

Role Fulfillment

feelings × players

Goal of performing your role in the group well; it is frustrating if the group still loses.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Roles must be distinct, matter for the group's success, and be performable in ways players can see and recognise. Team results should depend on each role's contribution.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Roles that exist only as labels, with all players doing the same things and contributing the same way.

KNOBS how different the roles are; how much the group result depends on each; how visible each player's contribution is

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Minimalized Social Weight

feelings × players

The game barely gets in the way of people talking to each other during play.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must demand little attention and have natural pauses, with little bookkeeping and no long waits. Players should be able to stop and resume freely.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game described as casual or social that still demands constant attention or long upkeep, so conversation suffers.

KNOBS how much attention the game demands; how easy it is to interrupt; how much upkeep it needs

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Guilting

feelings × players

The game makes the player act by making them feel pangs of conscience.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need real connections with other players (teams, guilds, reciprocity) and a situation where their action or inaction visibly hurts or helps someone. Social dilemmas or requests for help create it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pop-up message saying 'your friends need you' with no real person affected and no connection, so nobody feels anything.

KNOBS strength of social bonds; how visible others' needs or losses are; reciprocity rules

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Own Agenda

feelings × players

Algorithm-controlled characters appear to pursue goals of their own.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Agents need actions towards their own goals, plus visible emotional reactions to progress, success and failure, supported by memory and context-sensitive responses. The impression must survive repeat play without obvious scripted patterns.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character with a stated goal who behaves the same whatever happens and never shows any reaction to progress or setbacks.

KNOBS how many agents have goals; how rich their emotional expression and memory are; how varied their reactions are

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Togetherness

feelings × players

The feeling that you are playing with others, not alone.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must share a space or a goal over time and have chances for shared experience, such as joint success, shared failure, or moments to socialise. Group symbols and a sense of team identity help.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A team label or a multiplayer lobby where players act separately and never rely on or notice each other.

KNOBS team size and stability; how much players depend on each other; room for social downtime

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Team Accomplishments

feelings × players

The satisfaction of achieving something together with a group.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The task must truly need several players' contributions and be hard enough that success feels earned. Credit for the result must feel shared rather than attributed to one star.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A group completes the goal, but one player could have done it alone, so nobody feels it was joint.

KNOBS how much each task depends on all members; difficulty; how success is shown to the group

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Actor Detachment

feelings × players

The player does not attribute other people's in-game behavior to their real personality.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Gameplay should depend on in-game skill rather than outside traits, with anonymity or minimal personal information and a welcoming theme and presentation. Players must have little reason or means to judge each other by who they are.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Usernames are hidden but voice chat or profiles still reveal identity, or the game rewards real-world traits, so people are still judged outside the game.

KNOBS how much player identity is revealed; whether AI or anonymous play is used; how much outside skill matters

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Mutual FUBAR Enjoyment

feelings × players

Enjoyment from handling chaos and difficult situations together.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs chaotic, overwhelming situations that a group faces jointly, with enough pressure that coordination matters yet manageable enough to leave a sense of getting through. Shared goals or teams help.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Chaos where each player is overwhelmed alone, or chaos so total that success is impossible and play is just frustrating.

KNOBS how chaotic and pressured the challenges are; how much players depend on each other

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Sense of Self

feelings × players

A computer-controlled character reacts fittingly to events and to its own state.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The agent must react consistently to threats and to its own state, and remember earlier events. A single obvious failure breaks the impression.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character that has health and a name but ignores danger or forgets what just happened to it.

KNOBS how many situations it reacts to; how long it remembers; how consistent reactions are

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Freedom of Choice

feelings × procedures

The player has several actions available, and each feels meaningful.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Provide options with visibly different and relevant effects, and let players see or believe their choices matter. Avoid a dominant best option.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several options exist, but one is clearly best or all give the same result, so choosing changes nothing.

KNOBS number of meaningful options; how different their outcomes are; how visible the effects are

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Gameplay Mastery

feelings × procedures

The ability to perform actions and reach goals in the game with confidence.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Skill must matter: outcomes depend on player choices and execution more than luck, with consistent rules, readable feedback and challenge that is reachable but keeps pushing. There must be room to improve over repeated play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game where results are mostly random or one dominant strategy wins, so 'getting better' is not real, or levelling up that does the work for the player.

KNOBS balance of skill vs luck; difficulty and learning curve; depth and complexity of the rules

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Casual Gameplay

feelings × procedures

The game is easy to start, pause, and finish without spoiling the experience for oneself or others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Short or pausable sessions, a gentle learning curve, low stress and little punishment or dependence on other players' behaviour.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game is marketed as casual, but it demands long sessions, has harsh failure or punishes quitting midway.

KNOBS session length; ease of pausing; difficulty ramp; amount of penalty and time pressure

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Player Agency

feelings × procedures

The player can change the course of the game through their actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Choices must have visible, lasting consequences, and several options must be viable rather than one obvious best. The game must respond clearly to what the player did.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game offers many buttons and options, but the result is the same whatever the player picks, or the game plays itself.

KNOBS number and meaningfulness of choices; how strongly and visibly actions change the state

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Lull Periods

feelings × procedures

Stretches of the game when players do not need to rush their actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have stretches with no urgent threats, such as gaps between waves, and not force fast actions. Players need to know it is safe for the break to feel relaxing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A break is announced but threats keep coming or timers keep running, so no relaxation occurs.

KNOBS length of breaks; how often they come; whether threats are fully absent

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Gamer Mode

feelings × procedures

The player sees the game as a system of rules and looks for winning tricks in it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs to make effort feel worthwhile and the player absorbed, with clear goals and feedback so they willingly commit and treat play as serious. The page is a stub, so this is inferred from the patterns it lists.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Labelling a mode or menu option 'gamer' or 'hardcore' without any change in challenge, stakes or engagement.

KNOBS how much effort the game demands and how clearly that effort is rewarded

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Determinable Chance to Succeed

feelings × rules

The game helps estimate how likely a planned action is to succeed or fail.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must have consequences players can predict, and the game must give enough information or experience to let them estimate the odds. The estimate can be a little wrong but must be usable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Odds are shown as a number that has no link to what really happens, so players can't judge anything from it.

KNOBS how much information on odds is shown; how much hidden randomness there is

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Framed Freedom

feelings × rules

Choice feels rich but does not overwhelm with too many options or the need to prioritize.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Offer a small, clearly presented set of actions with limited resources, and open goals without forcing or timing them. Players must feel agency, not obligation or overload.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A menu lists lots of options, but a timer or forced objective pushes one path, so the freedom is only felt on the surface.

KNOBS number of distinct action types; how strongly goals and time pressure are imposed

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Tension

feelings × conflict

Worry about the outcome when you cannot fully control it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must care about the result and not control it fully, with real stakes for losing. Uncertainty has to be real and not too easy to see through.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Dramatic music and a countdown, but failure costs nothing and the outcome is certain.

KNOBS size of stakes; amount of randomness or hidden information; closeness of outcomes

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Challenging Gameplay

feelings × conflict

The player feels the game is testing their skills to the limit.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The difficulty must match the player's skill, failure must be possible but recoverable, and success must be seen as the player's own doing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies simply have inflated numbers, or the game is difficult through opaque rules or luck, so players feel cheated rather than challenged.

KNOBS enemy strength; margin for error; difficulty levels or adaptive difficulty; pace of the ramp

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Exaggerated Perception of Influence

feelings × conflict

The player feels they affect the outcome, whether or not they really do.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give players many visible options and strong-feeling feedback for their actions, such as buffs, tools and abilities, while keeping the real outcome only loosely tied to them. It has to stay hidden: if players figure out the trick, or fully master the game, the feeling collapses.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A flashy upgrade or button that plainly does nothing, which players spot quickly and then feel cheated rather than powerful.

KNOBS how strong and how numerous the visible player controls are, compared with their real effect on the outcome

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Luck

feelings × conflict

The feeling that random events are not fully random and tend to work out in the player's favor.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Random outcomes with visible uncertainty, plus ways for players to feel they may influence them, such as choosing when to roll or risking something. The outcome reveal needs to be noticeable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Random results occur but are hidden or happen without the player's involvement, so they never feel lucky.

KNOBS how random the outcomes are; how visible the roll is; how much the player can bet or choose

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Solution Uncertainty

feelings × conflict

The player does not know whether a solution to the task exists, which creates uncertainty.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The challenge must be complex or information-poor enough that players cannot tell the answer at once, and the answer must not be easily learned from earlier plays. Players must believe a solution may exist.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A puzzle with an obvious answer or one that can be brute-forced by trying every option, or a puzzle whose solution is copied from a guide.

KNOBS amount of hidden information; size of the option space; how much feedback hints at the answer

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FUBAR Enjoyment

feelings × conflict

Enjoyment when things are going badly but the player keeps fighting.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Real-time pressure, more demands than the player can comfortably handle, and difficulty rising with skill, while keeping success still possible. Failure must seem close but not certain.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The screen is busy with enemies and effects, but the game is easy or pausable, so there is no pressure to cope.

KNOBS density and simultaneity of threats; difficulty ramp rate; time pressure

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Time Pressure

feelings × conflict

The game creates a feeling that you must act and reach goals quickly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A real deadline or a race against others, committed goals, and a time budget that is tight for the players' skill level. Players must be able to sense the clock through indicators or alarms.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A visible timer that is so loose, or so lightly penalised, that nobody feels hurried or changes how they act.

KNOBS time budget relative to task difficulty; severity of failure; how visible the clock is

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Ubiquitous Gameplay

feelings × boundaries

You can play almost any time and in most places with little preparation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must need little setup or equipment, work without a fixed place or simultaneous players (for example asynchronous play), and allow short interruptible sessions.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A mobile app that needs a constant connection, a long session or a quiet setting, so it still can't be played at most times and places.

KNOBS required equipment and connection; whether play is asynchronous; session length

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Alternate Reality Gameplay

feelings × boundaries

The boundary is blurred, so it is unclear whether events belong to the game or to real life.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Game information must be hidden within ordinary media and activities, with several channels and imperfect information, plus puppetmasters who react to players. Players need to be able to mistake it for non-game content.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game is marketed as 'alternate reality' but is clearly labeled and runs in one app, so nobody is ever unsure.

KNOBS how well game content is disguised; number of media used; how much staff react live

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Replayability

feelings × outcome

How many new challenges, lessons, and experiences the game offers when played again.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each playthrough needs different challenges or room to improve, through randomness, many routes, or goals that differ. Outcomes must stay uncertain and mastery must not run out quickly.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Randomness that changes only surface details, so every run plays out as the same solved sequence.

KNOBS amount of variation between plays (randomness, content size); depth of mastery available

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Value of Effort

feelings × outcome

The feeling that the effort put into the game is worth something.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need real agency, visible feedback that links their actions to outcomes, and some permanence of results, such as persistent worlds, self-set goals or measurable improvement. Effort that gets overwritten or ignored kills it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Reward screens and numbers pop up regardless of what the player did, so effort and outcome are unrelated.

KNOBS how permanent results are; clarity of feedback on actions; proportion of outcome that depends on player choices

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Higher-Level Closures as Gameplay Progresses

feelings × outcome

As the game goes on, the stages that get completed become more and more significant.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Later achievements must be bigger in stakes, rarity, and effect than earlier ones, supported by gating, rising difficulty, or goal hierarchies, and checked in playtests. Late moments need to feel meaningfully more important, not just harder.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Later goals are just the same task with bigger numbers, so finishing them feels no more significant than the first one.

KNOBS how much importance or reward grows per stage; spacing and gating of milestones

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Hovering Closures

feelings × outcome

An upcoming event that the player can clearly see in advance.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to see a specific upcoming outcome and have reason to care, and it needs time to loom (a timer, a delay, a visible progress). The outcome must remain uncertain or influenceable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An outcome shown in the interface that is unavoidable, trivial, or too hidden to notice, so nobody feels any suspense.

KNOBS how visible the pending outcome is; how long the delay is; how much stands to be gained or lost

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Spectacular Failure Enjoyment

feelings × outcome

Enjoyment from losing or making a mistake in a loud and dramatic way.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Failure must be dramatic, visible and slow enough to watch, and the game must be hard enough for mistakes to snowball. Players must be willing to take the stakes lightly.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A plain game over screen or quiet elimination, or failure that is punishing and silent so nobody laughs or retells it.

KNOBS difficulty level; how much mistakes cascade; how visible failures are; how fast failure unfolds

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Ragequitting

feelings × outcome

A player abandons the session out of anger, without thinking how it affects others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It emerges when frustration rises beyond tolerance, often from repeated failure, unfair treatment or betrayal. Designers mainly limit it through fairness, mitigation of its effects and easy exits.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A quit penalty exists, but players leave calmly and not out of anger, so it is plain quitting.

