and your interests, which gives

0:03:31.030,0:03:34.930
you unique insights and perspectives
into how and why people do the things

0:03:34.930,0:03:40.720
they do. Sounds a lot like playtesting,
right? If you're a designer, it

0:03:40.720,0:03:44.320
should be pretty intuitive to implement
some of the formal practices of

0:03:44.320,0:03:48.760
participant observation. Participant
observation is usually considered a

0:03:48.760,0:03:53.950
qualitative research method, which in the
broadest possible terms means it's a way

0:03:53.950,0:03:58.000
to gather data which cannot be
quantified with numbers; it's about

0:03:58.000,0:04:02.980
actions, behaviors, and the reasons people
do things, though you can collect

0:04:02.980,0:04:08.709
quantitative data through participant
observation, too. That being said, it usually

0:04:08.709,0:04:14.290
focuses on 'why' and 'how' questions, and you
can learn many types of things using

0:04:14.290,0:04:19.330
qualitative research. Because of this,
it's a good way to gauge people's

0:04:19.330,0:04:22.060
emotional reactions to playing your
games,

0:04:22.060,0:04:27.220

and to determine what their play
experiences are like. That being said the

0:04:27.220,0:04:31.450
close attention the detail that
participant observation allows for is

0:04:31.450,0:04:35.889
also an excellent way to determine if
your game is balanced mechanically, and

0:04:35.889,0:04:41.080
if people are grokking the rules and the
feedback loop of the game. But before I

0:04:41.080,0:04:45.419
get too far ahead of myself, let's talk
about what participant observation

0:04:45.419,0:04:48.720
actually means.

0:04:50.880,0:04:54.910
So the first word of participant
observation is a clue to what the

0:04:54.910,0:05:00.010
practice: is it's a form of participation;
in this case, participation in a

0:05:00.010,0:05:05.650
community. Your game design community
might take on many forms: it probably

0:05:05.650,0:05:10.180
includes local people and distant
connections online, and it can change

0:05:10.180,0:05:15.220
size over time: sometimes expanding,
sometimes shrinking, depending on

0:05:15.220,0:05:20.650
circumstances. When you're a designer, one
of your greatest resources is other

0:05:20.650,0:05:25.420
designers. It's important to maintain
these connections, as well as connections

0:05:25.420,0:05:30.100
with tabletop game players, so that you

can immerse yourself in games and design.

0:05:30.100,0:05:35.920
In anthropology, participant observation
usually begins with a researcher finding

0:05:35.920,0:05:40.090
the group they're going to study - to
participate with - and making a connection

0:05:40.090,0:05:45.370
with that group somehow. When I started
this project I had no idea how I was

0:05:45.370,0:05:49.300
going to connect with designers, so I
started by asking a few friends and I

0:05:49.300,0:05:53.740
got connected with a local group on
meetup.com. The group holds regular

0:05:53.740,0:05:58.180
events in public places that members can
attend, so I just started going to those

0:05:58.180,0:06:03.520
events. In my experience, game designers
are really friendly, accepting folks who

0:06:03.520,0:06:08.290
love meeting new designers. As part of
this group, I had no trouble getting

0:06:08.290,0:06:12.760
experienced designers to play my early
prototypes and give me great feedback,

0:06:12.760,0:06:17.920
even though I was a total newbie. I'm
going to talk more about finding and

0:06:17.920,0:06:22.600
building a design community in another
video in this series, so for now just

0:06:22.600,0:06:26.860
know that a big part of participant
observation includes finding other

0:06:26.860,0:06:31.890
people doing design and participating

with them.

0:06:35.960,0:06:40.100
The second part of participant
observation might sound kind of vague,

0:06:40.100,0:06:45.560
but observation in the social sciences
is a lot more than just watching people

0:06:45.560,0:06:50.630
do things and taking a couple notes.
Anthropological observation is complex

0:06:50.630,0:06:56.120
and systematic: it requires focus, a
specific purpose, and attention to

0:06:56.120,0:07:01.030
detail. When a social scientist goes into
the field to do participant observation,

0:07:01.030,0:07:07.669
they are using theory, practice, and their
research questions as a guide. They have

0:07:07.669,0:07:11.599
a sense of what they want to see, but
since they're working in a dynamic and

0:07:11.599,0:07:15.889
unpredictable environment - a social
setting - they need to be flexible and

0:07:15.889,0:07:20.979
open to new things, which are qualities
you'll want to foster as a designer.

0:07:20.979,0:07:25.130
Something that social scientists know is that
it's better to enter the field with

0:07:25.130,0:07:30.620
questions rather than assumptions. In
design terms, you want to know if your

0:07:30.620,0:07:36.020
prototype is good and worth pursuing, or
how it can be improved; you aren't trying

0:07:36.020,0:07:40.430
to show off your game and convince your

testers why it's already great, because

0:07:40.430,0:07:44.389
the whole play testing process is
predicated on the idea that your

0:07:44.389,0:07:49.820
prototype is just that: a model that can
be improved. If you're planning to design

0:07:49.820,0:07:53.719
using participant observation, you
actually have an advantage over an

0:07:53.719,0:07:57.380
anthropologist going into the field for
the first time: as a designer,

0:07:57.380,0:08:01.849
you've got your theories and research
questions ready to go. Your theory is

0:08:01.849,0:08:07.669
your game- the model for you to test - your
research questions are things like, "does

0:08:07.669,0:08:12.680
this game work as I intended" or "does it
elicit the feelings and reactions I want"

0:08:12.680,0:08:18.169
or "do people enjoy playing it." But you
still need to structure your playtest

0:08:18.169,0:08:21.740
with intention, and learn techniques for
getting the most valuable information

0:08:21.740,0:08:26.630
you can out of the people who test your
games. We'll talk more about this when we

0:08:26.630,0:08:31.639
discuss focus groups, but for now, the
thing to keep in mind is that you are

0:08:31.639,0:08:36.349
trying to view people's behaviors
through the lens of a researcher: playtesters

0:08:36.349,0:08:39.030
have important information that

you need

0:08:39.030,0:08:42.810
and you want to collect it in a way that
you will be able to translate into

0:08:42.810,0:08:47.030
potential improvements for your design.

0:08:47.579,0:08:51.550
Another great part about doing
participant observation with designers

0:08:51.550,0:08:56.290
and tabletop gamers is that you'll get
the opportunity to try a wide range of

0:08:56.290,0:09:01.600
games, both prototypes and publish games.
This will broaden your perspective and

0:09:01.600,0:09:06.790
open you up to new ideas. For example, I
mostly own and play cooperative games,

0:09:06.790,0:09:11.440
and therefore most of my designs have
been co-op. But when I playtest with

0:09:11.440,0:09:15.639
local groups, I'm taken out of my comfort
zone and I get to experience new game

0:09:15.639,0:09:19.930
systems I might not otherwise play. I end
up playing competitive games with

0:09:19.930,0:09:23.829
mechanics I've never tried or that are
being implemented in ways I'm not

0:09:23.829,0:09:28.600
familiar with. This in turn inspires new
ideas from my designs and gives me

0:09:28.600,0:09:33.149
insights into how other designers create
games.

0:09:33.980,0:09:38.060
Okay, so I'm sure you're saying to yourself
at this point, "participant observation

0:09:38.060,0:09:43.070
sounds amazing! But how can I add it to
my design process?" Well I'm glad you

0:09:43.070,0:09:45.770
asked!
Participant observation is a great way

0:09:45.770,0:09:49.640
to learn about human behavior, and since
tabletop games are effectively

0:09:49.640,0:09:54.140
predicated on player interaction, this
method is a great way to learn about

0:09:54.140,0:09:58.610
player motivations, interactions, and
choices, while also getting feedback

0:09:58.610,0:10:02.870
about your game system. Participant
observation is a great way to collect

0:10:02.870,0:10:08.060
valuable information about your games as
you playtest. Involving yourself deeply

0:10:08.060,0:10:12.860
in the playtesting experience will
benefit you in countless ways: increasing

0:10:12.860,0:10:17.570
your own knowledge about games generally,
your prototype specifically, and the

0:10:17.570,0:10:22.100
types of designs other people are
playing and working on. The playtesting

0:10:22.100,0:10:26.750
process also has the dual purpose of
getting feedback on your games *and*

0:10:26.750,0:10:31.370
developing bonds with others by playing
their prototypes, creating a pattern of

0:10:31.370,0:10:35.630
reciprocity that could benefit you and
the game design community. When you have

0:10:35.630,0:10:40.160
a prototype at any stage, one of the best
things you can do is to playtest it,

0:10:40.160,0:10:44.210
preferably with some other people,
because it's really hard to assess a

0:10:44.210,0:10:47.870
game objectively
when you designed it. And for a number of

0:10:47.870,0:10:52.490
reasons, whenever possible, you want to
playtests with people who are 'weak ties'

0:10:52.490,0:10:58.640
relationships, meaning acquaintances who
aren't your close friends or family. This

0:10:58.640,0:11:03.530
doesn't necessarily mean total strangers,
but can be people you just met or ones

0:11:03.530,0:11:09.500
you see regularly but not who you know
really well. In many cases, these weak

