Game Design Document

Shahull strife

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# Title Page

## Game Name

Shahull Strife

## Tag line

Breakneck sci-fi action!

## Elevator Pitch

Ever played a card game that promises to act out a flashy fight or grand combat, only to proceed at a snail’s pace? Not here! This game lets you act out an action movie fight scene in breakneck, real-time card combat.

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# Game Overview

## Game Concept

Shahull Strife is a card-based combat game. Thematically, each player controls a team of characters in a single action scene-style confrontation. These character have individual health pools and each card in your deck belongs to one of these characters, reinforcing the team-based theme mechanically. You win by reducing every character in the enemy team to 0 HP.

It is also a real-time card game, which is a fairly niche genre with often very simplistic rules. The idea for Shahull Strife is to insert back in a few of the more complex mechanics and some interesting card play found in more traditional card games.  
To give the players some time to think, the real-time element is not about being fast in absolute terms, but about being faster than your opponent. The balance between speed and careful consideration is a core aspect of the game.

To deal with upkeep without interfering with real-time gameplay, Shahull Strife is a programming game – a game where you plan out a sequence of actions and only resolve their effects later. This way you can keep playing cards without having to worry about adjusting health etc until later. While dealing with upkeep between real-time rounds provides a nice breather and a chance for the player who was behind to catch up, the focus should always be on the real-time aspect of the game.

## Target Audience

Shahull Strife, being played mostly in real-time, is relatively unusual for a board-or card game. This means it can target two main audiences: those who are into the board gaming hobby and always looking for something they haven’t seen before (which is fairly common for board game players), and those who don’t typically like slower, more think-y games – especially if their friends *are* into the hobby, this game offers a way for them to still play together.

## Genre(s)

## Shahull strife is a 1V1 card game.

It is also a real-time game, specifically a programming game.  
Note that “programming game” has a slightly different meaning when applied to board games rather than video games.

Thematically, Shahull Strife is a sci-fi action game.

## Game Flow Summary – How does the player move through the game? Include both the interface and the game itself.

The primary interaction with the game is through playing combos. This corresponds to the planning of actions in any programming board game.

The player will have a hand of action cards, which they can play into a row from left to right. Every card has some requirements for playing it (character and momentum, clearly marked on each card in a way that draws attention for ease of play), so the players will need to solve a mini puzzle every round of how their cards can fit together. Secondarily, players will want to look at the effects of the cards they are playing (such as damage, block & healing, the secondary focus point of each card) to make sure they are not only playing a legal combo, but an optimal one.

The combo building part of the game happens under constant time pressure to enforce the real-time aspect. The faster player is rewarded, intentionally slow play is punished. Note that the interplay between wanting to carefully optimise your combo and the need to ga fast is a core appeal of the game.

After every combo building phase there is a combo resolution phase, mostly consisting of counting damage and adjusting health pools (represented on each character’s refence card). This phase is not the focus of the game and should be kept lean. There is no time pressure during this phase, reducing the probability of accidental mistakes and equalising the playing field for next round.

## Look and Feel – What is the basic look and feel of the game? What is the visual style?

The game is set in a sci-fi cyberpunk / science fantasy setting. The more the setting allows for unique and interesting factions, characters and mechanics, the better, so realism is not a priority.

Shahull Strife is a nod to gritty cyberpunk settings, but doesn’t always need to take itself too seriously.

Visually it is extremely important for cards to be intuitively readable at a glance, so no time is wasted reading complex card designs during the combo building phase. To this end many of the mechanics in the game are colour coded and use simple, readable shapes and icons to communicate information. To prevent cards from becoming a visual mess, those things that do not need colour coding are kept in pure greyscale. To help the brightly coloured mechanical information shine, the rest of the cards is much darker.

Thematic information on cards such as card names and art should remember that a single game of Shahull Strife is meant to be a single confrontation between these teams. That means all cards should stay in the action. Good: action poses, catching one’s breath, at most a “flashback” to something immediately relevant (e.g. a “careful planning” or “extensive training” card). Bad: any action that would logically take a long time or doesn’t involve direct confrontation.  
This thematic information is always secondary to the more mechanical side. It should be able to visually sink into background noise (while still looking appealing when inspected up close).

Components that do not need to be extensively used in real-time can break the above rules to bring more focus to the game’s theme, as long as they don’t break too far from the style established by the action card deck.

# Gameplay

## Objectives – What are the objectives of the game?

The explicit, stated objective of the entire game is to kill all of your opponent’s characters. This breaks down into different sub-goals on different scales.

Multiple rounds scale: To kill an entire team, you need to kill individual characters. Note that killing a character is significantly more impactful than damaging one, as the opponent will need to play the rest of the game without that character.