KNOBS frustration level and difficulty; quit penalties; how well the game absorbs a departure

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Thematic Consistency

feelings × drama

Characters, items, and their behavior fit together with the theme of the world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Characters, objects, rules and behavior must all follow the same set of expectations, and features that break the theme must be avoided or explained. Rules should plausibly follow from the fiction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The art matches a theme, but rules and behavior contradict it, so the setting is only decoration.

KNOBS how strictly rules follow the fiction; level of detail in setting; how many off-theme features are allowed

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Diegetic Consistency

feelings × drama

Nothing appears on screen that doesn't exist in the game world itself.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Everything shown must belong to the game world, so interface elements, scores and hints must be kept out or disguised as part of it. Repeated actions such as retries must also make sense in the world.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A world that looks real but shows floating score counters and tooltips all over the screen.

KNOBS how much non-world interface is shown; how it is styled

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Game Instance Stories

feelings × drama

Stories based on the events of one particular game that was played.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Games need chances for remarkable, varied events, and ways to record or share them, such as replays. Exceptional or failure moments help.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A replay or save feature exists, but games unfold the same each time, so nothing worth telling comes out.

KNOBS variance of events; ability to record and share; frequency of dramatic moments

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Easter Eggs

feelings × drama

Hidden surprises unrelated to the game's story and world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The secret must be hidden well enough to feel like a discovery but findable through exploration or hints, and it must be fun or funny when found. Players also need a reason to suspect secrets exist.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A hidden thing that is trivially visible, or so obscure and dull that nobody finds it or cares when they do.

KNOBS how many there are; how hidden they are; how strongly clues point to them

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Environmental Storytelling

feelings × drama

The story is revealed as the player walks around and explores a place.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The world must hold readable traces of past events in props, items and layout, placed where players pass, and players need freedom and a reason to look and interpret.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Decor that is only decor, or story info tucked in a place nobody sees and tells them nothing about what happened.

KNOBS density and placement of story clues; how obvious they are; how much is optional



Emotional Attachment

feelings × drama

Game characters show noticeable feelings toward phenomena and creatures of the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Characters need reactions that fit events and relationships and visible consequences of what happens to them, so players believe they care.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character who says it is sad or fond in a line of text but acts exactly the same afterwards.

KNOBS how many events characters react to; strength and visibility of reactions; how long memory of events lasts



Big Dumb Objects

feelings × drama

Huge man-made objects hinting at powerful creators.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The object must be seen from far away and feel vastly larger than the player, with hints about its makers. It should be a notable landmark players move toward or can't reach.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A big model is in the background but is not noticeable, has no hints of origin, and is just scenery.

KNOBS size and visibility; place in the world; how much is hinted about its makers; reachable or not



Memory of Important Events

feelings × drama

Game characters remember important past events and show that they do.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The design needs a way to detect and record significant events, and then characters must refer to them later in speech or behavior at fitting moments. The recall has to be specific to what the player did.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Characters say a generic scripted line that sounds like remembering but is identical whatever the player did.

KNOBS how many event types are tracked; how long they are kept; how visibly characters react



Changes in Perception of Real World Phenomena due to Gameplay

feelings × drama

After playing, a person understands real-life phenomena differently.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game system must model the real phenomenon faithfully, or tie game state to the real world (location, real activity), and players must be willing to draw the connection.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game has a real-world theme painted on top, but the rules don't model it, so players learn nothing new about it.

KNOBS how closely the model matches reality; how strongly game state is tied to real-life data or places



Critical Gameplay Design

feelings × drama

Game rules are built to make the player think and doubt something.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game's own rules and dynamics must model something in the real world so that players feel its structure and see it differently. The critique must come from play, not from text or the story.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The theme or story talks about a real issue, but the rules play like an ordinary game and the issue is not felt.

KNOBS how closely the rules mirror the real phenomenon; how strong the feedback loops and social dilemmas are



Clickability

feelings × interface

A responsive reaction to clicking that is pleasing in itself.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Instant, noticeable audio-visual feedback for every click, and a chance to repeat actions in a rhythm.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Things are clickable, but the response is delayed or flat, so clicking feels like filling in a form.

KNOBS feedback speed and strength; how often one can repeat; effects on combos and timing



Cooperation

dynamics × players

Players act together, sharing information and resources toward a common goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need shared goals or rewards, and tasks that really are easier or only possible together. They also need to be able to communicate and swap information or resources.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are put on a team and share a score, but each can win alone without caring what the others do.

KNOBS how shared the goals and rewards are; how often joint actions are required; communication limits



Agents

dynamics × players

Game creatures and objects that seem to have goals of their own.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Elements need visible abilities and actions that look purposeful and respond to circumstances, not fixed predictable motions. Players need to see them change the world in ways that suggest an aim.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game element wears a creature's face but moves on a fixed track, and players quickly see it as an obstacle, not an agent.

KNOBS how adaptive and varied their actions are; how visible their goals are



Social Roles

dynamics × players

Roles that people receive or take toward one another because of the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be several players with different abilities or tasks, a way to communicate, and enough gameplay differences that people fall into distinct positions. Anonymity and cut communication weaken it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Named roles listed in the game that players never actually take on, because everyone does the same things and has the same standing.

KNOBS how different player abilities are; how strong group structures are; how much players can communicate

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Betrayal

dynamics × players

A character breaks an explicit or unspoken agreement with another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must depend on each other through promises or alliances, with imperfect information and a real gain from betraying. Anonymous actions or traitor roles intensify it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game has a 'traitor' label or alliance rules, but betraying brings no benefit or is impossible, so everyone just cooperates.

KNOBS gain from betraying versus cooperating; how hidden actions are; use of traitor roles

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Player Unpredictability

dynamics × players

While it is unknown how others will act, the game's course cannot be foreseen exactly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be several real opponents with meaningful choices, and information that is hidden or imperfect so their moves cannot be easily deduced. No single dominant strategy should exist.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Opponents are present but all follow the same obvious best line, so their moves are easy to predict.

KNOBS number of opponents; how much information is hidden; how many viable strategies exist

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Social Skills

dynamics × players

Success in the game depends on the players' ability to communicate and persuade.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Outcomes must depend on how players deal with each other, through bluffing, trading, negotiation or alliances, and the interaction must not be fully mediated away by rules.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with a negotiation phase where the best move is always the same calculated trade, so charm or bluffing never changes anything.

KNOBS how many social actions affect outcomes; how open communication is; how much information is hidden

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Delayed Reciprocity

dynamics × players

You help others now, expecting the favor to be returned later.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to help one another at a cost to themselves, without a guaranteed immediate payback, and meet again later so that returning is possible. Trust and the chance of betrayal must be real.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A gift button that gives help to anyone for free, so there is no cost, no trust and nothing to repay.

KNOBS cost of helping; how likely and how soon players meet again; whether repayment is enforced

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Beat the Leader

dynamics × players

Several players team up against whoever is leading the session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to see who is ahead and must have ways to hurt or hinder that player together. Hidden scores kill the effect; open scores and interference actions support it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The leader is shown on a scoreboard, but players have no way to affect each other, so nobody can target them.

KNOBS visibility of scores; how much players can interfere with each other; hidden or open goals

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Functional Roles

dynamics × players

Different kinds of actions are assigned to different participants.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give entities different abilities and make tasks too many for one to cover, so cooperation and division of labor is necessary. Limited gear slots or exclusive abilities force specialization.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Class names exist, but everyone can do everything equally well, so the roles are just labels.

KNOBS how different abilities are between roles; how much one entity can cover alone; number of slots

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Further Player Improvement Potential

dynamics × players

The player can still improve their own skills in this game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Outcomes must depend on skill with room above average play, plus feedback that shows how well players did. Changing rules or rising challenge keeps the headroom open.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game claims depth, but outcomes are mostly luck or skill caps quickly, so practice yields nothing.

KNOBS skill ceiling; amount of performance feedback; how outcome depends on skill versus luck

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Symbiotic Player Relations

dynamics × players

One player's success or failure affects the other player in the same way.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players' outcomes must be genuinely linked (shared goals, shared enemies, or helpful actions that benefit others), so helping is in their own interest. Helping must also be possible through actual actions.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are put on a 'team' by name, but their results are independent and nothing one does changes another's outcome.

KNOBS how much one player's results spread to others; shared versus individual rewards; availability of helping actions

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Unsynchronized Game Sessions

dynamics × players

The starts and ends of different players' game sessions do not line up in time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must let people join, leave, quit or be eliminated at different moments, and the server or facilitator must keep play going for those who remain. Without free entry and exit, everyone ends up starting and finishing together.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A lobby with a join button that in practice always waits for a full group and ends for everyone at once, so sessions stay aligned.

KNOBS how freely players may join or leave mid-game; how elimination and surrender are handled

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Early Leaving Players

dynamics × players

Players abandon the session before the end, though the game didn't force them to.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Leaving becomes likely when games run long, feel lost or depend heavily on others; the design must decide how the game copes when someone departs.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rule saying what happens when someone leaves, in a game short or engaging enough that nobody ever does.

KNOBS game length; how hopeless a losing position feels; what the game does with a departed player's position

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First Player Advantages

dynamics × players

The benefit of taking actions before everyone else.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs turn-based play where moving first matters and starting positions are equal. The size of the edge depends on how much a single move can change the game, and balancing needs its own fix such as rotating order.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are labelled first, but moving first changes nothing, so no advantage exists.

KNOBS how much one early move is worth; whether compensation (turn rotation, bonuses for later players) is added

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Team Balance

dynamics × players

Competing teams have about equal chances of success and victory.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Team makeup and rules must offset advantages, with some correction for teams that fall behind. Features that snowball or cause lopsided numbers must be controlled.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Teams have equal member counts, but skill spread, roles, or snowballing make one side win most of the time.

KNOBS team composition rules; handicap strength; strength of catch-up effects

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Non-Diegetic Communication

dynamics × players

Players talk to each other as real people, not as characters of the world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need channels and reasons to talk outside the fiction, such as shared information, social settings or non-diegetic UI. Designers who want less of it must give diegetic substitutes or remove the triggers.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Chat that exists but nobody uses to talk about anything outside the story, or a chat that is framed as in-world speech while players still use it for out-of-game coordination.

KNOBS how much out-of-fiction communication is allowed or provided with channels; how much non-diegetic information the game exposes

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Asymmetric Gameplay

dynamics × players

Players' game experiences are built differently, or do not repeat earlier sessions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must have really different actions or goals, and those differences must matter to how they decide and play. The differences need enough balance that no side is plainly better, and variety should not run out in one session.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players get different names, pictures or flavour text, but the same actions and goals, so everyone plays the same game.

KNOBS how many aspects differ (abilities, goals, information, roles, start); how far apart they are

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Backseat Gamers

dynamics × players

Non-playing people influence the session with advice and opinions that players hear.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Spectators must be able to see the game and talk to players, and players must care about their input. Drop-in play lets people move between watching and playing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN There is a spectator mode, but spectators cannot communicate or players ignore them, so no one is influenced.

KNOBS spectator visibility; communication allowed; drop-in/drop-out possibility

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Reflective Communication

dynamics × players

Players discuss their actions with each other and think about the game together.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must depend on each other and have reasons to share knowledge, take each other's view and agree on methods. The game should give space and time for discussion and reward working it out together.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A chat channel or team mode exists, but no one has to talk to succeed, so nobody discusses or reflects.

KNOBS how much team success depends on shared understanding; time and channels available for discussion

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Kingmaker

dynamics × players

A player cannot win themselves but decides which of the others wins.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It arises when positions are clear and a hopeless player still has influence over others, as with early elimination or a predictable winner. A designer avoids it by keeping outcomes uncertain, hiding information, or giving losing players reasons to keep playing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A player is called a kingmaker but their choice has no real effect on who wins, so nothing happens.

KNOBS how early outcomes become clear; how much hidden information there is; how much a trailing player can still affect others

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Perspective Taking

dynamics × players

The player tries to see events through another player's or fictional character's eyes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs roles or characters that players must understand to act well, such as role-playing or a game master voicing characters. Rewarding choices that fit another's view makes it more likely.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A role-play label or character sheet that players never need to consider when deciding, so everyone just acts as themselves.

KNOBS how much the game rewards acting from another's view; how detailed the characters or roles are

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Races

dynamics × objectives

Goal of finishing under pressure, often ahead of others or before a deadline.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need a shared target with limited time or competitors, and progress should be visible. Excluding goals and a clear end condition create the pressure.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A finish line or score target exists, but with no rival or time pressure players just proceed at leisure.