0:11:09.500,0:11:14.540
ties acquaintances are some of the best
people to playtests with: they aren't so

0:11:14.540,0:11:18.170
close to you that they will have an
inherent bias in favor of your creative

0:11:18.170,0:11:22.990
work or want to protect your feelings
from any critical feedback. It is

0:11:22.990,0:11:27.980
extremely valuable - especially during the
prototyping phase - to have a group of

0:11:27.980,0:11:32.030
people who know enough about games and
game design that they can provide useful

0:11:32.030,0:11:36.380
feedback that is grounded in
experience, so if you have local gaming

0:11:36.380,0:11:41.420
groups - or better yet, tabletop designer
meetups - you should take your designs to

0:11:41.420,0:11:45.890
those events and get those people to
play them. Once you find a playtesting

0:11:45.890,0:11:50.360
group, you'll want to prepare
yourself to participate and observe: get

0:11:50.360,0:11:53.810
your note-taking tools ready and
position yourself where you can see as

0:11:53.810,0:11:58.010
many players as possible. You're going to
want to be able to see their faces so

0:11:58.010,0:12:02.720
you can record reactions like smiles,
frowns, and so forth. You can actually

0:12:02.720,0:12:06.980
practice this while playing other
people's prototypes, as well. In fact, this

0:12:06.980,0:12:11.150
might be a better way to start, since it
will be easier for you - when you're first

0:12:11.150,0:12:15.530
learning to do participant observation -
to practice taking notes when you aren't

0:12:15.530,0:12:19.910
also trying to teach your game. This is a
good way to learn how other designers

0:12:19.910,0:12:24.800
test their prototypes, as well; note the
kinds of questions they ask players, how

0:12:24.800,0:12:28.700
people react to things that happen at
the table, and the types of interactions

0:12:28.700,0:12:33.230
that go on during and after a playtesting session.
These pieces of

0:12:33.230,0:12:37.070
information will make up the data you
are collecting to improve your design

0:12:37.070,0:12:42.470
process. In anthropology, we use the term
"informants" to describe the people we are

0:12:42.470,0:12:47.180
studying firsthand. As a game designer,
your informants are your playtesters:

0:12:47.180,0:12:51.860
the people who you will be asking to
play and critique your games, and whose

0:12:51.860,0:12:55.960
reactions and feedback will help guide
the next iteration of your design.

0:12:55.960,0:13:00.650
Designers usually test their designs
themselves, with friends and family, their

0:13:00.650,0:13:05.870
spouses, and with anyone they know who
will try out their game. This is a great

0:13:05.870,0:13:10.490
way to get some initial kinks worked out
and to test out new ideas, but after a

0:13:10.490,0:13:14.300
certain point the usefulness of this
kind of testing will diminish, and that's

0:13:14.300,0:13:18.410
when you want some new informants.
These should be the weak ties acquaintances I

0:13:18.410,0:13:22.460
was talking about: people who haven't
played your design, who don't have

0:13:22.460,0:13:26.480
preconceptions about it, and who don't
have a strong emotional investment in

0:13:26.480,0:13:30.590
you and your feelings. It's vitally
important that you get a wide range of

0:13:30.590,0:13:34.940
people to test your designs for
playability, balance, and to figure out if

0:13:34.940,0:13:38.900
the game is fun, Now it might sound
challenging to get people you don't know

0:13:38.900,0:13:42.590
very well to play test your designs and
to give you feedback, but you'd be

0:13:42.590,0:13:47.279
surprised how easy it really is.
The thing social scientists know that

0:13:47.279,0:13:51.330
pretty much enables all of their
research is that people usually like to

0:13:51.330,0:13:54.900
talk about themselves and to tell you
what they think about the things that

0:13:54.900,0:13:58.230
matter to them.
So getting tabletop gamers to test your

0:13:58.230,0:14:03.390
games and give you feedback is generally
pretty easy; even at the first few game

0:14:03.390,0:14:07.940
design meetups I attended, I was quickly
welcomed and asked what I was designing.

0:14:07.940,0:14:12.390
The designers I've met make an effort to
play other people's games, and to give

0:14:12.390,0:14:16.800
constructive feedback, even for
prototypes that aren't very good. I was

0:14:16.800,0:14:21.300
able to get even veteran designers to
try out my original prototypes, and they

0:14:21.300,0:14:25.290
picked it apart in the nicest way
possible, giving me a bunch of ideas for

0:14:25.290,0:14:30.960
how I could improve my game. You should
be aiming to get as many playtesters as

0:14:30.960,0:14:34.500
possible to try out your prototypes, and
to get as much feedback about your

0:14:34.500,0:14:39.089
designs from them as you can.
Ask questions, make sure they understand the

0:14:39.089,0:14:43.650
rules, find out what they like and what
they'd change; basically, take note of

0:14:43.650,0:14:47.970
anything they'll tell you about your
prototypes. That being said, you need to

0:14:47.970,0:14:51.300
make sure you are keeping track of all
this information in an organized,

0:14:51.300,0:14:55.530
systematic way, because you will not
remember everything from memory alone,

0:14:55.530,0:15:00.270
especially a lot of the details. So I've
talked about note-taking, but what does

0:15:00.270,0:15:04.350
that mean when you're doing participant
observation? One of the challenges for

0:15:04.350,0:15:08.010
this kind of research is that it is
difficult to take notes on behaviors,

0:15:08.010,0:15:12.510
reactions, and issues that come up with
the prototype itself, while also

0:15:12.510,0:15:17.040
overseeing a playtest. Later in the
design process you might be able to get

0:15:17.040,0:15:21.900
someone to teach your prototypes so that
you can focus on observations, but even

0:15:21.900,0:15:25.800
if you have to teach the game yourself,
you can still record all the important

0:15:25.800,0:15:29.430
stuff your playtesters are telling you,
whether it's with their voices, their

0:15:29.430,0:15:33.900
reactions, or their interactions. It's
important that you make observations

0:15:33.900,0:15:38.190
with as much detail as possible. In
anthropology, we always want to achieve

0:15:38.190,0:15:43.529
what we call "thick description:" we want
to recount the sights, the smells, the

0:15:43.529,0:15:47.190
tastes, and the richness of the
interactions between people and the

0:15:47.190,0:15:49.470
behaviors they perform in their daily
lives.

0:15:49.470,0:15:54.750
now that level of detail isn't really
necessary in design; you probably don't

0:15:54.750,0:15:58.709
need to note that player one is eating a
tuna sandwich or that the walls of the

0:15:58.709,0:16:03.330
room are yellow. But you do want to keep
track of subtle pieces of information,

0:16:03.330,0:16:07.709
like whether somebody looks confused
but isn't saying anything or if

0:16:07.709,0:16:12.089
particular mechanic or interaction
elicits groans or excited smiles from

0:16:12.089,0:16:16.860
playtesters. People can tell you a lot
without saying a word,

0:16:16.860,0:16:21.000
and at times we might need prompting to
state what we are feeling when we're

0:16:21.000,0:16:25.950
playing a game. If you can, take time
after the playtest is finished to ask

0:16:25.950,0:16:30.150
people about their reactions. You might
get some deeper insights into what's

0:16:30.150,0:16:35.970
working - or not in your prototype. All
this is a long way of saying, keep track

0:16:35.970,0:16:39.900
of more than just the words people speak
when they test your prototypes, and

0:16:39.900,0:16:44.490
follow up whenever possible to find out
what motivates their actions in game and

0:16:44.490,0:16:50.370
their reactions to the game. One of the
ways you can get the best feedback

0:16:50.370,0:16:55.560
possible is to maintain some objective
distance. You don't want to do anything

0:16:55.560,0:16:59.250
that will make your playtesters feel
unwilling to give you their honest

0:16:59.250,0:17:03.570
feedback. Some of the best advice I've
ever gotten for doing qualitative

0:17:03.570,0:17:08.040
research is that you should view your
informants as experts and act like what

0:17:08.040,0:17:12.689
they are telling you is fact. That means
that - at least while you are interacting

0:17:12.689,0:17:17.040
with them in a research context - you
treat them as if they know all the

0:17:17.040,0:17:21.870
answers and that everything they tell
you is important. In terms of game design

0:17:21.870,0:17:26.699
this means that, whatever your play
testers tell you, you treat it as fact.

0:17:26.699,0:17:31.710
Now, of course, you can disagree with
their assessment or suggestions, or think

0:17:31.710,0:17:35.040
that they're flat-out wrong and that you
have a better solution, but you never

0:17:35.040,0:17:39.510
need to tell them that; just collect the
data. You're not there to argue with

0:17:39.510,0:17:44.370
their opinions; you're trying to assess
the quality of your design. So treat your

0:17:44.370,0:17:48.630
playtesters like experts and let them
give you their unfiltered reactions.

0:17:48.630,0:17:53.429
Later, you'll go back over your data and
decide what to work with and what to

0:17:53.429,0:17:58.080
ignore. It's important to keep in mind
that objective distance also includes

0:17:58.080,0:18:01.710
the time you step away from your
community to work with your data alone.

