

# Creation Through Destruction

Artifacts of Worldbuilding in Experiential Legacy Games

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

This work draws connections between physically, emotionally, and spiritually powerful media: storytelling, rituals, and games. All three utilize worldbuilding to have a profound impact on our lives and our games. By tracing their entangled evolution over time, it becomes clear that legacy games are one of their more recent forms. Legacy games employ many of the mechanisms of liberation and transformation rituals, setting them apart from similar genres. Legacy games began with a forward-looking goal to subvert the assumptions of traditional games, but many of the recent games labeled “legacy” have strayed from this original ethos. This work returns to the vanguard “legacy game” definition and employs iterative design research to push the boundaries of the game design space. To create meaningful, playful social interactions, the game iterations explore the power of various practices in their mechanics: fire, funeral rites, ancestral connections, generational knowledge, community-building, and more. The unique mechanism of “creation through destruction” emerged as the central tenet of memorable, meaningful legacy games.

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## Chapter 1 — Introduction

### **Inspiration for Research**

Spring of 2014. I'm a freshman in college, but I'm sitting in a junior-level psychology class and feeling out of place. The person next to me is the only one I even vaguely know—an older student who lives in the same dorm as me. A friend of his sits on the other side and they start eagerly discussing the friend's fantastical adventure fighting goblins and cleverly tricking nobility. When they notice me listening, they politely ask if I've played *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D)*, a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG). I hadn't, and to my great surprise, the friend offered to let me join his group.

Until then, I had often avoided tabletop games (my extended family are quite competitive in card games especially) because they created an antagonistic, stressful dynamic that I didn't find particularly fun. When I did play, there was always a crushing pressure to play flawlessly, to always *win*. Playing games was about the result, the victory, the future—not the present moment I was sharing with my fellow players and the playful world we were constructing together. As DeKoven (2013) writes, “our goal becomes not a well-played game but a game that we or our team can win. ... The conventions that we tend to enforce with each other are those which are more directly related to the maintenance of a particular game than they are to the establishment of a community. ... The play community becomes a game community, devoted to the pursuit of a particular game, measured in terms of our success or failure as players of that game.” (p. 12) To my youthful mind, you could only be a winner or a loser, and so there was little point in participating in a game if I would likely fail, even while first learning the game.

Coming from that restrictive focus on how to play a game “right”, the experience I had with *D&D* was nothing short of an epiphany. Playing *D&D* really opened my eyes to what games can “look like”



and how they're "supposed to be played": freely, eagerly, and collaboratively. The mechanics of dice rolling and our physical positions on the game map often faded to the background as we grew our world and narrative. We won or lost certain challenges, but we were never divided into "winners" and "losers." Truly, to establish a play community "we can't begin with something that's going to divide us or measure us against each other. We begin the play community by embracing each other, by giving each person the opportunity to experience him- or herself as a full and equal member" (Fluegelman, 1976, p. 42). Even with so much less experience than the others in my *D&D* group, I felt like we were all standing on common ground, all fully invested in crafting an engaging, playful experience.

Ever since that fateful meeting I have regularly played TTRPGs with them, and I'm adamant that it's one of the most effective ways to forge and strengthen deep social connections. You get to know them outside of game, but you also get to know the types of characters they like to play, how they think under pressure, what their go-to approach to solving problems is, and so much more. You build trust by playing around with different facets of yourself in a safe and encouraging environment. You even start to challenge established rules, shifting the focus from mechanics meant to keep the game the same no matter who we play with to a personalized, socially-dependent experience. As DeKoven (2013) puts it, "we have so affirmed our ability to play well together, to be safe with each other, that rules begin to get in the way of our freedom together" (p. 12). In the game world, you have the freedom to try on different identities: another social role, another gender, another way of seeing the world, another dark backstory. The fantasy world you build together reflects the shared commitment you have to push boundaries, challenge rules, respect limits, and imagine alternate futures.

This act of “worldbuilding” was magical to me because it created a unique, intimate space shaped by many hands towards one collective goal, and I needed to know more. Exploring worldbuilding led me to other ways people create social ties and deepen those connections: storytelling and ritual. Both practices leaned heavily on the process or experience of its practitioners rather than any product or artifact it created. I found playing games to be a logical intersection of the two, and I wondered how both powerful practices could be implemented in a new medium. Since they have historically (and in many cases still do!) been used to build community, give life meaning, and facilitate understanding and empathy, the natural next step was to see what would happen when applying the practices to games. This led me to legacy games, which employ many of the mechanisms of liberation and transformation rituals. Legacy games began with a forward-looking ethos to subvert the assumptions of traditional games, but the companies that created those vanguard games could only take them so far. From there, I stepped in to further explore legacy games and their interaction with rituals through iterative design research of game prototypes. By the end, my work has contributed insight on the value of iterative design research in game and design studies, the importance of legacy games standing as their own genre, the contribution of legacy games like mine to game and design studies, and the “purpose” of games.

To begin, the following chapter will explore storytelling, rituals, and their deep connection to games. Next, I’ll follow this connection to contemporary legacy games and their ground-breaking design traits. I’ll highlight what existing legacy games have contributed to innovations in game design, as well as what is still missing. Next, I propose iterative design research as the suitable method for addressing my research questions. From there I develop and update my game design goals based on surveys, interviews, and analysis of existing legacy and similar games. Then, I’ll get into the playtesting of my game, how it evolved, and report the results. After that I discuss the meaning of the results and review my design goals to show how they’ve been met. Finally, I draw

broader conclusions about the results and speculate about the future of the legacy genre and board games in general.

## Chapter 2 — Ritual and Games: Catharsis, Freedom, Transition

In this chapter, I explore the deep connections games have to storytelling and rituals both in the past and today. The artifacts produced by all three activities give us insight into the significant role they play in our communities. By following their evolution over time, it becomes clear that legacy games are the natural next form for these activities to take. Legacy games are the bellwether of the future for board games.

### **Purpose of Storytelling**

Stories of a particular culture are passed onto future generations by one mechanism: storytelling. “Storytelling is universal and is as ancient as humankind. ... It occurs in every culture and from every age. It exists (and existed) to entertain, to inform, and to promulgate cultural traditions and values” (National Geographic Society, 2020), as well as ways of seeing the world and our individual or community’s place in it. Critically, storytelling myths, fables, and instructions are not always “historically accurate or even true. Truth is less important than providing cultural cohesion” (National Geographic Society, 2020). Like strict rules can get in the way of our freedom to play together, hard facts can get in the way of storytelling’s purpose: crafting a narrative that can endure across generations and convey the essence of an entire culture. After all, what makes a culture is not a clean list of historical events, it is the messy, collective experiences of all its people. Tim O’Brien captures this concept well in *The Things They Carried* (1990): “I want you to feel what I felt. I want you to know why story-truth is truer sometimes than happening-truth” (p. 180).

### **A Holistic Experience**

Like the ideal play experience, storytelling requires engagement with deeper, more meaningful parts of us: the intersection of our body, mind, and soul. The body speaks, signs, listens, dances. The mind learns, reflects, feels, understands. The soul acknowledges its place as part of something bigger, a larger whole spanning generations in the past and future, a community spirit. The power

and resilience of storytelling is reinforced by the inextricable link between all three parts. For example, the “Native Hawaiian word for **story** is ‘mo‘olelo,’ but it can also mean **history, legend, tradition** [emphasis added], and the like” (National Geographic Society, 2020). Storytelling is a holistic experience.

#### The Body: Documentation of history for future generations

One facet of storytelling’s purpose is as “banks of wisdom” for cultures that have relied on oral traditions and folk tales to pass knowledge from one generation to the next (Jenkins, 2021). Later generations were not, of course, around for events that occurred hundreds or even thousands of years ago, so they must rely on the stories passed down to them. Preserving these stories is critical to a community’s collective memory and identity, as is evident in a BaNtwane woman’s reply to Reitsma (2013) offer to demonstrate the “delete” function of a recording device: “We would never throw a story away; we are not a throw-away society; the story is valuable as it is” (p. 4). Like palimpsests, these stories have layers that compound with each retelling but maintain traces of their earlier form. Though the literal words may get muddier over time, the cultural knowledge only gets sharper: “they give clues about significant times, customs, philosophy, and so on” (Jenkins, 2021).

#### The Mind: Reinforcing values and beliefs

Another facet of storytelling’s purpose is as an active reinforcer of a community’s values, beliefs, and perspective. These stories can model a community’s proper social order, warning its members that deviation from these norms can have cataclysmic results. For example, parables are stories meant to illustrate a moral lesson: “The Boy Who Cried Wolf” warns against lying, “The Emperor’s New Clothes” draws attention to social conformity, and “The Cow” demonstrates the omnipotence of a deity. Likewise, cautionary tales are folklore that alert and warn us about dangers: strangers in “Little Red Riding Hood”, teenage vices in “the Hook”, and pollution in *The Lorax* (Dr. Seuss, 1971).

As Jenkins (2021) writes, “stories create a shared understanding of the world. If the shared understanding is that violence is acceptable or useful, or that stealing is good, it can foster cultural norms that are accepted over time.” While social enforcement is one function of storytelling, it also upholds a community’s beliefs in far less didactic ways.

### The Soul: Connections across time

The final facet of storytelling’s purpose is as a community’s connection to its ancestors and descendants. People yearn to feel secure in “our place and role in life, and we like to think that the world has meaning. We tell stories about our ancestors and where we came from because they give a sense of belonging to a larger whole” (Jenkins, 2021). Instead of feeling aimless and alone when facing life’s challenges, we can draw strength and safety from generational wisdom and be mindful of our own contribution to that timeless archive. Rick W. Hill Sr., a Tuscarora of the Beaver clan, said it best:

"If you ask me what is the most important thing that I have learned about being a Haudenosaunee, it's the idea that we are connected to a community, but a community that transcends time. We're connected to the first Indians who walked on this earth, the very first ones, however long ago that was. But we're also connected to those Indians who aren't even born yet, who are going to walk this earth. And our job in the middle is to bridge that gap. You take the inheritance from the past, you add to it, your ideas and your thinking, and you bundle it up and shoot it to the future. And there is a different kind of responsibility. That is not just about me, my pride and my ego, it's about all that other stuff. We inherit a duty, we inherit a responsibility. And that's pretty well drummed into our heads. Don't just come here expecting to benefit. You come here to work hard so that the future can enjoy that benefit" (as cited in *Seven Generations - the Role of Chief*, 2010).

### **Storytelling Artifacts**

As can be expected from storytelling's complex role in our lives, the artifacts it creates are equally important and diverse. They are often the linchpin of passing knowledge to the next generation. Chipman (2007) observed that "learners are more likely to become intellectually engaged when creating personally meaningful artifacts" (p. 11), and Bellamy (1995) suggests enabling children to design new artifacts and give them experience evolving their community by constructing artifacts and sharing them with their community. There are countless examples of traditional storytelling artifacts, from the micro-level family artifacts (heirlooms, clan banners, hanko) to macro-level community artifacts (story beads, murals, tapestries). Given their scope, I will briefly describe two where the process of their creation is more significant than the product itself: quilts and beads.

While the creation of quilts for practical use (armor, warmth) dates back to ancient Egypt, their role as folk art is relatively recent, around the 13th century (Solis-Cohen & Solis-Cohen, 1993). Quilts can represent a personal story (reminder of a person, wedding, or birth), the story of a place ("women of Gee's Bend[, Alabama, which has a deep connection to slavery,] used to make theirs from worn-out work clothes" (*Story Quilts*, 2017)), and community (a Civil War teacher "printed her mailing address on her quilt so wounded soldiers could start up a correspondence with her and the children" (*Story Quilts*, 2017)). Artist Faith Ringgold sees a strong connection between the way in which a quilt comes together and storytelling, speaking to the way they are "pieced" together. Grandmothers, mothers, and daughters often spent time together creating them, and the stories they exchanged were as much part of the quilt as the fabric. She says, "quilts make for a warm form of storytelling, literally and figuratively" (as cited in *Story Quilts*, 2017) because they rest in people's homes, forming an intimate relationship with families.

Beads are even older than quilts—they have been found in archeological sites dating back more than 40,000 years (Douka et al., 2013). Beadwork is culturally significant to many cultures, and the

BaNtswana people of South Africa explained to Reitsma (2013) and her team that “beadwork carries symbolic meaning; a necklace ‘says’ something about the wearer’s status, the wearer’s tribal affiliation, and significant events the wearer has experienced” (p. 1). To them, beads and the story they capture are critical for transferring the aggregate knowledge of many generations, as shown in their description of how information is passed on: “1- learning-through-seeing, 2- making connections between beadwork, a particular event, and the person wearing it, 3- mother/daughter topical conversations, and 4- storytelling” (p. 1). Not only does the beadwork itself tell a story, but it can prompt and guide verbal storytelling, too.

### **Purpose of Rituals**

“For eons, humans have used rituals as tools to release and express emotion, build their personal identity and the identity of their tribe, bring order to chaos, orient themselves in time in space, and affect real transformation” (Tan, 2019, p. 3). The practice of ritual and the imaginary worlds created through storytelling are key to what Rappaport (1999) calls “the making of humanity.” Rituals and stories are what make us human, build our communities, coordinate individual activities into a collaborative event, and forge meaningful connections to the world and beyond. They create “protected space” (Rusch, 2018, p. 7) for people to better understand themselves and their culture, and act as the bridge between the physical world (“visible, the everyday, the profane”) and intangible worlds (“the sacred, the numinous, or the supernatural”) (Ryan, 2013, p. 29). Like non-gamers might wonder what the appeal is to fish in a game when you could fish in real life, one can wonder the same about rituals—“why would mankind waste its time performing rituals when people could solve problems through much more efficient practical actions” (Ryan, 2013, p. 31). The answer is that they serve a much deeper, more personal purpose—their physical, mental, and spiritual power have stood the test of time.



Parker and Horton (1996) extrapolated three main types of rituals: liberation rituals, transformation rituals, and celebration or commemoration rituals. Each serves a unique purpose for its practitioners, but I found liberation and transformation rituals to be the most intriguing.

### **Liberation: Freedom and Catharsis**

We live in a fast-paced, results-oriented society that puts more and more pressure on people at a younger and younger age. For example, there are hundreds of resources for parents and students who want to start preparing for college as early as 6th grade (Ma, 2012, among others), and that's not to mention the multipage CV that seems to be required for admission to elite universities: ACT, SAT, AP classes, IB programs, recommendation letters, interviews, varsity sports, volunteering, model UN, part-time jobs, orchestra, math olympiad, science fairs, starting a nonprofit, etc, etc...

As we get older, this can manifest as a compulsion to collect, preserve, and hoard objects because we assign perhaps undue weight and meaning to them. We make them precious and to be revered rather than used for what they are: a special occasion bottle of wine that's never opened, an expensive journal that's forever blank, cards and action figures preserved in museum-quality sleeves. Under such weight, it's no surprise that people find destroying things so cathartic and satisfying.

There's a pleasure in setting yourself free psychologically while also being released physically. We burn homework at the end of the year, smash dishes gifted by a toxic relative, and crush cars that seem to break down vindictively. When framed as non-violent within a ritual, destruction can be a powerful force of change and introspection. As Parker and Horton (1996) write,

“liberation rituals use symbolic acts of removal or disengagement from obstacles to healing. Paradoxically, this can include destructive acts, [but participants must] stay aware of their purpose – that is, being a vehicle for healing – so those acts do not devolve into self-serving,

gratuitous violence. ... Cutting strings, releasing something that has been trapped, dropping something that weighed you down, letting go of something you clung to, diffusing the darkness of a constraining force with light – these are all different takes on the symbolic enactment of liberation that imply the essential element of “working through”, yet do not require violence” (as cited in Rusch & Phelps, 2020).

I wondered, how does this powerful ritual action manifest in a different medium—games? There are certain expectations and “laws” of boardgaming that players are accustomed to: be gentle with the pieces, don’t touch them with grubby fingers, put cards in protective sleeves, and don’t you dare bring soda and chips anywhere near my gaming table! “Permanent destruction, the tearing of a card or writing on a board, generates a visceral response .....Breaking this taboo and permanently altering a game can be a stressful and cathartic experience at the same time” (Engelstein & Shaley, 2019, p. 26). How can I use ritual actions to upset these norms?

### **Transformation: Transition and Initiation**

Rituals have been called “our most basic form of technology; they are a mechanism that can change things, solve problems, perform certain functions, and accomplish tangible results” (Tan, 2019, p. 11) While liberation rituals release us (move “away”, destroy), transformation rituals rebuild us (move “toward”, create). These types of rituals can be rites of passage or initiation into a group, such as graduations, weddings, and reciting a Scout Promise. Through them, “something new is birthed, armed, blessed, and empowered” (Parker & Horton, 1996, p. 29).

While creation is certainly a fundamental tenet of transformation rituals, destruction is also an essential part of the process. To change or convert from one state of being to another, the current form must be broken down before being built back up, a process I refer to as transmutation. As these types of rituals blur the line between creation and destruction, they also blur together the

past, present, and future—“changes that have happened, are happening, or may happen” (Beck & Metrick, 2009, p. 37).

For example, to play a game we may first need to perform the transmutation of a *Monopoly* car into the replacement for a knight in *Chess*, or of a grassy patch into a suitable field for pick-up sports.

The artist Sanford Biggers calls this kind of deterioration through human interaction “‘use patina,’ the way the paint falls off, the way a chair is rubbed on the arms because someone kept sitting in the chair in the same way over time, molding the chair itself- it serves as a quiet tribute to history” (as cited in Wilcox, 2002). The transmutation is functional and often incidental, but it also serves as evidence that people are here, they played, and will likely play again.

### **Ritual Artifacts**

Ritual artifacts differ from storytelling artifacts in their use of creation and ruin. For the most part, storytelling artifacts are constructed, while ritual artifacts can also be formed through destruction. People can destroy candles, effigies, or papers listing fears and hopes in liberation rituals, and construct rosaries, wedding rings, or art in transformation rituals. “What all rituals have in common is that they center around transition” (Rusch, 2018, p. 8), whether that’s transitioning into something new or leaving behind something old.