KNOBS time limit; number of rivals; target distance; visibility of others' progress

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Meta Games

dynamics × objectives

Games built on the results and consequences of other games.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Results must carry over and be comparable between games, through scores, rankings or tournament structure. Players need a reason to care about this layer.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A leaderboard or achievement list that is displayed but changes no decisions and which nobody pursues or compares.

KNOBS what carries between games; how results are compared or rewarded

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Game World Exploration

dynamics × objectives

Goal: learn how the game world is laid out or find a needed place or item in it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must not see the whole world at once, and they must have real choices about where to go. Something worth finding, such as secrets, resources or shortcuts, must be spread across the unknown areas.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A big map where everything is already shown or marked, or where the path is a single corridor, so 'exploring' is just walking.

KNOBS how much of the world is hidden; how much is hidden and where rewards are placed; how much help (maps, clues) is given

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Stealth

dynamics × objectives

A goal to move and act so that you are not detected.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Enemies or opponents must detect and punish being seen, and the player must have cover, routes and the time to move carefully. Waiting or slow movement must be a real option.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A stealth label on a game where enemies barely notice you or where running through everything works just as well, so hiding is pointless.

KNOBS enemy sight range and awareness; penalty for detection; amount of cover; noise from movement

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Reconnaissance

dynamics × objectives

Goal of going around areas of the world and noticing what has changed in them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must not know where things are and must be able to find out by spending time or effort. The information must change, so old knowledge goes stale and checking again is worth it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A scouting action exists, but everything is already visible or never changes, so nobody bothers to use it.

KNOBS how much of the world is hidden; how fast information goes stale; cost and range of observing

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Pottering

dynamics × objectives

Fiddling with game resources for the sake of the activity, not for a goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need open-ended activities with no pressure, such as safe spaces, no hard deadlines, sorting or building tools, and freedom to set their own goals. Anything that threatens or interferes with their work must be limited.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A sandbox or farm exists, but constant threats, timers or mandatory objectives push players along, so nobody tinkers aimlessly.

KNOBS amount of pressure and threat; how many self-directed activities are offered; how safe the space is

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Speedruns

dynamics × objectives

A goal to finish the game or part of it as fast as possible.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a real-time structure, a trustworthy time measure and a way to compare or share results, ideally with replays. Routes should be learnable and improvable so there is room to get faster.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A built-in timer shown on screen that nobody tracks or compares, with no record, so there is no reason to try again faster.

KNOBS time limit or par times; whether records are stored and shared; how many shortcuts exist

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Player-Defined Goals

dynamics × objectives

Goal where players themselves create or customize goals and subgoals in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs open systems, readable information such as scores and state, and room for varied approaches. Players must feel free to set aims beyond the official ones.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game has a 'custom goal' menu that nobody uses, because the game offers no way to track or measure progress toward it.

KNOBS how open the sandbox is; how visible scores and progress are; whether goals can be formally set up

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Goal-Driven Personal Development

dynamics × objectives

Goal: after finishing earlier goals, the character sets new ones for themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Goals must be measurable from game state and link into chains, so finishing one opens the next, with a way for the agent to pick from them. For computer agents this needs detailed encoded conditions and benefits.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character whose 'new goals' are scripted text or a changed title, while behaviour and choices stay the same.

KNOBS how many chained goals; how much choice among next goals; how closely goals depend on past outcomes

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Construction/Scoring Phase Shift

dynamics × objectives

Players stop growing stronger and begin collecting victory points.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Building up an engine must pay off, but score-taking must eventually be worth more than more building. Players need to be able to judge when to switch, and the game must end in a way that makes the switch matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN There are build actions and scoring actions, but scoring is best from the start or building is always best, so no switch is ever needed.

KNOBS how quickly building pays back; scoring value; game length or end trigger

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Playing to Lose

dynamics × objectives

The player deliberately loses with their character because it is more interesting.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Failure must be allowed to be interesting, and players need room to roleplay and to shape their characters' fate. Rules should not wipe out a character too early, and the group should value dramatic loss.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players say they will lose on purpose, but they still try to win, or losing simply ends the game with no story value.

KNOBS how harsh the penalty for losing is; how much roleplay freedom players have; protection against early removal

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Extermination

dynamics × objectives

A stage of play where the main task is to destroy, most often other players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Elimination goals and combat must be available, with the strongest combat units or tools held back until late. Games must be long enough to contain distinct phases, and elimination must really be possible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Attacking is allowed from turn one and nobody can be eliminated, so no distinct late stage of destruction ever forms.

KNOBS when strong combat units unlock; whether and how players can be eliminated

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Stimulated Planning

dynamics × procedures

The game's design pushes players to think through their actions ahead of time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Results of actions must be predictable enough for plans to be trusted, and there must be goals that need several steps. The option space should be large enough to need planning but not so large that it is hopeless.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that lets you plan but where randomness or a single obvious move makes any plan pointless.

KNOBS predictability of outcomes; number of steps to goals; number of options per turn

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Varied Gameplay

dynamics × procedures

Gameplay changes within one game or from game to game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Choices have to lead to meaningfully different situations, supported by changing rules, random elements or generated worlds, and by feedback that discourages repeating one approach. Differences must affect how play develops, not just surface details.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Many options or levels that all play the same, so players settle into one routine within minutes.

KNOBS amount of randomness; number of distinct viable goals or strategies; how often rules or content change

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Tactical Planning

dynamics × procedures

Planning based on what is known about the current state of the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need several meaningful options whose value depends on the current situation, plus enough time and information to weigh them. Costs or trade-offs must make the choice matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN One option is always clearly best, or there is too little time or information to compare, so choosing is just habit.

KNOBS number of options; how much outcomes depend on local state; time to decide; amount of hidden information

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Dexterity-Based Actions

dynamics × procedures

Success depends on hand and eye skill rather than calculation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must run in real time with quick, low-lag feedback, and outcomes must depend on how precisely the player acts. The challenge should fit what players can learn to do.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Actions that look like they need aiming or timing, but an assist makes them succeed whatever the player does.

KNOBS required speed and precision; size of the target or timing window; lag

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Strategic Planning

dynamics × procedures

Planning based only on knowing the rules and what other players can do.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs learnable general structures and real strategic choices, plus replays so players can try and refine strategies. Outcomes should be predictable enough to reward a plan.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several listed strategies that all lead to the same result, so choosing a plan changes nothing.

KNOBS number of viable strategies; predictability of results; how much replay is encouraged

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Downtime

dynamics × procedures

Time when a player has to wait during a game session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It comes from rules that block actions, such as turn order, penalties or slow players. It stays bearable when there is something to watch or plan.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pause screen of a second or two that nobody notices as waiting.

KNOBS length of enforced waits; how often they occur; what players can do during them

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Player-Planned Development

dynamics × procedures

The player can plan in advance how the game's stats and objects will develop.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be several development paths with different long-term payoffs, and enough time and information for players to plan. The consequences have to carry forward.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A skill tree where every path ends up with the same power, so planning changes nothing.

KNOBS number of branches; how different their payoffs are; how costly it is to change plans

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Encouraged Return Visits

dynamics × procedures

Game design that makes players want to come back to the same places and activities.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must be persistent and able to be left and re-entered, with timers, regenerating resources or growing rewards that make coming back worthwhile.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A daily login prompt or reminder with a trivial reward that players claim and ignore.

KNOBS length of timers; regeneration rate; size and growth of rewards for repeated visits

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Game World Navigation

dynamics × procedures

Finding a way from one place in the game world to another when the route is not obvious.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Need a world with several possible routes and no obvious best one, so wrong turns are possible, and a destination worth reaching. Navigation aids must not give the answer away.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A level with a single path, or a minimap and waypoint line that always shows where to go, so there is nothing to work out.

KNOBS how many routes and branches; how strong the navigation aids are (map, markers, landmarks)

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Grinding

dynamics × procedures

Repeating simple actions many times to get resources or complete a goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a need for resources or progress that can only be met by repeating a simple, low-challenge action many times, with rewards that don't advance the player too much. Players must choose or feel pushed to repeat it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A repeating task that is quick and varied enough that players don't feel repetition, or one the player never needs to do.

KNOBS amount needed; drop rates; how repetitive and easy the action is

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Player Killing

dynamics × procedures

Players are removed from active play by the deliberate actions of others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to harm each other, and the harm must be traceable to a real agent. Penalties for dying and rewards for killing have to make it a real choice.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players can technically shoot each other, but death costs nothing and the victim returns at once, so it is just noise.

KNOBS cost of dying; reward for killing; who can attack whom and where

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Memorizing

dynamics × procedures

It benefits the player to remember facts about the game or its state.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Information must be shown briefly or only once, and later decisions must depend on recalling it. It must not be easy to look up again, and there must be enough variation that memory beyond one session helps.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with facts to remember, but the interface always shows them again or they never affect any decision.

KNOBS how long information stays visible; how much has to be remembered; whether it can be looked up again

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Experimenting

dynamics × procedures

Trial actions to learn the rules and game state or to practice skills.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Failure must be cheap and actions reversible, and the game must have something worth finding out (hidden information, complex systems, enemy weaknesses) with predictable cause and effect. Heavy penalties or too much randomness make players stop trying things.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A sandbox with lots of options, but one mistake is punished harshly or results are so random that nothing can be learned.

KNOBS cost of failure and reversibility of actions; how much randomness hides cause and effect

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Save-Load Cycles

dynamics × procedures

The player saves and loads again and again until the game reaches the state they want.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs easy, fast saving and loading and challenges where a bad result can be undone by reloading. Restricting save timing or slots reduces how often it happens.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A save system that is so slow or restricted that players never use it to retry, so no cycles of save, try, and reload actually occur.

KNOBS how fast and how often saving is allowed; how many slots; ironman-style limits

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Bluffing

dynamics × procedures

A player gives false information to influence others' decisions in their own favor.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Hidden information and unpredictable players are needed, plus ways to send misleading signals and a payoff for being believed. Face-to-face play adds skill, but any communication channel works.

JUST A LABEL WHEN All information is public or actions reveal intentions, so a bluff cannot work, or a bluff costs and gains nothing.

KNOBS how much is hidden; signals available; payoff and cost of being caught

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Collecting

dynamics × procedures

The player gathers items or elements, aiming to complete a needed set.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Collectable items must be spread out so that gathering them takes effort, and the gathering must serve some goal or reward.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Items lie everywhere and are picked up automatically, with no choice or effort and no use.

KNOBS item scarcity and spread; effort per item; what collections give

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Flip-Flop Events

dynamics × procedures

The last turn of one round and the first of the next go to the same player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The turn order must change between rounds, and players need actions (like claiming first-player spot) that let them end one round and start the next. Without such player-driven control it happens only by accident.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Turn order shifts on paper, but nobody can steer it, so the back-to-back turn is a random side effect nobody plans for.

KNOBS how turn order is reassigned; how much players can influence who goes first next round

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Analysis Paralysis

dynamics × procedures

The game stalls while someone takes too long weighing the consequences of possible moves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Appears when many options have predictable consequences and a player's turn blocks others, especially with high stakes in the middle or end of a game. It arises from player behavior rather than a direct rule, so designers can only make it likelier or rarer.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game has many options on paper but one is clearly best, so nobody deliberates and no stalls occur.

KNOBS number of options per turn; predictability of results; turn time limit

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Camping

dynamics × procedures

A player stays in one spot of the world for a long time, waiting for something to appear.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Waiting must be cheap, and a spot must give a lasting edge (range, cover, a spawn or resource point). Powerful ranged tools and hard-to-reach spots help it appear, while safe zones and alternative routes limit it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A nice-looking vantage spot exists, but it is easy to flank or the target never comes there, so no one stays.

KNOBS strength and range of weapons; how defensible spots are; spawn or resource frequency; number of flanking routes

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Team Strategy Identification

dynamics × procedures

A team finds and picks a shared strategy, often based on a mix of strengths.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need complementary abilities or synergies to find, a reason to work together (common threat or goal), and room to talk. The game must not hand them one obvious best plan.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Roles are clearly labelled and the optimal team plan is spelled out, so there is nothing to discover.

KNOBS how varied and hidden synergies are; how different the roles are; communication options

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Gameplay Engines

dynamics × procedures

A structure the player builds so that it works for them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need to be able to build components that feed each other so output grows (positive feedback, combos), with several possible builds to choose from. There must be a payoff, such as a scoring phase, that makes the engine worth the investment.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Upgrades that are just flat bonuses and do not interact or compound, so there is no engine to build, only a list of purchases.

