

Boardgame Designers Forum

Australian Games Expo 2008

Andrew Stapleton – July 2008



Abstract—A wrap of the inaugural Boardgame Designers Forum at the Australian Games Expo held June 7-9, 2008 in Albury, NSW at the Albury Convention Centre.

Keywords—game, design, boardgame, industry

I. Introduction

This year the Australian Boardgames Expo, held its inaugural design forum for boardgames on Monday June 9, 2008 at the Albury Convention Centre. This event was run and chaired by the recently formed Boardgames Australia organization.

I had originally intended this to be a short blog posting, however, it soon became apparent that in order to do the event justice, a more detailed approach was needed, and this article is the result.

Taking an overview of the event, the forum agenda started at the broad level of the industry, then examined intellectual properties with boardgame design, self publishing, playtesting, and a final wrap of the event (see below).

Boardgame Design Forum Agenda	
10AM – 11 AM	The Game Business
11AM-11.30AM	Intellectual Property
11.30-11.45AM	Tea break
11.45AM-12.15PM	Self-Publishing
12.15PM-12.45PM	Rules, Playtesting and Development
12.45PM	Wrap-up

Figure 1: The inaugural Boardgame Design Forum agenda

II. The Game Business

On the panel for this discussion were Mike Hirtle of Hasbro and Zev Shlasinger (Z-Man Games). I've included the bios as listed on the Boardgames Australia website (boardgamesaustralia.org):

Zev is the President of ZMan Games, a New York-based publisher founded in 1999. As well as original titles, ZMan Games also publish English-language versions of European titles.

Mike is the Vice President of Acquisitions for major US toy and game publisher HASBRO.



Figure 2: Mike Hirtle of Hasbro (right) makes a point while Zev Shlasinger of Z-Man Games watches on

In terms of game submissions, Mike mentioned that on average at Hasbro, 3000 concepts are year are reviewed with between 30-35 being accepted (i.e. 1% approximately). And while there is a policy for all unsolicited game concepts not to be accepted, there is one exception to that rule; game expos and conferences. The reason for disallowing unsolicited

submissions this is simply due to their vast number. Consequently, the usual pathway is through brokers (there are three boardgame brokers in Australia, all of which are based in Melbourne¹).

Zev then shared his experience. Unlike Mike, who works for a multinational, Zev's *Z-Man* games is, by comparison, a small, but successful independent publisher based in New York. *Z-Man* Games began with publishing collectible card games, then moved into other card games and now, also boardgames. Zev explained how he typically looks at outside submissions, and has an open submission policy. However, he does require submissions to follow guidelines, along with a "pitch" which is to include details such as number of players, playing time, genre etc. One of the key qualities Zev looks for in submission is uniqueness. He went on to say that if the submission passes this phase, then he requests the designer to submit a prototype for review.



It was interesting to compare Zev's viewpoint, as a specialist publisher, with Mike's as a global mass market publisher. Whereas Zev tended to focus on uniqueness and novel gameplay, Mike stated that he was "not so much looking for gameplay... but [rather for] the big promotional wow!" Customers for Mike are the large retail chains (*Walmart*, *Target* etc.), and hence he has a limited, and typically conservative, customer base (3-4 retail chains). Further, as you'd expect, games in this sector are typically dominated by brands and licenses, and very few new games come on-stream in this market.

What I also found to be an interesting fact was that for every game in the mass market there are approximately 200 in the specialty market. I thought that this provided a good appreciation of the differences between the markets.

As you'd expect from a global publisher, Hasbro uses economies of scale to their advantage and are after low cost, high volume sales. Typically they are looking at selling approximately 400,000 copies in the first year! (In videogame

¹ Melissa Rogerson of *Boardgames Australia* mentioned that the details of these brokers will appear on the website shortly (www.boardgamesaustralia.org).

terms that almost a AAA title). And just before you decide to buy a small pacific island, if things go well you'd see about \$0.80 per game. And just to flip to the other side of the coin, Zev explained that for him sales of 2000-3000 copies would be regarded as a minor success.

The discussion then shifted toward the process to market, and here again the differences were profound. For Zev, the process takes between 4-6 months, whereas for Mike, it takes approximately 2 years for a game submission to reach the marketplace (he's currently looking at submissions to be released in 2010). Zev also provided the tip that for him, conventions are a way to generate buzz, promote and release a new game, so it's always useful to keep in mind when the major conventions are taking place as possible release dates for your game. And following on from that Zev explained how his games are release on a case by case basis, whereas for Mike, Hasbro is in the process of becoming more global with their releases, and releasing games worldwide simultaneously.