### **Games: The Nexus**

#### **Evolving with the Times and Power Imbalances**

As the interplay of storytelling and rituals, games have evolved alongside them. While very early games had little story involved (ex. knock over your opponent’s stick), over time game premises (ex. in *Chess*, you command an army protecting a king) began to take hold, eventually evolving into the complex narratives we see in modern video games (ex. *The Legend of Zelda* includes a rich world history with both parallel and diverging timelines, see *Zelda Timeline*, n.d.). Games are

performed as part of rituals like the Olympic Games, and there are ritualistic elements to games like “rock, paper, scissors”—its chant and action are a familiar ritual of fate. Like rituals, games create an altered state of mind, a game space where you follow arbitrary rules and overcome self-imposed challenges. Often, you build this special little world with your fellow players by agreeing on boundaries and demonstrating your understanding of the world’s conventions. Violating these social conventions can be more severe than breaking a rule.

But who decides what is a game and what is not? Groups in power frequently determine what is the “right” way to play a game, which games are “valid”, and who “winners” and “losers” look like. Sutton-Smith (1997) describes the use of games and sports as an “exercise of power by the potentates in charge of such games—by kings, princes, politicians, colonizing administrators, aristocracies, ethnic groups, heterosexuals, and men. What is important is that the games of the less powerful groups are implicitly excluded and even ridiculed” (p. 205). Players who decide to make *Settlers of Catan* collaborative are told they’re not playing the “right” way. Women playing *Candy Crush* or *The Sims* are often invalidated by men declaring them “fake gamer girls” and dismissing such “frivolous” games as “not real games” (compared to *Dark Souls* or similar games). A frequent ideology of hegemonic games is contest, competition, and other struggles for superiority between groups. These games uphold the concept of a “winner” as a conqueror (*Risk*), a schemer (*Diplomacy*), and a rugged individualist (*Terraforming Mars*) who seeks out convoluted, analytical challenges to prove his intellectual superiority over others. These perspectives and values are declared the “norm” or “default” because it is assumed that if they are valued by white, Western, heterosexual men, they are valued by all. And, as Sutton-Smith (1997) points out, “the value for the hegemonial group is that playing the games can become a kind of persuasion to believe in the general ideology surrounding them” (p. 96). If people that have been marginalized wish to participate in mainstream games, they must adopt the priorities of the group in power.

Levi-Strauss has drawn a line to differentiate games and rituals: “while games lead to victory and defeat, and therefore to a relation of inequality, ritual turns all participants into members of the same community” (as cited in Ryan, 2013, p. 30). It may be beneficial in anthropology to create a dichotomy by associating games with the binaries of victory and defeat, and ritual with equality and wholeness, but I find it more helpful for research and game design to put them on the same spectrum. It would follow, then, that games which don’t divide players into winners and losers would lean closer to rituals on this games-rituals spectrum.

Many of Fluegelman’s “New Games” (1976) and DeKoven’s “well-played game” (2013) would fall into this ritual-leaning category, as well as games where the goal is “to prolong the play experience” (ex. *Minecraft*, *Cookie Clicker*, most MMORPGs) (Zagal & Deterding, 2018). In the tabletop game realm, *D&D* and others like it can be played as never-ending campaigns. These types of games allow us to rethink what it means to “play a game”, shifting the spotlight from competition and results to collaboration and process.

### **Transition to Modern Artifacts**

Games, storytelling, and ritual have adapted their forms in step with emerging technologies, sometimes becoming more liberating and cooperative (immersive theater, non-competitive board games), and other times more rigid and utilitarian (prescriptive literature, educational video games). The artifacts have also evolved, resulting in storytelling’s films, ritual’s national anthems before ball games, and games’ LEGO towers.

Interfacing modern technology with traditional practices has created many modern storytelling artifacts, sometimes by necessity to preserve vanishing cultural knowledge. Reitsma (2013) and her team collaborated with the BaNtwane community to design StoryBeads, “a recording device that

fits the target group's oral tradition and is based on a concept in which oral stories are recorded and associated with tangible beads that can be incorporated into traditional beadwork" (p. 1). Since the device included multiple beads containing recordings that could be strung together over time, storytelling could grow both narratively and physically, without discarding traditional practices. Rosner and Ryokai (2008) had a similar goal when creating Spyn, "a system for knitters to record, playback, and share information involved in the creation of their hand-knit artifact" (p.1). As shown by these two projects, researchers continue to find innovative ways to bring traditional storytelling into the 21st century without disrupting cultural methods.

Modern ritual artifacts may be less obvious than those of games and storytelling, but they have also evolved to embrace 21st century technology. Ryan (2013) argues that "if singing the national anthem [before a sports game] leads to an 'event,' this event is ... the public testimony of belonging to a certain community (p. 29) ... When the sense of the sacred disappears, as it tends to do in modern societies, ritual is still needed to refresh a social order which depends on the integration of the individual in a community" (p. 37). Ritual's contemporary role in community building and reinforcement can be seen in secular yoga and meditation classes, celebrations like the Sundance Film Festival and Burning Man, and ceremonies like graduation and acceptance in a fraternity. During these activities, artifacts are frequently revealed through creation or destruction. The charred remnants of a huge wooden effigy burned to kick off Burning Man, a favorite yoga mat with foot indents, and a logbook of every fraternity brother are all ritual artifacts.

Modern game artifacts are created during a game but stay with the players after it's over, outliving the session itself (Hymes, 2020). This includes character sheets, notes from campaign sessions, homemade maps, replacement pieces, and even new house rules reflecting a disastrous game of *Monopoly*. They increase "narrative resonance" (Hymes, 2020): how meaningful the story and

experience was to the player, and whether it sticks with them for a long time. As RPG blogger Moe T (2020) puts it, “some of these items may simply be souvenirs that bring back fond memories of the game, while others may be things that were made and that can be reused over and over again. ... In some cases, the artifact is the game itself as we make permanent changes during play.”

## **Emergence of Legacy Games**

### **Modern Board Games**

Board games in particular have always evolved to follow the eras and the money, reflecting our values and views of victory. The imbalance of power discussed earlier is particularly salient in board games and TTRPGs with colonial overtones. In this type of game, “winning” looks like dominance over others, exploitation of people and resources, and appropriation. As Wehrle (2016) points out, “the sanitized retelling of settler colonialism continues to be a popular motif in board game design.”<sup>1</sup> TTRPGs like *D&D* frequently valorize the quest to venture into a dungeon, kill its inhabitants, and take its treasure. Game lore detailing the inherent evil of various races was intended to mollify otherwise hesitant players. *D&D*’s publisher, Wizards of the Coast, recognized this problem in a recent post: “Throughout the 50-year history of *D&D*, some of the peoples in the game—orcs and drow being two of the prime examples—have been characterized as monstrous and evil, using descriptions that are painfully reminiscent of how real-world ethnic groups have been and continue to be denigrated” (*Commitment to Diversity*, 2020). It’s easy for a white man to imagine himself in the “default” Western European medieval fantasy world (ex. King Arthur’s Camelot)—after all, it was made for him and to cater to his tastes. Recently, Wizards of the Coast has also pledged to make their lore and characters more representative of their player base, shifting away from solely what a white, Western, straight, cis man wants in his world. As Alimurung (2019) points out, “gone is the rule mandating female characters’ strength be less than males’. Gone is the

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<sup>1</sup> *Settlers of Catan, Puerto Rico, Struggle of Empires, Archipelago, Mombasa, Goa*, among others.

sexist artwork—no more armored bikinis, no more monsters with breasts, no more topless ladies (unless her character really, really calls for it). Characters come in a rainbow of skin colors and body types and sexual orientations—like the wood elves who identify as non-binary.”

While the social issues around board games are beginning to be listened to and addressed, the problems of games’ physical forms are not at the forefront. Over time, as gamers’ interest in tabletop role-playing games like *D&D* and *Warhammer* grew, and Eurogames like *Settlers of Catan* followed suit, the investment in game components did as well. Players could have boxes of lovingly painted minis, detailed maps, and get more bang for their buck from the same game. Especially as Kickstarter came on scene, games got bigger boxes, expensive components, and demanded more shelf real estate.

As I mentioned earlier, the pressure of our modern world can manifest as a compulsion to hoard—for many, “board gamer” is synonymous with “board game collector”. For avid collectors there can be anxiety around preserving their expensive investment. They may buy two copies, one to leave unopened and one to play with gentle, careful, clean hands. In many ways, these feature- and component-heavy games are a step away from rituals, those of liberation and transformation especially. The experience of playing the game is outshined by the extravagant cover art, convoluted rules, and ostentatious shelf appeal. Relatively recently, board gamers have been compelled to reconcile their massive collections with dwindling living space as people are forced to move to find work or downsize to save money. Four 50-pound boxes of board games, in *this* economy? It’s just not sustainable.

### **Birth of Legacy Games**

Partially in response to this oversaturation of board games bloated by their embellishments, game designers began to experiment with single-use, unrepeatable gameplay. Rob Daviau, who



spearheaded the design of *Risk Legacy* (released 2011) and is credited as one of the first people to come up with the legacy style, was inspired by a question: why do games always have to reset? In the same vein, how can we “make a game decision matter, to up the ante, to maybe make you sweat a bit before you do something? ... We wanted to push that boundary to have lasting effects” (as cited in Mosca, 2017). Legacy games emphasize the heavy weight associated with permanent, impactful decisions. Because this style of game is relatively new, the definition is still muddy, but there is common agreement that they have multiple sessions, demand players make impactful decisions that forever alter the game, and players are unable to play the same game a second time (see Reiber, 2021 and the following chapter).

### **Why Study Legacy Games?**

Beyond the rising need to slim down our possessions, exploring legacy games is so relevant now because they reflect our current need for collaborative experiences that give us permission to play around, make mistakes, and break things. This may be a factor in the increasing popularity of escape rooms, which promote themselves as playful experiences where you learn the basic rules through trial and error while actively interacting with the rooms’ components. There’s something so freeing about not having to be careful, to play like you did as a kid without any worry about making a mess or being right on your first try—don’t think, just act!

Likewise, when we look to the future of board games we are turning to more experiential games with fewer mechanics and components. To this end, I propose that game designers return to their roots to find inspiration: rituals and storytelling. They can utilize findings about rituals and their social benefits, such as community-building, emotional reflection, and personal expression. There is much to learn in the game space regarding catharsis to produce freedom from rigid expectations and boundaries, release tension and anxiety about being perfect, and transition into new perspectives of the purpose of games. Just as rituals can usher individuals into new stages of life,

games can enable players to develop personally, including making mistakes, departing from “rules,” and finding new creative outlets.

## Chapter 3 — Legacy-Style: Game, Art, Experience

### **Contemporary Form, Traditional Practice**

As mentioned above, legacy-style is relatively new, but it displays a shift in game design towards collaborative, rule-breaking, trial-and-error experiences. Legacy games represent what happens when games move from concrete goals (objective win/loss) to subjective experiences, and they do so by drawing on storytelling's holistic engagement and community-building, and ritual's powers of liberation and transformation. Like other games, legacy games depend on the players' co-creation of a shared game world, but they also have a significant impact on the real world. They stand out from many other types of games in how they blur the line between fantasy and reality, creating a liminal space for players to occupy. Further, they uniquely employ a "creation through destruction" process, closely aligning them with art in addition to storytelling and rituals. In essence, they are the most recent iteration of these traditional practices.

### **Original Definition**

Engelstein and Shalev (2019) define a legacy-style game as "a multisection game in which permanent and irreversible changes to the game state carry over from session to session" (p. 25). This can also include permanently altering the game components, such as defacing or ripping cards, applying stickers or marks to the game board, and opening sealed packets—"generally, once players have completed a legacy game, they are unable to replay the game" (Reiber, 2021, p. 6). This is in contrast to campaign-style games like *Dungeons & Dragons*, which legacy games are often compared to. While campaign games can be reset and replayed with the same materials, players of legacy games generally must buy an entirely new copy of the game to play again.

In summary, the original definition of "legacy game" required the following features:

1. Persistent game state that carries over from session to session

2. Permanent and irreversible changes made to this game state by player decisions
3. Permanent and irreversible changes made to physical components
4. Changes are so significant that the game cannot be replayed

## **Legacy Game History**

### **“What is Done Cannot Be Undone”**

Rob Daviau, then working for Hasbro, is credited as one of the first people to come up with the legacy style. He spearheaded the design of *Risk Legacy*, released in 2011, and claims to have “half-shepherded, half-snuck the audacious design past the gatekeepers at the company, and emerged with a genre-defining hit” (Engelstein & Shalev, 2019, p. 25). Notably, “the game was sealed with a sticker that had to be broken to open the box, and which warned ominously, ‘What is Done Cannot Be Undone.’ This irreversible permanent change is what legacy games are all about” (p. 25).

*Risk Legacy* enjoyed modest success, but when Daviau partnered with *Pandemic* designer Matt Leacock to release *Pandemic Legacy* in 2015, the legacy format really took the boardgaming world by storm. It won multiple awards and though it was not the first released legacy game, many credit *Pandemic Legacy* with sparking interest in the new format. Reiber (2021) points to the upward trend of board game releases that feature legacy and legacy-like styles that occurred in the years after its release, and even in 2022 *Pandemic Legacy* ranks second on the popular boardgaming hub boardgamegeek.com (behind *Gloomhaven*, another game with legacy elements that was released in 2017) (*Legacy Game*, 2022).

### **Revolutionary Features**

The unique permanence mechanic was the main point of praise for legacy games when they first entered the scene and upset the established board game norms. In particular, they challenged the

characteristics of the game's boundary with reality and its relationship to time, as well as a player's interaction with game components.

### Blurring the game's boundary

Traditionally, games are characterized by the time-space frame in which they take place, separated from ordinary life. Huizinga (1955) likens this to ritual's creation of protected space, noting that "formally speaking, there is no distinction whatsoever between marking out a space for a sacred purpose and marking it out for purposes of sheer play. The turf, the tennis-court, the chessboard and pavement-hopscotch cannot formally be distinguished from the temple or the magic circle" (p. 20). According to him, these are all "forbidden spots, isolated, hedge round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart" (p. 10). The boundary created by a game separates its world from the real world: we are either playing a game or we are not, no shades of gray. DeKoven (2013) points out that this line between our reality and the new reality has "a critical function in maintaining the fiction of the game so that the aspects of reality with which we do not choose to play can be left safely outside" (p. 27). In order to play, we must be assured that playing is a reversible activity with no negative external effects. If we start a game of *Chess*, we can play freely knowing that no soldiers or horses will be harmed as we remove pieces. Nothing is permanent and we can always reverse time—if our opponent is young and inexperienced, we can allow them to take back a move that would put them in check and try again. When the game is finished, it is reset.

While I agree with Huizinga (1955) in that the special space of a game is similar to that of a ritual, I find that there is one key difference: effect on reality. Like games, rituals create the second reality of a protected space, but explicitly act as bridges and the mechanism to evoke changes in our primary reality. For example, we create the sacred space of a prayer circle because we want fortune in our everyday lives, and we wear our team's colors and chant their praises because we want them to

win. Likewise, legacy games have players occupy the limbo between the two realities. When they make a game decision, they are also making a life decision: if an in-game character dies, its out-of-game card is ripped. Time is sharply linear, since once a player makes that difficult choice to alter the game, they can never go back. Daviau (2017) describes legacy games as "experiential" in contrast to traditional games, which are "repeatable" (16:30).

### Create/Destroy artifacts

While traditional games can be seen as generative (many games can be created and played with the same materials), legacy games dismantle (materials are used in one game and are consumed during play). This is not to say that legacy games create nothing. In addition to creating the intangible "experience" for players, they often leave behind an artifact reflective of the process of its creation. Like in performance or concept art, the products are simply remnants of the art itself: the process. The act of destruction in legacy games *is* the gameplay experience. Other transitory events like buying an expensive bottle of wine or upscale meal aren't thought of as "destroying wine and food", it is understood that you are paying for an experience and consumption is the mechanism used to create it.

Critically, a legacy game evolves over time to reflect every hand that touched it, creating a customized game world and corresponding artifact unique to a specific group of players. Each time they return to the game, they can see the changes they made, recall the adventures they shared, and continue worldbuilding with the guidance of parameters they set over many playthroughs.

### **Design Gone Astray**

Legacy games started with this grand vision of blurring the line between the real world and the game world. No reset, no save, only your decisions permanently changing the game as you *physically* change it too. Playing in this liminal space allows designers to reorient a gameplay

experience around narrative and reflection rather than winning and solving. More attention can be paid to creating and destroying the game artifacts, and we can dig into what each component truly contributes to the experience. Early legacy games helped bring collaborative worldbuilding to the forefront and expose players to the freedom of creating a world that embraces them. And finally, legacy games grow to reflect their players, recalling the nostalgia of opening an old beat-up game box and being flooded with those memories.

Despite these progressive, even avant-garde characteristics that make legacy games special, there are very few of them on the market. This is due in part to the difficulty of developing them: “they are difficult to playtest, require generating quite a lot of content, ... require a substantial commitment to complete, and they typically call for the same group to come together ten or more times. ... Publishers, and thus designers, can feel trapped between offering a novel and essentially unrepeatable experience on the one hand, while still providing sufficient replayability to players, despite the consumable nature of the game” (Engelstein & Shalev, 2019, pp. 25-26). Defacing a game you paid (often a substantial amount) for can be a hard sell for most players, sidelining legacy games to a rather niche group and turning designers’ attention to how to make them more marketable.

### **Legacy “Lite”**

As a result of this thinking, many recent legacy games have shied away from true destruction, falling away from the power of liberation and transformation rituals. They either design destruction away altogether with removable stickers and instructing players to simply “set aside” any cards removed from the game, or they include it but only incidentally.

For example, in *Gloomhaven* certain cards display the symbol of a card being ripped, but the instructions indicate that the icon simply means “remove the event card from the game” (Childres,

2017, p.39), and the creator Isaac Childres confirms this. In fact, it was never intended for those cards to be torn, which would make the icon a pretty poor choice. This created some confusion for players on reddit (jordiweatherbie, 2020) who expected the term “legacy” to portend destruction, as was the case in *Pandemic Legacy*. There are even reusable sticker sets that players can buy to fully reset and replay their game, stepping away from a key legacy trait altogether. If players know they can just go back and try again, the weight and significance of their decisions is lost.