0:18:01.710,0:18:05.880
In design, this is the time when you
develop your prototype

0:18:05.880,0:18:10.590
using the information you have collected
from playtesting. After all, as much fun

0:18:10.590,0:18:15.360
as playtesting can be, you still need to
reflect on player feedback, iterate on

0:18:15.360,0:18:19.470
your prototype, and setup components and
rewrite rules for the next stage of

0:18:19.470,0:18:24.510
testing. That is the time for you to look
at what people said and decide how you

0:18:24.510,0:18:31.320
will or will not implement it into your
game. Using participant observation in

0:18:31.320,0:18:35.390
the design process is similar to some of
the practices designers already use.

0:18:35.390,0:18:41.100
After all, tabletop game players are
passionate about their hobby. Many of the

0:18:41.100,0:18:44.700
designers I've worked with are already
running playtests in a way that is

0:18:44.700,0:18:48.990
reminiscent of anthropological
methodologies; that's what I originally

0:18:48.990,0:18:53.370
inspired me to begin this project. My
hope is that these steps and techniques

0:18:53.370,0:18:57.840
are familiar, but that they also offer
some new insights for how you can start

0:18:57.840,0:19:03.270
to improve your design process by adding
a social science approach. If you have

0:19:03.270,0:19:07.380
any comments or questions, please get
involved in the discussion below, and if

0:19:07.380,0:19:11.850
you liked this video or found it helpful,
please subscribe to AnthroView and join

0:19:11.850,0:19:16.560
our Facebook group. Next time, I'll tell
you about using focus group techniques

0:19:16.560,0:19:23.880
for playtesting. Until then, may knowledge
guide you! Thanks for watching.

Video 3: Focus Groups for Tabletop Designers – URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSBt05F-sdE&t=69s

0:00:10.850,0:00:17.210
Hello everybody, and welcome to AnthroView! I'm Jamieson Mockel, and today I'll be

0:00:17.210,0:00:22.670
presenting the third video in our Critical Lens series, Anthropology for

0:00:22.670,0:00:27.830
Tabletop Game Designers. And today I'm gonna be talking about focus groups.

0:00:27.830,0:00:33.110
Focus groups are a social science research method where a moderator gets a group of

0:00:33.110,0:00:36.949
people together and starts a conversation between those people to

0:00:36.949,0:00:41.690
collect data about their feelings and opinions and thoughts and all that good

0:00:41.690,0:00:47.030
stuff. And I have some experience doing focus groups, because my first real job

0:00:47.030,0:00:54.339
as an anthropologist was conducting and researching focus groups with a

0:00:54.339,0:01:00.559
community group in San Jose. So, it's a method that, when I started getting

0:01:00.559,0:01:05.449
interested in game design and learning about playtesting, I immediately

0:01:05.449,0:01:10.370
realized how applicable some of the skills I'd been picking up doing focus

0:01:10.370,0:01:16.969
groups would be for designing games and getting the most out of playtests and

0:01:16.969,0:01:23.990
all that stuff that a lot of game
designers use to find out if their games

0:01:23.990,0:01:28.640
are working and if their games are fun
and if everything is kind of going

0:01:28.640,0:01:34.969
the way it's meant to go. Getting a group
of people together to playtest a board

0:01:34.969,0:01:41.420
game is basically the best way to learn
about a game design and to make sure

0:01:41.420,0:01:45.140
that it's doing what it's supposed to be
doing. I really hope you enjoy this video

0:01:45.140,0:01:50.380
and that it's informative, so let's get
to it.

0:01:51.490,0:01:56.509
Many of you might already know something
about focus groups; you might have

0:01:56.509,0:02:01.399
participated in one for market research
or a clinical trial. For those less

0:02:01.399,0:02:06.229
familiar, a focus group is a form of data
collection where a facilitator or

0:02:06.229,0:02:10.280
moderator leads a group of people
through a discussion to learn about

0:02:10.280,0:02:15.380
their beliefs, values, habits, and
preferences. There are many ways to

0:02:15.380,0:02:20.450
conduct focus groups, including ones with
two-way mirrors and video recording, but

0:02:20.450,0:02:24.440
that isn't really the kind of focus
group you're likely to use in tabletop

0:02:24.440,0:02:28.190
game design, although recording play
tests can be a really helpful way to

0:02:28.190,0:02:33.380
test prototypes in their later stages, as
designer Matt Leacock has pointed out in

0:02:33.380,0:02:38.299
numerous interviews. For the most part
though, a focus group for our terms is

0:02:38.299,0:02:43.310
very similar to your usual playtesting
style: you have a group of people play

0:02:43.310,0:02:47.390
your prototype, and you keep track of how
they play and the things they say about

0:02:47.390,0:02:51.260
the game, and then afterwards you ask
some questions about their experience.

0:02:51.260,0:02:56.810
The difference, really, is how you should
be collecting the data when you use this

0:02:56.810,0:03:02.060
method. There are some key advantages to
collecting responses in a group setting.

0:03:02.060,0:03:07.639
For starters, the interactivity of focus
groups means that you get to collect a

0:03:07.639,0:03:11.720
lot of responses from a variety of
people who each bring their own

0:03:11.720,0:03:17.030
experiences, knowledge, and play style
preferences to the table. This means you

0:03:17.030,0:03:21.829
can get feedback about the prototype
itself *and* see what testers say to each

0:03:21.829,0:03:26.239
other during their in-game interactions,
which tells you more about the player

0:03:26.239,0:03:30.980
dynamics at the table, and therefore the
experiences people are having while

0:03:30.980,0:03:34.099
playing.
You want to know what people think is

0:03:34.099,0:03:37.970
fun about your design and what needs
work, and one of the best ways to

0:03:37.970,0:03:41.090
accomplish this is to observe as many
people as you can

0:03:41.090,0:03:46.099
testing your prototype. Getting a variety
of opinions is extremely important since

0:03:46.099,0:03:50.359
everyone's tastes and interest will be
different, and what one player likes will

0:03:50.359,0:03:54.590
not necessarily be the same as another
person's opinion. That's another reason

0:03:54.590,0:03:58.700
why focus group research is a great
process for getting a better sense of

0:03:58.700,0:04:03.680
your games audience; are you getting more
positive reactions from people who like

0:04:03.680,0:04:06.800
euro game?
Or people who like dice chuckers?

0:04:06.800,0:04:12.260
Or role-playing games? Knowing your target
audience is always helpful as a designer;

0:04:12.260,0:04:17.870
after all, as players we all have
preferences that guide our choices of

0:04:17.870,0:04:22.190
what games to purchase and play. Of
course it can also be helpful to get

0:04:22.190,0:04:26.150
feedback from the people who don't
necessarily fall into the usual audience

0:04:26.150,0:04:31.130
for your game, but that's just another
strength of group testing. If you attend

0:04:31.130,0:04:35.360
playtesting events, you will likely get
players who don't often play the types

0:04:35.360,0:04:39.410
of games you design, and this will give
you access to a wide range of opinions

0:04:39.410,0:04:44.990
you wouldn't get from your usual board
gaming group. Moreover, this kind of

0:04:44.990,0:04:49.340
research is a great way to develop new
questions for future iterations of your

0:04:49.340,0:04:54.500
game. For example, if there's a mechanic the
testers say is not working as intended

0:04:54.500,0:04:59.210
in your current prototype, you can ask
specific questions about how they think

0:04:59.210,0:05:03.950
it can be improved, and then use that
feedback to help redesign the mechanic.

0:05:03.950,0:05:09.290
Then, once you have a new iteration, you
will know to ask questions about that

0:05:09.290,0:05:14.090
mechanic in your next playtest, to see
if your changes worked, or if you still

0:05:14.090,0:05:19.160
need to refine things more. Now, despite
these advantages, there are some things

0:05:19.160,0:05:24.140
you have to watch out for when you use
focus group methods. The most obvious is

0:05:24.140,0:05:28.430
that collecting data from a lot of
sources at once is challenging; you want

0:05:28.430,0:05:32.930
to keep track of what everyone says, and
what's working well, and what needs to be

0:05:32.930,0:05:37.430
adjusted in your prototype. To some
extent, good note-taking for group

0:05:37.430,0:05:41.960
research is something you'll have to
take time to work on. After all, practice

0:05:41.960,0:05:46.280
makes perfect, and as you do more
observations in group research, you'll be

0:05:46.280,0:05:50.360
able to take more detailed notes faster
and you'll learn what information is

0:05:50.360,0:05:54.350
important to take note of. But there are
a few techniques you can use when

0:05:54.350,0:05:58.610
starting out to ease this transition. A
good method for getting the most out of

0:05:58.610,0:06:03.200
a playtest is to ask players to take
their own notes during play - something

0:06:03.200,0:06:07.430
fellow designers are likely already
accustomed to - or to fill out a short

0:06:07.430,0:06:11.900
questionnaire about your prototype. I've
known a number of designers who use

0:06:11.900,0:06:15.470
questionnaires, and it's a great way to
get the most complete and thorough

0:06:15.470,0:06:19.430
response possible. This
might seem like something you'd do later

0:06:19.430,0:06:24.139
on in the design process, but it's fairly
easy to put together a general template

0:06:24.139,0:06:28.160
with some questions that will apply to a
wide range of prototypes, and I'll share

0:06:28.160,0:06:31.750
some suggestions for doing this at the
end of the video.