Combo resolution: Here you’ll want to manage the amount of block and damage you are generating to tip the scales on what characters die when. This is possible because some cards allow a choice of effects to be made during combo resolution.

Combo building: This is the moment-to-moment decision making that largely decides how much damage and block you’ll have access to. Players try to string together cards from a randomly drawn hand into a combo, with the competing goals of solving this puzzle as fast yet as optimally as possible. This of course means there needs to be a reward for playing fast.

On all these layers, defence is just as important as offense – you win by taking out your opponent’s team, which also means you lose if your own team falls.

## Game Progression

Since the game is thematically a fight between teams, there is a bit of an arc to it as individual characters fall on both sides. When a character dies, all of their cards are removed form the corresponding player’s deck. This permanently alters that player’s playstyle, since they are now missing an important tool in their team, but what remains is a leaner deck that can play faster and often build combos more easily.

## Play Flow – How does the game flow for the game player

See game flow summary for a brief look at this, and see the rules (separate document) for an extensive description.  
An in-between summary of the different steps involved follows below.

The game starts with both players picking the team they want to play and setting up the appropriate material.

From there it’s straight into the first combo building phase. The game loop here is inspecting your hand to find valid combos, trying to find the most optimal option and playing it into your ongoing combo. When you run out of good options, you can get some new cards and repeat, until your combo is finished at which point you communicate this to the other player. If you finished first, you get a bonus. If you finished second, you’ll get some time to finish your combo as well but be punished if this takes too long.

After each combo building phase comes the combo resolution phase, where you make the decisions presented on cards and process the upkeep of adjusting health pools etc.

After some rounds, a character will die, marking a major point of progression for the game. Of course if a player sees this coming, they may do their best to protect that character before it is too late.

After a number of character deaths, one or both teams will be fully eliminated, ending the game.

## Mission / Challenge Structure / Puzzle Structure

The main puzzle in this game is attempting to build combos from random cards in your hand. Again, the detailed rules for this can be found in the rules document.

A hand consists of 8 cards. You may play cards from this hand one by one and left to right into a row of cards representing your combo. You can always take back the most recent card you played, but everything played before that is locked in. At any point you may discard your entire hand and draw as many cards from your deck. The discarded cards are lost for this round.

Each card has some requirements that must be met by the previous card. For example, many cards belonging to a specific character can only be played if the previous card was from the same character. The other core mechanic deciding whether a card can be played is momentum. Momentum is a bit more complex, but it is fully explained in the rules.

The second layer to this puzzle is that not only will you want to make a legal play right now, you’ll want to make the play that sets you up for the best combo across this whole round and possibly even future rounds. This requires that the player pay attention to the effect of each card in addition to it’s requirements. Players also benefit from being familiar with their deck, so they have an idea of what might be possible even without having the relevant cards in their hand.

Remember, as always, that this little puzzle must be played in real-time, balancing optimisation and speed. For this reason the mechanics of this puzzle need to be kept relatively simple.

# Mechanics

## Rules – What are the rules to the game, both implicit and explicit.

See rules document for full explanation. See “Game flow summary”, “play flow” and “puzzle structure” for some non-exhaustive summaries.

## Model of the game universe. Think of it as a simulation of a world, how do all the pieces interact?

Despite some thematic writing about the consequences of these confrontations, the larger world is not simulated in the actual game.

As a simulation of an individual fight, this game takes a relatively standard approach. Characters’ conditions are described by health points, their actions are represented by playable cards.

Action cards are the heart of the game. The mechanic of them having a requirement to play means that every card you play interacts in some abstract way with the previous card played, and sets up the next card you’ll be able to play in the future. This not only supports the light puzzle-y feel of the game that makes it engaging in real-time play, but also mimics how every action in a well-choreographed fight scene needs to naturally flow into the next, or the way combo routes work in fighting games.

The few other aspects of the game all exist to support the fiction of this action scene and the gameplay of playing combos. Characters have health pools to provide a goal for the game. Both characters and teams can have unique abilities to give them a more vibrant, unique identity. Finisher cards exist to smooth over gameplay between rounds, so you can get straight back into combo building.

Some interesting things of note:  
this game simulates the nature of a fight as a frenetic scramble by forcing the players to play in real-time as they try to out-pace each other.  
The action cards in this game belong to specific characters, giving each character it’s own identity and reinforcing the theme of the game when a character dies and you lose all of their cards.

## Physics – How does the physical universe work?

It doesn’t. This game takes style over realism whenever the question arises. Unbelievable feats of acrobatics can be busted out many times during combat simply by playing a card, and since any team can play against any other, the confrontations will (unfortunately) often not make too much sense.

Every part of the “physical universe” that is simulated is already listed above – the mechanics are abstracted far away from any physical space or objects outside of the two teams clashing.