Mike outlined how the relationships with his customer can impact on the game. For example, a customer, say a large retail chain like *Target* for example, may tell him that the packaging for the game needs to be limited to a particular size due to shelf size constraints. Further, when it comes to marketing, Hasbro typically spend US\$2-4 million a year, and added that his customers are very conservative.



Figure 3: Mike outlines Hasbro's marketing strategy

Marketing for Zev is significantly different, with his marketing budget of US\$100 a month (US\$1200 per annum) significantly smaller than the multinational Hasbro. His primary form of marketing is at conventions, and through his website and sites such as boardgamegeek.com (also known as "The Geek") and boardgamenews.com.

Switching to the issue of royalties, there was a similarity between specialist and mass market publishing. In both cases the level was approximately 5% of sales. More specifically for Zev it was between 5-10% of sales at the wholesale price, whereas for Mike it was 5% or less.

Anotoether issue which arose during panel discussion was that of licenses and intellectual property (IP). Mike said that sometime he receives submissions which are concepts based on licensed product (e.g. Star Wars). On other occasions, a publisher may suggest a particular license for a submission.

The discussion became more general, exploring issues of growth (Zev mentioned that he's seen boardgame growth over the last 2 years), and crossover between the specialist and independent market. The consensus from the panel was that *Settlers of Catan* was the only game (in recent times) which has successfully made the transition from the specialist to mass markets.



One of the questions I posed a question to the panel, was the nature of relationship between the publisher and designer/developer during the process to market. The motivation for this question came from my experience in the videogame industry. For example, in the videogame industry publishers can influence milestones, have input on issues of gameplay, art direction and so on, and I wanted to understand what this relationship was like within the boardgame industry.

As you'd expect, both Zev and Mike had different perspectives. Mike said the relationship was negotiable. Hasbro has internal design teams that can be assigned to fix deficiencies with a design, however there are also occasions where the company works closely with the original designer. For Zev, essentially he takes his own playtest results and makes recommendations which may include suggestions about the art, game mechanics, and then work closely with the designer in following through on these recommendations.

Continuing the general discussion on playtesting, Mike stated that Hasbro had its own testing facility – *GameWorks* – which runs formalized testing (using techniques and facilities found in usability testing such as one way mirrors, non-participant observers etc.) for evaluating game designs. Hasbro also conducts less formal playtesting sessions during lunchtimes where all Hasbro staff from game designers, to marketing managers, to anyone in between can participate in the playtesting process. In addition to playtesting, Mike mentioned how the company also employs focus group testing, to determine player attitude and perceptions of their games. As an aside, note that more on game testing at Habro

can be found in my April 2007 post [Game Design the Hasbro Way](#).

Understandably, Zev's playtesting process is conducted on a much smaller scale than that of Habro. Zev laughingly joked to bribe your friends to get others to play your game and evaluate it. He also mentioned that as difficult as it may be, you need to stand back and observe what happens in the playtesting process, rather than become actively involved in explaining (or even debating) your design with playtesters. For Zev, playtesting is conducted by groups of players whose opinions he trusts. Also, he may take a game to a convention and have it tested, with the reward of a Z-man game providing an incentive to prospective testers. All in all, it could take between 8-12 weeks from tested prototype to published boardgame with Z-Man games, with card games even faster as they typically they play for 20-30 minutes and hence require less time to test.



Figure 4: Zev listens with envy as Mike outlines the playtesting approach at Hasbro

Both Zev and Mike agreed that, as you'd expect, is to your advantage having a previously published game with a print run. Responding to a question from the floor asking whether a "print and play" downloadable game could be considered "publishing", Zev agreed that it may help when approaching publishers. and suggested two key reasons for this. First, was that it provides opportunities for others to play your games and prototypes, as well as provide feedback. And second, the print and play market is very small, so would have little impact on you possibly even publishing the same game.