0:06:31.750,0:06:36.830
Another major difficulty is that, in many
group research settings, there's

0:06:36.830,0:06:41.360
sometimes a tendency for one or two
people to dominate the conversation. This

0:06:41.360,0:06:45.320
is a common occurrence in any group
setting; some of us are just naturally

0:06:45.320,0:06:49.580
chattier than others and have a lot to
say without much prompting. That can

0:06:49.580,0:06:53.120
actually be really helpful in
playtesting, since people having too much

0:06:53.120,0:06:57.410
to say is usually better than people
having nothing to say at all, but you

0:06:57.410,0:07:02.030
also want to get as much data as you can
from everyone at the table. After all,

0:07:02.030,0:07:06.350
some people are more reserved or slow to
respond, but this doesn't make their

0:07:06.350,0:07:10.550
feedback any less valuable. Since you
don't want to discourage the people with

0:07:10.550,0:07:15.139
the most to say, a good way to address
this is to pay attention to the less

0:07:15.139,0:07:20.330
talkative testers and ask to them questions directly. This can help break the ice a

0:07:20.330,0:07:24.500
bit and prevents the wallflowers from feeling like they're cutting into the

0:07:24.500,0:07:29.270
conversation, while also giving them a chance to share their thoughts. A related

0:07:29.270,0:07:32.570
problem is when you have someone who thinks that the play test is a debate

0:07:32.570,0:07:37.910
and wants everyone - including you - to agree with them; they have a strong

0:07:37.910,0:07:42.050
opinion, they think they know what's best for your design or about games in

0:07:42.050,0:07:46.940
general, and they want the group to validate it. To some degree this is an

0:07:46.940,0:07:52.190
unavoidable situation sometimes, and it can be tense or just annoying but there

0:07:52.190,0:07:56.960
are ways to prevent it from derailing your playtest. First off, you still want

0:07:56.960,0:08:01.039
to treat that tester as an expert - as I talked about in my previous video on

0:08:01.039,0:08:05.660
participant observation. Remember, you aren't trying to defend your design

0:08:05.660,0:08:10.370
choices; you want to know what can be improved. Still, it can be

0:08:10.370,0:08:13.610
counterproductive if one person is preventing the other testers from

0:08:13.610,0:08:17.870
feeling comfortable providing their
feedback. If you can, you want to

0:08:17.870,0:08:21.710
encourage others to share their
unfiltered opinions without shutting

0:08:21.710,0:08:26.659
down your opinionated testers. After all,
maybe they *do* know what they're talking

0:08:26.659,0:08:30.620
about but that doesn't mean their
perspective is the only valid one.

0:08:30.620,0:08:34.310
Acknowledge that you have noted their
suggestions but let them know that you

0:08:34.310,0:08:38.270
want to get as many different opinions
as possible, then ask other members of

0:08:38.270,0:08:43.279
the group to share their feedback. So
let's say you want to start running your

0:08:43.279,0:08:48.050
playtests like a focus group: that's
awesome! And in a lot of ways it's going

0:08:48.050,0:08:52.310
to be an easy transition because parts
of the playtesting process are already

0:08:52.310,0:08:56.900
pretty similar to social scientific
group research, but you're still going to

0:08:56.900,0:09:00.980
need to learn methods and techniques to
get the most out of this approach. That's

0:09:00.980,0:09:06.080
okay though, because I'm here to teach you
about it. The first step - once you have a

0:09:06.080,0:09:09.890
prototype to test of course - is to get a
group of people together to play your

0:09:09.890,0:09:14.270
game. Now you'll hear me say this
throughout the series: that the best

0:09:14.270,0:09:18.320
people to playtest with are game
designers and people that you don't know

0:09:18.320,0:09:23.330
very well: your weak ties acquaintances.
So if you aren't already part of a

0:09:23.330,0:09:28.310
design community you should start to
look for one. That being said, if this is

0:09:28.310,0:09:32.870
your first time trying out the focus
group approach, it's actually helpful to

0:09:32.870,0:09:36.709
test with friends and family so you can
practice these methods and get

0:09:36.709,0:09:41.270
comfortable with teaching your prototype,
taking notes on feedback and interactions,

0:09:41.270,0:09:46.760
and so on. When social scientists prepare
to facilitate a focus group, we have a

0:09:46.760,0:09:51.290
research design. This includes an outline
for how we're going to structure a group

0:09:51.290,0:09:56.120
session, research questions that guide
our project, lists of questions to ask

0:09:56.120,0:10:01.339
the group, and things like that. As a
designer, after you have a playtesting

0:10:01.339,0:10:04.910
session planned, you'll want to make a
list of the things you'll be looking for

0:10:04.910,0:10:09.320
during your observations. Start with the
big, broad questions you want to know

0:10:09.320,0:10:14.720
about your designs: does the system work
as is? What do people enjoy and what

0:10:14.720,0:10:20.480
would they change? And most importantly,
is it fun? These are some of the research

0:10:20.480,0:10:25.610
questions that should guide all your
designs. You also want to make a specific

0:10:25.610,0:10:29.180
list of questions for your prototype;
things you want to know about your

0:10:29.180,0:10:32.450
current iteration.
Maybe you just designed a new movement

0:10:32.450,0:10:36.470
mechanic, or you want to know if people
are using a certain character ability;

0:10:36.470,0:10:41.150
these are focused questions about your
design. Some of these questions might be

0:10:41.150,0:10:44.150
answered by asking your playtesters
directly, like if you

0:10:44.150,0:10:47.660
want to know how they felt about a
mechanic. Others you'll answer through

0:10:47.660,0:10:53.060
observations of the group play session,
such as if certain options or cards are

0:10:53.060,0:10:57.800
being used. And those observations will
often inform new questions. For example,

0:10:57.800,0:11:03.170
if you designed a new card and no one
plays it, you might ask people why they

0:11:03.170,0:11:08.450
didn't use that card. Like much of
tabletop game play, group research is all

0:11:08.450,0:11:13.400
about the interactions between people.
You can get individual opinions by

0:11:13.400,0:11:17.300
playtesting a design with a single
person, but what you should be focused on

0:11:17.300,0:11:21.980
in a group test is how players do things
in response to each other, and the

0:11:21.980,0:11:26.870
interesting dynamics that play out when
their in-game actions result in player

0:11:26.870,0:11:32.990
reactions or interesting counterplay. The
reason to use focus groups for game

0:11:32.990,0:11:37.250
design is that you want to know how
people interact at the table, and how

0:11:37.250,0:11:43.160
your mechanics interface with the other
design choices. So you want to see how

0:11:43.160,0:11:46.970
players react to something like the
effects of a card or the dice system

0:11:46.970,0:11:51.440
you're using, but you can also take this
opportunity to see how mechanics

0:11:51.440,0:11:56.180
interact with each other. Group testing
is especially great for revealing 'broken'

0:11:56.180,0:12:01.310
combinations of in-game choices; maybe
two cards played in sequence create an

0:12:01.310,0:12:06.680
unstoppable victory for one player or, on
the other hand, maybe many choices simply

0:12:06.680,0:12:11.240
cancel out what other players do. This
was the case in one of my first designs

0:12:11.240,0:12:15.440
but I didn't realize it until one of my
informants played my prototype to a

0:12:15.440,0:12:19.850
stalemate with his opponent. Seeing new
people play my game highlighted

0:12:19.850,0:12:24.440
something none of my previous tests did:
that some of my base mechanics were not

0:12:24.440,0:12:29.840
lending themselves to satisfying player
interactions or in-game choices. So be

0:12:29.840,0:12:34.130
sure to make notes on how players
respond to things in the game and if

0:12:34.130,0:12:38.330
something seems imbalanced in terms of
the game system. One of the techniques

0:12:38.330,0:12:42.530
that social scientists use when
conducting focus groups is creating a

0:12:42.530,0:12:46.850
visual representation of people's
responses and reactions that everyone

0:12:46.850,0:12:50.660
involved can see, which helps build a
more complete picture of people's

0:12:50.660,0:12:54.050
thoughts and opinions.
Now since time is always at a premium

0:12:54.050,0:12:57.529
when running a playtest, you won't be
able to use this approach

0:12:57.529,0:13:00.709
with the same depth as an
anthropological focus group; I know

0:13:00.709,0:13:05.180
that from experience. But you can use a
smaller scale version of this approach

0:13:05.180,0:13:10.129
with a felt pen and a large sheet of
paper or some note cards. When you're

0:13:10.129,0:13:14.629
asking for playtester reactions you can
write down a few key words and display

0:13:14.629,0:13:20.029
them on the table and ask people to
elaborate or expand on them. Let's say

0:13:20.029,0:13:24.649
someone tells you a mechanic is
confusing. Using this method you might

0:13:24.649,0:13:29.209
make a 'confusion' card and another card
with the mechanic that was confusing, and

0:13:29.209,0:13:33.319
place them together on the table. If
another player brings up something they

0:13:33.319,0:13:38.569
thought was confusing, add another card.
At the end of your playtest you can

0:13:38.569,0:13:42.290
just take a picture of these cards or
you can keep them together, and you'll

0:13:42.290,0:13:45.860
have a convenient way to keep track of
things that came up in your playtests.