## Economy – What is the economy of the game? How does it work?

There is no typical economy. No resources or mechanics in Shahull Strife function as currency (apart from possible team-specific mechanics). However, economy can also be used to talk about “action economy” and similar concepts.

Health, damage, block and healing all form a part of the HP economy. For the game to work, it is essential that damage is far more common than block and healing combined. Also, to make the game more interesting, there need to be some significant mechanical difference between block and healing. At the very least, block can only prevent damage while healing can recover previously lost health.  
Since your block and the opponent’s damage are directly compared against each other, this system encourages some awareness of each other’s state during combo resolution before you make decisions on cards you played.

Time is another important resource in this game, during combo building specifically. The player who finishes first is always rewarded, but even then the other player needs to be discouraged from playing overly slow. It is fine that the player finishing second gets some extra time to optimise their combo as a form of comeback mechanic, it just can’t be taken too far. The rewards and punishments ultimately have similar effects to those presented on cards, so the players can directly balance them against each other in their decision making.  
A side effect of this is that some actions like re-drawing your hand have a serious additional cost, but this is not necessarily a bad thing and there is little to be done about it anyways.

Finally, characters act as another layer on top of the health system. Ultimately, losing health has no direct mechanical consequences, but losing a character does. For this reason, players will be carefully controlling which of their characters get hit when to keep them alive as long as possible and make sure the right ones survive the longest.  
This also encourages involves awareness of each other’s state to see if it might be possible to kill your opponent’s character this round, or if you can just barely save your own character.

## Character / Game Piece movement in the game

Movement is sometimes implied by the theming of cards, but not explicitly modelled.

## Conflict: if present, how is this modelled?

The entire game is a model of conflict. See other sections as well as the rules for details.

## Re-playability

This might honestly be a weak point for the game. There is no deck building, which would immediately fix concerns about re-playability but is way out of scope for the game, doesn’t work well with the core mechanics and significantly decreases the designer’s opportunities to design unique and interesting teams.

Theoretically there is no skill ceiling, as you can always play just a little bit faster. The returns for that extra half a second gained are negligible though. The mechanics, while fun and engaging, don’t allow for that much tactical depth. This is not illogical as they need to be very simple in order for the game to be playable at speed by new players, but still a shortcoming.  
In the end though, being welcoming to new players will always be more of a priority to me than providing endless challenge for experts whenever the two conflict.

The one obvious thing that grants re-playability is the appeal of trying new and unique teams, each with a strong mechanical identity and unique gimmicks encouraging a different playstyle. This kind of re-playability is unfortunately entirely novelty-driven and loses its appeal once you have gained familiarity with all decks you own.

My hope is that the moment-to-moment gameplay of Shahull Strife is fun enough for the game to still be worthwhile despite a possible lack of tactical depth.

## Mistakes & cheating

In any game played in real-time, it is understandable that players will make honest mistakes. In Shahull strife specifically, players will accidentally play cards during combo planning without satisfying their requirements.  
The advantage of Shahull Strife is that not the entire game is played in real-time. During combo resolution, it is easy to find these errors – however, how do you deal with them? As always, the full description of the actual rules involved can be found in the rules document.

Since mistakes are perfectly understandable, the player should not be overly punished.  
On the other side, by adding explicit rules for dealing with illegal plays, it automatically becomes a valid option to make these kinds of plays on purpose. This is not desired for the game.

The ideal solution here is one that negates any profits made from the mistake or cheat, but without any additional punishment. Note that the profit from an illegally played card may not come from the effect of that same card. For example, you might play a weak card that you normally couldn’t, only to satisfy the requirements of an extremely strong card after.

# Story and Narrative

## Back story

*In the near future, most of humanity has adjusted to living in enormous metropoles concentrating nearly all economic and political power. The streets of are rife with violence as various factions fight for control in these megacities – whether that’s powerful corporations, shady underworld organisations, lone mercenaries looking out only for themselves, or police forces violently keeping everyone in check.*

A note on this lore: it is very functional, but nothing here makes for a particularly unique setting. If this needs to be a strong IP, it will need more of an identity. However, the current backstory does everything necessary to support the gameplay and the core fantasy without getting in the way. Plus, keeping things this vague keeps a lot of possibilities open to design uniquely themed faction teams

A potentially more fleshed-out version of the backstory of the game will be included in the rules.

Additionally, each team belongs to a larger faction with its own place in this backstory. Lore about each faction, each team and the characters that comprise it will be included with those teams’ decks.

## Teams, factions & characters

Only 2 teams are included in this vertical slice. An eventual official starter kit or similar would include at least 4.

