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World throne

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World Throne

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Abstract

World Throne is a four-player strategy board game that has been in development since 2016. Players take control of four distinct factions and battle on a grid-based board. Each player uses unique playing cards to augment piece combat. The object of the game is to conquer other factions by defeating them in battle, defend your castle from opposing players, and claim the power of the World Throne. Prominent game development research guided the creation of World Throne. In addition, Latin, Greek, and Norse mythology informed development of the factions, characters, creatures, cards, and places. The culminating products of this project include a game design framework, a journal of progress, a final reflection essay, World Throne itself, and a manual. To protect the integrity of my ideas, included here is only the game design framework which details major game design principles that guided development. Despite this formal conclusion to the project, World Throne is far from finished. I intend to continue polishing everything from the mechanics, to balance, to the artwork for years to come.

Game Design Framework

World Throne has been under development for over two years. Along the way, I've learned indispensable principles of game design that have guided my project. The purpose of this paper is to discuss these principles and how I've utilized them throughout World Throne's development. I describe the 12 most important principles for my project: Experience, Idea Generation, Audience, Core Mechanics, Rule Making, Game Balance, Choice and Chance, Playtesting and Player feedback, Momentum and Game Length, World Building, Creating a Fun and Smooth Environment, and Replay Value. I came upon these principles by analyzing some of the most prominent literature on board game design. These principles are amalgamations of the most commonly listed fundamentals within the literature. To best explain how these 12 principles come together, I've divided them into four categories based on the aspects of game creation to which they pertain: Knowledge Collection, Rules and Mechanics, A World You Could Live In, and Test Runs.

The knowledge collection category of principles identifies key brainstorming tasks necessary to begin game creation on the right path. The three principles in this category are Experience, Idea Generation, and Audience.

Experience: Knowing what has made other games successful is essential. This plays into rule writing, themes, language, aesthetics, and overall game design (Ham; Pulsipher 8; Rome and Hussey 23-31).

I've been playing games my whole life: board games, card games, video games, and sports. When my dad first suggested I make my own game two summers ago, it didn't take long for me to see how great of an idea that was. I had already been questioning why no one had created a board game like the one I would soon create. After about a week, I had already decided on the three games that I would base my new board game on: the board game Stratego, the digital card game Hearthstone, and the videogame series Fire Emblem. Throughout development, I have generated ideas based on where these games have had success. Of course, other games have been useful too, but these three have been by far the biggest influences.

The grid-based, turn-based gameplay comes from Stratego. This setup allows for clear identification of where pieces are and what they are capable of. I created the combat and rules for attacking based on Fire Emblem. I wish that I could have included two other aspects of Fire Emblem, attack range and accuracy. Unfortunately, including these as stats would have made attacking too complicated. The faction cards are inspired from Hearthstone. The writing for each one is intended to be consistent and clear based on Hearthstone's succinct style. The board and pieces allow me to expand upon the capabilities of the digital card game in exciting ways. For

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example, positioning is only a minor consideration in Hearthstone, but in World Throne it's crucial to keep piece positioning in mind at all times. Hearthstone was also model for my development of the factions. Based on where I've seen Hearthstone succeed and fail with its fanbase, it's clear that making each faction distinct in its strategies, appearance, background, and skills is very important. For example, in World Throne the Spirit Walkers are known for their spirit rituals that sap their very own lives in return for incredible power.

Idea Generation: Ideas for a game can come from anywhere at any time, and it's important to journal these ideas whenever they appear. When searching for new ideas, inspiration often comes from other games, personal interests, feedback from others, and movies or books (Pulsipher 7-9; Ham).

I have found that no matter the stage of development, idea generation is both crucial and inevitable. People love to give their opinions, and it's important to listen. I keep several organized journals for ideas, both digital and handwritten. I write down almost all ideas that I encounter, from one place or another. I generate my best ideas when I'm alone and can close my eyes to think. A weird way that I sometimes get ideas is in my dreams. World Throne is so prevalent in my life that my mind is still churning ideas while I sleep! I find that one of the most important aspects of generating useful ideas is to stay organized. I lump similar ideas together, mark off ideas that I've already tried, keep documents detailing why certain ideas didn't work out, and categorize ideas by importance. Some examples of documents I keep to stay organized are a document for playing with names, one for failed or uninteresting faction cards, and another for faction cards that I'd like to include somehow.

Audience: Everyone does not enjoy the same types of games. Therefore, early in game development, it's important to ask yourself who your target audience is. Some characteristics of players to consider are age, gender, values, intelligence, and personality (Koster; Pulsipher 101-130; Moseley and Whitton 197-198).