0:13:45.860,0:13:50.870
If you test your prototype multiple
times in a day you can even add to these

0:13:50.870,0:13:55.519
lists and create an even more extensive
record of feedback. This creates an

0:13:55.519,0:14:00.050
easy-to-use reminder for you, as well as
providing a good visual prompt for

0:14:00.050,0:14:03.829
testers giving you feedback. Another
thing you want to keep in mind is that

0:14:03.829,0:14:09.079
playtesting is about more than just the
actual play of the game: it helps you to

0:14:09.079,0:14:13.670
understand people's impressions and
reactions to the play experience. If it's

0:14:13.670,0:14:18.559
possible, you want to get your testers to
stick around for a bit after testing to

0:14:18.559,0:14:22.670
answer some questions and give you
feedback. Make sure to take advantage of

0:14:22.670,0:14:26.720
the time following any playtesting
session to debrief with your playtesters:

0:14:26.720,0:14:30.860
check in with them, ask questions
that you thought of during the session,

0:14:30.860,0:14:35.509
and take the time to get direct answers
about their impressions. It might be a

0:14:35.509,0:14:39.769
good idea to tell players before you
start testing that you'd appreciate them

0:14:39.769,0:14:44.209
staying after the play test to answer
some questions, as it can encourage them

0:14:44.209,0:14:48.589
to make some mental notes while playing.
Let them know that - if they're willing -

0:14:48.589,0:14:52.339
you'd like to get their postgame
thoughts so you can get a fuller picture

0:14:52.339,0:14:56.329
of their experience. You won't be able to
get all this information while they're

0:14:56.329,0:15:00.410
busy playing your prototype, after all,
and you want to gather as much data as

0:15:00.410,0:15:04.579
you can for improving your next
iteration. Now if someone says they have

0:15:04.579,0:15:09.319
time to play but not to debrief, that's
fine: you still want them to participate

0:15:09.319,0:15:13.890
and you can get valuable data
from them, but having people play your

0:15:13.890,0:15:17.730
prototype then answer questions
afterwards is one of your best sources

0:15:17.730,0:15:22.200
of information about your designs. If
you're using a questionnaire this can be

0:15:22.200,0:15:25.950
the time to have them fill that out, as
well, but you will likely also have

0:15:25.950,0:15:30.120
questions you want to ask that you
didn't have prepared ahead of time:

0:15:30.120,0:15:34.560
ones that came up during play.
Of course you don't want to overextend your goodwill

0:15:34.560,0:15:39.060
by trying to take too much of people's
time, but it's generally acceptable in

0:15:39.060,0:15:43.590
playtesting to make some time after
playing a prototype to debrief in this

0:15:43.590,0:15:47.820
way, and the insights you can get from
this can be some of the most valuable

0:15:47.820,0:15:52.170
and informative things people say. After
all, this gives you a sense of their

0:15:52.170,0:15:56.100
overall impressions, which is a great way
to determine if they thought your design

0:15:56.100,0:15:58.710
was fun,
functional, and unique, which are the

0:15:58.710,0:16:01.850
qualities you want to achieve.

0:16:04.020,0:16:08.130
Now, conducting a good focus group
requires some skills that take time to

0:16:08.130,0:16:11.790
develop, as well as a good sense of the
information you're looking to collect.

0:16:11.790,0:16:16.350
You want to know if your prototype is
working as intended, what is good, and

0:16:16.350,0:16:20.910
what needs adjustments, and if the game
is fun overall. As far as skills go

0:16:20.910,0:16:24.600
you'll want to practice note-taking,
especially to keep track of the things

0:16:24.600,0:16:28.050
people tell you in an organized way that
you'll be able to refer back to later,

0:16:28.050,0:16:33.240
and you'll want to maintain objective
distance: not taking anything personal if

0:16:33.240,0:16:36.959
someone doesn't like part of your design,
or thinks they have all the right

0:16:36.959,0:16:40.740
answers for how to 'fix' it.
It also helps to be good at teaching

0:16:40.740,0:16:44.700
games, since in many cases you'll be
explaining your prototype and helping

0:16:44.700,0:16:49.230
testers play. Some of these skills you
will develop over time, but there are a

0:16:49.230,0:16:53.610

few helpful tips that you can use to
improve your experience even during

0:16:53.610,0:16:58.500
early group playtesting. First off, you
want to make sure everyone is sharing

0:16:58.500,0:17:02.339
their thoughts. Some people are naturally
more inclined to speak up about

0:17:02.339,0:17:07.230
something they like or dislike; others
need a bit of prompting. If someone at

0:17:07.230,0:17:10.650
the table is not saying much, it isn't
necessarily because they don't have

0:17:10.650,0:17:15.630
anything to say. Pay attention to the
quieter folks and ask them directly to

0:17:15.630,0:17:19.949
tell you what they think. This will
facilitate a more dynamic discussion and

0:17:19.949,0:17:24.030
they might have some great insights that
give you new, valuable information about

0:17:24.030,0:17:30.690
your design. Remember: the key reason to
do group-style research is to get as

0:17:30.690,0:17:36.360
many opinions and ideas as possible from
a wide range of testers. Take advantage

0:17:36.360,0:17:42.059
of the opportunity to hear what everyone
has to say about your game. Also, even if

0:17:42.059,0:17:46.230
your audio or video recording the play-
testing session, you want to take notes

0:17:46.230,0:17:50.280
that you can refer back to while you are
asking the group questions about the

0:17:50.280,0:17:55.200

prototype after playing. Things often
come up in a playtest that you could

0:17:55.200,0:17:59.429
not have anticipated and you'll want to
ask questions directly related to those

0:17:59.429,0:18:04.559
issues. If you're relying completely on a
recording you won't be able to refer

0:18:04.559,0:18:08.490
back to things people said while you are
at the table with a given group, so do

0:18:08.490,0:18:13.520
yourself a favor and make notes you can
use during and after any group testing.

0:18:13.520,0:18:18.060
Finally, when you're formulating
questions to ask after a play session,

0:18:18.060,0:18:23.220
you want to try and focus on open-ended
questions that give participants room to

0:18:23.220,0:18:28.530
respond and to answer in their own words.
This is generally good advice for any

0:18:28.530,0:18:32.160
social science research that's trying to
find out about people's feelings,

0:18:32.160,0:18:37.200
opinions, and tastes. So if you want to
know if they thought the game was fun or

0:18:37.200,0:18:42.180
if a particular mechanic was working, you
don't necessarily want to flat-out ask

0:18:42.180,0:18:47.280
"was the game fun?" or "did you like the
trading mechanics?" because people don't

0:18:47.280,0:18:52.050
always have a solid answer for that.
Instead ask what they enjoyed, what they

0:18:52.050,0:18:56.880

didn't enjoy, what stood out to them, and
so forth. If you're interested in their

0:18:56.880,0:19:01.860
reactions to particular mechanics, try to
get more open answers by asking

0:19:01.860,0:19:06.630
questions like, "what did you think of the
trading mechanic?" or "how would you change

0:19:06.630,0:19:11.430
the way you trade resources in the game?"
This will give you ideas for new

0:19:11.430,0:19:15.690
iterations of your design based on their
answers, as well as providing more

0:19:15.690,0:19:21.750
valuable information than binary 'good or
bad,' 'like or dislike' responses, because

0:19:21.750,0:19:25.950
you'll elicit more nuanced feedback that
gets to the heart of what people are

0:19:25.950,0:19:30.600
feeling while they play. If you're going
to create a quick questionnaire for use

0:19:30.600,0:19:34.620
during testing you'll probably want to
include some questions that are specific

0:19:34.620,0:19:39.060
to your design but you can also start
with some broader questions that can be

0:19:39.060,0:19:43.590
applied to any prototype. If you haven't
done this kind of data collection before

0:19:43.590,0:19:47.910
here are some examples that you could
include in your questionnaire or revise

0:19:47.910,0:19:53.220
to fit your needs: "What was your favorite
part of the game?" "What was your favorite

0:19:53.220,0:19:58.190

mechanic or interaction?" "What was your
least favorite mechanic or interaction?"

0:19:58.190,0:20:03.780
"Did any of the rules confuse you?" "What
suggestions would you make to improve

0:20:03.780,0:20:07.980
the game?" These are just a few possible
questions to help get you started.

0:20:07.980,0:20:12.210
Feel free to use them in any way you
want or just as inspiration to create

0:20:12.210,0:20:17.100
your own. Focus groups can help you learn
all kinds of interesting things about

0:20:17.100,0:20:22.530
any topic, and the overall format is
already so similar to playtesting that

0:20:22.530,0:20:26.010
these methods should be able to help
improve your game designs with minimal

0:20:26.010,0:20:30.600
effort. Just remember that tabletop games
and focus groups are all about the

0:20:30.600,0:20:34.049
participants:
how they react to things and how they

0:20:34.049,0:20:38.309
interact with each other. You're just
there to facilitate their experience and

0:20:38.309,0:20:43.529
to record what you observe. Whether
people love or hate your design you can

0:20:43.529,0:20:47.850
still get great information from group
testing that you can't get any other way.

