**Theme Research**

**Many games incorporate a theme, which is the utilization of a particular subject or scenario world in which to immerse players. Almost anything can be used as a game’s theme: being a landlord (Monopoly), fighting monsters to protect a castle (Castle Panic), mice hunting for cheese in a castle (Burg Appenzell), monkeys in bumper cars (Spin Monkeys). As a game designer, choosing a fun theme that you really enjoy is important for your enjoyment of this process. A great theme, fully fleshed out, can attract and keep players as well, because a game where players move wooden cubes around on a board based on cards isn’t exciting, but working together to eradicate disease is really tense and exciting, and both are the game Pandemic. No one wants to be on a sinking island, trying to escape via shark, whale, and sea monster-infested waters, but it’s fun to pretend in the game Survive! Escape from Atlantis.**

**A great theme can also put players in the right frame of mind to make better, more informed decisions because they can use existing knowledge about a subject to help them. In these games, outcomes reflect real-world consequences of a player’s decisions. In Risk, when you lose an army, you lose actual army pieces. Not all games are reality-based, but themes help provide a context for the rules to help players remember them better. In Rampage, players use their monster pawns to smash buildings, throw buildings, blow monster breath, and move about the board. Luckily, we don’t have to experience monsters destroying cities in real life, but because the theme is fun and engaging, we remember the simple rules because they fit what we know from monster movies and stories.**

**Abstract games are the alternative to themed games. Abstract games do not have a story or simulate reality, and examples include Chess, Go, and Checkers. In abstract strategy games, players must think about the problem logically as the rules describe in a straightforward manner.**

**Themes must lend themselves to conflict: the source of competition in the game where players compete over limited options, choices, and resources. The game must represent conflict itself—escaping a labyrinth with treasures (The Amazeing Labyrinth) or successfully piloting a hot air balloon (Cloud 9). In addition, each game should offer small-scale conflict on each turn because of the choices they make—where to place a tile, should I place a worker or not, should I try to steal a city from another player in my future actions (Carcassonne)?**

**A board game has a theme: the place, subject, or scenario that models a real-world or imaginary conflict. Players will interact with this world using your chosen mechanics as well as how you have modeled them with your board and bits. For example, if your theme is city-smashing giant monsters, then it’s logical to assume that the board will look like a city landscape that can accommodate city-smashing giant monsters.**

**Themes have other benefits, too. Themes provide a structure that can help players remember the rules of a game. Themes can help players fit the rules into a context that helps them make sense. In the city-smashing giant monster game, actions like moving, smashing, using lasers, and roaring make sense because of the theme.**

**Themes can also help players use existing knowledge to help them. If a game was themed about the cheese-making process, players who have experience making cheese might have an advantage. Of course, players without knowledge of the cheese-making process could be at a disadvantage, so be sure to make sure your game is accessible to any player, regardless of experience.**

**Themes can help players enjoy the game more by giving them a chance to play “pretend” and thus enjoying the game more. The idea of pirates sailing the Caribbean might be more exciting than the idea of moving wood blocks on a board from one circle to another. Picking a theme that is related to something people know and understand can help to engage in the game with enthusiasm. The more engaged they are, the more they will like playing it.**

**Game publishers are looking for themes that are fresh, exciting, and not saturated in the market. There are plenty of games with zombies, fantasy-oriented, space and science-fiction themes, for example, so publishers either want completely new themes or games that have a twist on an established theme.**