*Gloomhaven* may have legacy elements, but it would not fit the original definition of legacy.

Less egregious but still a step back towards traditional games is the common mechanic of opening sealed envelopes or boxes (ex. *King's Dilemma*). Certainly this can feel like destruction since you're actually ripping something and cannot easily reverse that process, but it's not an essential, fully integrated part of the game. A player could just as easily flip to the needed page in a guide instead of getting new information from the envelope. Yes, the envelope is now open, but it's destruction without also creation since that information was always there in the game, just hidden. In the same vein, ripping cards feels destructive but it's more symbolic. The card is torn, but what has it created? What information did you gain? Plus, the card still exists in the game box or trash can, you still have time to change your mind and tape it back together. These types of legacy games simply rearrange their components, not destroy them—a destruction “lite”.

A reluctance to embrace full destruction in a game is further demonstrated by the rising prices, increased production costs, and indulgent embellishment of recent legacy games. For example, the manufacturer suggested retail price for *Pandemic Legacy: Season 1*, *SeaFall*, *King's Dilemma*, *Betrayal Legacy*, and *Charterstone* is just shy of \$80, *Clank! Legacy: Acquisitions Incorporated* is \$100, and *Gloomhaven* hits \$140. While at first the concept of a legacy game was a celebrated



response to a persnickety, preservationist board game collection culture, designers have nonetheless drifted back towards the status quo.

If we want to keep the innovative spirit that created legacy games, we can't be satisfied with dancing around destruction and offering destruction "lite" to players. We should reorient design thought around what makes legacy games special in the first place: choices with meaningful, permanent changes to the game and its components. After seeing all these recent "legacy" games pulling away from their roots in rituals, I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if designers instead leaned further into it. Ritual is a resilient practice, so perhaps we can add value and staying power to the game without sacrificing what makes it "legacy".

### **From Stagnation to Revitalization**

Juul (2014) warns that for games lauded as independent, there is an "inherent tension if a movement for dynamic innovation in games congeals around a well-defined style" (p. 9). Instead of embodying an original definition of what it means to be an "independent game" (an ethos), "independent" becomes a style grouping together games that look and play similarly. Legacy games began by expanding our approach to board game design, then started to narrow it again as they drifted away from the original "legacy" definition. They are starting to look worryingly similar to the games with norms they were supposed to be challenging: complex and chock-full of gratuitous components too expensive to risk damaging. While capitalizing on current trends is important to make games broadly marketable, slapping the "legacy" label on a game because players can open boxes does little to move the genre forward.

When a game's structure and materials get "louder", the less "contemplative the experience, and the less the game's mythical content actually invites our psychic participation" (Rusch, 2018, p. 6). To avoid stagnation, continue innovating, and create intimate, meaningful, process-focused legacy

game experiences, designers can't continue down this road to merge with traditional games and stifle their original rule-breaking attitude. A need exists for a return to the ideals we had when first imagining what legacy games can be, how they can be brought to another level, and how they can help us reframe what games and playing them looks like.

## **Proposed Treatment**

### **Questions to Answer**

When exploring potential solutions, I must use a method with the flexibility to address the following topics and questions:

Scaling back game components

- How can we decrease the bulk of a game box while adding or retaining value?
- How can we give remaining components more meaning and/or multiple functions?
- How can we design for intangible items (i.e. memories from a significant experience)?

Crystalizing the definition of "legacy" so it can stand as its own distinct genre

- Can we draw inspiration from "legacy" as a term in anthropology, psychology, genealogy, etc? For example, as something we are constantly constructing in the present rather than leaving behind (Boles & Berbary, 2014).
- How can we refine the original definition of "legacy" to contrast it more sharply with other games?

Abandoning replayability as the main trait that gives games value

- Lack of replayability was a key original legacy trait that granted incredible weight to player decisions—how do we preserve this while adding or retaining value?
- How do we make a game that feels like it's living (built upon by each iteration), not destroyed by previous players? How do we shift player perspectives from seeing an "unplayable game left behind" to a "valuable artifact of the experience"? Perhaps it's only

seen as an unplayable game if you go in thinking you can play again—we don't call a finished painting an "unpaintable canvas".

- How do we help players understand that "destroying" can be an effective method of progression and mechanism to play a game? For example, popping balloons with darts to win a prize is not destroying the game, "destroying" is how you play the game.

### **Action Plan**

To push the limits of games embodying the key features of the original definition of legacy, we must first find those games and gather more data, and if there are not adequate examples then we must design our own. I'll begin with targeted research to first find a suitable method and then to explore existing legacy games, disentangle them from similar game genres, and draw inspiration from sources closely aligned with both "legacy" and "games". By the end, I will have uncovered a better understanding of legacy games, their future, how to reignite the genre's original rule-breaking spirit, and bring them back to the cutting-edge where they belong.

## Chapter 4 — Targeted Game Design Research: Insights from Games and Players

### **Design as Research**

To begin exploring the research questions above, I primarily drew on methods from design research, particularly the “design exploration” corner of Fallman’s Interaction Design Research Triangle (2008). This was because, as I explained in earlier chapters, holistic user experiences were central to my questions, and design research is well-suited to studying them. As Fallman (2008) explains, key concerns of user experience include “physical, sensual, cognitive, emotional, and aesthetical issues; the relationship between form, function, and content; as well as fuzzy concepts such as fun and playability” (p. 4). All these areas play a part in fully engaging a player in the game, the moment, and their fellow play community. Consequently, to study phenomena that are only evident while they are occurring, my research must also be implemented in situ and utilize firsthand experiences. As Fallman (2008) notes, “allowing first-person perspectives to enter design research has the potential to provide findings unattainable with only an outside perspective, and thus add significantly to the overall quality and the relevance of design research” (p. 17).

Design exploration is particularly useful for my research questions because they concern upsetting established norms, finding new approaches, and seeing what is possible. As Fallman (2008) puts it, design exploration “often seeks to test ideas and to ask ‘What if?’—but also to provoke, criticize, and experiment to reveal alternatives to the expected and traditional, to transcend accepted paradigms, to bring matters to a head, and to be proactive and societal in its expression” (p. 8). My research is seeking expressive, experiential data about legacy concepts, how they manifest in games, and what kind of dynamics they support. It is not a quantitative evaluation seeking statistically significant analysis to prove that one game design is better than another. Rather, its

research questions closely align with those posed by Eladhari and Ollilia (2012) as common questions that can be answered with design research: “What types of game play dynamics and game play experiences can a certain mechanic, feature, approach, or method result in? How can it be decided whether a certain game play feature results in something valuable, such as a new type of experience, a meaningful experience, or a ‘better experience’ in some other way?” (p. 393).

To this end, I employed the iterative design research method, described by Zimmerman (2003) as “a cyclic process of prototyping, testing, analyzing, and refining a work in progress. ... interaction with the designed system is used as a form of research for informing and evolving a project as successive versions or *iterations* of a design are implemented” (p. 176). Critically, “the project develops through an ongoing dialogue between the designers, the design and the testing audience” (p. 176). Deeply involving players in the design process was paramount, and letting them manipulate and transform prototypes while offering their insights was invaluable. As Eladhari and Ollilia (2012) point out, “it is vital in game-design research to build and test designs in order to explore how certain game mechanics can result in different play dynamics and play experiences” (p. 391). To understand how novel mechanics influence player experience, we must let players experience the mechanics. While studying existing games has its benefits, and I use this method in my work as well, it limits our ability to speculate on more avant-garde game features: “Models about the nature of games and their features run the risk of being incomplete or wrong, simply because certain design spaces have not yet been explored” (Mateas & Stern, 2005, as cited in Eladhari & Ollilia, 2012, p. 393).

## **Finding Inspiration and Revising Game Design Goals**

### **Crafting Preliminary Goals: Games, Art, Legacy**

In order to return legacy game design to its pioneering roots, I first analyzed existing legacy and storytelling games to identify key features I wanted to preserve. I supplemented this research with

an exploration of games that create deliberate artifacts and other permanent changes. I then drew inspiration from actions centered on liberation, such as art and ritual. This brought me to resilient practices like family and community heirlooms, preservation of stories, and the meaning of “legacy”.

### Categorizing current legacy and storytelling games

Over the course of the past few years, I’ve observed and played a veritable library full of legacy and storytelling games. I needed to identify central features to both guide my game design and experiment with what combinations created the desired game experience. I noticed that all the tested games had features that clustered around five key traits: artifact creation, persistent game state, use of destruction, use of storytelling, and win condition. I used these central traits to start dividing the games into categories, which allowed me to determine what version of these traits (ex. destruction: involved, essential, or none) I wanted to better understand through playtesting.

Categorizing also helped me be more precise about my use of the “legacy game” terminology. The definition needed to be distinct from “storytelling games”, which I identified as having possible but not required artifact creation (ex. *Mad Libs*, *Folded Story*), no persistent game state, no meaningful destruction, and a range of vague to concrete win conditions (ex. *Mysterium*, *Dixit*). This is in contrast to the three legacy game categories I identified below, which all have a persistent game state but differ on the other four key traits.

The first category is “Legacy Storytelling Game”, which includes games like *The Quiet Year* and *The Hen Commandments*. In these games, artifact creation is encouraged but not necessarily required, and there is no meaningful destruction so the game could be played again. Like pure storytelling games, the narrative in these legacy games is open-ended and affects all players, and there are multiple mini-wins as it plays out, but a final win condition is more vague. The emphasis is on the

unfolding story and worldbuilding, similar to the campaign-style emblematic of most TTRPGs. For these games, “legacy” mostly refers to the persistent, growing game state and fallout of story decisions rather than artifact creation or meaningful destruction.

The second category is “Legacy Experience Game”, which includes games like *The King’s Dilemma* and *Gloomhaven*. These games require artifact creation and storytelling is structured, often choose-your-own-adventure (CYOA) style. They have concrete win conditions and involve enough destruction that the game cannot easily be played again. Critically, destruction is not essential to gameplay—instead, it is either cosmetic and reversible (ex. using removable stickers) or performative and incidental (ex. opening sealed envelopes). As above, in these cases “legacy” refers to the persistent, growing game state and fallout of story decisions, but now also refers to the evolving artifacts.

The third category is “Legacy Experience Adventure”, which includes games like *Beak, Feather, & Bone* and my very own *IDEOGRAM*. These games require artifact creation, storytelling is open-ended and shaped by all players, and there is a vague or even non-existent win condition. Like an escape room, the emphasis is on the experience rather than a strictly defined win. Most importantly, destruction is essential to the gameplay and results in a single unique experience. Progression in the game truly hinges on irreversible changes to the game components. At last, “legacy” is used in these cases to refer to the evolving and disappearing artifacts, the persistent, growing game state, the fallout of story decisions, an open-ended win condition, and destruction being essential to play the game.

From analysis of existing legacy and storytelling games, I identified this combination of traits to structure the experimental game design: Creation of artifact (essential), Game state (persistent and

growing), Use of destruction (essential and fully integrated), Use of storytelling (all players involved in meaningful decisions and their fallout), and Win condition (open-ended) (See Table 4.1).

**Table 4.1**

***Legacy Game Categories and Traits***

	Persistent game state	Use of destruction	Artifact creation	Use of storytelling	Win condition
Storytelling Game	No	None	Possible	Open-ended	Vague to concrete
Legacy Storytelling Game	Yes	Not meaningful	Encouraged	Open-ended	Vague
Legacy Experience Game	Yes	Not essential	Required	Structured	Concrete
Legacy Experience Adventure	Yes	Essential	Required	Open-ended	Vague to nonexistent
<hr/>					
<u>Experimental Game Design</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>Essential</u>	<u>Required</u>	<u>Open-ended</u>	<u>Vague to nonexistent</u>
<i>Other trait (column) options</i>		Not essential	Encouraged	Semi-structured	Vague
		Not meaningful	Possible	Structured	Vague to concrete
	No	None	None	None	Concrete

Analysis of games creating artifacts and permanent change

The creation, destruction, and preservation of game artifacts is key to my definition of legacy, so the next stage of initial research was into games centered on these actions. *Cranium* and *Pictionary* both require drawing to communicate an idea to another player. While the drawings can't be reused, many families keep them in the box to laugh at next time they pull out the game. I liked this use of the artifact as a memento, but I wanted the items to build on each other over time in-game and have meaning out-of-game too.



This led me to various TTRPGs like *Warhammer* that encourage players to hand-paint miniature figurines (minis) of characters and enemies. Lovingly painting and proudly displaying intricate minis is a culture in and of itself, giving these artifacts a purpose in- and out-of-game. Still, the individual artifacts were supplemental to the game and didn't depend on each other, so I looked into games like *Yarn Quest*. As creator Tania Richter explains it, "each quest is a knitting pattern, and as the player leads their character through the quest, they come across enemies to battle, choices to make, and items that all influence the patterns knitted on the project" (as cited in CreaCraftsAdmin, 2018). The real-world knitted artifact (often a scarf) is fully dependent on choices made in the game world, and each event grows the project. This was closer to what I wanted from my experimental game design, but focused on creation rather than its interplay with destruction.

To explore the importance of the destruction aspect, I looked into games that demanded permanent, often punishing decisions in gameplay. One that really caught my attention is the "Nuzlocke Challenge", "a set of rules intended to create a higher level of difficulty while playing the *Pokémon* games" (*Nuzlocke Challenge*, 2022). Normally when a Pokémon faints during battle, it can be revived at a Pokémon Center, but instead Nuzlocke considers that Pokémon dead and it must be permanently removed from the player's roster ("released"). This raises the stakes of each battle immensely, since if your best Pokémon takes one unlucky hit, you can't use it ever again and will likely pause your progress. A near-universal but not strict rule is to give each Pokémon a name (ex. Pikachu named Sparky), "for the sake of forming stronger emotional bonds" (*Nuzlocke Challenge*, 2022). Truly, once we give something a name (be it a pet, car, or houseplant) we form a quick attachment to it. So not only does the player have to take a mechanical blow upon losing a Pokémon, but likely an emotional one too. I wanted this kind of weight to the decisions in my experimental game too, so players would be very deliberate and mindful about their choices and become emotionally invested in the characters, world, fellow players, and communal story. To do

that, incorporating the heavy finality of destruction seemed like the most interesting and effective way to go.

Since I wanted my game design to fully integrate destruction and be an essential part of the gameplay, I gathered inspiration from activities dependent on destruction. Popping bubble wrap, opening presents, and water balloon fights are familiar activities that simply wouldn't be themselves without destruction. Popping a single bubble or balloon may seem trivial, but each instance is satisfying in its own way. Likewise, the *Dread* TTRPG uses a *Jenga* tower to control the suspenseful flow of energy critical to horror games with incremental, otherwise trivial actions. Players succeed or fail in their actions based on their ability to remove a block from the tower, so each anxiety-inducing block movement or tower shake builds tension until it's finally released with successful removal or when the tower falls. Each interaction with the tower had to be deliberate and reflect the high stakes. I knew I wanted to have similar moments in my experimental game so even incremental progress was satisfying to players, and so I could create a cycle of high stakes, high energy tension and low energy release of relief or disappointment with an adequate cooling off period.

From analysis of games with creation artifacts and games with destruction as an essential mechanism of gameplay, I identified methods of utilizing creation and destruction in my experimental game design: artifacts serve a purpose both in- and out-of-game, artifacts build on each other and the story, decisions have mechanical and emotional weight, incremental instances of creation and destruction are satisfying and show progress, and a cycle of high- and low-energy moments with a cooling off period.

### The appeal of liberation actions

To further explore the use of destruction as an essential mechanism to move forward, I turned again to ritual and artistic practices. As was mentioned in the previous chapters, purification and transition rituals often utilize destruction. Items from a life one wishes to leave behind or effigies may be burned, symbolic scarring or tattooing may be performed as part of coming of age, there may be breaking of a glass at a wedding. In particular, rites involving fire caught my attention—they are immensely visceral yet intangible. One feels the heat and offers it fuel, but we can't hold fire in our hands, we pass right through it. Watching its motion is soothing, its light creates a relaxing ambiance, and it can just be outright fun to burn things.

Certain artistic practices rely on destruction as well, praising the process of making the art over its actual product. Action painting “shifted the emphasis from the object to the struggle itself, with the finished painting being only the physical manifestation, a kind of residue, of the actual work of art, which was in the act or process of the painting's creation” (TATE, n.d.). Creation of a painting, of course, involves destruction of the canvas. Conceptual art like Douglas Gordon's *The End of Civilisation* (2012) involves burning a piano, and Félix González-Torres' *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)* (1991) has its viewers remove pieces of candy from a pile. Performance art's creation often involves active participation from the audience, such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964) that allowed the audience to cut away pieces of her clothing. What really caught my attention was books written to help free readers from perfection through process art. In Keri Smith's “Now in Color” version of *Wreck This Journal* (2017), it instructs readers to “release all attachment to outcome. Do not try to make something pretty. Pretty is a bit boring. Use chance. Connect with the part of you that is an angry, idiosyncratic mess. Let that part of you loose on this book. You are here. You exist. Make/leave a mark. \*^% it up!” (p. 1). It's noted in *Destroy & Design This Journal* that “it can be a cathartic experience to those who need it” (Chartwell Books, 2021, p.1), and I think creating a space

that grants permission to mess up and experiment is critical in a society pressured to achieve perfection.

Still, I wanted the destruction itself to create meaning in my game, not only serve as the mechanism to advance the game. Games mentioned above have creation artifacts, but it's harder to find ones with destruction artifacts. They are far more common in rituals, particularly divination. For example, tasseography is a form of divination that interprets the remnants of drinks, commonly tea. A cup of tea is created, the tea is destroyed through imbibement, and the tea leaf artifact is assigned personal meaning through interpretation. I wanted players to focus on the process of creating their artifact through destruction, while also utilizing that artifact itself to further the game.

From analysis of practices centered on liberation, it was clear that destruction as a mechanism was common in rituals and art but not in games. For my game design, I wanted to explore that mechanism further as a means of progression, transition, and release. I also wanted to experiment with balancing meaningful destruction artifacts and an emphasis on process over product—how could I show that they were not mutually exclusive?