I considered my audience very carefully when I first started drafting World Throne's first concepts. I had a vision of what I wanted the game to look like, and based on that, I looked at games with similar themes, gameplay, or complexity to decide on my audience. I think the most important demographic traits for game design are intelligence and age. World Throne is complex game, but that doesn't mean learning it has to be difficult. It is always in the front of my mind to keep all mechanics straightforward and easy to comprehend. I know that a game with as many layers as World Throne isn't going to suit everyone's tastes, but I've had several play testers with no background in complex games be thrilled by World Throne. Sometimes I'm forced to create redundancies of explanations for particular interactions to make the game more accessible to inexperienced, younger, and older players.

My intention has been to broaden the age range that would be interested in World Throne. Broadening the lower age range goes hand in hand with lowering the intelligence barrier. In addition, I've attempted to incorporate "cool" themes and characters which will be enhanced by the art. Broadening the upper age range is difficult because fantasy themes aren't as popular with older adults. Elements of realistic war and combat in World Throne's mechanics hopefully work to extend the interests upward to some degree. My best guess as to the real age range of interested players is between 12 and 45. Luckily, this range should naturally extend beyond 45 as younger people who are interested in games like World Throne get older.

Rules and Mechanics

Once a designer has established the basic ideas that will shape the game, the next step should be to design the rules for game play. This category lays out how to generate and balance the rules and mechanics that will dictate every action players take. The four principles in this category are Core Mechanics, Rule Making, Game Balance, and Choice and Chance.

Core Mechanics: It's important to begin game design with core mechanics and to shape the game around these. Core mechanics are the rules and actions that form a game's backbone. They form the basis for how players interact with the game at the simplest level. Play would be impossible if any core mechanic were removed. Without perfect understanding of what your core mechanics are, you will lose track of what you are trying to accomplish and how you can progress (Ham; Pulsipher 17-21).

Of everything I learned from my research on game design, this principle has been the most helpful. Some of the most important core mechanics in World Throne are the grid-based movement, the attacking process, and card-altered combat. These three mechanics form the heart of gameplay and could not be removed or altered without significantly impacting all other aspects of World Throne. After designing the core mechanics, I began adding anything and everything I desired into World Throne. Based on playtesting, I realized the game had become too complex and cluttered. It was difficult for me, the game designer, to keep track of how each action should affect the game. Since this past Christmas, I have been hard at work simplifying World Throne. Although I've cut many mechanics and rules since then, I'm happy that I tried out so much. It feels like I threw a thousand ideas into World Throne to see which ones would stick. Perhaps it's because I was so open to ideas that I had to remove as much content as I did.

One example of simplification was the removal of ruler abilities. These abilities gave rulers an edge in battle and were unique to each ruler. For example, the Demon ruler's ability was to recover 20 health when it destroyed an enemy piece. While this mechanic is interesting and flavorful, it turned out to be unnecessary and complicating. Most players forgot that rulers even had abilities! After I removed the abilities, gameplay was unaltered, a sign to me that the abilities were not integral to the game in the slightest. I have kept these abilities documented in case the time arises where I'd like to repurpose them.

Rule Making: There should be a balance between explicit, written rules and implicit, unwritten rules. Rule drafting is a task that should not be undertaken too early or too late in development. Rules need to be clear, concise, and thorough. A blind playtest, a playtest where only the manual is available to teach players the game, can provide valuable insight into the functionality of your rulebook (Ham; Fullerton).

One difficulty I've had with rules is determining whether a rule is obvious or needs to be written explicitly. In my initial version of the manual, I chose to write everything down explicitly so that nothing is unclear. I plan to remove rules based on playtests if something is obvious, doesn't need as detailed an explanation, or is clear based upon other rules. However, a major category of implicit rules I haven't made explicit are social rules such as teaming up on someone, threatening someone with consequences outside of the game, and discussing certain aspects of the game while playing. I think I'd like to let rules like these stay implicit because choice is part of the spirit of World Throne, and I'd rather let people have fun in the ways that best suit them. I have not yet had any blind playtests yet, so perhaps I will need to revisit that decision.

World Throne began with a set of very broad and basic rules. These included rules for attacking, moving, and playing cards. Beyond this, very few rules had been drafted for at least several months. I spent most of my time at first working on the faction cards. The cards provide much of World Throne's unique flavor, and I wanted to see where I could go with them before anything else. Along the way of designing cards, preliminary rules started to materialize at first, but then after I had created many cards for each faction, I began to establish more significant rules for gameplay.