**Theme Brainstorming #1: So Many Themes!**

**Highlight the themes you like. Write down as many other different ideas as you can think of for your game. Branch out, try for novelty, develop a lot of ideas for a certain topic, as much as you can!. Keep in mind that game companies are always looking for NEW themes, but an amazing game can and will emerge from these existing themes IF the game offers a new variation or twist. Remember, no war or sports.**

| **General Gaming Themes**  **Adventure**  **Alien/Alien Invasion**  **Animals: Land, Sea**  **Aviation**  **Bluffing/Humor/Memory**  **City Building/Destroying**  **Colonization**  **Computer/Internet/Hacking**  **Crime, Mafia, Murder**  **Cyberpunk/Dystopia/Post Apocalypse**  **Deduction/Mystery**  **Dinosaurs**  **Economic**  **Environment/Ecology**  **Exploration: Sea, Space**  **Fantasy/Legends/SciFi/Myths/**  **Steampunk/Victorian**  **Fairy Tales**  **Farming**  **Horror/Haunted House**  **Industry/Manufacturing**  **Magic/Wizardry**  **Maze**  **Medicine/Science**  **King Mercury Rulezzzz** | **Monsters: Cthulhu, Vampires, Werewolves, Swamp Man, Zombies**  **Nautical/Sailing/Pirates**  **Negotiation**  **Ninjas/Kaiju/Kawaii**  **Office/Business/Commerce**  **Police/Firefighters/Emergency Management**  **Politics**  **Racing**  **Robots/Technology/Inventions**  **Royalty**  **Science/Nature**  **School**  **Spies/Secret Agents**  **Superheroes**  **Territory Building/Acquisition**  **Toys**  **Trains/Transportation**  **Historical Periods**  **Prehistoric civilization**  **Ancient Civilization—Greek, Roman, Chinese, Japanese, Central American, South American, African, Australian, Middle Eastern**  **Early America** | **American West & Settlement**  **Medieval**  **Renaissance**  **Cold War**  **Present-day foreign cultures**  **Wars (NO)**  **Revolutionary, Civil War, Modern Warfare, Native American War, WWI, WW2, WW3, Vietnam, Korean War**    **Specific People**  **Alexander the Great**  **Genghis Khan**  **Napoleon**  **Jack the Ripper**    **Popular Interests (Be sure to really think about how to incorporate conflict!)**  **Celebrities/Fashion**  **Holidays**  **Food**  **Music/Movies/TV/Radio**  **Novel, Comic book-based Sports/Recreation/Dance**  **Travel/Culture** |
| --- | --- | --- |

**Write out TEN different theme ideas for your game. Expand on single-word concepts to include the potential for large-scale conflict. *Ex: Monkeys in bumper cars, trying to capture as much fruit as possible.***

**1.**

**2.**

**3.**

**4.**

**5.**

**6.**

**7.**

**8.**

**9.**

**10.**

**Theme Brainstorming Step #2: So many ideas!**

**Now that you have identified possible themes of your game, you will need to research these themes. For example, if you wanted to make a game about coal mining, some research might show you that the biggest dangers are methane gas and coal dust. Additional research might show what safety measures can be taken to avert these hazards, and the cost to implement them.**

***Pick two themes you are interested in, and read about them. Jot down any and all ideas you can generate. Emphasis: VOLUME of ideas.***

**Topic #1: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Sources (write the URL of websites visited):**

**1.**

**2.**

**Found & known information--at least 10 ideas (be sure to elaborate, don’t just write down single words or phrases)**

**Topic #2: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Sources (paste in complete URLs of websites you use):**

**1.**

**2.**

**Found & known information--at least 10 ideas**

**Theme Brainstorming Step #3: Others’ Feedback**

Now that you have identified the theme of your game, you should get others’ opinions. Good design takes the needs of your users into account. You get to design the game you want, but incorporating others’ feedback helps to discover new ideas, challenge your assumptions, and find out what really appeals to others.