#### The deeper meaning of “legacy”: Active process linking past, present, and future

To further refine my design goals and set a guiding light for the design as a whole, I delved deeper into my understanding of “legacy” as a concept and practice. Family heirlooms are a tangible connection to one's ancestors and their legacy. When wearing a well-loved, tarnished brass locket, one draws strength from the generations who wore it before. There is a similar feeling of nostalgia and connection to others that comes from finding old notepads, score cards, scribbled lists of house rules, and doodles of notable moments stuffed inside old game boxes, but I wondered how I could further explore “inheritance” in the board game medium.

As Boles and Berbery (2014) put it, “legacy is not a passive bequeathal to the next generation but rather a current, constant, and complex intermingling of experiences and interactions that are ever refracted through the self and those who have gone before us” (p. 600). As legacy games can be understood as the intersection of game, ritual, and storytelling, I understood a legacy to be an active interplay of the past, present, and future. Wisdom of the past is dynamic, always evolving to suit the needs of the current generation, always reinforcing a connection to the core of what came before and how it guides us in the present to shape our future. I wanted my legacy game design to embody this definition of legacy by allowing players to think about their strength as the accumulation of generational knowledge. In other words, how can we explore this *concept* of legacy within a legacy *game*?

#### Preliminary design goals: Upset the norms, evolve the world, and use ritualistic elements

Informed by my background research, I outlined the audience and goals for the experimental game design. I wanted to target small, close groups of friends, players experienced with TTRPGs or Live-Action Role-Playing (LARP), and creative writers. I assumed these groups would be the most attracted to and enjoy a conceptual, self-directed, narrative-heavy game. Overall, I wanted to emphasize game experience over game mechanics, so I knew players that sought intricate rules and emotionally distant gameplay would not be part of the target audience. Further, I wanted to disrupt the hegemony of games that valorize a colonial mindset. I needed the game to embody exploration without appropriation, victory without conquest, and a balance of power between players, the game, and the designer.

To determine the game design’s success, it needed to fulfill the following primary criteria, ideally but not necessarily fulfilling the secondary criteria:

#### Primary design goals

- Upset the norms of traditional games

- Reframe what “winning” and “losing” look like
- Reframe what “playing” a game looks like
- Emphasize process and experience over perfection
- Persistent and evolving game state, world, and story
  - All players involved in meaningful storytelling decisions and their fallout (mechanical and emotional weight)
  - Utilize destruction as an essential means of progression, transition, and release
  - Artifacts of creation and destruction that build on one another and have meaning in- and out-of-game
  - Open-ended win condition with satisfying incremental progress
- Utilize elements of rituals to create a holistic game experience
  - Catharsis
  - Optimize the community-building power
  - Promote the positive benefits of rituals

#### Secondary design goals

- Explore concept of legacy within a legacy game
- Fuel a balanced cycle of high- and low-energy moments with a cooling off period

### **Updating Goals: Survey of the Board Game Community**

Before designing my experimental legacy game, I wanted to be sure there was an interest in it from the board gaming community. Further, since the game I wanted to design was very experience-focused, I wanted qualitative, personal data to inform my design decisions. Instead of appealing to existing or prospective board gamers in general, though, for my present design concept I narrowed its audience. I knew two groups in particular might seek out this type of game: whimsical “indie” board gamers who were already attracted to unusual mechanics and pushing the boundaries of what games “look like”, and story-focused TTRPG players who want enduring, impactful decisions

but perhaps aren't as familiar with the board game format or find it too restrictive. I sought input from these two key groups of expert practitioners throughout the design process.

### Survey and Interviews

I began by distributing a survey to several Discord servers and other online groups that functioned as hubs for those interested in learning board game design, playing cooperative video games and TTRPGs, and various art media. In parallel, I conducted semi-structured interviews with those who expressed interest in a more in-depth discussion via the survey and my personal board gaming groups. Respondents recounted their experiences with legacy games and what ritual, storytelling, and art methods would be interesting to explore in a game space.

First, their thoughts on their experience with legacy games. Reviews were mixed and generally dependent on the respondent's experience with TTRPGs and Eurogames, especially when it came to the self-identified subsection of "indie" gamers. Most TTRPG-leaning players disliked the grudges and competitiveness of games like *Ultimate Werewolf Legacy*, and the unbalanced player goals of games like *SeaFall*. Overwhelmingly, they enjoyed but were dissatisfied by legacy games with "choose-your-own-adventure"-style storytelling such as *Sleeping Gods*, and many in the more granular "indie" TTRPG-leaning player group avoided "TTRPG in a box" games like *Gloomhaven* altogether. To them, this limited agency felt more like a scripted, purely virtual world video game not a dynamic, mixed real/game world board game. They greatly preferred *The Quiet Year* and *Beak, Feather, & Bone*, which both support very open-ended storytelling and role-play, and require very little time devoted to setup and learning mechanics. Still, they cautioned against making storytelling *too* open-ended, since even for very creative writing-savvy players a blank page is difficult to jump off. On the other hand, Eurogame-leaning players enjoyed the directed story and punishing encounters of games like *Gloomhaven* and *Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon*. For the

“indie” Eurogame-leaning subset, complex mechanics and intense planning was what they expected from their legacy games.

Still, both TTRPG- and Eurogame-leaning respondents repeatedly expressed frustration with games that had victory points or strict, quantitative win conditions tied to “inconsequential” mechanics. For example, they noted an adversarial relationship that develops when players have mutually exclusive goals despite the goals themselves not being key to gameplay. A player may be tempted to do something “not fun”, or that doesn't move the story forward, solely to gain more personal victory points. Both groups loved the unfolding story and multi-game goals of games like *Pandemic Legacy*, and the ownership over the game experience and creation of content found in games like *Betrayal Legacy*.

Overall, the majority of respondents said they were excited for new and more bold legacy games to come out, but that they hadn't played one that fulfilled all their needs. Through analysis of my discussions with them, I deduced that they desired the following:

1. Emerging narrative as the characters and world grow and evolve during successive plays
2. Ownership over “making” their personal game experience
3. Literally and permanently building or modifying physical game components
4. Cooperative gameplay offering both community and individual contributions
5. Ability to trace connection between a decision and a result both in the short- and long-term

Next, respondents mused on what ritual, storytelling, and art methods would be interesting to explore in a game space. A couple suggested drawing inspiration from LARP to find ways to curate mindful ritual actions. They felt that the ritual actions performed inLARPs (meeting for session 0, pausing the game for lunch as a community, lying down “dead” for the requisite amount of time)



help the game to be more powerful and make these actions more meaningful. One connected the concept of “legacy” with the ritual use of heirlooms: her grandmother had a long dress she wore “for luck”, which was passed to her mother who turned it into a sundress, and when it passed to the respondent, she made it into a vest. The object itself evolved over time, but it retained its ancestry’s core purpose of “bringing luck”. She and I discussed how we can use something old or familiar in a new way that is more relevant to our present situation. We thought it would be interesting to explore the dynamic nature of ritually-used objects in a game, and even track their changes the way family quilts and heraldry track a family’s growth.

Quilts, heraldry, and family crests are also effective storytelling practices. A couple interviewees were experienced knitters and drew an explicit link between the story of an item's creation and its physical appearance. Even when not guided by games like *Yarn Quest*, a scarf that starts out messy at the top but clean at the bottom reflects the knitter’s personal journey of improvement. This “story of creation through creation” seemed to be the opposite of artist Sanford Biggers’ “use patina”, which is the story of deterioration through deterioration: “the way the paint falls off, the way a chair is rubbed on the arms because someone kept sitting in the chair in the same way over time, molding the chair itself- it serves as a quiet tribute to history” (as cited in Wilcox, 2002). In actuality, both concepts contribute to the overall act of “simultaneous creation through destruction”.

This was an unusual but interesting idea to players. They liked the idea of an item or place that is worn down by repetitive use creating more power, especially in the game space. Usually as a game starts to break down it’s less fun to play and more likely to be treated as ruined, or even trash, so they thought it would be nice to instead treat these games with veneration. It felt more suitable to honor them as items that brought a lot of enjoyment over the years and find ways to better reflect

the love that was poured into them. We discussed potential games that have pieces that start out very pristine, but as they get tarnished over time through use, there would be a system to give that piece or part of the board more power as a reward for being a favorite.

In that same vein, players expressed the desire to get as much meaning out of each game component as possible. This meant reassessing overlooked game parts, like the cardboard at the end of a game's notepad. Usually what was on the notepad is the only thing that has meaning, but maybe the cardboard could have meaning too—it is also part of the game and represents the “end of an era”. Even old games that have game pieces replaced with junk (screws, a peanut, a piece from a different game) are vessels that tell the ever-evolving story of the game's life and the people playing it.

On discussing storytelling more generally, respondents noted that a good storyteller always creates an immersive environment and builds affinity between the listeners, the characters of the story, and the storyteller themselves. Many expressed a desire to do this more in games—increase immersion and affinity with the game and their fellow players. A common suggestion for more effective storytelling was eliciting (or demanding) direct participation from the listeners/players. When the storytelling process encourages participants to be fully integrated in the story's creation, they are more invested in the outcomes. As one interviewee remarked, “people just care more when the story is about them.”

Frequently, respondents mentioned incorporating art into the play process to enhance the storytelling experience. Activities like writing on cards and drawing characters or items made play sessions more memorable, and made players more invested in the game's long-term playability. One interviewee said, “I'm immediately more attached to a character if I've doodled her on the

gamepad”, and another added that “games have higher stakes once I’ve named all my meeple.” There was a recurring theme of turning something random or unrecognizable into something meaningful to the player or the community as a whole. In addition to bestowing significance on a meeple, another example given was when an artist takes a scribble and adds different line weights to it in order to craft a recognizable image from the chaos. How can game designers take the same jumble of random pieces and create stories that players see themselves in and feel tailor-made just for them?

Generally, respondents wanted more multisensory, tactile experiences (artistic or not) in order to feel more physically engaged. With many senses stimulated by the game, they felt they could be more holistically tuned in. I suggested mixed media components such as varied textures and materials to manipulate (corrugated cardboard, differing card weights, smooth or rough), unusual audio (sound-based puzzles, sounds marking locations), fragrances (candles scented to reflect a mood, area, or character), and even flavors (teas or candies associated with different shops or characters).

#### Analysis to Find Game Design Themes

Finally, I knew I couldn’t satisfy the desires of every subgroup I interviewed, so I focused my legacy game design around filling an underexplored spot in the board game space: the intersection between the aforementioned self-identified “indie” board gamers and story-driven TTRPG players. I needed to strike a balance between the desire for whimsical, unusual game mechanics and for impactful, lasting decisions that ripple through a rich story and world. To find this balance, I distilled down all the feedback into important themes that I wanted to guide my design: collaborative worldbuilding, divergent stories, story and board transformation, chronicling and reflection, and quality of life improvements.

Collaborative worldbuilding was a frequently overlapping interest for “indie” board gamers and story-driven TTRPG players. Both subsets wanted to play a big part in worldbuilding decisions so that they had the ability to craft a world that echoed their unique group interests and dynamics. I wanted the essence of collaborative worldbuilding to go beyond player/designer co-creation and even player/player co-creation. One aspect of rituals and their role in maintaining a legacy that I kept coming back to was how ancestral wisdom passes to each successive generation to make it stronger.

Respondents wanted to see their decisions impact the game world for the future (physically and narratively) and have satisfying continuity through divergent stories. Overwhelmingly, they preferred stories that were minimally guided by the game over choose-your-own-adventure-style narrative branching. Respondents wanted a “place to start”, not for every action to be chosen from a list and get the same result for every instance of the same choice. They wanted the freedom to mold the story to suit their particular needs, but cautioned that they still needed enough of an outline to anchor themselves.

In essence, I took all these desires to mean that they wanted the game to facilitate divergent interpretation: everyone gets the same story prompt, but each group can grow that seed into vastly different routes and conclusions. Respondents said they wanted these design points in order for the game to be more engaging, but to me it was deeper than that. As one remarked, people are more invested in stories that are about them or their personally relevant concerns, so to increase investment I would need to increase the narrative’s relevance. To help the goals in the game feel more pressing and immediate to players, I again would need to leave parts “unfinished” so it could be molded to fit each unique group. I needed to give players enough scaffolding that they had a place to start, but leave it open enough that the prompts didn’t feel like barriers.

Again and again, respondents praised the physical alteration of game pieces involved in most legacy games, even if the implementation wasn't very effective. Some of the TTRPG-leaning respondents wished they had a physical representation of the years they poured into a campaign—something more “at-a-glance” than their ever-growing book of session notes. I took this to mean that they wanted the simultaneous transformation of the figurative story and the literal game pieces. They wanted to see their game world progress manifest in the physical world, but it was apparent to me that they didn't want to just *see* the progress, though, they wanted the deterioration of the game to serve as a record tracking it.

To explore this in a prototype, I wanted to allow for as many simultaneous in-game and real-world transformations as possible, while also making it easy to track the changes. It also felt important for this customization process to happen as part of the main gameplay—worldbuilding in situ—rather than only as part of setup or debrief. I wanted to create a visibly expanding world in step with world exploration in the story, such as by uncovering rooms on a darkened map or filling out a timeline. Still, I was cautioned that incorporations of art and legacy mechanics must match the theme and be driven by the world being built so it doesn't feel gimmicky. It was clear to me that the game mechanics I would be experimenting with had to be fully integrated and make sense as a natural part of the play process and the constructed world itself. They had to feel like a true, organic embodiment of what was happening in-game, and clearly show the growth of the board, characters, and players.

The TTRPG-leaning respondents mostly regarded chronicling and logbooks as an essential part of the game narrative, but many of the others noted them as helpful extras for organization. Surely I could create a mechanic that served both purposes. Plus, to really encourage players to get invested

in their communal storytelling, I felt it was essential for them to have a space dedicated to reflection. For the prototype, I created a logbook with space for both personal player notes and community events. I wasn't sure what topics would be most important for players, so I left it open enough that the field of options would naturally whittle down through use. I wanted to capture the essence of a diary, a place where players could record significant actions and events, why they happened, and the players' feelings about them. As the game progressed, they could look back on their entries in a few days, months, or years to trigger memories and gain insight into how they were feeling at the time compared to now. Comparing feelings of the moment and with hindsight is an important part of the reflection process since it helps put things in perspective.

Throughout interviews and survey analysis, two player experience improvements stood out: engaging multiple senses and variable time commitment. While I could increase engagement in the game's story through relevance to players and space for reflection, to sustain engagement it was clear I had to offer multisensory stimulation. Liberal use of color (vision) and material textures (touch) were common suggestions, but I wanted to try the underexplored senses too: taste, smell, auditory systems, and other regions of the brain. As for variable time commitment, a number of players expressed exasperation with the multiple hours required by many campaign-style games for just one session. Not even just for playing—sometimes properly setting out the board and game pieces takes a good chunk of time. If setting up for a session is an ordeal in and of itself, then playing feels like a chore you have to set aside an entire evening to tackle. This can be fun under the right circumstances, but respondents felt it would be better if they had the choice of short or long-term sessions.

I wanted to explore a variety of sensory stimulation in my prototype, though I knew many would eventually be cut or simply weren't practical. I gravitated toward using a variety of physical

materials (smooth or textured paper, squishy ink pads, colorful markers), mental tools (facilitate both casual and deep discussions, present players with both logical, number-based and creative writing challenges, help them plan for immediate and future events, ask players to emotionally reflect), and stimuli for taste and smell (scented candles, burning paper, candies for different events encountered).

### Updated Game Design Goals

As was mentioned above, I updated my target audience to players at the intersection of “indie” board games (low-budget, unusual mechanics, conceptual, experimental) and story-driven TTRPG (dynamic narrative, co-created world, deeply personal and tailored experience, community).

Guided by the valuable input of my expert practitioners, I modified my design goals to address the concerns and needs of my updated target audience. It was clear that players needed to be involved in many stages of the design process, and that the design process itself would even include handing off an “unfinished” game. Since each instance of the game needed to be tailored to each group, it made sense to leave some game aspects vague so players could “finish” them themselves. Now to determine the game design’s success, it needed to fulfill the following updated primary criteria, ideally but not necessarily fulfilling the secondary criteria:

#### Primary design goals

- Process-focused: Creation through destruction as an *experience* and the primary method to progress forward
- Artifact-focused: *Action* of building and/or destroying game component(s) as the way to track/record progress
  - Enduring and ephemeral artifacts

#### Secondary design goals

- Fully player-centered design
  - Through development and deployment

- Player agency
- Streamlined game
- Blur lines between game world and real world
  - Simultaneous changes in-game and out-of-game
  - Dynamic narrative and world
  - Permanence
- Ritual elements and performance
  - Blur past, present, and future
  - Process over product
  - Community-building
  - Freedom from perfection
  - Death is not a punishment



## Chapter 5 — Trial by Fire: Experimental Game Design

### **Playtesting *Legacy: (RE)discover(ING)***

I conducted multiple playtests of various iterations over the course of six months. Participants included video game designers, prolific board game, TTRPG, and LARP players, and others involved in fields of media study. In most cases, when it was clear a change was needed, it was immediately implemented in the test and then used from the start in the next test. My design goals guided each change to ensure the game didn't get off track. Working with my playtesters and integrating their feedback was an invaluable part of the research.

### **Current Design**

#### **Key Mechanics**

- Creation of a custom map and tarot deck
- Collaborative worldbuilding with writing prompts
- Physical record of each session and reflection on events
- Participation in rituals (funeral pyre, tattooing accomplishments, fingerprinting, leaving a mark)
- Both a meaningful role in community and as an individual
- Story progression and ability enhancement depends on PC death

#### **Game Summary**

Players play as the leaders of Bands united under one Community that is rediscovering their ancestral homeland after the gods rescue them from a dying world. Over many generations of explorers, each unique Band strengthens their abilities as leaders die, events are handled, inhabitants are met, and places are explored. Connections to ancestors ensure future success as their wisdom and teachings are adapted to new situations, helping to uncover a shared history and paint a collective future.

First, players pick a Band of families that they will represent - each has unique abilities they can contribute to the community. Next, they create a handful of band members that represent the current leader and whoever will succeed them. Then players lay out their facedown encounter cards for the session, pick a unique ink color, and perform a fingerprinting ritual. They take turns trying to touch as many of the cards as possible, one hand at a time. They then stack the cards and start their journey by dripping water and paint on the starting spot and swirling it around to make a path. Their next location is anywhere on that path.

