

The Design and Testing of the Board Game – Lord of the Rings

by Reiner Knizia

The design of the Lord of the Rings Board Game was a great opportunity but also an extraordinary challenge. Tolkien's powerful epic of more than a thousand pages is loved by millions. This game would reach a large audience, but they would have high and very specific expectations. My brief from the publisher was to design a sophisticated family game of about one hour playing time. Even though I couldn't cover the entire story line, my aim was to stay within the spirit of the book so that the players would experience something similar to the readers of the book. These design goals would have many consequences for the game design.

Design Process

I don't have a fixed design process. Quite the contrary, I believe that starting from the same beginning will frequently lead to the same end. Finding new ways of working often leads to innovative designs. Of course, there are always the basic ingredients of game mechanics, game materials, and the theme or the world. These are good anchor points and in a balanced design these dimensions will blend together nicely and support each other. Furthermore, there are some fundamental design questions about the player's point of view: Who am I? What am I trying to achieve? What are my main choices? How do I win?

In the early design stages I often close my eyes and look into new worlds, new systems, and new materials, searching for exciting game play. I try to develop an understanding of what I want to feel when I play the game: the thrill, the fun, the choices, the challenges. Clearly, for the Lord of the Rings Board Game I needed to develop a deep understanding of Tolkien's world, the underlying themes, and the motivations of the characters. This was not achievable by merely reading the book itself. I also needed to know what excited the fans, and what was at the center of their discussions. Dave Farquhar, a friend and regular playtester, was a great fan of Tolkien. We spent countless hours going through the story page by page, discussing its relevance for the game. Clearly I could not reflect much of the detail of the books. But more important was the feeling of the world. The true focus of the book was not the fighting, but more personal themes – the development of each character's sense of self as they attempt to overcome adversity.

The story starts with the hobbits leaving their home to venture into unknown lands. I decided that each player would represent a hobbit aided by the good characters and peoples in Middle Earth. Of course their only chance was to co-operate. To do Tolkien's masterpiece justice, the players would have to play together. This structure would make the game design very unusual. But the rules could not simply demand co-operative play: the game system had to intrinsically motivate this type of play. Therefore, I embedded the hobbits' mutual foe, Sauron, into the game system itself. Even the most competitive players would soon realize that the game system threw so many dangers at the players that they would naturally have to support each other to maintain a strong front against their common enemy.

In contrast to a book, a game must be replayable many times, giving fresh excitement each time. As the storyline would already be known to many of the players but not all of them, the game would have to work and play well irrespective of the players' knowledge of Tolkien's world. Another important consideration was the physical appearance of the game and its graphical presentation. *The Lord of the Rings* is full of atmosphere, and has long been a source of inspiration for beautiful illustrations. John Howe, a famous Tolkien artist was signed up to do the artwork, and I wanted to give him plenty of opportunities to enrich the game and excite the Tolkien fans with powerful visuals. Furthermore, the target retail price and the square box shape would influence the components I could use.

Scripted Game System

Considering the challenge of distilling an epic story into a game, I started to develop a general approach that I call the "scripted game system." Essentially, this is a method of distilling the key parts of a story and presenting them in game form. It enables episodes to be linked together in a storyline that compresses some parts, but expands the key adventures that the players will play in detail.

Applying this approach to the Lord of the Rings Board Game, I imagined a "summary board," showing the overall progress of the players' journey, and a corruption line to visualize the growing power of Sauron. Below would be a number of more detailed and beautifully illustrated "adventure boards" on which the key episodes would be played in sequential order. These boards would reflect the flavor of particular episodes through thematic events and play would take place on activity tracks representing fighting, movement, hiding, or friendship. Each scenario board would have a primary track that provided the main route through the scenario and measured the players' overall progress. Shields, representing victory points, would generally be acquired on the primary track.