Section-9 (actual name pending):  
A government special forces team cracking down on terrorism and the underworld crime scene. Or just about anything getting in the way of the corrupt government, really.  
Consists of a commander effectively playing the role of main character for the team, and two other supporting units: a lethal sniper and an unstoppable force in riot control gear.

Goons:  
One of many branches of an organised crime organisation filled by nameless, faceless goons.  
Consists of a bunch of practically interchangeable and individually incompetent goons, and a boss to lead them making the team function as long as they remain safe.

## Story progression

Story does not progress during the game. At most the introduction of new teams over time can introduce new elements to the world.

## Accompanying game pieces – story booklets, art work

The main back story of the world itself will be explained in the rule book. Story information about teams and their characters will be printed on one side of their respective reference cards, the other being reserved for mechanics.

# Game World

## General look and feel of world

The world of Shahull strife is barely represented in the game itself outside of flavour text and possibly the backgrounds of card art.

The city of Shahull is vibrant multicultural neon. It is also gritty and violent, moody and oppressive. In summary, traditional cyberpunk fair. In addition to this, Shahull Strife can also be just a little bit more cartoonishly exaggerated into the fantastical or silly. Many board- and card games have an innate silliness to them where themes don’t quite align with mechanics, or where the designer just leaned into the rule of cool as hard as they could without care for realism. This game leans into that.

## Areas

As the game has no model of physical space and movement, these are not relevant and therefore not fleshed out.  
Of course logically, Shahull would be comprised of many districts and neighbourhoods, and fights could take place in a number of interesting locations.

While not used now, this may be a possible area of expansion in the future – introducing unique modifiers depending on what district of the city you are fighting over, for example.  
Alternatively, a smaller scale representation of the environment may be considered. This could be done by adding environmental attack cards to players’ decks.

## How to relate to the rest of the world

The world outside the city of Shahull is comprised of sweeping empty landscapes filled with enormous industrial plants and stippled with other cities much like it. However, neither the industrial wastes nor any inter-city relations are important to the game of Shahull Strife, hence it’s name.

Of course these details of backstory can still be used as inspiration for future teams and other expansions.

## What levels use it

## Connections to other areas

# Characters.

## For each character

## Back story

## Personality

## Appearance

## Abilities

## Relevance to the story

## Relationship to other characters

## Artificial Intelligence Use in Opponent and Enemy

## Non-combat and Friendly Characters

# Interface

## Card interface

Cards, especially action cards need to be extremely visually clear to be readable at a glance without effort.

Language of effects:

* Damage – red icon. No numbers or text.
* Block – blue icon. No numbers or text.
* Healing – green icon. No numbers or text.
* Options – a line between different effects on a card means you have to pick either side during combo resolution
* Target – icon in effects box for the player using it, and in a separate location so it’s easily spotted when a player swaps targets.
* Unique abilities – either unique icons with their own colour (or using an existing colour if related), or keywords (eg “PARRY”), or keywords with a simple parameter (eg “BOOST [damage]” where damage is the appropriate icon). The explanation of these mechanics is on the team reference card.

Anatomy of an action card:

* Character bar – requirement on the left, link on the right. Colour coded.
* Momentum bar – requirement left, link right. Uncoloured but using values to identify which options are available.
* Card effect – see “Language of effects”
* Targeting icon – optional. Reminder of card effect for easy spotting.
* Character & Team reminder – small icon useful during setup & when a character dies.
* Card name & art – cool for reinforcement of the theme, but not essential gameplay information. Should take a back seat.

Anatomy of a finisher card:

* Character bar – as with action cards
* Momentum bars – same as action cards, but providing multiple options such that at least one fits in every situation
* Effects – two separate effects fields, one when played at the end of your combo, one at the start.
* Targeting icon – all finishers need to draw target when played at the start such that there is always a well-defined targeted character.

Anatomy of a team reference card:

* Team name & icon
* List of characters & their icons
* Mechanical side: explanation of custom mechanics for the team
* Narrative side: quick back story on the team & their larger faction
* Team art

Anatomy of a character reference card:

* Character name & icon
* HP tracker
* Starting HP
* Mechanical side: character ability
* Narrative side: back story or other description of the character
* Character art

## Help System / Manual

See the rules document. It currently doesn’t have examples of play and lacks graphic design or professional layout. Should also be less wordy.

# Design guidelines

## Design guidelines

Quick setup

Prevent waiting

Player feedback

New & experienced players together

Balance & fairness / character balance

A game for yourself

Skill ceiling

Distinctions between phases

## Design principles

Working memory

Balancing

Feedback loops

Zero sum games

Time dilation

Define the problem

Asymmetry

Errors without punishment

Fast / cheap / good

Play testing / paper prototyping

80/20 rule

Doubling & halving

Core gameplay loop

Making moves

Memory vs skill