Each new location flips an encounter card, which presents a community then leader challenge. Everyone's abilities contribute to the community score, but only the leaders with their fingerprints on the back of that card contribute to the leader score. If they succeed in both challenges, they fill out the card to name and describe the place, creature, or event they encountered. If leaders fail a challenge, sacrifice themselves, or die for any other reason, their card is immediately burned on the pyre. After this funeral rite, that leader's band will have access to the abilities gained over their lifetime, passing the wisdom on to the next generation. Critically, there's no way to level up your abilities without a leader first earning them and then dying in order to guide the Band from beyond. The Community is only as strong as its collective ancestral wisdom.

At the end of each session, players perform a tattooing ritual by etching a design into their scratch-off silhouette. Usually the symbols only had meaning for the tattooer, but some players enjoyed fully drawing the funniest moments. They also contribute to the community chronicle, an at-a-glance summary of what they did that session that they can look back on in days or years.

## **Game Evolution**

### **Introductory Narrative**

In the first iteration, players were given only very basic information about the world. It was just enough context for players to generally have an idea about what was happening so they could test the game mechanics. While I was able to test the function of mechanics like watercolor bleed, testing quickly hit a wall. Without a cohesive understanding of who their characters were and how they fit into the world, traveling was directionless and had little meaning. Plus, players had a hard time filling out location cards because without a clear narrative, they had to worldbuild from scratch instead of customizing a base that was already there for them. To resolve this, I answered player questions about the world, and over a handful of playtests I was able to distill the most common questions and answer them with an introductory paragraph to be read before starting the game. The introduction used in the latest iteration is below:

*Welcome, travelers! Or should I say 'welcome back'? You will not remember, but you have been here before. Well, not 'you' the individual leader, rather 'You' the collective, unbroken chain of your family, your Band, past, present, and future. This is your homeland, the place your ancestors first built with many hands united under one community. You'll find their fingerprints scattered across locations in the world, places that were significant then, now, and beyond. We, energies you call gods, have brought you here because your old world was dying. This was not the end, though, it is the start of something new—creation through destruction. With each successive generation, you will accumulate valuable knowledge to help you in the present to shape the future. Rediscover what you've lost, evolve it to suit your needs, and make this place your home once again.*

## **Maps Created**

Maps were added to the game so players could orient themselves and the locations in the world, as well as to show the physical effect of their travels on the world. Maps began only with a border, and players chose a starting point on the map. As they filled out location cards, they added names, topography, and other relevant information (see Figure 5.1). In the first iterations, players filled a

brush with watercolor and dabbed it onto their starting location. After a while, the paint would bleed out into a circle, and players chose their next location from that radius. While players loved the colorful visual, the actual paint bleed was unreliable, difficult to manage, and added a lot of downtime. In one playtest, I switched them to a watercolor splatter method instead, which had them connect the scattered dots of paint as their travel path (see Figure 5.2). This was more active and didn't involve waiting, but the locations were functionally predetermined instead of a mystery. Plus, it was very prescriptive and not reflective of the "free nomadic wandering" indicated in the narrative.

Finally, in a later playtest, instead of waiting for the watercolor to bleed an impatient player picked up the map and swirled the droplet of paint around to create a path (see Figure 5.3). By implementing this spontaneous method in other playtests, I found that this was much more interactive, high energy, and controllable for players. They couldn't fully control the roll of paint, of course, but they were more actively involved in where they ended up traveling.

**Figure 5.1**



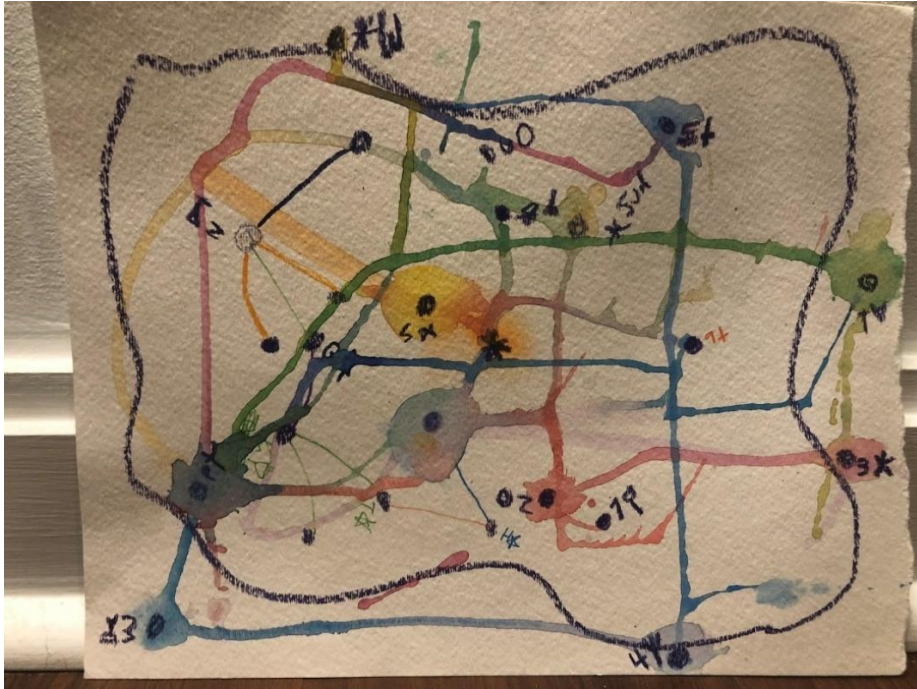
*Note.* Players added location names, travel dates, paths, topography, and other information to their map.

**Figure 5.2**



*Note.* Players allowed watercolor to bleed from a starting point then chose their next location within that radius. The wait time ended up being too long, so I had them switch to splattering the paper, choosing locations from the spots, and connecting them with colored lines.

**Figure 5.3**



*Note.* Players began by choosing the next location via paint bleed, but later switched to rolling the paint around to create paths.

Another change was determining where to start the path after an unsuccessful location challenge event. It didn't make sense to continue traveling from that spot since the players were unsuccessful, so we tried sending them back to the previous location after a loss. That way, they would have to confront challenges again to continue making progress in that direction. Plus, it ended up being an interesting visual of repeated losses—if they had to return to a location multiple times, it became saturated with muddy paint.

### **Skills Used**

At first, I implemented multiple custom skills (hunting, crafting, writing, compassion, intuition, etc) that influenced various character abilities, similar to TTRPGs like *D&D*. In each subsequent playtest, though, I cut more abilities and it became clear that keeping tabs on all the abilities was distracting

from more important parts of the game. I didn't want to overcomplicate gameplay (both for players and so I could get through rapid iterations), so I switched to four skills modeled after the suits in tarot (swords, staves, coins, and cups). This later inspired me to base the encounter cards on the tarot deck as well.

### **Band Sheet Records**

The Band sheet represents a player's Band (particular group of families) and tracks their accomplishments over the course of many sessions. The front displays a Band's unique name, image, history, ambitions, goals, starting skills, a special ability they can use to help the community, and a place for players to add their Band's motto. On the back, players create a timeline of their leaders, when they died, what abilities they earned, and whether the abilities have been redeemed yet after their death. The back also displayed the Band's evolving coat of arms or tattoo.

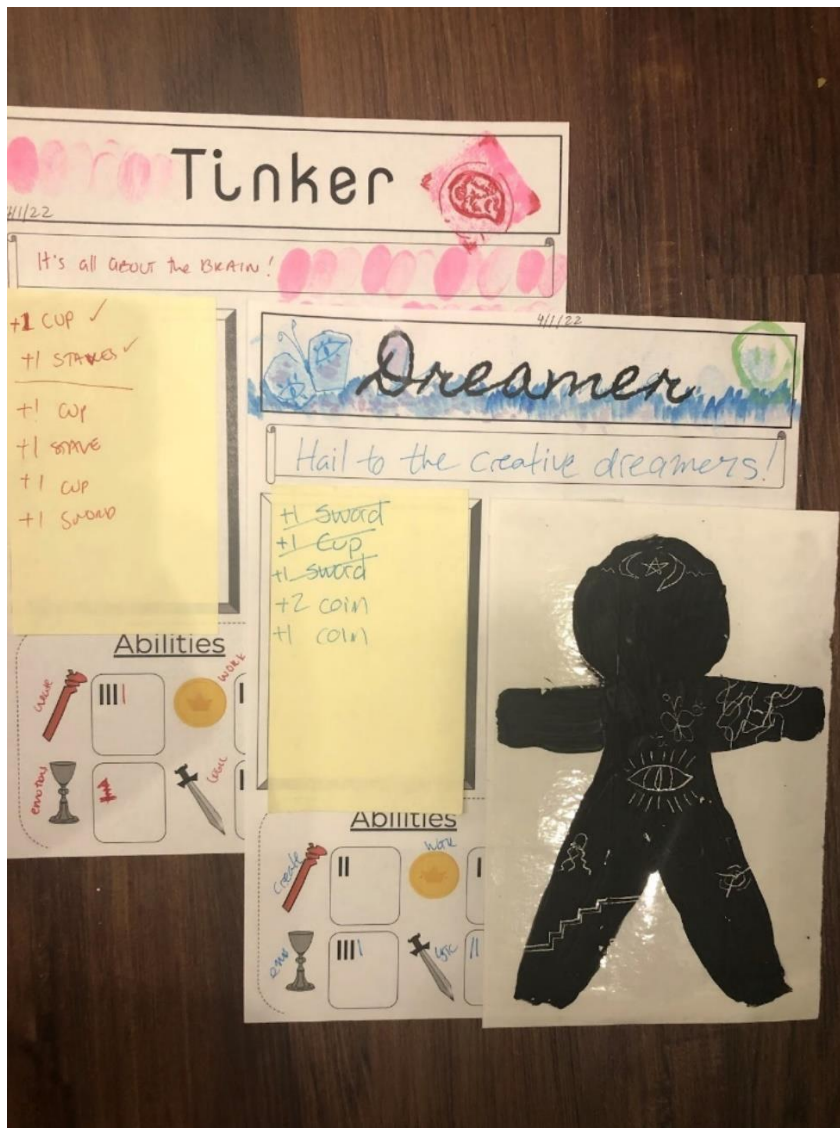
In early iterations, the sheets did not have any biographical information, but this was quickly added after a couple rounds of playtesters asked about their Bands. Like with the introductory narrative, they needed a baseline they could further customize. I added the "Band motto" for the same reason: multiple Dreamer players can customize their Band with different mottos based on their interpretation of the history and ambitions (see Figure 5.4). Changes to the front of Band sheets centered on helping players distinguish themselves from the rest of the group while still respecting their contribution to the whole.

On the back, the timeline, dates of death, and earned/redeemed abilities stayed essentially the same throughout playtests (see Figure 5.5). The visual, symbolic representation of the Band's growth and accomplishments was always a dedicated time for reflection and discussion after the session, but its form changed multiple times. Early playtesters had a coat of arms model, which had them draw a symbol on their family's heraldry. It proved difficult for players to come up with what to draw



beyond a literal representation of the event, so I switched materials. I made scratch-off silhouettes with crayon and paint for players to etch symbols onto (see Figures 5.4 and 5.6). This seemed to be easier, perhaps because players were more familiar with symbolism in tattoos (many had their own tattoos, too). As a bonus, the etching mechanism was more closely aligned with rituals than creating a coat of arms anyway.

**Figure 5.4**



*Note.* An example of the front of a Band sheet where players have added mottos and decoration. The bottom right shows an etched tattoo silhouette (paint) after a few sessions.



Figure 5.5



Note. An early example of the back of a Band sheet. From left to right: timeline of leaders, date of death, coat of arms, and earned/redeemed skills.

Figure 5.6



Note. Etched tattoo silhouettes (crayon) after a few sessions.

## Leader Card Burning

The leader cards represent the player's current band leader and line of successors. Players make 3-5 at the start of the session because they will likely cycle through a few during play, driving home the theme that death is an essential part of progress. The cards give the individual members of a player's Band a face (players have full control over the physical traits of the people in their world), but aren't so detailed that they will be discouraged from burning them (see Figure 5.7).

**Figure 5.7**



*Note.* On the left, examples of leader cards. On the right, players preparing for a fallen leader's funeral pyre.

In early iterations, leaders had to earn an "honor" in order to pass on the skills they acquired. Honors were awarded by other players for brave actions, amusing decisions, impressive role-play, or other actions worthy of recognition. A couple groups adjusted the rules so the honors were only superficial, rather than having an effect on the game. They liked rewarding each other for contributing to a fun game, but I didn't need to push them so hard to do it, so I kept the honor field on leader cards but dropped the requirement.

While using fire was enjoyable for players, some had questions about how exactly the leaders were dying, since it wasn't always clear after losing a challenge. One group opted to add a leader's "dying words" to the Community Chronicle or Band sheet, most notably, "squid. Why did it have to be squid?" Another group, which had a medical examiner student, wrote a "death report" on the back of the leader card (usually a nebulous "CUPPI"<sup>2</sup>). I carried both additions forward to later players so they could add context to their leaders' deaths, but few utilized the change.

### **Encounters Deck**

In early prototypes, what became encounter cards were separated into two decks: events and history. Event cards contained events that either affected the characters in some way or prompted worldbuilding discussion (ex. "You discover a new flower—what does it look and smell like?", "You run out of supplies and must return to the nearest camp"). History cards were based on the standard tarot deck and contained information for players to fill out about newly discovered locations and people (ex. Six of Swords: "An ancient battle occurred here. What caused it?"). When players moved to a new spot on the map, they would draw a card from each deck and resolve them. If the event card was a skill challenge, the players would roll a 20-sided die and add that score to the score of the required skill (ex. hunting) to determine success. For history cards, players would fill out the location or person's information then gain skill levels equal to the card's value (ex. nine Swords for the Nine of Swords), and if it was a major arcana they would reflect on the question.

Through each playtest, many aspects of this base deck were tweaked and adjusted in line with players' needs and use of the mechanics, aiming for a more and more streamlined experience. Eventually, this all led to the current encounters deck. First, the use of the 20-sided die was dropped in favor of more consistent methods of resolving challenges. Players still wanted the

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<sup>2</sup> Circumstances Undetermined Pending Police Investigation.

excitement of chance, though, so a coin flip or odds/even die was added that could temporarily boost one of their skill levels. Once the result of challenges was less unpredictable, it didn't make sense to keep the events deck, so it was combined with the history deck to make the encounters deck. Without the events deck, I needed a new mechanism for activating challenges. The numbers on the encounter cards served that purpose—skill level was tested against that flat number to determine success. The numbers no longer granted skills, so that duty was reassigned to the face cards (ex. Knight of Staves). At that point in the design process, each Band's skills contributed to an overall community skill pool, so it didn't make sense to keep them spread across the Bands.

To add value to both individual and community skill scores, I added a fingerprinting ritual<sup>3</sup> at the start of the game and separated challenges into two stages: community and leader. Players randomly inked their fingerprints onto the backs of encounter cards (see Figure 5.8), and as a result they could see which Band would be up next while the cards were still face down. All players could contribute to filling out the card when it was revealed (see Figure 5.9 for examples), but the Band(s) with fingerprints on the back would have the final say. Now when first revealing a card, if it was a number then the players faced a "trap"—they had to challenge the card's number with their community score and couldn't retreat. If successful, that first stage would be "unlocked", and they were free to leave and return without having to face the community stage again. To challenge the leader stage, all Bands with fingerprints on the back of the card (which could be one solo Band) added their scores together to beat the number. If successful, those Bands whose scores were used gain one skill of the specified suit. Importantly, this was not a victory through conquest. Rather, players prove to their ancestors and gods that they have accumulated enough knowledge in their journey to continue onwards.

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<sup>3</sup> Adding the fingerprinting ritual was the cumulative result of many other design changes, see later chapters.



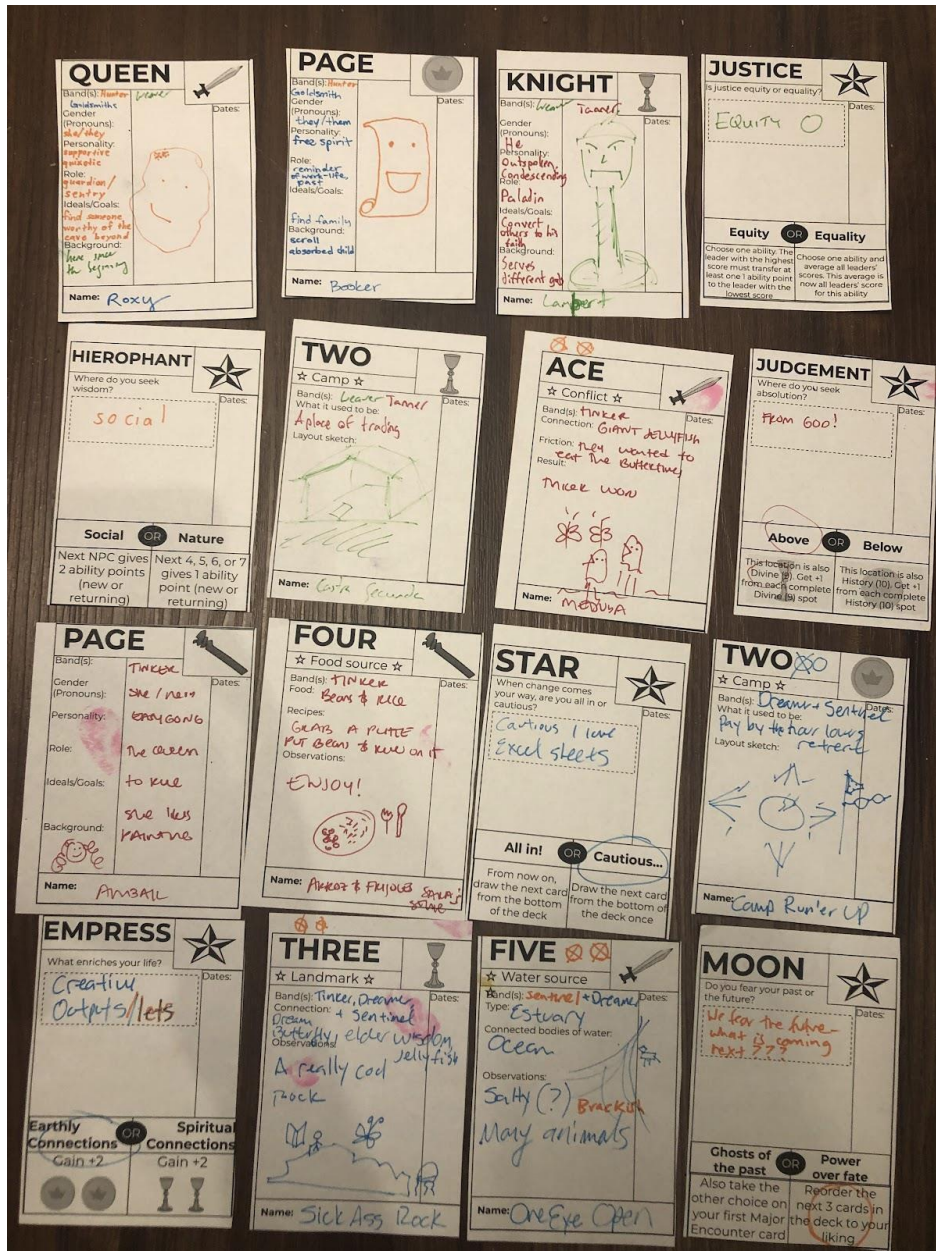
Throughout this process, the major arcana cards remained the primary mechanism for subjective reflection questions, but over time they were integrated more fully into the objective gameplay too. The latest iteration has players choose between two options, one each ostensibly referring to the tarot card's upright and inverted meanings. The options had a range of effects: lore-focused or purely flavor, changes to mechanics, granting skills, and others.