In order to avoid players merely concentrating on the main track and moving swiftly through the scenario, valuable life tokens, resources, and allies would appear on the minor tracks. A scenario could be finished in two ways, either by completing the primary track, or because the events had run their course and had overtaken the players – usually with serious consequences. To create more predicaments, players would be required to complete the scenarios with three life tokens (one of each kind), or they were pushed along the corruption line on the summary board toward Sauron.

The corruption line was designed as the primary pressure being applied to the players. Their hobbit figures would start at the "light end," with Sauron beginning at the "dark end." As the game progressed, events would draw the hobbits toward the dark, while Sauron moved toward them. If Sauron met a hobbit, that player would be eliminated from the game and all his resources would be lost. Even worse, if the hobbit who possessed the One Ring was caught by Sauron, the game would end in defeat for all players. Although players could sacrifice time and resources to move back toward the light, Sauron would never retreat. So over the course of the game the players would gradually slip toward the dark, creating a sense of claustrophobia and impending doom-just as in the book.

Tolkien's hobbits were rarely in control of their situation. To reflect this, I introduced a general tile deck with a series of events that affected the players directly, creating a significant time pressure in the individual adventure scenarios. The event deck would simply trigger the next event, but the events themselves would be different in each scenario, reflecting the specific flavor of the episode. Although the players would know which events could happen in each scenario, they would not know how soon they would occur.

The interplay of all of these game systems would create many threats, operating differently each time the game was played, and creating opportunities for discussion and planning. Many tactical choices would present themselves and hopefully lead to a rich interaction between the players. The players, bringing different personalities and playing styles to the table, would have to pull together and truly collaborate. This would create a similar feel to the book-the game would not just re-tell Tolkien's plot, but more importantly it would make the players feel the emotional circumstances of the story.

Playtesting

My primary design technique is to create a game first in my mind and play it there over and over again. This can go on for many weeks. When I feel the need for practical playing experience, I finally build the first prototype and play it with my playtest groups. The decision to enter the prototype stage is critical. Moving too early without a clear concept wastes a lot of time, as it is much simpler to change things in one's mind than in a physical prototype. Moving too late may not reveal design weaknesses early enough and may require a complete redesign.

Once the initial concept is properly elaborated, playtesting becomes the core activity of game development. The fun and excitement of playing cannot be calculated in an abstract fashion: it must be experienced. I prepare each of my playtest sessions in great detail-I plan the exact issues I want to monitor and test. During play, I record relevant data about the game flow. Afterwards, I analyze the results and then make necessary or exploratory changes. This becomes the preparation for the next playtest session, during which I can find out how the changes will affect the game. The revolving process usually continues over many months, sometimes years. With experienced playtesters, we spend much time after each test discussing how it went-what worked and what didn't. Often we make changes on the spot and play again.

The first stage in prototyping the Lord of the Rings Board Game was to prepare just one scenario and to see how the basic system played. It was somewhat natural to choose the intended first scenario, the departure from Bag End and the journey to Bree. The first test usually brings many surprises. It is a reality check in which my mental picture of the game is compared to what happens with real people. The first prototype was soon extended by the next two scenarios, bringing us up to Rivendell.

Initially I anticipated the game would cover eight or ten scenarios, but this was a major miscalculation. Very soon it became apparent that the game was becoming too long; by the end of the first hour, instead of climbing Mount Doom we were only just reaching Rivendell. I realized that I had to focus on the core episodes of Tolkien's story, and as a consequence none of the first three scenarios were realized in the Base Game (though I was later to resurrect the journey to Bree in the first expansion).

I selected four main episodes from the story: Moria, Helm's Deep, Shelob's Lair, and Mount Doom, and created corresponding scenario boards. These scenarios were then linked on the summary board with small episodes in Rivendell and Lothlorien. I played and played the game with my playtest groups over the better part of a year—typically three or four playtest sessions each week with changes between each session. In addition, I gave Dave Farquhar a test copy to use with other testers and generate even more playtest results. Many details were analyzed for each board, including the positions of the hobbits and Sauron on the corruption line, cards and shields held by each player, tiles drawn, and number of turns played.