The early rules changed many, many times. For example, the maximum number of cards players can hold changed from 5 to 7 to 10 to unlimited. Eventually, I had established a large set of cards and an accompanying set of rules to hold the framework of the game together. Later, designing the pieces and their stats forced me to create more rules for their functionality such as rules governing how health totals change in specific situations such as when units rank up. Finally, when I sat down for the very first playtest, I drafted dozens of tiny rules that were necessary for playing that I hadn't even considered before seeing people gathered around World Throne's first game board. For example, I decided that players must declare any actions they take out loud to maintain clarity. Since then, I have been critiquing, elaborating on, adding, and removing rules as playtests have proceeded and new ideas have been integrated.

Game Balance: Ethan Ham in *Tabletop Game Design for Video Game Designers* describes four types of game imbalances that are relevant to World Throne. Action imbalance occurs when the benefits of a player action are either too weak or too strong. Event imbalance occurs when a game mechanic is either too insignificant to impact the game or too powerful such that it causes play decision making to become "obvious or meaningless." Strategic imbalance occurs when the game supports a dominant strategy. Asymmetric imbalance occurs when one player has an

undesired advantage at the beginning of the game. It is important to consider all four of these when designing rules and playtesting. Correcting these requires careful playtesting and objective analysis of gameplay elements, often from the perspective of others (Ham).

By far, I've devoted more time to game balance than anything else. The faction cards constantly need balance changes, and the unit stats have been changed almost a dozen times. The first cards and the first units I designed were very far from where they are now. I knew that would be the case too, given that I basically spit-balled the power levels at first. I always make extensive balance changes after a round of playtests. Several times, after a break from development for a few weeks, I came back to the faction cards with fresh eyes and saw many cards that needed changing. It seems nothing is ever perfect. Game mechanics have changed many times too, although the core elements have mostly stayed the same throughout development. I'll give examples of the Ham's four game imbalances to illustrate the balance changes I've made to World Throne.

➢ Action Imbalance: When ruler abilities were still around, and before I'd removed the Elven faction, Queen Elmira of the Elves had the ability to attack from two spaces away. It turned out this ability was so strong that it became impossible for anyone else to win if the Elves got their ruler into play.

➢ Event Imbalance: One game mechanic that was far too weak to impact the game was the Human faction ability, Ballista. The humans could use their ballista to deal damage to pieces across the map. It turned out that until much later in development, Ballista was far too weak to ever be used. This is a good example of why it's important to hang onto old ideas because there could be a time in the future where they'll be viable again.

➤ Strategic Imbalance: Early in development, there were no rewards for conquering another faction, and there was no rule stating that players won if their ruler held the World Throne for 5 consecutive turns. Without these additions, the dominant strategy for any player to win was to simply keep all their units back and watch other factions fight and lose pieces.

➤ Asymmetric imbalance: An imbalance that still lingers today is the advantage of going first. Although small, the player who goes first has a leg up on everyone else. I'm still trying to figure out a way to fix this issue. I've narrowed it down to giving the other players some equal advantage, but I still need to figure out what it will be.

Choice and Chance: Choices that players make should be interesting and not obvious so that positive outcomes feel rewarding and negative outcomes don't feel purely unlucky. Players should be expected to weigh different, seemingly positive decisions. Choice should be weighed with chance. Incorporating too much or too little chance in a game risks closing off large categories of players (Pulsipher 115-116; Ham).

My philosophy on chance in games was set in stone when I began this project, and it has not changed. I believe strategy games are best when there is as little chance as possible. I don't think every strategy game needs to be like chess, which is certainly a game that involves virtually no chance. However, my experience has shown me that chance often makes people take games less seriously, not try as much to win, feel less satisfied with their own win, and feel more dissatisfied with a loss. Therefore, my intention was to make World Throne a game almost entirely based on skill. There are a myriad of choices present in each player's turn and even before the game actually begins! Player's choose their faction, their pieces, choose what faction cards to keep in the mulligan, and lead their army in whatever way they see fit.

Some people prefer games with dice and other elements of chance. I understand that and have attempted to appeal to that audience as well, if only slightly. World Throne's chance lies in its cards. There is an element of chance in what cards each player draws throughout the game. Although this is mitigated by a mulligan phase at the beginning of the game (where players may draw a new starting hand), chance is certainly present to a small extent in each player's turn.

Rules and game balance need to be tested to ensure game design works with real players, not just on paper. This category outlines how best to pursue playtesting. The two principles in this category are Playtesting and Player Feedback and Momentum and Game Length.