Some final words of wisdom for the panel were:

- Keep in mind that the game that's submitted to a publisher for evaluation doesn't need to be perfect, but does need to be representative of the final game
- Ensure that you research the market to see what other games are out there
- Playtest your game to ensure it's not "broken" before you submit it
- And research the publisher's product line(s) to ensure that there's a match between what they publish, and what you're designing

III. Intellectual Property

Peter Gretton was next up on the agenda to speak about intellectual property. His bio on Boardgames Australia reads:

Peter is a patent and trade mark attorney in the Melbourne office of Davies Collison Cave, where he ...provides a range of intellectual property management services to corporate clients, manages tenders and proposals for the firm....[and] also leads the firm's business development activities in regional Victoria, conducting seminars and workshops, and helping prospective clients to develop an understanding of intellectual property principles.



Figure 5: Peter Gretton listens to one of the many questions on intellectual property from the floor.

Peter began with patent saying that it can cost anywhere between \$10-15k for a patent, and that you can apply for a patent for a boardgame (however it is difficult to do this for the European market highlighting how patent rights are jurisdictional). A boardgame patent essentially applies to a "method of playing a game (by moving pieces) defined by a set of rules".

The ultimate test of a patent is "if it's new", however in the instance of games, this can be of questionable merit. It can also be costly to design as a patent infringement case would cost somewhere around \$250k and be heard in a federal court!

Peter mentioned how a lot of boardgames were not patented, and consequently, if you were to patent a boardgame, when the patent office receives your request, there not much for them to go on to determent uniqueness.

Peter explained how copyright was the type of intellectual property (IP) rights used by game designers. The pros of copyright is that it's free and that it arises automatically, however the con is that there has to be proof of actually copying, which can be difficult. It is also important to keep in mind that copyright doesn't protect ideas, just the *expression* of ideas. It was also suggested that approached such as sending a prototype to yourself, or selling it to someone and having a receipt of purchase may assist with proof of publication.

Also discussed was the trademark process. Peter mention that you can file for trademark by applying to the trademarks office, however you need to ensure that you apply within the correct class. Boardgames is in class 28, with internet and CD-ROM games in class 9 and 41 respectively. The essential quality of a trademark is that it needs to be distinctive. Costs are \$300 for a registration fee, the n \$150 per class, and this is for an Australian trademark. If the trademark it to apply overseas, then you'll need to file for each registration. The scope of trademarks applied to words, logos, shapes, colors, sounds and smells.

For example, trademarks for Barrel of Monkeys include the name "Barrel of Monkeys", the shape of the barrel and the shape of the monkeys.



Figure 6: Monkey Business. 'Barrel of Monkeys' has trademarks on the name, the shape of the barrel and the shape of the monkeys.

IV. Self-Publishing

After enjoying a freshly brewed espresso from the coffee cart, and mingling with the crowd, it was time to return to the venue for the self-publishing panel. This panel consisted of Phil Harding (*Adventureland Games*), Ben Nelson (*Nelson Design*) and Meredith Ashton (*Ashton Productions*).



Figure 7: Award winning designer, Phil Harding, shares a joke with the crowd, while Meredith Ashton looks on.

Phil, designer and self-publisher of *Archaeology: The Card Game*, began by providing general overview of his production pipeline.

- 1) **Idea:** For Phil, the original idea was a game about pirates picking up treasures, but after some early evaluations and feedback, he decided to
- 2) **Design Notebook:** Phil shared his design notebook for ideas which included game designs, mechanics, inspirations for games, observations and so on, and emphasized the importance of a Design Notebook in his process.
- 3) **Prototype:** Phil reinforced the need for prototype development
- 4) **Playtesting:** Phil explained how playtesting was regarded as a key component of the design process. He explained how the internet provided good sources for recruiting playtesters; especially www.boardgamegeek.com and www.bgdf.com
- 5) **Production:** The final function within the pipeline is that of final production. Phil explained that out of the two possible approaches – going through a production manufacturer or self-publishing – Phil decided on the latter as he was only anticipating a small run.



Figure 8: Phil's winning design takes the Boardgames Australia inaugural Best Australian Game Award.

Ben, the director of an Adelaide-based design and print added that it's important to consider minimum printing requirements from printers when self-publishing small print runs, and to understand the break even points through economies of scale. For example, Ben mentioned that in the case of offset printing it would take approximately 2000 copies to be printed for offset to be cost-effective, and that in any case the minimum print run is somewhere between 250-500 copies depending upon a specific printer's setup costs.