One of the vital tenets of good playtesting is comprehensively to explore every possible strategy and style of play. A frequent error committed by inexperienced designers is to develop a game for just one test group. Of course, to be successful a game must appeal to many different types of players. It must be robust and exciting on many levels, for casual players as well as for experienced gamers. My basic approach in the Lord of the Rings Board Game was to offer the players plentiful but nevertheless limited resources.

Beginners usually spend these resources freely, proceeding optimistically through the game until the resources become scarce and they succumb to Sauron. With more experience, players realize that spending resources early in the game will have serious consequences later on. Players foresee future threats and pitfalls, and the discussions focus much more on strategy and risk. The more the game proceeds, the more apprehensive you get and the greater the need for the players to strategically cooperate. Like the book, the game offers a journey of personal growth. In the game, you have the advantage of being able to play over and over again to do better each time.

More Changes

I like my game designs to begin with elaborate concepts and too many features, and then later streamline the game play, only retaining the best parts of the design. I find this process easier than trying to bolt on additional elements later, and overall it has led me to more satisfying game designs.

Apart from identifying the most interesting features and the most intuitive rules, an important focus of the continual playing and replaying was to balance the game. Each game should play out differently, but all games should present roughly the same degree of difficulty. Luck should not make a game too easy, nor too difficult. Each of the adventure boards required balancing the flow of events needed to provide an escalating challenge. If events occurred too early the players would be

drained of resources and find themselves unable to go on. Key events encouraged the party to move along different tracks, giving them important choices about how to proceed. The game also had to be balanced for the varying numbers of players. Otherwise, it could become substantially easier the more players took part because they had more resources among them. Or it might become tougher with more players, as each character had to be looked after.

Two further thematic challenges arose as testing progressed. First, I wanted to bring Gandalf more fully into the game; and second, I wanted to give the shield tokens a purpose other than merely to measure victory points. Often I find it harder to solve a single design problem than to address two at the same time. A single problem allows many possible solutions and – being a perfectionist – it is difficult for me to identify the single “best” solution. When looking at two problems at once, a common solution often appears more readily. In this case I introduced a Gandalf deck containing powerful cards that the players could buy using the shields.

This also illustrates another important game design principle. Solving a specific design issue should not just address the issue in isolation but should ideally contribute to the overall game play. This differentiates a game fix from a game feature, and of course, games should never use fixes. The Gandalf cards are a nice game feature, because they allow the players more tactical choices and help in balancing the game. Players may decide to keep their shields to achieve a higher score, or “invest” them to gain more powerful resources or overcome an obstacle. And of course, different players may prefer different approaches and have to arrive at a consensus.

I had originally conceived the game for three to five players, but as I monitored the results I wondered whether it would play well with just two. I often initially aim for two to four, or three to five players to satisfy the market requirements. When I have a stable design, I then explore whether I can extend the player numbers through minor design changes. Initial test results with the game confirmed that the two-player version was playable, but it was too easy to win. In response, I decided to reduce the number of resource cards given to the two players in Rivendell and Lothlorien.

One side effect of all this testing was that the game was being optimized for experienced players, so new players were finding it too difficult. In setting the final variables, I took this into account. Never forget your target audience! For confidentiality reasons, I normally keep testing within my own groups, but this game was so unusual that I needed to confirm once more how the general public would react to it. So we set up separate test sessions, some with game players and some with non-players. Sometimes the non-player groups did better than the game players! So we knew that we had what we wanted.

The Road Goes Ever On

After eighteen months, the design was finished and delivered to the publisher. But the design process continued. Nine months later, in October 2000, the game was released into the market. One year later, in October 2001, came the first expansion, *Friends & Foes*, with two new scenario boards and an entirely new game element of 30 foes. Exactly one year later, the second expansion, called *Sauron*, let a player take the role of Sauron and actively lead the dark forces against the hobbits. Today, the Lord of the Rings Board Game is available worldwide in 17 languages, with sales of over one million copies.

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