KNOBS how strongly parts reinforce each other; cost and speed of building; when and how scoring starts

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Altruistic Actions

dynamics × procedures

Actions that benefit someone else rather than the player themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Helping others must cost the helper something or carry no obvious reward, with no shared payoff that makes it simply self-interest. Players must have a reason (social or hoped reciprocity) to do it anyway.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'gift' action exists but pays the giver as much or more, so players just do it for profit.

KNOBS cost to the helper; whether payoffs are shared; whether gifts can be returned

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Expansion

dynamics × procedures

A stage where the main aim is to increase the share of the game world you control.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a world big enough to grow into, a way to own territory (occupation or building), and costs or unlocks that pace how fast growth happens. Goals that reward gaining ownership push players into it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A map with claimable spots, but claiming gives no benefit or is capped so tightly that nobody spends a phase of play on growing.

KNOBS map size and terrain; cost and unlock requirements for claiming or building

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Repetitive Gameplay

dynamics × procedures

The player repeats the same actions or choices over and over.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game's loop must offer few action types and the best choice must stay the same across rounds. Whether it feels like practice or tedium depends on the skill growth and rewards around it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with many menus or content on offer, but the same few actions win every time, so variety exists only on paper.

KNOBS variety of actions needed; how long one action type is demanded; how fast the best play changes

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Feigned Die Rolls

dynamics × procedures

The game master rolls dice for show, and the result does not affect how the game goes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs a human game master, hidden rolls, and players who cannot check results (screens, secret rolls). The game master must be willing to override outcomes to shape the story.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game master rolls openly in front of everyone or follows the dice anyway, so the roll is not feigned at all.

KNOBS how many rolls are hidden; how often the game master ignores or overrides the dice

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Asynchronous Collaborative Actions

dynamics × procedures

Players help each other at different times and need not see each other's actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Game state must persist between sessions, and one player's action must give a real benefit to another who acts later. Players need enough trust, so keep the number of steps and the timing of rewards reasonable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game has a shared goal or gifts, but each player's progress would be the same without anyone else, so nobody is really working together.

KNOBS how many steps needed to benefit; whether rewards come together or separately; time limits

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Back-to-Back Game Sessions

dynamics × procedures

Right after one session, players play again with roles swapped.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must actually play again with roles swapped, so sessions need to be short enough and scores easy to compare across rounds. Lobbies help when players are remote.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The rules suggest playing twice with swapped sides, but nobody does or no one adds up the results, so imbalance stays.

KNOBS session length; whether scores carry across sessions; how roles rotate

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Speedending

dynamics × procedures

A player sure of the lead tries to end the game as fast as possible.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to estimate who is ahead, and must have actions that bring the end closer, such as emptying a shared supply. The winner must be decided after play ends, not by an instant win.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game-end condition that is nominally reachable but that nobody can judge or trigger in time, so players play on and the ending is never rushed.

KNOBS how clear the score standings are; what triggers the end; how fast end triggers can be depleted

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Middlegame

dynamics × procedures

All stages of the game between the beginning and the end.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs recognizable phases, so the middle must have its own goals and kinds of action, such as expanding or building, different from the opening and the end. Rules like balancing effects can be tied to it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game whose phases are named in the manual but play feels the same throughout, with no real shift in goals or actions.

KNOBS how long the middle lasts; what shifts in goals and rules separate it from other phases

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Save Scumming

dynamics × procedures

The player keeps reloading a save and replaying a hard spot until they get lucky.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It shows up when saving is unlimited and cheap, retrying costs almost nothing, and outcomes are random or hidden. To prevent it, limit slots or saving, or make failure persistent.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that technically has a save limit but lets players copy or back up files, so reloading still costs nothing and the limit changes nothing.

KNOBS how many save slots; where saving is allowed; how costly reloading is

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Unpredictable Behavior

dynamics × procedures

Characters are capable of unexpected actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Agents need real variation, through randomness, complex rules or human control, while still staying within sensible limits. Players should not be able to learn and exploit a fixed script.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Agents that follow a fixed script with a bit of random flavour that never changes what they do.

KNOBS amount of randomness in agent decisions; complexity of agent rules

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Scouting

dynamics × procedures

Moving through the world to learn about dangers while staying unseen.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs partial visibility of the world, a real chance of being detected, and a payoff for information such as threats or ambushes. Hiding places and routes make the activity richer.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Exploring the map with no enemies or no detection risk, so scouting is just walking around and nothing is learned or threatened.

KNOBS detection range and chance; how much of the map is hidden; how many hiding places

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Cycle Deck Engines

dynamics × procedures

Cards that let you draw new cards, so the player runs through nearly the whole deck.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs deck building, cards that draw further cards, and a deck small or thin enough that cycling through it is possible. Costs and limits must keep the loop strong but not endless.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A few draw-a-card effects that are lost in a big deck and never let a player cycle it.

KNOBS how many cards give extra draws; deck size; limits on plays per turn

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Strategic Knowledge

dynamics × rules

Knowing the rules, possible actions, and value of moves apart from any specific situation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have stable rules and structures that carry across sessions, and hidden or deep parts worth learning. Playing must give feedback that shows what works.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that changes so much each time, or is so shallow, that nothing learned in one session helps in the next.

KNOBS how much stays the same between sessions; amount of hidden rules; how much depth rewards learning

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Predictable Consequences

dynamics × rules

You can estimate in advance how the game will change after actions or events.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Rules must be deterministic and clear enough to read, and the game must show state and effects. Little hidden information or randomness should sit between an action and its result.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Rules are written down, but dice, hidden effects or opaque systems make outcomes impossible to foresee, so players cannot plan.

KNOBS amount of randomness and hidden information; clarity of feedback and previews

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Player Balance

dynamics × rules

Game design that gives everyone equal chances of success or victory.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Starting positions, resources and abilities must be near-equal, or any asymmetry must be offset by something else. Designers must watch for feedback loops that let an early lead decide everything, and test with real play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The sides look symmetrical on paper, but one option or position wins nearly every time in practice.

KNOBS how equal starting resources and abilities are; strength of catch-up or anti-snowball rules

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Social Adaptability

dynamics × rules

The game easily adjusts to different groups of people and circumstances.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The design must offer real options such as pausing, drop-in/out, adjustable length or location, and players or a facilitator must have the power to use them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rulebook line saying you may adapt the game to your group, while the rules give no practical way to pause, shorten or change anything.

KNOBS how easily play can be paused or joined; how adjustable session length is; who may change the rules

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Fudged Results

dynamics × rules

The game bypasses its own calculation rules or makes hidden exceptions to them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Someone must be able to override results, either secretly by a facilitator or via a scarce player resource, and it must be rare so effort still matters. Hidden use requires outcomes not being fully open.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The rulebook mentions bending outcomes, but dice are rolled openly and rules are enforced, so nobody ever fudges anything.

KNOBS how often overrides are allowed; whether they are secret or a limited player resource

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Competence Areas

dynamics × rules

Heroes and other entities have specializations that can be developed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Entities must have uneven abilities that matter for real tasks, and a reason to divide work or to choose a niche. Choices should be meaningful and not obviously one-sided, so no single specialty is always best.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Classes or units have different names and icons, but their numbers and options are so alike that any of them can do any job.

KNOBS how different the abilities are; whether specialties are fixed at start or chosen and changed during play

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Game Element Trading

dynamics × rules

Players exchange, in real life, the items that make up the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must own different tradable items that keep value beyond one session, and be able to meet or exchange them. Item rarity and sources shape demand.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Items are labelled tradable, but all are equal or worthless, so nobody wants to swap.

KNOBS rarity of items; how they are obtained; how easy trading is

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Positive Feedback Loops

dynamics × rules

An effect reinforces itself: each next such effect is stronger than the previous one.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Rewards must make the next success easier or larger, with no strong caps or counter-effects. Designers must check how quickly the effect grows, or the leader runs away.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A bonus is given for winning, but it is so small or so capped that early leads fade and nothing compounds.

KNOBS growth rate of the reward; strength of caps or counter-loops; how much advantage carries over

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Helplessness

dynamics × rules

Situations in which the player cannot change anything themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to see the game going on while having no useful input, and the state needs a clear end (a timer, a rescue by others, or the situation resolving). Without a way out or a clear duration it just feels broken.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A brief animation or stun where the player can still steer, act, or skip ahead, so nothing about their choices is actually removed.

KNOBS how long the state lasts; what ends it (timer, rescue, none)

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Entrenching Gameplay

dynamics × rules

As the game goes on, the situation becomes harder and harder to change.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must be irreversible and combine so that earlier choices lock in later ones; resource loss helps. Reversibility must be mostly avoided.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Irreversible-looking moves that are easy to undo or have so little effect that the state remains open to the end.

KNOBS how irreversible actions are; how strongly effects accumulate; resource depletion rate

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Free Game Element Manipulation

dynamics × rules

Players can move and change game elements outside of the rules.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Components must be physical or open to hand manipulation, with no automated enforcement, and the group must tolerate rule bending. A human or self-run setup is needed rather than a strict program.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The rulebook says players may adjust things, but software or a strict facilitator blocks any rule-breaking move.

KNOBS how much the facilitator or software enforces rules; how easily components can be altered

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Negative Feedback Loops

dynamics × rules

Rules that bring some game measure back toward a preset value.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must measure a part of the state, such as relative position, and apply a counter-effect strong enough to matter but not so strong that effort is pointless. It usually needs playtesting.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A catch-up bonus so small that leaders still win, or so large that it flips results no matter how people play.

KNOBS how strong the correction is; what is measured; how soon it triggers

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Ninja Looting

dynamics × rules

Taking loot that the player has no right to.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Loot must be physically takeable by anyone nearby and ownership must not be enforced. The reward must be worth taking, and other players must be near enough to do it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Loot labeled as shared or ownable that is in fact automatically assigned, so nobody can take anything from others.

KNOBS who can pick up loot and when; how long loot stays unprotected

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Investments

dynamics × resources

A player gives up resources for a time for gain later, not knowing how it will turn out.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Resources must be spent with the payoff delayed and uncertain, and the payoff must be worth the wait. Players need enough knowledge to weigh the risk.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Spending resources that return immediately or with certainty, so it is just a purchase.

KNOBS cost; delay before payoff; size and certainty of the return

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Trading

dynamics × resources

Players exchange resources with each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must hold different things of different value to them, be allowed to exchange them, and have a way to find and talk to each other. Needs must differ enough that swaps benefit both sides.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A trade menu in a game where everyone has the same needs and goods, so nobody ever gains from using it.

KNOBS how unequal the holdings are; which items can be traded; trade limits or fees

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Exploitation

dynamics × resources

A game stage where the main aim is to use what you already have as efficiently as possible.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need owned resources, locations and abilities to optimize, plus enough system depth that efficient setups (gameplay engines) beat sloppy ones. Unlock timing and costs decide when this stage starts.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Resources are available, but there is only one obvious best use, so there is nothing to optimize and no phase of optimizing.

KNOBS resource yield and number of resource sources; when optimizing abilities become available

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Resource Management

dynamics × resources

Allocating and spending available supplies wisely.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Resources must be limited, useful for several competing ends, and spending must have consequences later. Players need enough information to plan their use.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Resources are shown on screen but are so plentiful or so single-purpose that no real choices arise.

KNOBS scarcity; number of competing uses; income versus spending rate

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Complete Resource Depletion

dynamics × resources

Some resource in the game is gone entirely, temporarily or permanently.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Resources must be finite or consumed faster than they are replenished, and something must actually use them up, whether players or the system. The running out must change what is possible afterwards.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A resource is labelled scarce, but it replenishes so fast or is so plentiful that it never actually hits zero.

KNOBS starting stock; regeneration rate; consumption rate



Resource Competition

dynamics × resources

Players compete for limited resources.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Resources must be scarce, shared and valuable, so one player's gain is another's loss. Players need to be able to interfere with or beat each other to it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Each player has a private supply of the same resource, so they never actually compete.

KNOBS total supply versus demand; how much is shared; how easily players can block each other



Puzzle Solving

dynamics × conflict

Tasks that are solved mainly by thinking.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The challenge must be solvable by deduction or experiment, with clear information, fitting difficulty and no pressure that replaces thinking. Brute-force trial should be costly or impossible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A puzzle is presented, but it can be solved by trying every option or by luck, so no reasoning is needed.

KNOBS difficulty; amount of information given; number of attempts; time pressure



Complex Gameplay

dynamics × conflict

It is hard to plan actions or understand what they will lead to.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be enough components, rules and options that interact, so that deciding or foreseeing outcomes is truly hard. The complexity must be in decisions, not just in bookkeeping.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Lots of tokens, stats and menus, but one option is clearly best, so there is little to decide.