**Task:** Interview other students.

**Process:**

* Partner with a student.
* Take turns telling each other about your game theme ideas.
* Ask questions to see what they think about your ideas.
  + Examples:
    - What sounds cool about this idea?
    - What do you think should definitely be included with the theme?
    - Is there anything you would suggest to change?
    - Is there anything that you have questions about?
    - Do you have any questions?
* Take notes below by writing down at least five ideas from each interviewee for EACH game idea.

| **Student Name:** | **Student Name:** |
| --- | --- |
| **Theme Idea #1:** | **Theme Idea #1:** |
| **Theme Idea #2:** | **Theme Idea #2:** |

**Theme Brainstorming Step #4: Ideas + Research + Conflict!**

**Now that you have identified the theme of your game, you will need to research the theme. For example, if you wanted to make a game about coal mining, some research might show you that the biggest dangers are methane gas and coal dust. Additional research might show what safety measures can be taken to avert these hazards, and the cost to implement them. How can you incorporate real-world information into your game?**

**MY THEME:**

**Research your theme and write something you learned from your real-world research that you might include in your game AND explain how it would add large and small-scale conflict in your game.**

| **Real-world information** | **How would it add to large AND small-scale conflict? (Give three examples for small-scale conflict, i.e. types of player choices.)** |
| --- | --- |
|  | **Large:**  **Small:** |
|  | **Large:**  **Small:** |
|  | **Large:**  **Small:** |
|  | **Large:**  **Small:** |
|  | **Large:**  **Small:** |

**Alternative Theme Brainstorming Step #4: Theme & Mechanics (10 pts)**

**How can you incorporate real-world information into your game by using mechanics? In the “Real-world Information” box, write down something you learned from your research that you could use in your game. In the “Game Mechanic and How You Would Use It'' box, write a mechanic and explain how you would use that mechanic to make the real-world information part of your game.**

**MY THEME:**

| **Real-world information** | **Game Mechanic and How You Would Use It** |
| --- | --- |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |
|  |  |

**Theme Brainstorming Step #5: From Theme to Game**

**Now that you have a theme in hand, it’s time to select the specific elements of that theme that you want to put into your game.**

**1.**  **What elements of your theme are most important? *This is the objects, the stuff, of your game. (For example, in a pirate-themed game, I might list pirates, ocean, ships, booty, flags, and islands.)***

**2.** **How do these elements create external conflict on a large scale? *How do these elements create the overall big conflict for the game? (For example, the pirates sail the ocean on ships that can be upgraded to hunt for booty and plant flags on the different islands.)***

**3.** **How do these elements create internal conflict for players on their turns? In other words, what choices will players have to make? *(For example, players will have to decide which islands to sail to, which treasure chests to search for booty, and which islands they want to put their flag on.)***

**4.** **How will players engage in conflict with each other as they play the game? How will the decisions of one player affect the decisions of another player? *(Players will compete on who can place a flag on each island first and to search treasure chests for the most treasure.)***

**5. What ONE OR TWO mechanics do you plan on using, and how will you incorporate them into this theme?**

**Theme Brainstorming Step #6: Game Sketches**

Sketch detailed, different versions of your board, cards, bits--anything needed to help you make the jump between your ideas and physical reality. You must sketch and label at least FOUR different board layouts, and six other objects (cards, bits, custom dice, etc.)

**Final Game Design Requirements & Proposal**

**Your Game Must Have Conflict! The three types of conflict...**

* You want something, and someone else wants it too.
* You want to do something, and someone gets in the way.
* Someone has something, and you want it.

**Large Scale Conflict:** The big challenge for everyone

**Small Scale Conflict:** The choices players have on their turns

**Game Requirements**

* Must play 2, 3, and 4 players
* Must be able to be digitized (all on one file)
* Have large and small scale conflict
* Emphasis on player choice
* Approved mechanics only
* Random elements may be present but must be used sparingly, have a minimal effect
* Square, not rectangular board (unless you have a good reason)

**Game Restrictions**

* No sports or war themes
* No coop games
* No player elimination
* No player to player violence, no “killing”
* No weapons that are school inappropriate
* No event decks

**My Game Theme:**

**My Game Mechanics (proposed):**

**Description of my game idea (explain how theme, mechanics, and large and small scale conflict combine).**

***NOT SET IN STONE, this may change along the way!***