My Design Philosophy for AG

I got started with game design in 1992 at the age of 33 after beholding Reversi. I had no desire to actually play. (I’m a decidedly below average player of games.) Just knowing the rules was enough. I was awed that someone had designed such a beautiful game. It occurred to me that maybe I could design a game too if I put my mind to it. It was worth a try.

Enter Quadrature. After playing it about 1000 times with one of my neighbors, we were unexpectedly caught in a cycle. At first I didn’t believe it was happening. We played a few more moves. And a few more. Ultimately I had to face reality. Quadrature was non-finite. I was crushed and embarrassed. I never played Quadrature again. And I would never design a non-finite game again.

My second game, Tanbo, was conceived by pacing around in my apartment for a couple of weeks in a trance, not seeing anything but images of game concepts. I still remember the eureka moment. I was euphoric. Tanbo has turned out not to be my most popular game, but it’s special to me. It was my first finite game. And it served an important purpose. It was a precursor to Oust.

My sole motivation in game design is architecture - discovering interesting, unique structural concepts. I’m firmly against non-finite games, even if they aren’t likely to have cycles. If cycles are possible, there seems to be a principle making them more likely with advancing skill (Chess, Checkers, Go without ko). But mainly it’s a question of aesthetics for me. I just don’t like the potential for cycles in a game, however unlikely.

I’m generally not interested in creating variants. I prefer my games to have nothing in common with existing games, Redstone being a notable exception. And all of my connection games are related to Hex and Y, simply because strings of like-colored stones connect peripheral (or sometimes internal) segments.

Quality of play isn’t very important to me unless a game is flawed somehow. I think around 10 percent of my games have turned out to be fun to play. Of course I’m glad if my game is well liked. Popularity is just not a driving force for me.

I’ve been designing in kind of a bubble. At the time of Quadrature, I didn’t realize there was a whole world of abstract games out there. Much later I would learn about Hex and Y, which impacted me greatly. I have a whole series of connection games, including a couple which are arguably even simpler than Hex and Y (Gyre and Lariat).

I have a very narrow view of what games should be like. First and foremost they should be finite. They should employ generic equipment: moveable, stackable checkers of 2 different colors on a checkerboard or hexhex board. Or non-moveable, non-stackable stones of 2 different colors on a goban or hexhex board. I have on occasion broken my own rules (Redstone).

Sorry, but I haven’t appreciated other designers’ games as much as perhaps I should have. To me they often seem arbitrary or illcontrived, or just too complicated. This is more ignorance than arrogance. I understand what I’m doing, but I probably don’t understand what you’re doing.

A handful of other designers’ games have piqued my interest, and I have a section for them, “Not My Games”, on my website, marksteeregames.com.