0:20:47.850,0:20:53.490
So give these techniques a shot, and as
always, if you have any questions, get

0:20:53.490,0:20:58.200

involved in the comments below. Next time, I'll be covering the importance of being

0:20:58.200,0:21:02.610
part of a game design community, and how interacting with your fellow designers

0:21:02.610,0:21:08.020
helps you to design better games. So I hope you'll join me for that. Until then,

0:21:08.040,0:21:12.980
may knowledge guide you. Thanks for watching.

Video 4: Community Building for Tabletop Designers – URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4zBWRMvLAU&t=43s

0:00:08.860,0:00:15.139
Hello everybody, and welcome to AnthroView.
Today we'll be presenting the last

0:00:15.139,0:00:20.090
video in our Critical Lens series
'Anthropology for Tabletop Game Designers,'

0:00:20.090,0:00:24.340
and in this video I'm going to be
talking to you about community building.

0:00:24.340,0:00:30.050
Now, community building is a process that
often gets taken for granted, and part of

0:00:30.050,0:00:33.829
the reason for that is that it seems
like it's just a natural process that

0:00:33.829,0:00:39.050
plays out when we interact with people.
And to some degree that's what it is. But

0:00:39.050,0:00:42.620
when you examine it from an
anthropological point of view, you start

0:00:42.620,0:00:47.329
to uncover some of the subtle
complexities and the important features

0:00:47.329,0:00:50.899
of building a community. So in this video
I going to talk about things, like

0:00:50.899,0:00:57.710
communities of practice and reciprocity,
that kind of lend insight into the way

0:00:57.710,0:01:04.010
that community building can help game
designers build a stronger community, can

0:01:04.010,0:01:09.470
help individuals become better designers,
and that makes the game design community

0:01:09.470,0:01:13.549
better for everyone involved.
Now some of the things I talk about in

0:01:13.549,0:01:18.259
this video might be things that you are
already doing or some of it might seem a

0:01:18.259,0:01:24.979
little overly theoretical but
understanding the reason why we

0:01:24.979,0:01:30.799
carry out different practices or why it's
important to do things like going to

0:01:30.799,0:01:36.380
playtesting events and talking with
other people about design and games

0:01:36.380,0:01:42.259
in general helps us to understand how we
can participate and build a stronger

0:01:42.259,0:01:47.810
game design community for everybody
involved in the process, and in turn, how

0:01:47.810,0:01:53.450
those behaviors make us better designers.
So that's why I decided to end the

0:01:53.450,0:01:58.640
series using this as kind of the
capstone of all the other lessons that

0:01:58.640,0:02:03.619
I've hopefully helped you pick up along
the way. So I hope you enjoy this video

0:02:03.619,0:02:06.729
let's get to it.

0:02:06.909,0:02:12.430
In previous videos, I've talked about how
to collect data from playtesters and the

0:02:12.430,0:02:17.410
importance of fully engaging with the
design process, but many of the topics in

0:02:17.410,0:02:22.120

this series so far have been predicated
on the idea that you are already part of

0:02:22.120,0:02:27.720
a tabletop game design community. And if
you're already reading about design,

0:02:27.720,0:02:33.520
talking about design, and designing and
playtesting games, then congratulations!

0:02:33.520,0:02:38.200
You're already part of the game design
community. But there's more to community

0:02:38.200,0:02:43.180
building and participation than that.
Remember: tabletop games are all about

0:02:43.180,0:02:48.069
interactions, and that means design is
more than just the brain work you do

0:02:48.069,0:02:52.510
when creating cards and mechanics; it's
also about the people who play your

0:02:52.510,0:02:57.700
designs, how they play and interact, and
how you can benefit from playing and

0:02:57.700,0:03:03.519
interacting with them. When I designed
this project, one of the core concepts I

0:03:03.519,0:03:08.489
was using to build my research design
was the idea of communities of practice.

0:03:08.489,0:03:15.040
This concept was developed by Jean Lave
and Etienne Wenger to explore the ways

0:03:15.040,0:03:19.959
that we learn skills and information
from our colleagues. A community of

0:03:19.959,0:03:25.690
practice is a group of people who work
together, share ideas and values, and who

0:03:25.690,0:03:30.160

benefit from interactions with various
members of the group, and by extension,

0:03:30.160,0:03:36.280
each member provides benefits to that
group through those interactions. In his

0:03:36.280,0:03:41.380
aptly titled book, "Communities of
Practice," Wenger wrote that, "the primary

0:03:41.380,0:03:47.100
focus of this theory is on learning as
social participation," going on to say

0:03:47.100,0:03:53.350
"social participation shapes not only
what we do but also who we are and how

0:03:53.350,0:03:58.900
we interpret what we do." Simply put, it's
a way of learning in which we pick up

0:03:58.900,0:04:04.150
skills and knowledge through our
interactions with others. Now, I don't

0:04:04.150,0:04:08.260
want to bog you down with a lot of
theoretical discussion here, but there

0:04:08.260,0:04:12.160
are some important ideas to lay out that
will help you understand how this

0:04:12.160,0:04:17.590
concept of communities of practice can
benefit your design practice. Wenger

0:04:17.590,0:04:22.860
identified four components of this
'social theory of learning:' meaning,

0:04:22.860,0:04:29.710
practice, community, and identity. Those
four concepts illustrate how we learn

0:04:29.710,0:04:35.229
many things in life, especially since
humans are social creatures. Think of it

0:04:35.229,0:04:40.780

this way: meaning is how we experience
learning; practice is what we do while

0:04:40.780,0:04:46.569
learning; community is how we learn from
each other; and identity is how what we

0:04:46.569,0:04:52.389
learn has the potential to change us.
This is a very broad overview, and a

0:04:52.389,0:04:56.800
closer reading on Wenger's book could
benefit anyone interested in social

0:04:56.800,0:05:01.330
learning, but I'll try to simplify these
concepts using my own experiences in

0:05:01.330,0:05:06.099
game design. At the outset of this
project, my identity included being an

0:05:06.099,0:05:12.069
anthropologist and a tabletop game
player - among other things - and my early

0:05:12.069,0:05:16.930
design practice included reading rule
books, and making house rules from my D&D

0:05:16.930,0:05:22.659
campaigns, and playing tabletop games, of
course. My community was my friends who

0:05:22.659,0:05:26.680
I gamed with and with whom I
occasionally discussed ideas for our own

0:05:26.680,0:05:32.320
game designs. Wenger identifies 'meaning'
for communities of practice as the ways

0:05:32.320,0:05:38.139
that a practice fits into our everyday
lives. Games meaning for me was that they

0:05:38.139,0:05:42.909
were a source of fun and camaraderie
during a somewhat tumultuous upbringing;

0:05:42.909,0:05:47.830

they were an escape, to some degree, but also served as an effective way to

0:05:47.830,0:05:52.990
connect with friends. I especially loved co-op action games and that has

0:05:52.990,0:05:58.120
persisted through today into my tabletop gaming hobby. These categories evolved as

0:05:58.120,0:06:02.560
I began to get interested in design and started participating in a community of

0:06:02.560,0:06:07.240
practice. My identity started to incorporate my role as a graduate

0:06:07.240,0:06:11.979
student and aspiring game designer. I added to my practice reading about

0:06:11.979,0:06:17.469
design and books, learning about design from game studies and design classes at

0:06:17.469,0:06:22.990
my university, and making my own prototypes. As I began to attend game

0:06:22.990,0:06:28.599
design meetups, my community expanded to include other designers: ones I met at

0:06:28.599,0:06:33.220
those events, as well as those who write about design online and in books.

0:06:33.220,0:06:37.900
And as far as meaning I started to incorporate a view that games were

0:06:37.900,0:06:42.900
something more than just components and rules; they are social experiences:

0:06:42.900,0:06:48.820
intricate systems of interaction, and an interest that continues to occupy much

0:06:48.820,0:06:53.590

of my mental bandwidth. This is just a
long way of saying that my interest in

0:06:53.590,0:06:59.290
tabletop game design situated me firmly
into a community of practice. So that was

0:06:59.290,0:07:02.950
a lot of theoretical stuff, and
understanding how we learn can be a

0:07:02.950,0:07:07.780
useful way to think deeply about topics,
but you're here for the practical stuff,

0:07:07.780,0:07:12.610
right? So let's talk about applying this
to your practice. I can't stress enough

0:07:12.610,0:07:17.290
that the best thing you can do to be a
better designer is to participate in an

0:07:17.290,0:07:22.240
active community of players and other
designers. If you're new to design, you

0:07:22.240,0:07:26.980
should waste no time in finding people
to talk to about games and design, and

0:07:26.980,0:07:32.110
who will play your prototypes. Start by
finding a venue where people are playing

0:07:32.110,0:07:38.470
games: a local game store or cafe, a
public meet up, a convention, or a

0:07:38.470,0:07:44.169
designer event. You can find these kinds
of events online - or even better - if you

0:07:44.169,0:07:48.940
know someone who is part of a gaming
group, ask them to bring you along. This