**Figure 5.8**



*Note.* An example of the fingerprinting ritual's results.

Figure 5.9



Note. A collage of completed encounter cards from multiple playtesters.

### Community Chronicle Records

The Community Chronicle logs what the community has been through and discovered as a whole.

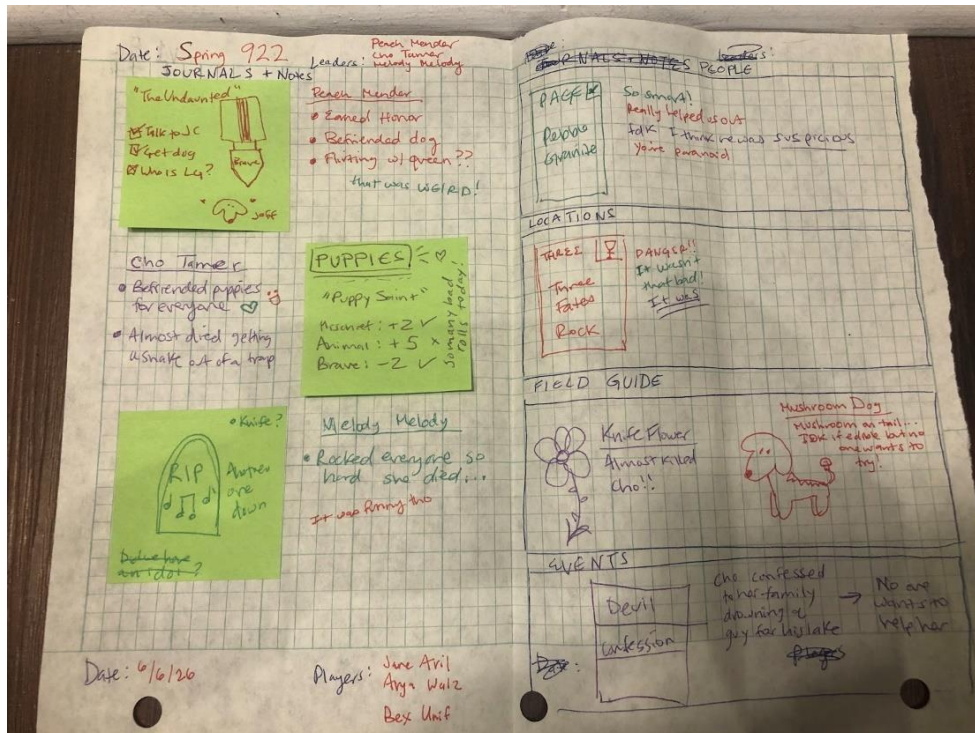
Essentially, a collage of the session's events that players can look back on in days or years. After

each session, the following are added to the Chronicle:

- Session Tile: A small square of paper on which players can make notes, doodle, write commentary and questions, add quotes, task lists, diary entries, and even make it into a game item (ex. paper crane).
- Encounter Tile: A smaller, simplified version of the Encounter cards that players filled during the session. In the margins, players can note funny events, commentary, and their feelings about the places, NPCs, flora, fauna, and decisions.

My early playtesters had the choice of a logbook format or a field guide format. The logbook format (see Figure 5.10) arranged information by session with player and character information on the left and world information on the right. The field guide format (see Figure 5.11) arranged information by type, with separate tabs for player and character information, NPCs, locations, and wildlife. Since none of the early groups chose the field guide option, I moved forward only with the logbook format.

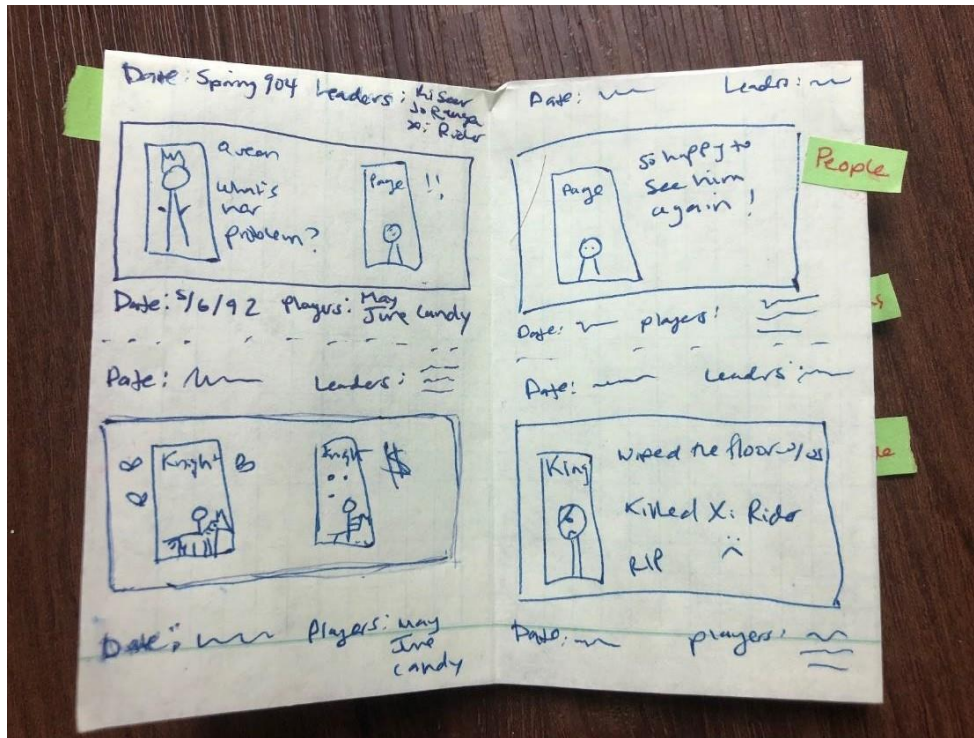
**Figure 5.10**



Note. An early example of the logbook format option.



Figure 5.11



Note. A mockup of the field guide format option.

### Other Artifacts

Early prototypes contained even more potential artifacts with the knowledge that the least popular would naturally be pruned by players over time. One of these was “relics”, which were items created to commemorate a particularly influential leader’s death. They were sculpted out of small pieces of clay and their bonus (ex. extra Coin skill for one season) was redeemed by adding the clay back to the communal ball. While it was enjoyable, other similar artifacts were preferred. In that same vein, I had additional art mini-games for players as part of a variety of creative and mental challenges, but they were not chosen over the others. Another pruned potential artifact was “gifts”, which were items required for puzzles and granted to leaders by NPCs. While this made the results of interacting with an NPC more tangible, the puzzle mechanic itself was too demanding to implement when weighed against its relative importance to the game.



## **Length of Play**

To support a player's control over the length of time they chose to commit to a game, I initially left it fully open to negotiation between the players. Early on, though, some players expressed a desire for flexible ending criteria. Like with the introductory narrative, players wanted a base that they could freely tailor to their needs. Additionally, for research practicality there needed to be a point of cutoff so I'd have time to interview players about the game. First, we tried a finite number of successors in each session (4-6), which would end the session ("season" in-game) when all successors from any Band die. This wasn't too popular since dying started to feel like a punishment for players who wanted the session to continue for a while longer. Instead, we moved to ten completed encounter cards per session, though players were still free to vary that number. Alternatively, if they wanted a longer session they could move into the next season and tackle another ten cards.

## Chapter 6 — Results of Playtesting *Legacy: (RE)discover(ING)*

Each part of the game I playtested sought to address the concerns and needs of my target audience. Reported here are the major results of implementing the design changes whose evolution was examined in the previous chapter. Though the iterative design changes were meant to address player needs more and more effectively, some results showed that a different approach is needed. Overall, I had a great time with all my players, and it was clear throughout each playtest that they enjoyed themselves too.

### **Game Components**

#### **Introductory Narrative**

The introductory narrative I gave to players before playing sought to address a need for a game “starter kit” (designer gives everything players need to make their own world, then steps back and lets them finish the game’s development), divergent stories (everyone gets the same story prompt but each group can grow that seed into vastly different routes and conclusions), and connecting the past, present, and future.

Once the introductory narrative was added, players had more context about who their characters were and what they were doing in the game world. Players liked the idea that their characters were coming back to a place they had been before but had forgotten about. They found it intriguing and mysterious, and it drove them to explore more of the game world. Plus, it helped them understand the game mechanics: all characters were connected to their ancestors, and the mechanics depended on the buildup of skills over generations. Players also had more conversations centering on the world’s narrative and how their community’s growing story fit into it. They had more direction when brainstorming information for characters and locations, and could use the narrative as a jumping off point while still making the game their own. They reported that knowing why the

characters and world existed helped them be more deliberate about their decisions and justifications for them. It was up to them to put together the pieces they were given, and different groups took the game in divergent directions.

### **Maps Created**

The map and its creation process sought to address a need for multisensory and tactile experiences, the ability to physically see and feel progress made during successive plays, and collaborative worldbuilding. I stimulated players' senses with rough watercolor paper for the map, slippery parchment paper for the map overlay, and vibrant paint colors. They also manipulated the map paper to swirl paint around and got wet cleaning their brushes, actions which often raised the energy of the group even after a challenge loss. The map's hands-on interaction was a favorite for nearly all groups, and they eagerly engaged with it, but since they usually weren't setting up the game beforehand, it's unclear whether that process would affect their enjoyment of the mechanic.

As for physically seeing and feeling progress and engaging in collaborative worldbuilding, the map starts mostly blank but is filled in as players explore, succeed or retreat from challenges, and mark points important to the party or player. After each session, they could see where they crossed old paths, what locations they had to return to many times, and generally how much time had passed since they rolled the first rivulet of paint. The wear and tear of the map served as a record as much as the text written on it did. Players took many different approaches to creating the map: simply rolling the paint a couple inches, building up a deep bubble of water until the surface tension broke and flooded the area with color, trying to keep up a continuous line until the paint dried, and much more. While it had not been my original intention, players made painting the route to their next location its own minigame complete with self-imposed challenges and rewards.

### **Skills Used**

The skill mechanics I gave to players sought to address a need for streamlined gameplay and opportunities for both individual and community contribution. With only four skills to keep track of, players made choices about which challenges to face quickly. Even though making the choice was quick, it was clear that having concrete skills to work towards motivated players to make strategic, purposeful decisions. The majority of groups raised their skills in line with the increasing level of challenges, but a couple struggled to make decisions that would set up their group for success in the future. For exploring a new location and then failing the challenge, a common pattern emerged: players were excited about the challenge (high energy), then surprised by its difficulty (negative release of energy), then retreated to tackle easier challenges instead and build their skills (rising energy), then returned to the difficult challenge with a vengeance (energy peak), and finally succeeded over it (positive release of energy). Players commented that while they didn't understand at first why the Bands had different levels of starting skills (ex. four swords for the stalwart Sentinels), it became clear as they played that each unique Band had a special part to play in the overall success of the community.

### **Band Sheet Records**

The Band sheets with some pre-filled information I gave to players sought to address a number of needs all on one component: both community and individual contributions, an emerging personal narrative from a world "starter kit", the ability to trace the connection between a decision and a result both in the short- and long-term, the clear overlap of past, present, and future, and multisensory experiences.

Players used their Band's unique special ability as both a flag to rally the community around and a personal bargaining chip. Though the latter was not an intended result of the design, players knew that their ability gave them a key role in the community's success, so some players felt it was honorable to selflessly use it for the good of all, while others used it to further their Band's

ambitions or goals. For example, one player negotiated a deal to use their Dreamer ability only if the group agreed to dedicate the next religious or memorial location to “Harambe”. When the other Bands later refused to follow through, a bitter blood feud was declared between them. The next couple locations the Dreamer player filled out referenced the other Bands’ betrayal, making it a permanent part of their world.

Players used the pre-filled biographical information (history and ambitions) on their particular Band’s sheet to guide their approach to various decisions. Everything else being equal, players reported that they made their final choice based on what they thought their Band would choose. For example, one of the Sentinel Band’s goals is to “protect another leader from death”, so one Sentinel player opted to sacrifice their own leader instead of another’s. Background information also helped players distinguish locations marked by their own Band from others. For example, a player of the spiritual Dreamers Band filled out a “new flora” location with psychedelic mushrooms, while the player of the healers of Menders Band instead marked a “new flora” location as a source of medicinal herbs. Some groups developed a friendly rivalry between their Bands as a result of competing goals or ambitions, which then led to more prolific commentary on the session’s events in the Community Chronicle.

With the timeline of leaders and their earned abilities, players could see their progress and trace the connection between their decisions and results both immediately and later in the game. In that same vein, each leader’s effect on the past, present, and future was clear. After losing a few Coin challenges, one player remarked in frustration, “I get it, great[x6] grandpa Lawrence was an idiot and picked Swords over Coins and we’re *still* paying the price!” Unexpectedly, some players used the timeline and earned abilities to resolve disputes between clans and declare certain ancestors “saints” or even “gods”. In one case, when two players couldn’t agree on a name for a Cups location,

one player declared that they should get to choose since the third leader on their Band timeline was the “patron saint of Cups.” In their view, because that leader had bequeathed more Cups skills to their Band than any other Band’s leaders had, that leader had earned veneration in the community history and therefore special considerations for his Band. While this pitch was rejected, a different group allowed a player’s Band to refer to itself as descendants of the “God of the Nines” because their leader had claimed all four “Nines” in the deck during her life.

The tattooing ritual players completed after a session functionally showed the buildup of history over generations, and the process was a multisensory experience that players were eager to get to after playing. Unexpectedly, some admitted that they only took notes for the Community Chronicle because they wanted to remember what happened in order to make the tattoo. In essence, the tattooing served as its own record while also driving the Community Chronicle records. Players took a wide range of approaches to their tattoo designs: literal drawings of events, symbolic representations, unrelated shapes or patterns, and even text. Because tattooing involved scratch-off cards it was one of the messiest mechanics, but like with making the map players didn’t seem to mind—some even commented on how fun it was to make a mess.

### **Leader Card Burning**

Creating and burning leader cards sought to address a need for multisensory experiences, viscerally permanent changes to game components, investment in the story and group, and reframing what “winning/losing” looks like.

As soon as I mentioned the game involved fire, most players were surprised, excited, and a little wary. For playtests that took place inside public buildings, we had to be especially cautious with containing the flame inside a used candle jar. The burning mechanic had the most multisensory engagement: feeling the heat, watching the flame rise and fall as it consumed the paper, hearing it

crackle, and smelling the burnt ashes and whatever remained of the scented candle. It was not unusual for players to burn spare scraps of paper after the session and add to the jar's buildup of ash.

At first, some players (especially those with libraries of expensive board games) balked at the idea of destroying a game component so viscerally and permanently—you can't tape ashes back together if you change your mind! I expected some initial resistance to burning from players before giving it a try, and that's how it went for the majority of players, but two players in one of the groups stubbornly held out until the end of the game. Of course, without burning their leader cards they couldn't unlock accumulated skills, and they seemed to realize how far behind the other players they were as the game went on. Despite all that, they wouldn't budge. Interestingly, afterward they reported that they really enjoyed the game and assured me their behavior was not reflective of the game, only "who we are as people". Still, their hesitation over the viscerally permanent destruction process showed how much work I still needed to do to reach even the most mulish collectors.

I expected players to enjoy playing with fire and celebrating the ephemeral nature of their leader card artifacts, which most did, but I did not expect a handful of players to ask to keep the tiny jar of ashes left over after the session. At first, I thought they had ignored the reason why they burned the cards in the first place, but during the post-game interview one player likened the jar to an urn. A morbid metaphor to be sure, but she emphasized that while burning the card was important for one reason, keeping the ash it transformed into was important for an unrelated reason. I had not anticipated the ash having any meaning to players since I incorrectly assumed that burning such a small piece of paper would not leave any significant trace.

When players choose their handful of leaders for the session, they fill out the character's name and relationship to the current leader. It was common for players to give their leaders familial relationships, but some opted for a "found family" structure and had relationships like "best friend", "favorite barkeep", "tutor", and "cool neighbor". Assigning names was more difficult for most players, but after they picked the first few names they usually stuck to that theme (ex. Jay, May, Kay, Bay). People naturally grow more attached to something after it's named, whether it's a pet, car, vending machine, or winter storm. Immediately after naming their leaders, players talked about the game differently. They remarked that it was nice to have an individual face rather than the ambiguous mass of Band members. It was clear that they were invested in the named leader's story in addition to the overall Band and community story. Many worked hard to earn their leader an "honor" before they died, despite the fact the "honor" system was only aesthetic after a few early playtests. Because these players were so attached to their leaders, burning their cards after death was especially hard for them.