Playtesting and Player Feedback: Early playtesting is necessary for checking that the dynamics and mechanics of the game work properly, identifying unexpected situations, and improving the overall gameplay experience. Playtesting should be carried out regularly with others, on one's own, and even in one's own head as changes are being made to the game (Ham; Pulsipher 16-21). Beyond testing rules and balancing, playtesting is for receiving feedback from other people. Considering ALL feedback from varied audiences is crucial. One must playtest with players both within and outside of the intended audience (Ham; Moseley and Whitton 199-200).

Anytime I'm working on World Throne in any capacity, I'm always picturing real people playing the game. I imagine people I know utilizing the new rule, mechanic, card, etc. These mind playtests have allowed me to adjust rules to suit how World Throne is truly played, not just how I think it should be played. I find that these playtests are particularly useful for wording new cards. I picture others reading the card and saying, "What does this mean?" or "What can this do?"

I first began playtesting with others last summer, and since then I have playtested dozens of times with as many people as possible. My playtests have mostly taken place at my house around my kitchen table. I would like to playtest soon at a board game convention where I would surely receive novel and important insights. I try to play with people of diverse ages, game skills, personalities, values, intelligence, and attitudes toward board games. By playing with a large

range of people, I can see how World Throne suits different audiences and what particular kinds of people like and dislike. For example, my parents have been great to playtest with because they are older, don't have much appreciation for fantasy themes, and haven't played any games like World Throne before. Their feedback alone has been incredibly eye-opening. For example, I learned card text should be concise to avoid confusion and can't be too small for older players to see. I understand that I'd need hundreds of playtesters from each category of player to get a reliable range of feedback necessary for a refined, publishable game. I do plan on getting this extensive data once World Throne is closer to being completely done.

During all of my playtests, I write down just about everything I hear because everyone's input matters. Players don't always interpret cards the way I expect, some players have disliked certain rules and potential strategies, and many players have suggested their own changes or additions. Playtests have also been valuable for finding typos and inconsistencies. Most of all, playtests have been the key to balancing World Throne (I will discuss this in the next section). My next goal is to hold a blind playtest now that I have finished the manual and the game is far into development.

Momentum and Game Length: A game should be engaging from beginning to end. Average game length is important because the longer a game is, the more difficult it will be to maintain player interest. Shorter games should leave the players wanting to play again, but this relies on the game having replay value. Another threat to maintained interest is a player's belief that he can win. An unwinnable game can be unenjoyable—player elimination and chances to come from behind can combat this (Ham; Acosta 14).

No issue has been nearly as difficult to solve as the issue of game length. However, I believe I've almost entirely solved it with my most recent round of changes. Beginning with the very first playtest, people lamented that the game moved too slowly and took too long to finish. I would guess that my first playtest would not have concluded for six hours had we not cut it short! However, it is important to note that even in the first playtests, people were engaged until the moment we stopped playing. It may have been slow, but it's always been exciting! My first solution to the problem was to make the board smaller, with fewer grid spaces so that players would reach the World Throne sooner and begin fighting within three turns. This helped significantly, but alas, the game was still sluggish.

My next decision was to add a ranking system to the units, which made them stronger as they destroyed enemy pieces. This made players play more aggressively and win more quickly after they'd gotten an advantage. This too helped, but it was still not enough. For many reasons, including shortening game length, I removed the Elves and made the board smaller yet again. These two changes together got game length down to about three hours, but this is clearly still too long. Finally, I concluded that the solution was the one piece of feedback I'd received again and again for over a year, to add an additional action to each player's turn. I always wanted to implement this change, but before removing the Elves, it wasn't possible. Once I realized that I could now make the change, I began working on it immediately because it was the biggest balance change I'd ever made. Almost every faction card had to be changed to fit the new rule. After its implementation, game length dropped to around one hour and 45 minutes for three or four players and one hour for two players. I'm am very happy with these numbers.

An important, yet much easier to solve, problem that I faced was how to give players a chance to come from behind. I've incorporated many ways for players to make powerful moves

that can bump them back to the top. However, players that fall too far behind, and don't quickly find their way back up, are easily eliminated. Players almost never survive long if they have lost crucial pieces. This keeps people from feeling like they're in an unwinnable game.

The best way I found to create opportunities to bounce back was to make each faction's cards incredibly powerful, yet still balanced. This means that if a player has put himself in an offensive position, he will be able to carry out powerful moves, even if they've lost some pieces. In this way, World Throne always rewards proactive players. Players who prefer a slow and steady approach will still find a home in World Throne, as long as they balance this strategy with smart aggressive turns.