Figure 9: Ben Nelson adds his view on self-publishing

Meredith Ashton of Ashton Productions a PR and Marketing company, then provided some further insight into board and card game production, and self-marketing. She mentioned that it was crucial to create a relationship with your local digital printer (e.g. *Snap, Kwik Kopy*), and to use standard sizes such as A3 or A4 (if possible) to help reduce costs.

She then explored viral and guerrilla marketing opportunities, For example, sending emails to boardgame sites with a photo of the game along with supplementary copy to assist with promoting the game. Another approach is to "hang off the coattails of another event" – it could be a sporting event, film event, someone famous visiting and so on.

Meredith also mentioned traditional media, and suggested that an educational angle could assist with promotion as it

has “wholesome appeal, family values... and isn’t crassly commercial”.



Figure 10: Meredith Ashton gives some pointers on innovative, low budget marketing strategies.

And finally there’s marketing opportunities at events such as conventions, like the Australian Games Expo, as a way to promote you go (something mentioned earlier by Mike and Zev in their Introduction to the Game Business). During this discussion, Melissa Rogerson of *Boardgames Australia* mentioned that she was attending the Essen game fair – the largest in the world – later this year (<http://www.merz-verlag.com/spiel/e000.php4>).



Figure 11: Melissa Rogerson of Boardgames Australia, and moderator of the Boardgame Designers Forum is off to Essen this year.

V. Rules, Playtesting and Development

The final area of discussion centered on rules, playtesting and development. Panel members for this session were John Hanley (*Funatical*) and Richard Vickery (*Boardgames Australia*). According to the *Boardgames Australia* website:

John is a director of Australian games distributor Funatical and has a strong interest in prototyping and developing games.

Richard has a keen interest in boardgame and rules development, and is the Chair and one of the founders of Boardgames Australia.

The discussion opened with issues surrounding production, and in particular sourcing components for games. Two notable suppliers mentioned were *Spielmaterial* (www.spielmaterial.de) and *Plastics for Games* (www.plasticsforgames.co.uk) who were also able to mould plastics components to your own requirements upon request.

The point was raised about the influence of design elements such as physical components can have on the overall design of a boardgame and that in some cases what is available (and affordable) can ultimately dictate design decisions.

Also, as most components tend to be purchased offshore, issues surrounding customs and importation costs were raised. Things to consider were wooden components as they need to be fumigated which add to the cost, and that small wooden components also look like nuts through an x-ray machine which means that even if fumigated, they will typically be inspected.



Figure 12: John Hanley of Funatical adds his views during the session on game development.

Card game production issues included the size and number of cards as using a standard deck number of 54 cards and of a standard size will help reduce costs. Keep in mind that cards can also be used for rules etc.

Playtesting was then discussed, with suggestions for possible playtesting being boardgame groups, and via retailers. Personally, I would have liked more detail in the discussion as I have a particular interest in playtesting in all forms of games, and the various techniques and methods used to evaluate games. For example, the playtest group at *Microsoft Game Studios* adopts methods from the domain of usability as part of their playtesting analyses. Various approaches, such as heuristic evaluation and one-on-one playtests (e.g. achieving designer intent) I personally would

have found useful in addition to outlining success metrics. Maybe at next year's event this could be done in more detail.



Figure 13: Richard Vickery of Boardgames Australia.

The discussion then moved onto rules and game design, with the statement that “the rules are where it’s at”. The suggestion was made to find a similar game to the one you want to design and use their structure as inspiration for your own game’s rules. Another suggestion was to develop a “quickstart” guide with the boardgame *Dividends* (<http://www.boardgamegeek.com/game/16873>) being suggested as having an exemplar guide.

The final topic for discussion was development. Here quality control in print runs, such as ensuring that you receive a proof and using color swatches, was explained. Ensuring that your product is accessible by those that are color blind, along with safety standards, particularly in relation to small parts was also discussed. The suggestion was to test if parts would fit within a 35mm film canister. If it did then it would not be suitable for children under 3 years, and this would need to be displayed on external packaging.

The final comment was not to take your game too seriously, and to keep in mind that it’s a product... and to have fun making games!



About the Author

Andrew Stapleton is currently employed by Krome Studios, Australia's largest videogame company.

Andrew has professional experience in the videogame and interactive entertainment industries as well as in broadcast television and educational video. He has also worked as a university lecturer and researcher, and as a consultant on various projects.

Andrew holds a Doctorate in Science Education, an Honours Degree in Physics, plus Graduate Diploma's in Media Studies and Science Communication.

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