Players had strong reactions to the idea that to "win" and progress in the game, they had to "lose" challenges and have their leaders die. It seemed to be difficult for them to reframe death not as a punishment, but as the means of success. In the first session for some groups, they had to actively work against their instinctive death avoidance: "If you do that, I'll die. Wait, no, that's a good thing, never mind." Once players got the hang of the mechanics, though, plans for a leader's death became a normal part of conversation. Multiple groups had players falling over themselves to be martyred for the community and their Band, which would give the group access to the leader's bequeathed skills. Even when "losing" a challenge, players noted that "at least we know what's there now and can get ready for it."

## **Encounters Deck**



Encounter cards did a lot of heavy lifting in regard to addressing player needs for: connection and community-building, collaborative worldbuilding, ownership over “making” their personal game experience, space for reflection, and game artifacts that have meaning outside of game.

I designed one of the very first things players do when starting the game to be centered around connection and building community. After they’d laid down the encounter cards for the session, they performed a fingerprinting ritual. Each player pressed the fingers of each hand to their own colored ink pad, then played “finger *Twister*” to touch as many cards as possible. Without fail the sessions started with laughter because of the ridiculous way they had to contort around each other. Players enjoyed the fingerprinting process so much that throughout sessions, many also added fingerprints to the map, Band cards, leader cards, and each other. Functionally, players liked that the fingerprints indicated who led filling out the card, so they didn’t have to pick someone every time. Having multiple prints on a card encouraged them to entangle their Bands’ stories and work together to add to the world in a way that made sense. They recognized that they each had their individual colors but were all part of something bigger. Some players commented on the use of fingerprints specifically: “it’s undeniable proof that I was there. If I write [M] on a card, that could be any [M], but with a fingerprint? That’s one in a trillion.” In answer, another player teased, “we have each other’s fingerprints so we better stay friends—can’t have you framing me [for a crime].” Not exactly how I intended the mechanic to build community, but noted by players nonetheless.

Encounter cards were the primary and most salient method of collaborative worldbuilding in the game. As players’ watercolor path led them to a new location, they faced both a community and individual challenge. Players reported that they liked having the two challenges split up, since each Band could have their chance to shine while also contributing to the group. They also mentioned that the two levels let them have incremental progress so having to retreat didn’t feel like wasted

time. Players felt like they were still building the world even when they weren't filling out the encounter card. When I showed them cards from other groups, they were always amazed by all the different directions groups went with the same prompt. The different types of locations had them thinking about aspects of the world they normally wouldn't consider, like how their ancestors had used the place or what recipe they would make with the novel food sources. Most players liked taking the time to create a rich world, but others wanted to quickly get back to the action of challenges, burning things, and swirling paint around. Though I had intended for the prompts to scaffold deep discussions, players felt that the game supported both styles of gameplay, and it was up to them to decide how thorough they wanted to be.

The game put a lot of the responsibility for fleshing out the world and story on the players, giving them ownership over their personal game experience. Players repeatedly remarked that you could only get out what you put into the game: if you had deep discussions and extensive lore the world would be very rich, whereas if you focused on challenges and cycling through leaders the world would be straightforward and spartan. They enjoyed seeing their game world progress manifest in the physical world, growing, changing, and eroding in parallel. It gave them a sense of control over the game's trajectory and as one player snidely remarked, "if you're not having fun that's on you—you have the power to make it fun and instead you're letting the game play you." Even choosing to roll the die for a chance to temporarily boost their skills played a big part in their sense of agency. Every time someone rolled, the group's energy rose in excitement, so sometimes players would choose to roll after a string of challenge losses to feel like they were "doing something instead of just taking it sitting down." Of course, in reality they had no control over how the dice would land, but what was important was that actively throwing dice *felt* like they did.

All the encounter cards, but the major arcana (ex. World, Hierophant, etc.) especially, were intended to give players the space to take part in guided reflection and deep discussion. Unsurprisingly, the time spent reflecting varied widely by group. While some really liked having deep conversations with each other, others opted to give a joke answer and keep the game moving. For those who chose to ruminate over the prompts, they reported that it was an interesting way to learn more about how the other players think. They said the prompts reinforced the game's theme of blurring time periods—for the same location, these players thought about what their ancestors did there, what they planned to do, and what future explorers might do there. What did they want to leave behind so their descendants would know they were still being watched over? Of course, not all groups took the prompts so seriously. Their cards ended up being short but very representative of their unique brand of humor.

Finally, I aimed to leave players with a game artifact that they could use in the real world too. While most players were aware of tarot cards, few had gotten or performed a reading. Most of those who had heard of tarot knew about the calamity implied by “The Devil” and “The Tower”, and approached those cards with apprehension. Still, players appreciated the familiarity and liked the idea of giving the cards their own customized meaning. I am aware of only two groups that finished their encounter deck and used it for actual readings, and both reported getting “pertinent” results. I’m not entirely sure what that means, but I’m glad they could successfully use the artifact outside of the game.

### **Community Chronicle Records**

The Community Chronicle had players archive their events and experiences, which sought to address a need for recordkeeping that is both functional (dates, who was there, what happened) and experiential (feelings about events, personal notes, space to reflect), and for a place to highlight both individual and community accomplishments. When designing it, I intended for the Community

Chronicle to serve as the functional at-a-glance summary of what happened in previous sessions and a place to celebrate both community and individual deeds. One side of the page held the notes of individual players, and the other side held information about the locations they had discovered as a community. As they played more games, the Chronicle itself grew.

Every group that was given a Community Chronicle used it for recordkeeping: date of session, date in-game, names of leaders present at the start, and player names. Use of the rest of the page, though, was varied. Some players took thorough notes, wrote diary entries for each leader, reflected on each session and their overall journey, and expressed deep investment in the characters and outcome of the community story. They also mentioned that it was fun to look back on earlier entries and see how their attitudes had changed. They could easily trace events in the past to success or hardship in the present.

Other players took notes only because they wanted to remember what their tattoo would be based on, and some didn't take notes at all. On the locations side of the page, few recorded which locations they had encountered that day. Those that didn't often pointed out that their growing stack of completed location cards was already keeping track of their community accomplishments. Instead, some used that side of the page to record how different leaders died during the session.

Interestingly, one group reached out to me after they finished their location deck and expressed regret about not writing down when they encountered each location. They had been using the deck for tarot readings, so the cards were all out of chronological order. Another group found a compromise: record the encountered date on the card itself, not the Chronicle, which I later added to the prototype.

### **Length of Play**

The options I gave players for determining how long they would play sought to address a need for a variable time commitment to a game. To give players control over their time, I offered a guide to how long typical sessions were but gave them the option to shorten or extend it as needed.

Generally, each session took around 1½ -2 hours, with the very first session taking about an extra 30 minutes to learn and get used to the rules. Each session represents one season in the year (ex. Spring Year 2) and comprises 10 completed encounter cards. I specified completed cards because I wanted players to have the option of making a tactical retreat from a difficult card without compromising how long their session would be. Still, players could stop at any time and pick up with their remaining cards next time. They can also extend the play session by tackling another season immediately after completing one.

Over the course of playtesting, only two groups had to stop before completing a session, and it was due to prior outside commitments rather than wanting to stop the game. While the average time for a session was 1½-2 hours, one group completed 10 cards in just 45 minutes and another took 4½ hours. Of particular note was one group who said they were used to *D&D* sessions taking up to 6 hours, so when my game only took 2 hours, they opted to jump into another session right away. While only less than a quarter of groups decided to do back-to-back sessions, the majority came back for a second session on a different day, and some played up to six sessions.

## Chapter 7 — True Destruction: Reigniting the Spirit of Innovation

After accumulating and analyzing my playtesting results, I was able to reflect more deeply on each key game material and further assess whether my design addressed the player needs outlined earlier in this paper. Overall, I found that most of them effectively addressed those needs, and for those that were less successful, I offered potential changes that could do a better job in the next iteration. Finally, I revisited my primary and secondary goals and determined I had adequately met each of them.

### **Discussion of Results and Future Changes**

#### **Introductory Narrative**

Importantly, the narrative framing separates the game actions from ones found in colonial-themed games. Players are told that they are rediscovering their ancestral land and resources, not taking them from others through force. Challenges are not to defeat foes, rather a test from their ancestors and the gods to determine if they have accumulated enough knowledge to proceed. The names of locations are evolving and remaining in the community's possession, not being replaced. Instead of focusing on the TTRPG trope "us vs. them", my game centers the entire community (past, present, future) and its growth.

Further, the introductory narrative was key to give players context and direction. They needed to situate themselves within the world and understand their place in it before they could formulate goals. When players didn't understand who they were, they didn't make deliberate decisions or have any justification for them. They weren't very engaged with the game or invested in their collective world and the outcome of their story. Once players knew they were chosen by the gods to rediscover their lost ancestral homeland, they had a reason to pick certain decisions over others, and that helped fuel investment in the story. When choices aren't random, players have a sense of

control over how the game progresses, and they care more about the result. They start to think more deeply about how their next location, NPC, or community event will fit into the world they built. Players can see their characters as a critical piece of a larger whole, reinforcing the game's themes of being part of a community connected across time and space, and contributing to that pool of generational knowledge.

The introductory narrative even helped players pick a physical direction on the map of where to go next. Without context, sliding the drop of paint around to make a route felt aimless or random—"I don't know why I'm doing this, I just am because that's how you play the game." Once players knew who they were and why they were in the world, traveling and exploring could be more purposeful. They added self-imposed challenges to make the narrative richer, such as rolling routes into the map's ocean and having to justify why the next location was so far out to sea (and how they got there in the first place). Overall, the introductory narrative was effective at addressing player needs for a game "starter kit", divergent stories, and connecting the past, present, and future.

### **Maps Created**

The map is one of the first materials players encounter that demonstrates the game's "creation through destruction" ethos and therefore sets the tone for the rest of the game: playful, freeing, and tactile. Repeatedly, players looked to me for permission to color and write on materials I gave them, even after I'd finished explaining that the purpose of the game was to explore creation through destruction:

*"Can I draw on this?" "Of course." "Are you sure?" "Yes, please do." "I'll really do it.*

*Fingerprints all over the whole thing. You're really sure?" "...maybe I should go over the goals of this game again." - MM, Me*

Notably, it seemed to be much easier for players to put paint on the map than it was for them to mark up premade sheets like the Band sheets. I got the impression that it was primarily because of

the different materials: watercolor paper and printer paper. With watercolor paper, there is a sense that art is “supposed” to happen on it, whereas formal text goes on printer paper.

This “messy”, somewhat uncontrollable collaborative art piece helps players escape the pressure of perfection, since it’s impossible to roll a paint droplet with any real precision. As Fluegelman puts it, “No one is an expert lap sitter. No one is a professional ball pusher. So nobody has a reputation to risk. Nobody has anything to lose. If you enjoy yourself, you win” (1976, p. 42). Still, being able to roll the paint instead of waiting for it to bleed out from a drip of water gives a sense of control, that you are an active agent in determining the community's path. This sense of vaguely directed wandering helped keep the game’s tone more free-spirited than if players *had* to go certain places. Plus, the colorful crisscross of chaotic lines across the map from progress in multiple sessions reinforces the game’s theme of accumulating and adapting knowledge. As different colors pass over each other again and again, they blend into their own unique pigment and show all the separate experiences building on each other—something that couldn’t happen if the paths stood alone. Physically and actively engaging with the map is an important part of keeping players mentally and emotionally engaged too. With many senses stimulated by the game, players can be more holistically tuned in to the game and each other. Overall, the map creation process was effective at addressing player needs for multisensory and tactile experiences, the ability to physically see and feel progress made during successive plays, and collaborative worldbuilding.

### **Skills Used**

I decided on only four skills because I wanted the design to be simple and streamlined enough that math and other calculations wouldn’t sap the players’ energy and overwhelm them during gameplay. Earning skills was also an easy early motivation for players to make purposeful decisions before the narrative-driven goals came into play. Starting levels of skills varied across Bands so different players could feel important while also contributing to the whole. While some players are



content with a fully collective game where all players act as a single group, I could bring in more types of players by giving them the chance to stand out individually too. With only four skills to keep track of, challenges could be resolved quickly, allowing players to return to the more reflective, creative process of worldbuilding. Still, some players were more excited about challenges and collecting skills than fleshing out locations. I got the sense that those players struggled to see the connection between the skills they were earning and the world, which led to them treating the skills as numbers to unlock cards rather than as the actions that led to them building up a location's lore. I want my game to be flexible and support different gameplay styles, but I also want to find a better way to bridge the gap between players who favor lore and those who favor numbers and competition.

To explore and better understand this gap in a future iteration, I would introduce a couple more specific sub-skills that are dependent on the four main skills. That way, players could customize their Bands more granularly, hopefully enticing them to build out the story of their Band through specialization. For example, instead of globally getting just a Sword skill, a Sentinel could put the Sword skill point in the Defense sub-skill, while a Hunter might put it in the Attack sub-skill. The Band's sub-skills would be more reflective of the player's personal goals for the Band, and a by-product might be a bit more effort put into writing about the world.

### **Band Sheet Records**

The Band sheets were one of the most densely packed game materials: they contained Band information, active and pending skills, leader timelines, completed tattoos, and more. It was important for it all to be close visually so players could start to see connections between the different types of information. In particular, having the leader timeline, earned skills, and in-progress tattoo all in line made the past, present, and future connection explicit. There's a list of ancestors on the timeline and marks on the tattoo silhouette, but there's also blank space ready to

be filled with descendants and new symbols. There's crossed out redeemed skills of the past, but also ones you know you can only use when your present leader dies in the future. In essence, people collaborate with their ancestors to better understand their present, constructing their personal version of the current world and imagining possible futures. I wanted to highlight this overlapping of past, present, and future in my game, showing that we are always standing on the shoulders of giants.

To assess the success of the Band sheets in addressing player needs, its components needed to be separated for evaluation with respect to each need. To address the player's need for opportunities for both community and individual contributions, the Band sheets' biographical information and unique special ability proved effective. Players had their Band's individual part to play in the community's success as a whole, and they had opportunities to stand out and feel valued. The biographical information also effectively helped address the need for an emerging personal narrative from a world "starter kit". With the Band's background information and ambitions, players can start to think about how their Band might react to certain decisions compared to others, but they can take that story seed in any number of directions. If players need a jumping-off point to guide gameplay, they have it. If they don't, they can adjust the information as needed or even ignore it. They never have to feel like they don't know their Band's place and purpose in the world.

To address the need for the ability to trace the connection between a decision and a result both in the short- and long-term, the Band sheets' leader timeline and record of skills proved effective. Together, the two components document the Band's growth over the course of multiple sessions, allowing players to see how they've excelled (or failed) as a result of previous choices. Following the timeline back, players can see which ancestor was "responsible" for their current situation—for

good or ill. These connections across time and the consequent list of names give a sense of accumulation, that the Band is growing bigger even as leader cards are burned.

Finally, in addressing the need for multisensory experiences, the tattooing mechanism excelled. It allowed for dedicated time after a session where players could debrief and reflect while doing a tangible task. Tattooing prompted players to think differently about their experiences: how would they abstract an event into a symbol? Watching the markings expand and take over the silhouette was an effective representation of the Band's growth and accomplishments. Additionally, irreversibly scraping off paint from the silhouette was an embodied connection to traditional tattoo rituals.

### **Leader Card Burning**

Burning cards on the “funeral pyre” always got a strong reaction from players, whether it was excitement or apprehension. The method, using fire, was very effective in eliciting over-the-top emotions—it affected people in a deep, unexplainable way. It seemed to unlock something primal, a fascination with watching things be consumed by flame, instantly making the rest of the activity more interesting:

*“Wait wait—you’re actually setting it on fire?!” “Yes...?” “I thought that was a metaphor or symbolic or something! I love this game a hundred times more now.” - MM, **Me***

In my experience with players, the drive to set something on fire even overrode their deep-seated, magpie-like instinct to collect trinkets. Even if players were hesitant about burning their first leader card, it quickly became satisfying to do so. It was a tactile representation of letting that leader go, opening a new chapter for the next leader, and transitioning into using their new skills. The game's use of destruction by fire prompted players to question their assumptions about what “winning” and “losing” look like in a game. Most games treat death as the default punishment for a failure, whereas my game lowered the stakes so players could focus on exploring, experimenting, and

trying new strategies. They had the freedom to not be perfect. Death wasn't the end, or a punishment. It was a natural step in moving forward, and an essential part of the play process.

Through the multisensory experience of burning, players transformed the real-world card into the game-world's accumulation of a Band's ancestral knowledge. I think this allowed players to reflect on their relationship with "permanence". If a paper is burned, has it disappeared or been transmuted into ash? If a leader's card is destroyed, are they gone or do they still manifest as the Band's accumulated skills? If the characters forgot about their ancestral homeland, was it gone or waiting to be rediscovered by the community? Players were invested in each other and the story because they recognized the psychological permanence of sharing an experience with another person. They collectively agreed to permanently give up a portion of their finite, real life to each other, and transform it into a boundless, intangible memory shared by all.

### **Encounters Deck**

Like the Band sheets, the encounters deck rolled multiple important components into one: fingerprinting, worldbuilding prompts, and the deck itself. They all depended on the buildup of knowledge over generations, reinforcing the game's themes. Each component complemented the others to effectively address player needs for connection and community-building, collaborative worldbuilding, ownership over "making" their personal game experience, space for reflection, and game artifacts that have meaning outside of game.

Fingerprinting the back of encounter cards was very enjoyable for most players both because it was messy and because it set the tone for a collaborative game experience. Right from the start they are building connections and sharing personal space to reach all the cards. Seeing the mass of hands tangled on the table reinforces the sense of community, that the players are all part of one whole. Since early playtesters using colored stickers instead of fingerprints were far less into the process, I

can deduce that the physical interaction of hands plays a key role in forging the players' sense of community. When players draw an encounter card and see whose fingerprints are on the back, they have the opportunity to deepen the connection between those Bands while also creating a location for the entire community's world. Even when the inky fingerprints are used to mark up another player's Band sheet, it's building connection. Since you used your fingerprint to make a little butterfly on my sheet, now when I look at this game component originally meant to reflect my Band's individual achievements, I am reminded of you.