KNOBS number of components, rules and available actions; how much they interact; how much information is shown



Performance Uncertainty

dynamics × conflict

The outcome depends on how skillfully the player performs the action themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Outcomes must depend on skill in a physical, mental or social task that varies from player to player and moment to moment. Success must not be guaranteed by simply knowing a procedure.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An action that looks skill-based but has a fixed outcome whatever the player does, or one so easy that everyone succeeds every time.

KNOBS how demanding the skill task is; how much the result depends on performance versus system; tolerance for error



Trade-Offs

dynamics × conflict

The player chooses among several options and weighs what can be given up for what.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Options must have genuinely different, comparable costs and benefits, with no choice that is better in every way. Players must understand the consequences well enough to weigh them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A choice between options where one is clearly best, so the 'decision' is obvious and players never hesitate.

KNOBS relative size of the gains and costs of each option; how well the effects are shown to the player



PvE

dynamics × conflict

The game itself, not other players, creates the challenges for the player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs system-controlled opponents or hazards with enough behaviour to be a real challenge. Players need reasons to team up against them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies exist but are passive or trivial, so there is no real challenge from the system.

KNOBS enemy strength and number; AI behaviour; difficulty scaling



Internal Rivalry

dynamics × conflict

The opponent or competitor is in the same social group as you.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must belong to a shared group while having goals that conflict, and the rules should keep the conflict from ending in outright elimination. The group's norms or limited actions keep it ongoing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Teammates labelled rivals but with fully aligned goals, so no one ever works against another.

KNOBS how strongly individual and group goals diverge; what actions are allowed against rivals



PvP

dynamics × conflict

Players, as individual people, directly compete against each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need opposed goals, ways to affect one another and roughly matched skill. Matchmaking or balancing tools help sustain it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Many players share a space, but they cannot hurt or compete with each other, so it is parallel solo play.

KNOBS how much players can harm each other; matchmaking; balance and handicap tools



Social Dilemmas

dynamics × conflict

A choice between benefiting yourself and benefiting another player or your group.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Selfish choices must truly pay in the short term while hurting the group, and players must be unsure what the others will do. They also need other human participants who can be trusted or betrayed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A shared-pool choice where cooperating is plainly best for everyone, or where the selfish option gives no real advantage, so there is nothing to agonize over.

KNOBS size of individual vs. shared payoff; how hidden or delayed others' choices are; group size

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Uncertainty of Information

dynamics × conflict

The player is unsure whether the information they have can be trusted.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Some relevant information must be hidden, noisy or possibly false, and players must need that information to decide. It should not be so extreme that decisions become pure guesses.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Hidden information that does not matter for any decision, or that players can easily look up elsewhere.

KNOBS how much is hidden; how reliable the information is; available sources of clarification

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Internal Conflicts

dynamics × conflict

Desired actions get in each other's way: progress in one costs you in another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The goals must be of similar appeal, with consequences players can foresee or learn, so that choosing one really costs another. Choices should be hard to take back.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several goals offered where one is plainly the best or all can be done anyway, so there is nothing to agonise over.

KNOBS how many incompatible options; how equal their appeal; how reversible the choice is

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Attention Demanding Gameplay

dynamics × conflict

Any minute of inattention can cost the player dearly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Several things must be able to hurt a player at any time, such as real-time events, multiple threats or continuous goals, with a real penalty for lapses. Lull periods must be kept rare.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A timer or enemies are on screen, but nothing bad happens when the player looks away, so they can safely ignore it.

KNOBS how many things need watching; penalty for inattention; real-time pace; time limits

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Lucky Guess Solutions

dynamics × conflict

A player can guess the correct answer to a problem by chance.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The puzzle or choice must have several options that can simply be tried with quick feedback. Few options and cheap retries make guessing likely.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A puzzle looks like it could be guessed but the choices are so many or penalties so harsh that guessing never works.

KNOBS number of options; cost of a wrong try; how quickly feedback comes

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Surprise Attacks

dynamics × conflict

Attacks that the target did not expect.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Combat must exist alongside hidden information (fog, stealth, hiding spots, traps), and attackers need a real way to approach unseen. Defenders must be able to be caught unprepared, with a cost for being caught.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies pop out of nowhere on a script, or the player is warned so clearly that it is just an ordinary fight with a jump-scare sound.

KNOBS how much each side can see; how many hiding or flanking routes exist; damage bonus for striking unseen

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Trial and Error Solutions

dynamics × conflict

The solution is found by simply trying all the possible options.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The set of possible solutions must be small and visible, and trying a wrong one must be cheap enough that testing is possible. The solution should be found only by testing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A puzzle with so many options, or such heavy penalties for a wrong try, that testing is unrealistic, or whose answer is obvious.

KNOBS number of candidate solutions; cost of a wrong attempt; whether the answer changes between plays

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Area Control

dynamics × boundaries

Power over a zone: who can move through it and which actions are available there.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Areas must differ in value, be contestable by several players, and give real benefits (resources, abilities) to the holder. Taking and holding must require effort and be possible to challenge.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Areas are marked as owned, but all areas are equal or no one can contest them, so ownership means nothing.

KNOBS how many areas; how valuable each is; how hard they are to take and hold

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Pervasive Gameplay

dynamics × boundaries

A game that coexists with everyday activities or blends into them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Gameplay must be able to happen alongside ordinary activities, through real-life actions that affect the game state, ubiquitous access and safe spots or drop-in and drop-out. It must not demand dedicated places or equipment.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A mobile game that is said to be played anywhere but needs focused attention and a dedicated session, so it never blends with other activities.

KNOBS which real-life activities count; how often and when the game asks for attention; how interruptible it is

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Negotiable Play Sessions

dynamics × boundaries

Each person decides how long to play, and this does not spoil the session for others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to leave and return without breaking progress for themselves or others, through pauses, saves, turn breaks or drop-in play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pause or save feature that exists but penalizes leaving, or is unusable in multiplayer, so players must stay until the end.

KNOBS how easy it is to pause or leave; how much progress is lost by stopping

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Arenas

dynamics × boundaries

Open places in the game world where fights happen on their own or by design.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Open spaces must be bounded and contain attractions such as resources or objectives, with other terrain types around them for contrast. Players must be drawn there by what it offers.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An open area is labeled an arena but has nothing to want, so players avoid it and fight elsewhere.

KNOBS size and openness of the area; what draws players in; how many entrances

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Real World Knowledge Advantages

dynamics × boundaries

Real-life knowledge about the game's subject helps the player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Game decisions must depend on facts that exist outside the game, and the game must not hand those facts to everyone. Players must also differ in how much they know.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Trivia sits in the game's theme or flavor text, but anyone can do equally well without knowing it.

KNOBS how much outcomes depend on outside facts; how much of that information the game supplies itself

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Seamful Gameplay

dynamics × boundaries

Knowing where sensors and connections work gives the player an advantage.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs location-sensing technology with real, learnable coverage gaps, and gameplay where being out of coverage helps, such as hiding. It does not work where coverage is everywhere.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Dead spots that exist but offer no advantage, or that players cannot find out about, so they are just glitches.

KNOBS where and how large coverage gaps are; how much being unsensed helps players

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Negotiable Game Sessions

dynamics × outcome

A player can influence how long they play without spoiling the game for others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must give a meaningful experience at both short and long lengths, with natural stopping points and ways to extend or shorten play. Other players must not be harmed by the choice.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game claiming flexible length while the content or progression needs a fixed time, so short sessions feel incomplete.

KNOBS minimum and maximum session length; points where play can end

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Tournaments

dynamics × outcome

A goal to win a series of matches arranged as a competition.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Matches must be linked by a bracket or standings so that earlier results shape later play, and there must be enough players and a schedule to run it. Players need a reason to care about the overall result.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A list of unconnected games with a 'tournament' label, where results never feed into a ranking or later matches.

KNOBS format (elimination vs. round-robin); number of rounds; length of each match

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Endgame

dynamics × outcome

A final stage that happens in every play of this game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Earlier play must lead to a state with a distinct character, such as fewer options, high stakes or elimination, and the game needs a regular way of finishing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A phase labelled endgame in the rules that plays like the middle game, with the game just stopping.

KNOBS what ends the game; how play narrows toward the end; how strongly earlier choices matter at the end

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Uncertainty of Outcome

dynamics × outcome

Before the game starts, it is hard to say reliably how it will end.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be real sources of variance, such as chance, deep strategy or unpredictable players, and no dominant strategy or runaway leader. Skill should still matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with random elements that rarely change who wins, so the result is clear well in advance.

KNOBS amount of randomness; balance between players; strategic depth

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Surrendering

dynamics × outcome

A player stops the game, admitting defeat.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a visible losing position and a cheap way to quit, and the rest of the session should survive someone leaving. How readable the standings are decides how early people give up.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'concede' button exists but nobody ever uses it, or using it ruins the game for everyone else so it is effectively unavailable.

KNOBS how clearly standings show who is losing; how easy it is to quit; what happens to the others afterwards

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Early Elimination

dynamics × outcome

A player is knocked out long before the session ends for everyone else.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to lose out long before the game ends, and no role is kept for them, so they wait a long time. The effect grows with game length and a lack of short rounds.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An elimination rule that exists but only triggers in the last minutes, so nobody sits out for long.

KNOBS how easy and how early elimination is; game length; what eliminated players can still do

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Predictable Winner

dynamics × outcome

During the session, players can see who will almost certainly win.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It emerges when snowballing mechanics, big skill gaps, readable scores and kingmaking exist without comeback tools. Designers mostly work to prevent it with uncertainty or catch-up mechanisms.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A leaderboard shows someone ahead, but comebacks or hidden scoring keep the result open, so nobody treats the winner as settled.

KNOBS strength of positive vs negative feedback; hidden information; randomness; catch-up mechanisms

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Unwinnable Game States

dynamics × outcome

States from which no actions can lead to a win anymore.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules need irreversible actions, dominant strategies or kingmaking that can lock a player (or everyone) out of any route to victory, and the player must be able to notice or suspect this. Hidden scoring or a late-revealed winner can mask it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that merely feels hard or a player who is far behind but still has a clear comeback path; nothing is actually closed off.

KNOBS how reversible actions are; strength of catch-up mechanisms; how visible the score is

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Roleplaying

dynamics × drama

Players take on the goals and behavior of fictional characters.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give players an agent-like character or faction with goals of its own, real freedom in how to pursue them, and some internal tension or hidden aims. Add a world with enough texture that staying in role has something to respond to.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A hero with a name and a portrait whose goals are just the player's own score, so nobody ever acts as the character would.

KNOBS how much character goals are set by the game versus chosen by the player; how much freedom there is in pursuing them

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Character Defining Actions

dynamics × drama

The actions chosen during play determine what kind of character one becomes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Characters need abilities that change or get interpreted according to the player's choices, and the game or its group must register and remember those choices.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Character traits are chosen from a menu at the start, and nothing the player does later changes them.

KNOBS how strongly actions feed back into stats, relations or story; how many distinct paths exist

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Open Destiny

dynamics × drama

Characters' stories turn out differently from game to game because of what happens.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Characters or factions need tracked state that actually changes in response to events, and endings must differ enough to be noticeable. There must be few enough distinct outcomes, each reachable by different play, for players to see the difference.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several endings that are only a cosmetic text change on top of the same arc, or a branching that always converges to the same fate.

KNOBS how many distinct endings; which characters or factions have a tracked arc; how much play affects each arc

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Diegetic Communication

dynamics × drama

Players communicate as people do in the game world, without leaving their roles.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must give players a reason and a way to speak in character, and avoid options that pull them out of it. Separate channels for out-of-game talk help.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A fantasy setting where players chat about scores and tactics in ordinary terms the whole time.

KNOBS which channels exist; how strongly in-character talk is encouraged

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Exceptional Events

dynamics × drama

Rare events that are remembered because they are so unlikely or affect the game so strongly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Include rare, high-impact or surprising outcomes (critical results, betrayals, spectacular failures) that cannot be undone at once. Hidden information and randomness help, but the events must really change the game state, not just flash by.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rare-sounding event that happens often, or one that changes nothing and is quickly reversed, so nobody remembers it.

KNOBS how rare the event is; how large and how permanent its effect on the game state

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Enactment

dynamics × interface

The player personally does and says what their character does and says.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs characters, a setting that invites in-character action and an audience of other players; rules should reward or at least allow performance.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players pick a character name and class but speak and act as themselves.

KNOBS how much the rules reward in-character play; presence of a facilitator or audience; warm-up support

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Multiplayer Games

mechanics × players

Games in which more than one player takes part.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must give each player a real role with consequences for the others, through competition, cooperation or communication. Players need ways to find and join each other.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that supports several players but where they play in parallel with no effect on one another.