0:07:48.940,0:07:54.130
is a great way to introduce yourself to
a new community of tabletop gamers. But

0:07:54.130,0:07:58.210

even if you don't have anyone to
introduce you, that's okay. Tabletop

0:07:58.210,0:08:03.340
gamers are always looking for new
players, and game designers are extremely

0:08:03.340,0:08:08.110
friendly, supportive, and inviting people,
and there are plenty of online resources

0:08:08.110,0:08:13.270
where you can find people to talk about
design and play prototypes with. Look

0:08:13.270,0:08:19.540
around on Meetup.com, BoardGameGeek,
Facebook groups, or similar websites

0:08:19.540,0:08:25.330
where people connect and see who is
doing design in your area. It might be

0:08:25.330,0:08:29.710
intimidating at first, but if my
experiences tell me anything, it's that

0:08:29.710,0:08:34.270
designers are always enthusiastic about
new people joining their community, and

0:08:34.270,0:08:38.919
they love to share their design insights
and play new prototypes from aspiring

0:08:38.919,0:08:44.890
designers. Now, depending on where you
live, finding playtesting communities

0:08:44.890,0:08:48.820
might be more challenging,
but if that is the case I suggest asking

0:08:48.820,0:08:53.890
around at your friendly local game store
to see if anyone who works or dhops at

0:08:53.890,0:08:58.330
the store is interested in design. You
can also look into tabletop gaming

0:08:58.330,0:09:03.280

conventions and their websites. Most cons
have some kind of design community

0:09:03.280,0:09:07.540
presence, and you should be able to find
some information about connecting with

0:09:07.540,0:09:13.570
those groups on sites like Meetup or on
Facebook groups. I suggest taking any

0:09:13.570,0:09:19.330
chance you can get to attend a protospiel or tabletop prototype event. The

0:09:19.330,0:09:23.500
people you meet could end up being your
collaborators and friends in the future,

0:09:23.500,0:09:27.340
and the feedback you get on your
prototypes could lead to major

0:09:27.340,0:09:32.380
innovations in your designs or your
practice overall. Once you have a group

0:09:32.380,0:09:36.910
to playtest with, it's time to implement
those social science skills we covered

0:09:36.910,0:09:41.290
in my earlier videos. If you haven't
watched them yet, I suggest you check

0:09:41.290,0:09:45.670
them out, to pick up some data collection
techniques and anthropological methods

0:09:45.670,0:09:50.800
for examining behaviors and practices.
Having a good eye for how people respond

0:09:50.800,0:09:55.810
to experiences during play is helpful at
all stages of prototyping, and will serve

0:09:55.810,0:10:00.930
you well in all your design endeavors. If
you already have a prototype ready to go,

0:10:00.930,0:10:05.620

definitely bring it to every event you
attend, even if you don't know anyone

0:10:05.620,0:10:10.600
there or aren't sure if other designers
will even be there. It never hurts to

0:10:10.600,0:10:15.580
offer gamers a new experience, and - if you
meet them - other designers will want to

0:10:15.580,0:10:20.590
play your prototype, even if they don't
know you yet. That has definitely been my

0:10:20.590,0:10:24.970
experience in the design community.
Designers are excited to see what others

0:10:24.970,0:10:29.710
are making and the try out prototypes at
any stage of development, and from people

0:10:29.710,0:10:35.260
at any level of expertise, and lots of
tabletop gamers love to see a new game

0:10:35.260,0:10:40.810
system, even if they aren't explicitly
interested in design themselves. If you

0:10:40.810,0:10:45.370
play and design games, chances are you've
got a good sense of how mechanics and

0:10:45.370,0:10:49.750
systems can work together, so don't be
afraid to show off what you have. But

0:10:49.750,0:10:54.160
even if you don't have a prototype ready
to go, you should still go and play some

0:10:54.160,0:10:59.120
other designers games. It'll be a great
opportunity to broaden your design practice

0:10:59.120,0:11:03.470
and you'll meet some people you'll
want to stay connected with as you start

0:11:03.470,0:11:07.930

to delve into the world of design. In other words, get out there and

0:11:07.930,0:11:13.670
participate with some designers. Okay, so once you've been to some prototyping

0:11:13.670,0:11:17.709
events, you're going to want to become more engaged with the design community.

0:11:17.709,0:11:22.040
Just going to events and talking with other folks interested in tabletop

0:11:22.040,0:11:27.079
gaming is great, but what does it really mean to be part of a community? And how

0:11:27.079,0:11:32.029
can we increase our engagement and give back to other designers? Figuring that

0:11:32.029,0:11:38.509
out is the next step to becoming a vital part of your community. In his GDC talk on

0:11:38.509,0:11:44.300
community management, Sean 'Day9' Plott argues that one of the best things you

0:11:44.300,0:11:49.639
can do to help build a community is to contribute to it. I'll put a link to that

0:11:49.639,0:11:54.350
video below, but there are some simple things you can do to put Plotts advice to

0:11:54.350,0:12:00.230
work. Going to events and playtesting people's designs is contributing; talking

0:12:00.230,0:12:04.059
about design with newcomers and experienced designers is contributing;

0:12:04.059,0:12:08.990
interacting on message boards and online forums of contributing; and creating

0:12:08.990,0:12:13.879

things that are helpful to other
designers is contributing. The important

0:12:13.879,0:12:18.079
thing to remember is that you are not
participating just to reap the benefits

0:12:18.079,0:12:22.309
of the goodwill you'll gain. You'll want
to contribute to the community for the

0:12:22.309,0:12:27.110
sake of contributing, not because you're
expecting to be owed something in return.

0:12:27.110,0:12:32.740
Plott emphasizes this when he says "the
currency of community is contribution."

0:12:32.740,0:12:36.709
Contributing to a community is one of
the best ways to build that community,

0:12:36.709,0:12:42.040
and due to the principle of reciprocity -
which I'll talk about more in a minute -

0:12:42.040,0:12:48.139
a stronger community benefits all members.
You can lead by example by offering to

0:12:48.139,0:12:52.579
chat about games and by playing other
designers' prototypes, but you aren't

0:12:52.579,0:12:56.120
doing it just to benefit yourself.
These are fringe benefits of

0:12:56.120,0:13:01.670
contribution, not the reason for doing so.
When I began this project, the whole

0:13:01.670,0:13:05.959
point was to create something useful for
designers. That's the point of these

0:13:05.959,0:13:10.100
videos. I didn't study tabletop
designers through an anthropological

0:13:10.100,0:13:14.720

lens just to lock that knowledge up
in a place where relatively few people

0:13:14.720,0:13:18.110
could access it;
I chose YouTube as a platform to

0:13:18.110,0:13:23.210
distribute my findings so that anyone
could explore them, and - hopefully - learn

0:13:23.210,0:13:27.470
from what I've done. Creating something
like an app or video series where you

0:13:27.470,0:13:32.360
use your own experiences, perspectives,
and skills to inform other people in

0:13:32.360,0:13:36.560
your community is a great way to
contribute. You can create something

0:13:36.560,0:13:40.970
practical for designers using your
knowledge and resources. That's why my

0:13:40.970,0:13:45.740
videos are about social science methods;
because that's a topic I know about and

0:13:45.740,0:13:49.610
I can share it with others.
Not everyone has the time or resources

0:13:49.610,0:13:54.260
to go out and study every subject that
could be helpful to their design work,

0:13:54.260,0:13:59.360
but a quick synthesis and actionable
lessons can be tremendously helpful.

0:13:59.360,0:14:04.160
If you can explain the probability of
different dice rolling results, or how to

0:14:04.160,0:14:09.320
print cards and components at home in a
short concise way, that's an extremely

0:14:09.320,0:14:14.810

useful resource for designers. Likewise,
if you can create a basic app for

0:14:14.810,0:14:19.580
tracking design changes or creating
custom components for prototyping, I know

0:14:19.580,0:14:25.220
plenty of designers who would benefit
from it. Even tangentially related topics

0:14:25.220,0:14:29.960
can be tremendously helpful: if you know
a lot about a specific historical period,

0:14:29.960,0:14:34.250
that can help designers looking to
design historically accurate games, while

0:14:34.250,0:14:39.920
knowledge of various sciences can help
refine games with scientific themes. The

0:14:39.920,0:14:44.240
main point to remember is that you know
information and can do things that

0:14:44.240,0:14:48.830
others would struggle with, and helping
to simplify or teach those things to

0:14:48.830,0:14:54.020
designers is a viable way for you to
contribute to your design community.