The worldbuilding prompts were received well, though I would scale back a couple questions on the NPC cards in the next iteration. Players who took the time to thoroughly fill out the NPC cards tended to make up their own prompts anyway, so putting my own on there was of little use. The rest of the location prompts guided players in thinking more deeply about their emerging world by asking them to consider aspects they might not otherwise have thought of. The major arcana cards prompt players to reflect on their own attitudes, such as "Where do you seek absolution?" on "Judgment". Their answer has an in-game result tied to it, but most of the discussion happens out of game between players. Since time devoted to filling in the cards varied, in the next iteration I want to find ways to make them more appealing. Perhaps framing it as a debate would help: two players could be assigned as advocates for one of the two choices, and the rest of the players would vote on who made the best (or funniest) case. With this change, players could certainly still give quick joke answers and move on, but those types of players might be enticed to tell those same jokes on a more formal platform instead.

As a central mechanism of collaborative worldbuilding, accumulating knowledge, and displaying progress, players treated the cards with reverence. I knew of only two groups who used them as an actual tarot deck, but others reported showing them to their friends who came over for board game

nights. In both cases, the cards effectively had meaning outside of the game, but in the next iteration I would push even further. Maybe I could inspire more players to use it as a tarot deck if I included some basic instructions on how to do a reading in the game rules.

### **Community Chronicle Records**

The Community Chronicle was designed to serve as the objective at-a-glance summary of what happened in previous sessions, as well as the place to document the subjective experiences of players. Unlike the Band sheets, which archived the history and experiences of one player and their Band, and the encounters deck, which archived players' effects on the game world, the Chronicle was more like the borders of a puzzle, helping the individual pieces fit together in one cohesive picture. Like the encounters deck, though, I wanted the physical Chronicle to grow in size and weight in step with the players' intangible game-world progress.

Since players always used the Chronicle for tracking the dates, names, and events of each session, it was clear that it succeeded in addressing a player's need for functional recordkeeping. Less clear was whether it addressed the needs for documenting experiences and serving as a hub to celebrate both individual and community accomplishments. A group's utilization of the Chronicle for the latter depended heavily on their familiarity with TTRPGs: if they had experience writing character diaries, taking session notes, and reflecting on the session after it ended, they used the Chronicle for that purpose. If they didn't have that experience, they were less likely to use the Chronicle for subjective purposes. I speculated that this was for two reasons: one, it was not instinctive to write down their thoughts about an event when they had already said them out loud, and two, the Chronicle's functions felt split across other materials, making it redundant.

For example, I intended for the Chronicle to have more uses outside of the game: sparking memories when players looked over it with their group and serving as a conversation piece with

other groups. In practice, though, the encounters deck seemed to serve that purpose much better, likely because it embodied the gameplay more deeply. After all, the encounter cards quickly showed the players' progress with its height, and it had the fingerprints, the major arcana's discussion prompts, the locations' and NPCs' biographical prompts, colorful writing, and often outrageous drawings. Outsiders could more comfortably talk about the information on the cards than the very contextual notes in the Chronicle.

Once the encounter date was added to the encounter card rather than noted in the Chronicle, the Chronicle started to become obsolete as a place to archive information about the game world itself. Instead, in the next iteration I would scale back the Chronicle to have only a very basic, objective recap of the session's events and give more space to archiving subjective experiences. Rather than duplicating the world information already contained on encounter cards, the only objective information in the Chronicle would be for functional organization of the session (date, names, list of key events). The majority of space on the page would be devoted to the community's reaction to the world as it grows i.e. session tiles (player quotes, opinions about locations, diary entries, items made during sessions, etc.). Because the Chronicle would be repurposed for solely intra-community use, it wouldn't need to be bogged down with contextual information. It would only need to contain information that's significant to just one community and their customized game experience (character deaths, impressive or odd accomplishments, funny moments, money in the swear jar, etc.). By pushing the responsibility of a conversation piece fully onto the encounter cards, the Chronicle is free to be something special and secret, only meaningful to those "in-the-know".

Thanks to playtesters without TTRPG experience, I was alerted to the fact that the purpose of the Chronicle was unclear and seemed to be duplicated by other materials. I took it for granted that players would want a single location to store information spread across other components.

Evidently, those other components can stand alone and don't need to be aggregated. Hopefully making the Chronicle's function clearly distinct from other game materials would help its role in the game be better understood by players with and without TTRPG experience. If it is seen as a unique component critical to the overall gameplay, it might be more approachable, and players might be more inclined to use it.

### **Length of Play**

Though some players (certainly some of the ones I interviewed) held the attitude that it was primarily up to the game designer to curate a play experience, I wanted my game to demonstrate the critical part players play in the process and level the balance of power. In particular, I wanted a player's responsibility for crafting their personal game experience to be salient and explicit. For a game intended to boost player agency, allowing them to determine how much time they wanted to spend playing the game was a necessity. To that end, I had originally left how to "end" a session fully up to a player—no guidance at all. This attitude was heavily influenced by the ethos of Fluegelman's New Games movement (1976), which emphasized that game rules and win conditions were an ongoing negotiation between players and didn't take priority over having fun playing the game. I wanted players to feel free to pick up and put down the game at will if they lost interest, not allowing for a moment of "let's just get this over with". Based on my own experience with personal board game groups, when players are given unclear (or boring) ending criteria, they autonomously decide on alternate criteria between themselves. In my design, I wanted to give players the power to customize "winning" and "ending" to suit their particular group rather than pre-determine for them what was important.

In practice, players liked the open-ended nature of determining success, but they wanted an anchor. Without one, certain game actions felt aimless, and few players were swayed by "just to see what's there" as a motivation to explore. Without victory points, competition, or other extrinsic rewards,



some players were at first confused about where they should direct their energy. I often had to field questions related to “how do I win?”, and many weren’t satisfied by my cryptic response: “you can succeed at challenges, but it’s up to you and the group to decide how or if you win.” Consequently, I very carefully started to add criteria players could use as a base for negotiating rules tailored to their group. First, I added skill challenges for when players uncover a new location, giving them the opportunity to experience a mini-success or -loss without also determining the results of the game as a whole. This helped the energy flow of the game by adding rising anticipation when facing a challenge and the release of relief or disappointment afterward. This energy fluctuation at certain points complemented the laid-back, slower periods of time when players were writing down worldbuilding information.

Next, I added a suggested length for a session: ten completed encounter cards. That way, the in-game seasons had comparable lengths and players had a firm but flexible finish line in mind. In other words, they could see and move toward the next checkpoint with the knowledge that they could freely move it, rather than gaze forever into a nebulous void of potential playtime. I realized that the counter to restrictive, one-size-fits-all rules was not no rules at all—too much freedom could be paralyzing. After all, it’s difficult to create something from nothing. Giving players flexible rules to shape to their needs could be *more* liberating than unbounded autonomy.

That said, I have purposely left the overall game with no explicit end state so players can determine what that looks like for their particular group. In my view, this was critical in helping players focus on the process of playing with each other rather than on “solving” the game. For a group, the end condition could be completing their encounters deck, burning through 100 leaders in each Band, or getting the map so saturated with paint that they can’t see the paths anymore. Still, these endgame rules are arbitrary, so players are free to pick the game back up at a later date and give it new end

criteria. To support this endless, ever-evolving cycle, in my next iteration I want to reinforce a player's sense of "returning". In the current prototype, nothing happens when players return to a location they have already filled out, so traveling through that area is merely incidental. Instead, I'd like to reintroduce an event deck that applies only when coming back to a location and that gives players more worldbuilding prompts and high-level skill challenges. That way, travel between locations would be more meaningful, it would create tension even in a "familiar" place, and players can do more granular worldbuilding.

## **Review of Goals**

Playtesting provided thorough, valuable insight into the key traits of legacy games and what they could be in the future. Many of my playtesting notes were quotes from the players, and though they were admittedly generous with their praise and suggestions, their words help illustrate whether I effectively implemented my design goals. Through analysis of these notes, I was able to pinpoint which of my design goals were addressed and how.

## **Addressing Primary Goals**

### 1. Process-Focused

My first primary goal was process-focused: deploying creation through destruction as an experience and the primary method to progress forward. Players devoted a big chunk of their post-game interview to describing the "feel" of the game and the emotions it provoked:

*"I really love the feel of the tattooing... even when I 'mess up' it's part of the story, y'know? Like, 'oops Uncle Jeb drank too much before my ceremony and now I have a wiggly line, but we love him.' It just feels right. It's something that could happen in the game's world, but I'm actually doing it, it's happening in my real world too." - JB*

*"My favorite part was making the map. Yeah, it looked cool when we were done, but I really liked the actual 'making' time. I just felt so happy watching that little bit of paint run around*

*the paper, almost fall off the edge, and go in a direction I really didn't want it to. I suppose I can't control the direction of a river of paint any more than I can control the way my own journey unfolds. I guess I felt reassured, in a way? No matter what happened I enjoyed doing it." - KL*

*"This was nothing short of incredible, I haven't felt like this about a game in a while. I usually hate these types of games because I take so long to think of the perfect name and stress out about my drawing skill. It was so relaxing to think '\*\*\*\* it, I'm burning it anyway!' Messing up felt like more fun than doing it right—what's even 'right', eh? I had to change my whole attitude and just let myself play." - RL*

They talked about freedom from perfection, permission to perform badly, and questioning what we think of as the “right” way to play a game. For many of the players who weren't already avid gamers, they admitted letting themselves just play was stressful in a way, but as the game went on they were able to let go of some of that anxiety. The map and leader cards made destruction an integrated and essential part of the play process, and necessary for progress. For the leader cards in particular, they are designed to not be too detailed since players will eventually burn them. Knowing the card is transient frees players from the pressure of making the “perfect” name or portrait. They felt it was helpful to be “forced” to destroy something in order to progress:

*"I'm glad you're making me burn this. I'm one of those people that hang onto every little scrap of paper from games... Yahtzee, Settlers of Catan, I probably even have Tic-Tac-Toe somewhere. But for this, I know if I don't burn it I won't get their skills and I'm holding the community back." - KL*

In the end, I believe I adequately met my first primary goal.

## 2. Artifact-Focused

My second primary goal was artifact-focused: deploying the action of building and/or destroying game components as the way to track and record play progress. While my process-focused goal zeroed in on players' experience and emotions, the artifact-focused goal highlights the tangible changes players made.

By far, the overall favorite artifact was the map. Not only was it fun to make during the game and keep afterward, but it also felt very natural and integrated as part of the game world. As with the encounter cards where players came up with characteristics for locations and characters, they could physically watch their worldbuilding grow. Like the stack of completed encounter cards kept getting heavier, the map kept getting more colorful. Because the map builds up with paint every time players go to a new location, colorful, chaotic lines span the paper and bleed together wherever they cross paths. It showed players' progress as well as their difficulties: if they repeatedly failed challenges and had to keep going back to the same spot, it became muddy with the many layers of paint. Players felt it was a beautiful way to track the unique path taken by each group, and it made the game feel personalized to them:

*"It's not the kind of game you rehome—not that I think anyone would want to. It's like if I got an intensely tailored suit, wore it to my wedding, and then tried to give it to someone else.*

*They'd have no use for it because it was made for me, and it wouldn't mean as much to them as it does to me." - DO*

*"Seriously, this map is going directly above my mantle. No one is going to know what the hell it is, but I'll know. I'll look at it and think, 'look at all those paths into the ocean and off the board. This map is a monument to [KL]'s brave fight with watercolors.'" - MM*

Players really loved having permission to be playful, the ability to look back on the mess they'd made, and the option to retain some components (enduring) and burn others (ephemeral). In the end, I believe I adequately met my second primary goal.

## **Addressing Secondary Goals**

### **A. Player-Centered Design**

My first secondary design goal emphasized getting players involved in many stages of the design process starting with development and continuing even after deployment. Player insights were critical to each stage of my research process, and in playtesting their suggestions were implemented and tested right in the moment. With multiple mechanics, I demonstrated that design doesn't stop when a game is handed off to the players—on the contrary, players are critical in curating their personal game experience and “completing” the game to suit their needs. In the end, I believe I adequately met my first secondary goal.

### **B. Blur Lines Between Game/Real World**

My second secondary design goal was to blur the lines between the game world and real world, allowing for simultaneous changes to the dynamic in-game world and our own out-of-game reality. Players wanted to see their game world progress manifest in the physical world, growing, changing, and eroding in parallel. It was apparent to me that they didn't want to just see the progress, though, they wanted the wear and tear of the game to serve as a record tracking it. It would be one thing to have solely a “use patina” game and another to have a game where it's possible to track when and why each new alteration took place. With the map and leader cards in particular, I believe I adequately met my second secondary goal.

### **C. Ritual Elements and Performance**

My final secondary design goal concerned the benefits of liberation and transformation rituals, as well as the overlap of past, present, and future. With fire, fingerprinting, creating the paint travel path, answering personal prompts, and other ritual-like mechanics, I was able to bring the freedom, community-building, and self-reflection that traditional rituals bestow on their practitioners.

Through multiple game components, I emphasized the power of accumulated knowledge and support from family across time and space. As I have demonstrated, I believe I have more than adequately met my final secondary goal.

## Chapter 8 — Conclusion: Future of Legacy

### **Contributions to the Field**

Throughout this work, I have drawn connections between physically, emotionally, and spiritually powerful media: storytelling, rituals, and games. I traced their evolution over time to legacy games, one of their more recent forms. After dozens of design iterations, analysis, and reflection, my research has contributed insights on the following:

- The value of iterative design research in game and design studies
- The importance of legacy games standing as their own genre
- The contribution of legacy games like mine to game and design studies
- The “purpose” of games

### **Value of Iterative Design Research**

This research, in conjunction with others like it, further establishes iterative design research as a valuable approach in game and design studies to generate inspiration, test ideas, and accumulate data. This approach is uniquely suited to probe questions related to a holistic player experience because it centers the emergent dynamics of players and a game in progress. It has the flexibility, relevance, and intimacy required to collect player insights and actively involve them in the design process. Additionally, the specific design exploration approach within design research is especially effective at answering “blue-sky”, “what if” questions and imagining new design directions. This approach was critical for me to learn more about what aspects of games contribute to players’ community-building, meaningful decisions, sense of agency, and much more covered in earlier chapters.

### **Independent Legacy Game Genre**

This research demonstrated a need for consistent language when discussing “legacy” games in order to establish them as a genre distinct from other similar media. As shown by my breakdown of

various games claimed as “legacy” in earlier chapters, the label has been used quite liberally since it was first introduced. As a result, the term has become less useful—players are unsure exactly what they’re getting when they’re looking to purchase such a game, and game designers and researchers aren’t sure if they’re discussing the same thing. This work proposed a return to the original, forward-thinking definition that highlighted the key traits setting it apart: a persistent game state that carries over from session to session, permanent and irreversible changes made to this game state by player decisions, permanent and irreversible changes made to physical components, and changes are so significant that the game cannot be replayed. This definition pushes innovation, and as my experimental game demonstrates, it can create progressive, memorable, meaningful game experiences.

### **Contribution of Legacy Games**

As has been demonstrated through extensive literature and design research, legacy games are a valuable asset to the game design field as a whole. Their unique utilization of “creation through destruction” aligns them with ritual actions and their artifacts and sets them apart from similar media like TTRPGs and storytelling games. This mechanism is utilized both in legacy games’ mechanics (ex. creating a map by covering it with paint, creating a fulfilling experience by burning a card), as well as their design ethos (pivot toward process over product). Legacy games give players the space and opportunity to freely mess up, make mistakes, and not be perfect. Though the vanguard companies that first helped make legacy games popular have in many ways faded away from the original rule-breaking mindset for financial reasons, we are still free to explore their possibilities in academia.

As an academic endeavor rather than an industrial one (what Fallman [2008] would call “design practice”), this work’s contribution to game and design studies is to widen the scope of design possibilities rather than make “the best game”. Large board game companies are restricted by



financial boundaries and consequently have the means to experiment with game design, but only so far as it continues to make them money. As mentioned in earlier chapters, it's therefore not surprising that these companies tend to drift back to their tried-and-true designs. It is the role of academia, then, to experiment and pursue the ideas that come from blue-sky thinking. By gathering information and contributing it to a collective pool of research, my work and others like it keep the realm of design possibilities open. Design practitioners, like the aforementioned board game companies, can use this font of knowledge to create the games of the future without taking on the risk of exploring novel design ideas themselves.

### **“Purpose” of Games**

Legacy games are another step towards games as experiences rather than solely physical products. They operate in the limbo between the game world and the real world, blurring the game/reality boundary and subverting established game norms. My game design played in this liminal space, allowing me to reorient a gameplay experience around narrative and reflection rather than winning and solving. Flipping the script on conventions like character death leading to a loss, game components remaining pristine, and the binary of “winners” and “losers” opens up the design space so we don't get too comfortable and settle into arbitrary boundaries. To keep moving forward, we must take a step back and reassess the limits we've set for ourselves. Why *do* games always have to reset? Why *can't* I negotiate the win condition with my team? What *would* ritual practices look like in the board game medium?

### **Future Directions**

There is still so much to explore in game design, and legacy games are a valuable medium to do so. While my work delved deep into rituals and storytelling as practices influencing legacy games, there are other areas of interest that warrant further examination: LARP, ambient media such as

Slow TV, theater, and expressive therapies, to name a few. I briefly touched on each in my initial research, and they have interesting ideas to contribute to game studies too.

The future of board games is not in expensive, revered, complex games doubling down on their components, it's in experiential games that support a social, meaningful play process. To that end, there is an emerging idea that game designers are called upon to play the contemporary "soul guiding role that artists, poets and shamans played for the larger community throughout history" (Rusch, 2018, p.7). Designers following this idea can apply my findings and others like it to utilize rituals and their social benefits, such as community-building, emotional reflection, and personal expression. There is much to learn in the game space regarding catharsis to produce freedom from rigid expectations and boundaries, release tension and anxiety about being perfect, and transition into new perspectives of the purpose of games. Just as rituals can usher individuals into new stages of life, games can enable players to develop personally, including making mistakes, departing from "rules", and finding new creative outlets.

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