KNOBS number of players; competitive or cooperative; how much they affect each other



Teams

mechanics × players

Agents or game elements acting toward one shared goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Members must share rewards and penalties so their interests align. Some actions should benefit or depend on teammates.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players wear the same colour but are scored individually, so teams have no effect on decisions.

KNOBS team size; which rewards and penalties are shared; friendly-fire rules



Dedicated Game Facilitators

mechanics × players

A program, machine, or person who keeps records and manages the game's participants.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The facilitator must truly take over the work, such as hidden information, bookkeeping or fair judging, so that players need not do it. It must be reliable and trusted.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A computer or person nominally in charge, while the players still do all the tracking and rule checks themselves.

KNOBS which tasks are handed over; who or what acts as facilitator



Game Masters

mechanics × players

People who run the game world and the players' interaction with it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give one participant the authority to run the world, adjudicate and improvise, backed by tools such as scenarios and rules. Players must accept their rulings.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A GM role is named, but it only reads out fixed text and cannot adapt anything, so it is a narrator.

KNOBS how much authority and freedom the GM has; tools provided; whether the role rotates



Single-Player Games

mechanics × players

Only one player can take part in each game session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Without other people to push back, the game must supply its own opposition through puzzles, scripted enemies or time pressure. It also needs a clear decision on whether the game can be won at all.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A multiplayer-style game that is simply played alone, with no automated opposition or puzzle to replace the missing opponents, so nothing resists the player.

KNOBS strength and behaviour of automated opposition; whether the game can be won; time limits



Companions

mechanics × players

Game-controlled characters that follow the player and help them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A companion needs a real role: abilities or goals that cover what the player's own character lacks, and behaviour reliable enough that the player can count on it. If they follow and talk but never change what the player can do, nothing happens.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character trails behind the player and chats, but can't be hurt, doesn't act, and the player's outcomes are the same without it.

KNOBS how strong and independent the companion is; how many can be had; whether they can be lost or turn traitor



AI Players

mechanics × players

Software characters that play roughly like humans and take their place.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The AI must play by the same rules as humans, with a visible aim of winning, and work in the available modes (teams, drop-in). Skill level should be adjustable to fit the people it replaces.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A bot occupies a seat but plays passively or randomly, so it cannot substitute for a real player.

KNOBS AI skill level; when AI can join or replace players; how predictable it is



Parties

mechanics × players

Groups of characters acting together toward a common goal within the world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Characters must need each other, for example through complementary roles, and the group must have a size limit or composition choices. The relationships among them must give real reasons for cooperating.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A group of characters that follow the player around but are interchangeable and contribute nothing, so the party is just a count.

KNOBS party size and maximum; how roles are distributed; how many characters each player controls



Drop-In/Drop-Out

mechanics × players

The game is built so players can join and leave during a session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must keep working when the player count changes: it needs a way to rebalance, hand over or park a leaver's pieces, and bring a returner back without wasting others' effort.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A menu that says you may join or leave at any time, yet a leaver breaks the game or a newcomer is hopelessly behind and cannot take part.

KNOBS how and when players may join or leave; what happens to their assets; how newcomers are caught up or balanced



Factions

mechanics × players

Groups in the game world united by which deeds they reward and forbid.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Set clear criteria to join, stay and advance, and make group membership change what members can do or must do. Gatekeepers, quests or requirements make joining meaningful, and group rules must be enforced.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A faction label or banner that has no effect on abilities, access, goals or how others treat the player.

KNOBS requirements to join and stay; how many factions one can belong to and what membership grants

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Late Arriving Players

mechanics × players

The game lets you join at any moment without waiting for someone else's start.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The system must be able to insert a new player into a running game, with spawning, a fair starting state, and some answer to the balance problems newcomers cause. It needs players to actually arrive at different times.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A join button exists but latecomers start so far behind or ahead that they cannot take part in a meaningful way.

KNOBS how late one can join; what starting resources a newcomer gets; whether bots fill empty slots

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Spectators

mechanics × players

People who watch the players' actions but do not affect the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Public information must be available to outsiders in a form they can follow, such as a view of the game or replays. Players eliminated early also need a way to keep watching.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Watching is allowed in theory, but the information shown is unreadable, hidden or too fast to follow, so spectators learn nothing.

KNOBS how much information spectators see; delay of the view; whether they can talk to players

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Handles

mechanics × players

Nicknames by which players and their achievements are recognized.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Names or symbols need to be tied to records or accounts and shown where others see them (scores, chat, over avatars). Decide how they are chosen and moderated.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A name field that is never shown or saved anywhere, or auto-generated names everyone ignores.

KNOBS length and format; free vs preset choice; where they are displayed

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Asymmetric Starting Conditions

mechanics × players

Players begin the session with different capabilities.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Differences at the start must affect early choices and the likely course of play. Balance through playtesting, rotating roles or handicaps, and decide whether they are fixed, random or player-made.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Starts differ only in cosmetics or trivial amounts, so after a few turns no one can tell who began where.

KNOBS how large the start differences are; fixed, random or player-chosen; compensation for weaker starts

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TvT

mechanics × players

Games where teams compete against each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Fixed teams with shared goals and a scoring rule that compares teams, plus attention to team balance and to players leaving or joining. Teams must be able to affect each other.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players wear team colours but score and win individually, so team membership changes nothing.

KNOBS team size; balancing methods; how team results are scored

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Team Development

mechanics × players

Teams change over time because of the game's progress and the players' growing skills.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be real improvement options that cost resources and change what the team can do. Improvements should be visible and should shape later play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The team has a level or rank that goes up, but it changes nothing in what the team can do.

KNOBS cost and speed of improvement; what can be improved; caps on growth

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Massively Multiplayer Online Games

mechanics × players

Games where hundreds or thousands of players live and communicate in one world at the same time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A server infrastructure, support for joining and leaving at any time, and communication tools. Enough players need to be online and reasons to return so social play appears.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A big shared world exists but players hardly meet or affect each other, so it is solo play in a crowd.

KNOBS player capacity per world; how much players interact; how often content is updated

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Massively Single-Player Online Games

mechanics × players

The game uses data from other players' sessions, but everyone plays separately.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Servers must carry other players' results, such as scores, ghosts or gifts, into each person's game in a visible way. Players need to notice and react to this input.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A leaderboard exists but sits in a menu and never changes how anyone plays.

KNOBS what data is shared between players; how visible it is; how much players can help each other

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Zero-Player Games

mechanics × players

People make no direct decisions during play; the game runs by itself.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must run by themselves, with any player influence confined to setup, programming or rule creation, and be rich enough for interesting outcomes to emerge. Observers need a way to watch and compare.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game where a player presses a button now and then but the outcome never depends on it, billed as a zero-player game with no real setup choices either.

KNOBS how much freedom the setup phase gives; complexity of rules; how agents are programmed; observation options

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Public Player Statistics

mechanics × players

Information about players that is easily available to everyone else.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Stats must be visible to others, tied to a persistent identity and connected to meaningful performance. Who can see them must be decided.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Stats are kept but hidden, anonymous or irrelevant, so nobody sees or cares about them.

KNOBS what is tracked; who can see it; how long it persists

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Non-Player Help

mechanics × players

The game expects people who are not playing to help the players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Outsiders must know they can help, and the help must be restricted by limited actions, power and cooldowns so it does not skew balance or devalue players' own effort. Information from helpers can be unreliable to keep it risky.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A help feature that nobody outside the game is told about, or that gives such weak or restricted help that it never changes any outcome.

KNOBS how strong helpers' actions are; how often they can help; how helpers are informed and admitted

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Entitled Players

mechanics × players

Players get the right to change how the game goes and are responsible for everyone's experience.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Some players must get real powers over how the game runs, such as creating content or removing players, along with a role that expects them to use these for others' benefit.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A title or badge for certain players that gives them no abilities to shape the game.

KNOBS which powers are granted; who gets the role; limits on how powers are used

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Tiered Participation

mechanics × players

The game offers different ways to take part, differing in time and kind of actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each tier must have a real, distinct role and requirements, and tiers must stay meaningfully connected to the same game. Players should be able to choose or move between tiers.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Tiers are only labels for how much someone plays, with no different game roles.

KNOBS number of tiers; time and activity required per tier; ease of moving between tiers

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Synchronous Gameplay

mechanics × players

All players' game sessions run at the same time and overlap.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs ways to get everyone present together and a pace that suits shared time, with breaks handled. Communication and waiting rules matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are online together but each plays alone and never has to react to anyone else's timing.

KNOBS turn or real-time structure; how long sessions last; how breaks and late joiners are handled

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Possibility of Anonymity

mechanics × players

The player can choose not to reveal who they are.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must give players a way to hide their identity and must not leak it elsewhere, e.g. through cross-session statistics or friend lists. Communication has to go through masks such as handles or avatars.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A nickname field exists, but real names, linked accounts or public stats still reveal who the player is, so hiding changes nothing.

KNOBS how much identity is shown; whether names, profiles and stats are linked across sessions

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Coaches

mechanics × players

People who lead a team and give its members advice.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The coach must have actual levers (training, tactics, reserves) that change team outcomes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A coach title exists, but the coach can't affect anything the team does.

KNOBS scope of the coach's powers; how team development is controlled

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Friend Lists

mechanics × players

The game keeps a list of players who matter to each person so they are easier to find.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Provide ways to add, confirm and find friends, and tie services such as chat, invites and gifts to the list. Needs server infrastructure to track players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A list screen exists, but it connects to no matching, chat or gifts, so it is just a contact book.

KNOBS how friends are found and confirmed; what features are limited to friends; friendship levels

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Game System Player

mechanics × players

A passive participant controlled by the system under simple rules, with no visible will.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give it simple fixed rules players can understand and perform, with enough power to actually threaten them. Its actions should be easy to carry out in self-run games.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A dummy opponent exists but can't affect the outcome, so it is just scenery.

KNOBS how complex its rules are; how strong its actions are; how much randomness it uses

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Player Anonymity

mechanics × players

Other players do not know who exactly is playing.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must remove or block identity cues such as names, voice and friend links, and enforce this consistently. Designers must decide whether anonymity is optional or forced.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are called 'anonymous' but use persistent handles, or can easily be recognised from chat or friend lists.

KNOBS whether anonymity is forced or optional; which identity cues are hidden; whether communication is allowed

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Reserves

mechanics × players

Team members who wait outside the game because not everyone can play at once.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The active-slot limit must be lower than the team size, and swapping must be allowed with some cost or timing. Members must differ in skill or stamina so choosing who plays matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Bench players exist, but all members are identical and swaps never happen, so the bench changes nothing.

KNOBS number of active slots versus team size; swap rules, timing and cost

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Invites

mechanics × players

Actions by which a player calls new people into the game, sometimes earning a reward for it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a way to reach people outside it (online link, share feature) and must let newcomers join a running game or world. A reward or social reason for inviting helps players actually use it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An invite button exists but newcomers cannot join anyway, or nobody has a reason to press it, so no one ever arrives.

KNOBS what the inviter gets as reward; how many invites are allowed; how easily invitees can join

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Enforced Player Anonymity

mechanics × players

The system itself hides from players who the other players are.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must remove or limit names, friend lists and open chat, so players really cannot tell who others are or contact them outside gameplay.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Anonymous-looking nicknames that are still consistent and linkable, and open chat that lets players reveal who they are.

KNOBS what identity info is hidden; which communication channels exist; whether exceptions for known friends are allowed

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Robotic Players

mechanics × players

Real robots that take part in the game on equal terms with players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The robot needs sensors, movement and an AI that can really act in the physical play space and follow the game's rules, as a human participant would. The game must be built so that physical actions by the robot count in the game state and other players can respond to them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A robot sits on the table or moves along a fixed script while a person or a program secretly makes all the decisions, so it takes no real part in play and nothing depends on it.

KNOBS how much the robot can sense and do; how skilled its AI is; how much the robot's physical actions affect the game state

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Initiative

mechanics × players

The ability of agents to act on their own, not only in response to events.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Agents must be able to start actions that are not simply triggered by something the player did, and these actions must affect play. Players need to notice that the agent chose to act.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Agents that only react to player actions or follow a script that looks spontaneous, so they never start anything.

KNOBS how often agents act on their own; what range of actions they can start

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Traverse

mechanics × objectives

A goal to move a game element from one point in the world to another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear start and end point with a route that holds obstacles, choices or opposition, so the journey is not trivial. Progress should be readable to the player, for example through checkpoints.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A destination marker reached by simply holding a key down, with nothing to cross or avoid.