0:14:54.020,0:14:57.350
Ask your fellow designers what kinds of
knowledge and resources they could

0:14:57.350,0:15:01.970
benefit from and see if you have the
capacity to help fill those gaps. If you

0:15:01.970,0:15:06.470
have technical writing expertise, offer
to help edit rulebooks or to spellcheck

0:15:06.470,0:15:11.420
cards; if you know about medieval
weaponry, ask if someone designing a

0:15:11.420,0:15:16.040

fantasy game wants advice for designing
weapon mechanics. You can help a novel

0:15:16.040,0:15:20.870
or practical ways, but remember that
contributions to your community help to

0:15:20.870,0:15:25.670
make everyone a better designer. Another
helpful thing to remember is that every

0:15:25.670,0:15:28.610
game design
benefits from diverse perspectives and

0:15:28.610,0:15:34.129
extensive playtesting. Playtesting with
your fellow designers is a great way to

0:15:34.129,0:15:38.870
get feedback, but it's also important to
remember that anyone with an interest in

0:15:38.870,0:15:44.240
games can provide valuable feedback on
prototypes. And since prototyping events

0:15:44.240,0:15:49.310
benefit from having plenty of potential
testers, I strongly suggest that

0:15:49.310,0:15:54.769
designers encourage friends who are not
overtly interested in design to attend

0:15:54.769,0:15:59.540
prototyping events to play prototypes. A
number of the events I have participated

0:15:59.540,0:16:04.699
in over the years are open to anyone, and
some specifically look for non-designers

0:16:04.699,0:16:09.949
to come play and give feedback on
designs. There are plenty of reasons why

0:16:09.949,0:16:14.779
this is a good idea, including growing
the size of your community and having a

0:16:14.779,0:16:18.850

large pool of potential testers with
diverse opinions and experiences.

0:16:18.850,0:16:24.230
Tabletop game design is a niche within
an already niche hobby, and sometimes

0:16:24.230,0:16:28.819
testing with only designers is difficult
simply because not many designers might

0:16:28.819,0:16:33.889
be available at the same time and place.
But finding tabletop game players is a

0:16:33.889,0:16:38.300
bit easier and designers will appreciate
getting as much feedback from as many

0:16:38.300,0:16:42.319
people as they can on their designs. So
encourage your friends who aren't

0:16:42.319,0:16:47.149
designers - but who still love tabletop
games - to attend events and offer their

0:16:47.149,0:16:52.360
feedback. Doing so will widen the pool of
potential testers in the community and

0:16:52.360,0:16:57.620
strengthen your design community by
including more voices of people who know

0:16:57.620,0:17:02.029
and love games. And since these players
could be potential buyers of your game

0:17:02.029,0:17:05.809
in the future, getting feedback about
what is working and what needs work

0:17:05.809,0:17:10.970
- while spreading the word about your game -
are great benefits. In anthropology, much

0:17:10.970,0:17:15.740
has been written about reciprocity. It's
a major concept that is far too

0:17:15.740,0:17:20.240

expansive to cover in depth here, but we
can work with a basic definition for our

0:17:20.240,0:17:25.880
purposes. In brief, reciprocity is the
idea that community members help each

0:17:25.880,0:17:31.280
other with their skills, knowledge, and
resources, and in turn, community members

0:17:31.280,0:17:33.679
can count on help from others when they
need it.

0:17:33.679,0:17:38.570
This in turn produces a system where
everyone is sharing knowledge, skills, and

0:17:38.570,0:17:42.210
resources with
everyone else, and therefore everyone

0:17:42.210,0:17:47.279
gets taken care of. The game design and
prototyping process is a great model for

0:17:47.279,0:17:51.779
reciprocity: you go to a playtesting
event to get people to try out your

0:17:51.779,0:17:56.970
designs, but while you're there, you also
test other people's games as thanks or

0:17:56.970,0:18:01.919
just to try new games and give advice.
And even when you don't have a prototype

0:18:01.919,0:18:06.090
you are currently working on, you'll
still want to go to events to be a

0:18:06.090,0:18:11.220
tester for other designers games, to talk
with them, share techniques and

0:18:11.220,0:18:15.029
experiences, and just hang out with
people who share your interest in games

0:18:15.029,0:18:20.369

and design. One way to really help out
your fellow prototypers is to test

0:18:20.369,0:18:24.389
their games with the same attention to
detail as you use when you test your own

0:18:24.389,0:18:29.970
designs. When you play someone's
prototype, take notes, ask questions, and

0:18:29.970,0:18:33.869
engage with the other players. The person
who is running the playtest will

0:18:33.869,0:18:38.220
appreciate your enthusiasm and your
notes will help you to give even better

0:18:38.220,0:18:42.869
feedback on their designs. And this will
likely mean that those other designers

0:18:42.869,0:18:47.309
will be more open to taking a similarly
deep approach to testing your designs

0:18:47.309,0:18:51.899
and spending more time discussing games
and design with you.

0:18:51.899,0:18:55.919
Again, you should be contributing for the sake
of contributing, because you will grow as

0:18:55.919,0:19:00.299
a designer just through the process of
helping others. Another thing you can do

0:19:00.299,0:19:04.379
is to be willing to replay a prototype
while the designer makes changes on the

0:19:04.379,0:19:09.149
spot. This approach works well, especially
for designers who are new to the process

0:19:09.149,0:19:13.740
or who have new systems they're trying
out, but it can be hard to find people

0:19:13.740,0:19:17.749

willing to sit through the process of
changing mechanics and rules on the fly.

0:19:17.749,0:19:22.830
Just try to be adaptable and open to
helping by being a sounding board for your

0:19:22.830,0:19:27.149
fellow designers. And you don't have to
wait for the designer to ask you to do

0:19:27.149,0:19:31.230
this; you can suggest the approach if you
think you have ideas that they could

0:19:31.230,0:19:35.669
benefit from. Just remember that in the
end the designer will have the final say

0:19:35.669,0:19:40.799
on what works and what doesn't for their
design. That brings us to the end of this

0:19:40.799,0:19:45.429
series on Anthropology for Tabletop Designers
but that doesn't mean that the

0:19:45.429,0:19:50.950
discussion has to end here. Go ahead and
leave us a comment down in the section

0:19:50.950,0:19:55.960
below if you have any other advice for
either community building or any of the

0:19:55.960,0:20:01.179
other topics we've covered in this
series, or if you have questions about

0:20:01.179,0:20:05.919
design, or if you just want to share your
own experiences and thoughts about

0:20:05.919,0:20:10.330
anything relating to tabletop game
design. I'd also like to take this time

0:20:10.330,0:20:16.659
to thank the community of Bay Area game
designers that I interviewed for this

0:20:16.659,0:20:23.470

project, that I playtested with, and that
I got a chance to talk to and get to

0:20:23.470,0:20:31.179
know, and who were so welcoming and so
willing to help and to provide their

0:20:31.179,0:20:36.519
insights into game design. If it wasn't
for them I literally could not have

0:20:36.519,0:20:42.580
created this project, since everything
that I presented to you has been built

0:20:42.580,0:20:49.600
off of all of their participation in
this project. If you're a tabletop game

0:20:49.600,0:20:53.620
designer and you enjoyed this series, let
us know in the comments because we'd

0:20:53.620,0:20:57.639
love to make more videos about design
the future. And if you're interested in

0:20:57.639,0:21:02.139
anthropology in general, go ahead and
subscribe to AnthroView so you'll get

0:21:02.139,0:21:07.830
notified whenever we post new videos. But
until next time, may knowledge guide you!

0:21:07.830,0:21:24.200
Thanks for watching

Endnotes

Chapter 2

[i] Pseudonym.
[ii] Pseudonym.
[iii] Pseudonym.
[iv] Pseudonym.
[v] Pseudonym.
[vi] Pseudonym.
[vii] Pseudonym.

Chapter 3

[viii] Some members of the tabletop gaming community would begrudge me not mentioning here that, especially in recent years, solitary or "solo" tabletop games have grown immensely in popularity, having amassed a large following and prompting many designers - including those I worked with, like Ben and Stanley - to begin including rules in their games that allow individuals to play them without other players present.
[ix] Games where players score points for amassing specific combinations of resources or game pieces.
[x] Games where players use in-game resources to acquire cards which provide them with new abilities or powers.
[xi] Games where all players work together against some form of automated opponent, usually a deck of cards or even a mobile phone app. In cooperative games, players carry out actions for their opponents based on the automated method the game is designed around.
[xii] Not every tabletop game includes actions that stand in for specific actions in the game world, but many do include thematic elements such as the ones I describe for *Sentinels of the Multiverse*.

Chapter 4

[xiii] This is another subjective element of design, of course, as most games rely on at least some amount of randomness to create variable outcomes and to level the playing field for new or inexperienced players.
[xiv] In tabletop gaming, *artificial intelligence* or *A.I.* does not refer to computer learning as we might know it from high-tech industries, but to game systems which dictate how non-player characters or the in-game environment acts and reacts to player actions, usually determined by players drawing cards or mentally remembering to trigger certain actions in response to player choices.

Chapter 5

[xv] I have played Stanley's game many times, and it is quite challenging and random odds can lead to difficult or unwinnable scenarios for players. During my own play, my fellow players and I might occasionally cheat the order of cards in the same way Stanley did, if randomness is leading to diminished fun.
[xvi] The complexity of board games and the need for player interpretation of rules means that even published games end up with 'game-breaking' flaws or combinations of actions which make the play experience lopsided. This is why there are countless multi-page errata documents that

publishers post online after a game's release, and long discussion threads on sites like BoardGameGeek.com where players ask questions and debate the meaning of rules and text on game components.

[xvii] It turned out that the design community I joined used social media to post public events and that I could have likely found this community with some online searching of my own, but this would have likely taken quite a bit longer and I would not have had the confidence that knowing someone in the community provided.