

CMS.608 / .864: Game Design

Written Rules Style Guide v. 1.0

Begin with a short introduction that describes the game. This should set the scene in terms of the fiction, and give a broad overview of how the game plays.

Example 1, *Agricola*: “Central Europe, around 1670 AD. The Plague which has raged since 1348 has finally been overcome. The civilized world is revitalized. People are upgrading and renovating their huts. Fields must be plowed, tilled and harvested. The famine of the previous years has encouraged people to eat more meat (a habit that we continue to this day).”

Example 2, *Puerto Rico*: “Prospector, captain, mayor, trader, settler, craftsman, or builder? Which roles will you play in the new world? Will you own the most prosperous plantations? Will you build the most valuable buildings? You have but one goal: achieve the greatest prosperity and highest respect! This is shown by the player who earns the most victory points?”

Example 3, *Carcassonne*: “The southern French city of Carcassonne is famous for its unique Roman and Medieval fortifications. The players develop the area around Carcassonne and deploy their followers on the roads, in the cities, in the cloisters, and in the fields. The skills of the players to develop the area and use their thieves, knights, farmers, and monks will determine who is victorious.”

Include a complete component list.

The rules should specify all of the components included in the game, so players can verify whether the game is complete. This should be exact and exhaustive.

Do: “100 blue wooden cubes.”

Don't: “A bunch of colored wooden pieces.”

Prefer short, imperative sentences in the active voice.

Do: “Place your marker in the hex.”

Don't: “The marker is placed in the hex by the player.”

Be mindful of gender pronouns – not all your players (and team members!) will be male.

Do: “On each player’s turn, he or she...” or “On his or her turn, the player...” or “During each turn, the player...”

Don’t: “On his turn, he...”

Use numbered lists when the sequence of items is important, for example when describing a process or series of actions. Specify beforehand that these steps must be taken in order.

1. First you should do this step.
2. Then you should do that step.
3. Lastly, do this step.

Your lists should start with 1, not 0. Your players are people, not computers.

Use bulleted lists when the precise sequence is unimportant.

- Don’t forget to place your marker on the hex.
- Remember that all players must say “where am I?” on their turn.

Include pictures of the game in-progress to illustrate the initial setup, and use sequences of images to illustrate complicated rules or steps.

Showing how the game is supposed to look before and during play is enormously helpful, and is much easier to understand than written descriptions.

Call-out or otherwise highlight any exceptions to common rules.

Do: “You may only buy one house on your turn. **Unless it is Thursday.**”

Use consistent terminology.

Always refer to aspects of the game in a consistent way. Do not use different terms for the same pieces, or for turns or rounds. Make sure any labels on the game pieces themselves match the terms used in the written rules.

Arrange the rules logically.

Use headings to divide your rules into sections. If you are describing a sequence of actions in the game, make sure the order in the rules matches the order that happens in the game.

Include player aids when appropriate.

If your players need to remember a lot of information, make sure that information is either on the game components themselves, or on reference sheets. This gives the players a quick way to verify information without having to thumb through the full rules.

Do not include information or rules on the player aid that is not in the rule as well.

Give an example of one game turn.

Give a description of one turn of play. For example, you might say “Allison begins by drawing a card from the pile. She then must play two cards from her hand, so she chooses a Red card and a Yellow card.” This helps players understand the flow of the game. Use pictures and diagrams to illustrate the turn.

Specify first player.

Even if it is unimportant or silly, tell the players how to select the first player.

Do: “The person born closest to an ocean goes first.”

Don’t: “Pick someone to go first.”

Provide tie-breakers if possible.

Tell players how to resolve a tie. If such a rule is not viable, perhaps because there is no other way to evaluate success beyond winning and losing, you can say “in the case of a tie, players share the victory.”

Specify limits on resources.

In some games the number of bits is a real limit. For example, in *Monopoly* no more houses may be built once all the houses have been used. In other games the number of resources is an “artificial limit,” meaning that if all the bits are used players should provide more. In this latter case there is no upper limit to the amount of resources a player might have.

Include a FAQ at the end of the rules when needed.

This is especially important when there are many possible exceptions to the rules, or many complex cases that will be hard for new players to resolve.

General Hints

- Feel free to ask the instructors for feedback on your rules before submitting the game.
- Playtest your rules! At each playtest be sure to provide players with a typed copy of your rules. Have your testers read the rules and try to play by themselves, and be sure to ask them about the written rules later.
- Study the rules of games we play in-class. Some of the rules will be very good, and some will be very bad. Pay attention to and learn from them.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

CMS.608 / CMS.864 Game Design
Spring 2014

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.