KNOBS distance; obstacles along the way; number of checkpoints

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Quests

mechanics × objectives

Goal of completing a task for which a reward is given.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each needs a clear task, a visible reward and a way to be offered and completed. Rewards must be worth the effort and tied to the world.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A quest log exists, but tasks are trivial, rewards meaningless or the requirements unclear, so players ignore it.

KNOBS number and type of quests; reward size; how they are offered; difficulty

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Clues

mechanics × objectives

Items or information that hint to the player how to achieve a goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must carry real information about goals, appear at the right moment, and match the game's setting.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Hints exist but are too vague, too late or say what the player already knows.

KNOBS how explicit they are; when and how often they appear; whether they adapt to player struggle

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Gain Ownership

mechanics × objectives

Goal: become the owner of a certain game element.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Make ownership of items, pieces or areas matter, giving benefits, points or progress, and make it contestable. Without contest or reward it is just a pickup.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players can own things, but ownership gives no benefit and nobody can take it, so there is no pursuit.

KNOBS value of owned elements; how contestable they are; how many can be owned

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Optional Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal that need not be completed to win or finish the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The goals must be visible and worth pursuing for their own sake, and the game must not require them to win. Tracking them with a reward or penalty gives them more weight.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A listed side goal with no reward or interest, so nobody ever goes for it, or one that is secretly required to progress.

KNOBS how many optional goals; whether the game tracks them; what reward or penalty they carry

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Eliminate

mechanics × objectives

Goal: remove certain elements from the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be targets that can be removed and ways for players to remove them, and the goal must matter to winning or progress so players pursue it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Targets that are listed as removable but cannot be hurt in practice, or removing them gains nothing.

KNOBS how many targets; how hard they are to remove; what removal gives

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Gain Information

mechanics × objectives

Goal: act so as to obtain information and draw conclusions from it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Hide information that matters for decisions, and give actions to uncover it. The knowledge must change what players do.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players can discover facts, but the facts are irrelevant or already obvious, so searching has no use.

KNOBS how much is hidden; cost and means of uncovering it; how useful the information is

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Gain Competence

mechanics × objectives

Goal: learn to perform a certain skill in the game at the required level.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Offer abilities players can obtain through items, levels or upgrades, with real gameplay effects and a choice of paths. Players need a reason to want more power.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Upgrades exist but only give tiny or cosmetic bonuses, so nobody pursues them.

KNOBS number and size of upgrades; cost to obtain; how many paths to choose

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Evade

mechanics × objectives

Goal: avoid being caught and avoid being hit.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a clear threat with a penalty if it hits, and the player must have means of avoiding it, such as movement, and a real chance of failing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A danger so slow or easy to dodge that it can be ignored, or a hit that costs nothing.

KNOBS speed and accuracy of threats; the player's mobility; penalty for being hit

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Survive

mechanics × objectives

A goal to keep your game elements from being destroyed or removed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a real threat (enemies, hazards, draining resources) and a real loss when the thing dies. Players must be able to act to prevent that loss.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The thing to protect cannot realistically die, or dying costs nothing, so 'survive' is only a label on the screen.

KNOBS threat strength and frequency; how fast resources drain; how many lives or how much health

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Ephemeral Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal: it appears and disappears mid-game, and you can fail it through no fault of your own.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Goals must appear and expire during play on their own terms, with failure possible beyond the player's actions, and be worth chasing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Temporary goals that stay available long enough that everyone completes them eventually, so timing never matters.

KNOBS how often goals appear; how long they last; how they are triggered, random or state-based

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Preventing Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal of stopping some other goal from being completed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The target goal must be one that can be interfered with, and the blocking agent needs real means, information and time to act. Opposing goals must conflict directly.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies exist with a blocking role, but they are too weak, too passive or unable to reach the target, so nothing is ever prevented.

KNOBS strength and number of blockers; the information they have; time limits



Continuous Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal: keep part of the game state within set limits.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Something must threaten the held state so that it needs attention, and failing must have a consequence. The player must be able to tell how well they are doing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game says keep something above a level, but nothing pushes it down or failing costs nothing.

KNOBS how long it must be held; how tight the limits are; how strongly the state is pushed away



Mutual Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal in which the same task faces two or more participants.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must truly succeed or fail together, with shared rewards or penalties. Added individual incentives decide whether the shared goal stays shared.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A team label or common objective in the text while outcomes and rewards stay individual, so players just pursue their own aims.

KNOBS how much is shared versus individual; how big the shared reward is



Achievements

mechanics × objectives

Goals whose completion is remembered beyond a single play session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs persistent storage across sessions, goals that point at varied or unusual play, and visibility to others if they are to carry social value. Goals should require effort or experimentation rather than happen on their own.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Badges pop up for things everybody does anyway, with no persistence or visibility, so they change nobody's play.

KNOBS how many achievements; how hard they are; how visible and what they ask players to try



Overcome

mechanics × objectives

Goal of defeating an opposing force.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be an opponent with a way to resist or act against the player, and clear rules for what counts as defeating it. The opposing force needs agency or a story that makes it feel like a force.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An enemy that is on the goal list but is passive and cannot resist, so defeating it is just a chore, or a victory that is announced without any real opposition.

KNOBS what opponents are to be defeated; how many; how defeat is defined and how strong they are



Goal Hierarchies

mechanics × objectives

Goal: goals are linked so that completing or failing some affects others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Goals must really depend on each other, so finishing lower goals is needed for, or helps, higher ones. The relationships should be visible to players so they can plan around them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A list of tasks that can all be done in any order with no effect on one another, just presented as a tree.

KNOBS number of levels; how strict the dependencies are; whether lower goals are required or optional



Herd

mechanics × objectives

Goal: bring objects to a needed place not by moving them directly but by acting through others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The herded elements need their own movement and a limited set of ways for players to nudge them (pushing, luring, blocking), with a clear destination. The herded things must be able to go the wrong way so steering takes real effort.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Elements that just follow the player or a fixed path to the goal, so the player never has to handle their independent movement.

KNOBS how stubborn or erratic the herded things are; how strong the player's influence is; distance to the goal



Secret Goals

mechanics × objectives

A goal where a player has a task that the others do not know about.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give players private goals that matter for winning, and keep them hidden through cards or a facilitator. Other players must have a reason and a way to guess or probe.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Hidden goals that all players have identical or that do not affect how anyone plays, so there is nothing to guess or hide.

KNOBS how many secret goals; how different they are between players; whether they must be fulfilled to win



Guard

mechanics × objectives

Goal: keep other players or elements away from certain zones or objects.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be something worth guarding and real opponents trying to get it, with ways for the guard to fail. The guard needs means to watch and block, either passive (traps, alarms) or active (combat).

JUST A LABEL WHEN An objective marked 'defend' that nobody ever attacks, or that cannot be lost.

KNOBS what is guarded; how strong and how frequent the threats are; what means of defence are available



Supporting Goals

mechanics × objectives

A goal to complete a task that mainly helps reach the game's other goals.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The reward must really make the main goal easier, and the link must be visible to players. Whether the goal is required or optional decides if players weigh trade-offs.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A side goal whose reward has no effect on the main goal, so it only looks like it helps.

KNOBS size of the help given to the main goal; whether the goal is required or optional; cost to complete

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Selectable Set of Goals

mechanics × objectives

A goal where the player chooses which goals to pursue from a set.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Offer several goals that really differ in risk, reward, or path, and make choosing among them matter, for example by excluding others. The set may change during play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A list of goals where one is clearly best or all lead to the same result, so choosing is not a real decision.

KNOBS how many goals are offered; whether the set changes; whether choices exclude each other

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Excluding Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal: choose one of several, because completing one closes off the others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Define goals whose completion conditions really conflict, with clear rules for who or what wins when they clash (usually order of completion or a tiebreaker). Players need to be able to choose among them for the trade-off to matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several goals are listed as alternatives, but a player can achieve all of them anyway, so nothing is given up.

KNOBS how many goals exclude each other; whether exclusion is between players or within one player's own choices

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Deliver

mechanics × objectives

Goal: move a game item to a specified object or place.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The object and the destination must both be specific, the trip must have some difficulty or opposition, and the delivery must be recognized by the game. The way there should require real movement.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An item that appears at the destination or is handed over by a menu, so no trip is made.

KNOBS distance; what opposes the trip; how many items must be delivered

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Collections

mechanics × objectives

Goal: complete a whole set of smaller goals.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear set with visible progress, items with effort or variety behind them, and a reward for completion.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A completion list is displayed, but finishing it yields nothing and the items are trivial to get.

KNOBS set size; rarity of items; reward for completion

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Alignment

mechanics × objectives

Goal: line up your pieces or elements in a row.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to move or place pieces, and opponents must be able to interfere, so completing the line takes planning. The line needs a clear payoff such as a capture or a win.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Lines form by chance with no player influence or no payoff, so there is nothing to aim for.

KNOBS required line length; how pieces move or are placed; whether opponents can block

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King of the Hill

mechanics × objectives

Goal: take a desirable position in the game and hold it while others try to take it away.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Several players must want the same hold-the-spot condition that only one can have, with holding rewarded over time. The holder needs some edge or pressure so the position matters and the others are pushed to contest it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A marked zone exists but holding it gives nothing, or nobody can contest it, so people ignore it.

KNOBS time required to hold; how fast score builds; advantage or penalty for the holder

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Predefined Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal set by the developers in advance, before the game starts.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Requirements and outcomes must be fixed in advance and visible enough for players to plan. A reward or consequence has to be attached to completing them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A goal list is shown, but completing items gives nothing and changes no decisions, or players invent their own aims anyway.

KNOBS how many goals; how they are ordered or nested; how much is revealed up front; reward size

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Conceal

mechanics × objectives

Goal: prevent other players from learning the information they need.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need a way to hide things (hiding places, hidden information, decoys) and an opponent who actually searches or benefits from knowing. Without both, hiding is pointless.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A goal says to hide, but everything is visible to everyone anyway, or nobody is looking.

KNOBS how much information is hidden; how many hiding places or decoys are available; how well opponents can search

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Rescue

mechanics × objectives

Goal of freeing someone who is guarded or cannot move on their own.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a held target, something that guards it, and means to overcome or avoid the guards. Rescuing must change the game state, such as progress or reward.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A captive mentioned in the story, but freeing it takes no effort or has no effect on play.

KNOBS strength and number of guards; distance and obstacles to the target; reward for success



Committed Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal: the player commits in advance to completing a task, as if by contract.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Taking the goal must be optional, with a real cost for failing or for giving up other goals.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'commitment' prompt that can be dropped at any time with no penalty.

KNOBS penalty for failure; reward for success; whether goals exclude each other



Dynamic Goal Characteristics

mechanics × objectives

Goal: the conditions of the goal itself change as the game goes on.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Changes must follow clear rules and be visible enough that players can replan, yet not so large that the goal feels like a different one.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A goal whose displayed numbers or wording shift but whose real task, cost and approach stay the same.

KNOBS which goal parameter changes; how big and how frequent the changes are; what triggers them



Main Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal that shows the player which challenges to take on and gives motivation to play.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must state the overarching aim clearly and tie play actions to reaching it. Completing it should be how one wins or finishes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A stated goal exists but other activities are more rewarding, so players ignore it.

KNOBS how many main goals; whether all are required; how clearly they are shown



Configuration

mechanics × objectives

Goal: arrange game elements in a required order or layout.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The target arrangement must be clear, and there must be real obstacles to reaching it, such as opponents, hidden information, time or a puzzle. Progress toward it should be visible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An arrangement is named as the goal, but it is reached automatically by ordinary moves, so it asks for no planning.

KNOBS size and complexity of the pattern; how many elements; how hard it is to place them



Sidequests

mechanics × objectives

A goal made of tasks that can be skipped when completing the main story.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Side quests need their own goals and rewards that are worth the detour, and a main quest they can be skipped from without breaking it. Some should lead to different outcomes or exclude each other so that choosing between them matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A fetch-and-return errand marked as optional whose reward is trivial or duplicated by the main path, so skipping it costs nothing and doing it adds nothing.

KNOBS how many side quests there are; how big their rewards are; how many exclude each other



Interferable Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal: other players or the game itself can speed up, slow down or break its completion.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Other agents need actual actions that can hamper the goal, and a reason to use them. Players should be able to tell who might interfere.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A goal others could theoretically interfere with, but no action in the game lets them, so it is effectively safe.

KNOBS what actions interfere; who can interfere; how visible the goal and threat are



Repeat Combos

mechanics × objectives

Combinations where the same action must be repeated a set number of times within a time limit.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The required count and time window must be tight enough to need effort or skill but reachable. The reward must be worth the effort, and progress should be visible so players feel the chain.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A combo counter that rewards nothing, or a window so generous that every ordinary play meets it without trying.