This final category addresses ideas secondary to rules and game balance, but still crucial to the final product. These principles are all about captivating players with a unique world and making them want to keep coming back for more. The three principles in this category are World Building, Creating a Fun and Smooth Environment, and Replay Value.

World Building: Painting an engaging narrative can draw players' interest but also helps them learn rules and mechanics. A story or theme also helps generate ideas, but mechanics should be given priority over the story. Furthermore, research is important to keep the story consistent and imaginative (Moore; Ham).

I think I've followed Moore and Ham's world building guidelines particularly well. When I first started developing World Throne, I only created enough of the story, lore, and background that was necessary to guide my development of the game. My focus was almost entirely on mechanics. The few elements that I created and felt were necessary early on were the names for each of the factions, as well as some details that set them apart such as unique sets of skills, environments, or characters. The initial world elements helped me develop distinct faction cards, faction abilities, board terrain, and card names.

Research was important to the creation of the early aspects of World Throne's world. I began by researching the lore of many other popular games. Besides basic guidelines for building my game's story, this allowed me to see what's been done before and what I could make my own. I also spent several weeks looking into Roman, Greek, and Norse mythology to come up with early character concepts. Furthermore, I studied Latin and Greek words in order to

create my own names for people, groups, and places. For example, Illumara is the kingdom of the Human faction that I created based on Latin root illustrant, meaning illuminate.

Very recently, after I decided my mechanics were solid, I created the background and narrative for World Throne. Doing so was incredibly easy because I've been immersed in the game for over two years. I've been jotting down story ideas since day one. The narrative is not completely fleshed out, but it's enough to understand each faction and the world. Although I'm done building the world for now, I plan on writing a great deal of backstory for each faction before the game is eventually published. Adding backstory may not directly affect how the game is played, but I know from personal experience that a compelling story attracts players and keeps them immersed in the game. The downside to a well-developed backstory is that some players may not be able to connect with it, and it may confuse or overwhelm them as a result.

Creating a Fun and Smooth Environment: The bottom line of creating a game is that players need to have fun. The game needs to be enjoyable and engaging. Confusing rules or mechanics will turn players away from the game (Ham; Pulsipher 123-127).

One of the most significant issues I faced when creating World Throne was confusing and complicated rules and mechanics. My attempts to simplify World Throne have successfully made the game more accessible. World Throne will always be complex, but I see it as my job to make it as accessible and easy to learn as possible.

I'm certain that World Throne is an engaging game. To be successful, players need to pay attention to the flow of the game and to other players' decisions. Nearly everyone who has played has told me that they enjoyed the game and are excited to play again. I can also see how focused and engaged players are on each of their turns. Even after they've been eliminated,

people stay enthralled in the game! World Throne is fun to watch, which makes being eliminated not so bad (although it still stinks to lose). Something that I know adds to players' enjoyment is how unique the game is—notably, few other games combine board-based combat with playing cards. Most of my play testers had never played anything like World Throne before, so the very mechanics of the game engaged players from the start.

Replay Value: All games, especially shorter ones, should make players want to come back and play it again. Overall quality of game design is of course the number one factor for this, but incorporating many different ways to play or an array of choices within the game adds significant replay value (Pulsipher 76,79).

As I described in the Choice and Chance section, World Throne is a game of choice. The first choice players make, choosing a faction, adds tremendous replay value. Since each faction is entirely unique, players will only be able to truly experience World Throne by playing all of them. The next choice players make, choosing which units to use, creates substantial diversity across games played with the same faction. Players are able to move their pieces, conquer other factions, take the World Throne, and play their faction cards in any fashion they like. Finally, the large number of cards in each deck makes it difficult to see all of a faction's cards in a single game. Since people tend to really enjoy the diversity of the cards, this fact should make people want to play again and again until they've seen all the cards. All these aspects of World Throne should create enough replay value to make every game a unique experience.

Final Thoughts

      The twelve principles discussed here are by no means a complete list for all board games, but they have been crucial to World Throne's development. The most important skill I've learned for game development is the ability to take a step back and evaluate how everything that's been done contributes to the big picture—the end product. Without that broad lens, it's easy to get lost and discouraged along the way. Finally, I believe that the three most important characteristics for a game developer to have are patience, an open-mind, and cleverness. Patience pushes a developer through mis-steps and struggles, an open-mind links the developer's vision with the players' experience, and cleverness makes the game worth playing.

Playtest Photo

Figure 1. World Throne's presentation included a playtest with my advisory committee: Kevin Jefferson (bottom-left), Kelly Giles (top-right), and Dr. Keller (bottom-right). Pictured top-left is Emilee Vanderwerff, another JMU student.

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