KNOBS number of repeats; length of the time window; size of the reward



Unknown Goals

mechanics × objectives

A goal that is unknown to the player at first, and sometimes later too.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Goals must be genuinely hidden from the player at first and revealed later through play or clues. Hints should exist so players know something is there.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Goals that are labelled hidden but are listed in the menu or manual, or that can be guessed from the start.

KNOBS when and how goals get revealed; how many hints are given



Enclosure

mechanics × objectives

Goal: surround game elements with an unbroken line or wall made of other elements.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Pieces need placement or movement rules that allow forming a closed boundary, and enclosing must earn something such as capture or ownership.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An enclosing shape that can be formed but gives no benefit, or the board makes closing it impossible.

KNOBS size of the board; what can enclose and be enclosed; what enclosing yields

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Symmetric Goals

mechanics × objectives

A goal where the sides have essentially the same tasks and the same rewards for them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK All sides must have the same objective with the same requirements and rewards, and the means to pursue it must be comparable. Differences in start or tools quietly break the symmetry.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Everyone has the same stated goal, but different starting powers or rewards make it effectively different goals.

KNOBS sameness of objectives and rewards; how equal starting conditions are

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Asymmetric Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal: players have tasks of different kinds that cannot be swapped between them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each goal needs a different path and a different payoff, with abilities fitted to the goals, and some check that no goal is clearly easier. Cyclic strengths between goals can keep fairness while keeping the difference.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are handed different goal cards, but all goals reduce to the same thing, like 'collect the most points', so play looks identical.

KNOBS how much goal requirements and rewards differ; whether goals are assigned or chosen; how well they are balanced against each other

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Endgame Quests

mechanics × objectives

Goal: complete a task available only at the end of the game, with a reward suited to that stage.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Quests must be unlocked by reaching the end phase and be hard enough for experienced characters, with rewards that matter to players who have already maxed out.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Extra quests that are just earlier quests with bigger numbers, giving rewards nobody needs.

KNOBS unlock condition; difficulty; reward type and value

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Team Elimination

mechanics × objectives

Removing all members of the opposing team from the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Teams must be able to lose all their members for good, with no endless respawning. Eliminating members must be possible and worth pursuing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Members come back immediately, so 'wiping the team' never ends anything.

KNOBS how hard members are to eliminate; respawn rules; team size

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Main Quests

mechanics × objectives

Goal of completing a task whose completion wins the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK One overarching quest must organize the main story and places, with side quests supporting it. Its completion should be what wins or concludes the game.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A quest is labeled main but can be skipped without consequence, and players never need it.

KNOBS length of the quest chain; how many places and characters it touches; whether finishing ends the game

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Mandatory Goals

mechanics × objectives

Goal of a task that must be completed in order to move forward.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must make it truly required for completion, with the requirement known to players. Any bypass undermines it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A goal is marked required but a shortcut lets players finish without it.

KNOBS how many goals are required; whether all or a subset must be done

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Combat

mechanics × procedures

Actions aimed at killing or defeating opponents.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Opponents with opposing goals, an action set with real tradeoffs, and meaningful stakes for winning or losing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Fighting animations play, but outcomes are decided by stats alone and nothing the player does matters.

KNOBS damage and health; range of weapons and abilities; enemy strength; penalty for losing

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Movement

mechanics × procedures

Action of moving game elements around the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a space and clear rules for how elements move through it. The terrain and goals should make where and how far one moves matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Things technically move, but in a space so empty or with goals so unrelated that position never matters.

KNOBS speed or distance per move; terrain costs; restrictions on direction

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Construction

mechanics × procedures

The player adds or rearranges elements to create buildings or structures.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Building must have a material or cost, restrictions, and results that affect later play, such as defence, production or scoring. Players need real freedom in what and where to build.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players press a build button and a fixed object appears, with no choices and no effect on the game.

KNOBS cost and materials; build limits; how much freedom in placement

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New Abilities

mechanics × procedures

Skills gained during the game that open up new actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The ability must allow an action that was not possible before and be introduced at a time that opens new options. The game must give uses for it, such as new challenges.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A new ability that is only a number increase or a reskin of an old action, or one with no situation that calls for it.

KNOBS when abilities are given; how many; how different they are from existing ones

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Self-Facilitated Games

mechanics × procedures

The players themselves enforce the rules and keep all the records.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Rules must be clear and simple enough for players to apply and check themselves, with tokens or turn order lessening what must be remembered. Players also need to be able to agree on disputes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that claims players run it but hides required calculations or rule enforcement in an app or referee, so players do none of the work.

KNOBS how much bookkeeping players do; rule complexity; helper tokens

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Aim & Shoot

mechanics × procedures

The player aims at a target and shoots.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need a way to point at a target and an outcome that depends on accuracy, with some difficulty from movement, distance or limited ammunition. The target must be clearly visible and the control precise enough to feel fair.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Shots auto-hit or snap to targets, so aiming is just pressing a button.

KNOBS aim difficulty (target speed, size, distance); ammo count; hit tolerance

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Turn Taking

mechanics × procedures

One player takes actions, then the turn passes to the next players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear order and clear conditions for when a turn starts and ends, enforced by the rules or system. Designers should also deal with the first player's advantage and with waiting time.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Nominal turns that nobody enforces, so players act whenever they like.

KNOBS turn order; what ends a turn; whether there are extra turns or time limits

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Combos

mechanics × procedures

A set of actions that together achieve more than each does alone.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A specific order or configuration must give a bonus clearly beyond the parts, hard enough to need skill or planning but discoverable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A combo counter is shown, but the extra effect is tiny or comes from simply spamming one action.

KNOBS bonus size; sequence complexity; timing window

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Abilities

mechanics × procedures

Actions a character or unit can take that change the state of the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each agent needs a clearly defined set of actions that visibly change the game state, and the sets should differ between agents so that choosing who does what matters. Players must be able to see what an action does and why using it is worthwhile.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Elements have actions listed on paper, but the actions are the same for everyone or never matter, so nothing is actually done with them.

KNOBS which actions each element gets; how many and how strong they are

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Game Pauses

mechanics × procedures

A deliberate halt to the flow of game time and events.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Game time must otherwise run on its own, and the pause must truly stop events, possibly with limits or saving. It must be available at useful moments.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pause button exists, but the game keeps running or it is blocked in tense moments, so it can't be used.

KNOBS when pausing is allowed; maximum pause length; what remains active during it

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Turn-Based Games

mechanics × procedures

The game is split into clear parts where the player can think and choose an action.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must clearly mark when planning and acting are allowed and when not, with a clear end of turn. Decisions need to reward the time spent thinking.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game described as turn-based where actions are really continuous and the turns do not limit anything.

KNOBS how long a turn lasts; actions per turn; whether turns are simultaneous or alternating

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Capture

mechanics × procedures

Goal: remove a game element or bring it under your own control.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Clear rules for who can capture whom and by what action, plus a real consequence for the loser (lost unit, lost ability, retaliation).

JUST A LABEL WHEN Pieces are called 'captured' but nothing changes for either side; they come back at once or the loss costs nothing.

KNOBS which pieces can capture or be captured; the capture method; whether captured pieces switch sides or leave play

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Extended Actions

mechanics × procedures

An action lasts so long that nothing else can be done during that time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The action must take long enough that doing it means giving up other actions, and it should carry risk, such as being interruptible or locking the player in. Effects can scale with duration or kick in after a threshold.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A short animation or brief delay that never stops the player from doing anything else, so no real trade-off exists.

KNOBS duration required; whether it can be interrupted and how effects scale with time

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Real-Time Games

mechanics × procedures

Game time runs at the same pace as real time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game state must update continuously on its own, with something (a computer, a timer, physics) driving it. Events must demand reaction within a short span so waiting has a cost.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with a visible clock or animation, but the state only changes when a player acts, so waiting costs nothing.

KNOBS speed of the game clock; how long players have to react; whether pauses are allowed

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Secondary Interface Screens

mechanics × procedures

Screens with actions and data that add to the game's main interface.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Move actions and information that do not fit the main view into dedicated screens, such as inventory or character sheet, and make them quickly reachable. They matter when they hold real decisions.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A menu screen that only repeats what the main interface already shows and offers no extra actions.

KNOBS which actions and information go on separate screens; how many screens; whether the game pauses when open

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Maneuvering

mechanics × procedures

Controlling the movement of objects in real-time games.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Real-time movement with consequences for bad control, such as obstacles, enemies or timing. Speed and number of hazards decide the difficulty, and players need a good view of space.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players can steer, but nothing needs avoiding or reaching, so movement is empty.

KNOBS speed; number of obstacles; control sensitivity; penalty for collisions

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Deck Building

mechanics × procedures

During a session, players add cards to their deck and then play with them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a varied supply of cards with different prices and effects, and the cards must go into a deck that is reshuffled so that choices show up later. Players should be able to combine cards in ways that matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players add cards, but they are all alike or so weak that the deck plays the same whatever is chosen.

KNOBS card supply and variety; card prices; whether cards can be removed

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Focus Loci

mechanics × procedures

World elements through which the player performs actions and decides how to use them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Give players clear elements through which their actions affect the world, and decide how many there are and whether control can switch between them. The actions offered must really be tied to these elements.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character model is on screen, but all commands act on the world globally, so the avatar is just decoration.

KNOBS how many controllable entities; which actions each one provides; whether control can be switched

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Player Created Game Elements

mechanics × procedures

Game elements that players make themselves for use in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must offer creation tools and a way for the made elements to enter play and matter there. Designers must also handle effects on balance and on the economy.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players can make things, but they stay cosmetic or are never used in actual gameplay.

KNOBS what players may create; how much freedom they have; how created items enter the game

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Drafting

mechanics × procedures

Players take turns choosing game elements from a shared set until the choices run out.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be real choices between elements of differing value, with a clear order of picking. The picks must carry on to later play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players take items one at a time but they are all the same or the choice is forced, so it is only a handout.

KNOBS how many options per pick; order of picking; how many picks

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Extra-Game Actions

mechanics × procedures

Acts prompted by the game that do not affect the current play.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs real value in preparing, documenting, negotiating or running things outside the game state, such as planning, saving, storytelling or creating content, and the rules or interface must support it. Players should gain something from them later.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A menu or notebook option that nobody has a reason to use because nothing in play benefits from it.

KNOBS how much the game supports and rewards out-of-game preparation, sharing or record keeping

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Hotseating

mechanics × procedures

Players take turns sitting at one interface and making their moves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a clear rule for when control changes hands, and the waiting players need something to do or to watch so the wait is tolerable. If secrecy matters, players must not see each other's turns.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several players nominally share a device but the game never enforces turns, so they just crowd around or one person plays.

KNOBS what triggers a handover (turn end, death, level end); turn length or time limit

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Crafting

mechanics × procedures

Creating game items from other items or materials.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Crafting needs inputs worth gathering and recipes or choices whose products matter for play. It should cost something, like materials, time, skill or tools, and the result should be better than what could otherwise be had.

JUST A LABEL WHEN There is a crafting menu, but the same items are easier to find or buy, so nobody needs it.

KNOBS recipe cost; crafting time; skill or tool requirements; how many recipes

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Minigames

mechanics × procedures

A small game inside another game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The small game needs its own distinct rules, and its outcome should feed back into the outer game. They should be short and different enough to bring variety.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A reskinned menu choice or a brief interlude with no skill or choice that changes nothing in the outer game.

KNOBS how many there are; how long each lasts; how their results affect the main game

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Action Programming

mechanics × procedures

The player chooses actions in advance, and they are carried out later.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a gap between choosing and execution in which things can change, plus a limited set or budget of programmable actions. Players need enough consequence visibility to plan but not so much that outcomes are certain.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players 'program' actions but execution is immediate or nothing changes in between, so it is just ordinary choosing.

KNOBS how many actions are programmed at once; which actions are available; time allowed to plan

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Rhythm-Based Actions

mechanics × procedures

The action must be timed to a set rhythm.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear, perceivable rhythm must exist and failing to match it must have a cost. Timing windows need to be tuned so success is possible but demanding.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Beat visuals or music that play along, but timing is not checked, so any input works.

KNOBS tempo; width of the timing window; penalty for missing the beat

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Excise

mechanics × procedures

Side actions that are required to play but add nothing to the game by themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It appears when the game state must be updated by hand (bookkeeping, tracking statistics, handling many units or characters) with nobody or nothing doing it automatically. To avoid it, automate the upkeep or fold it into real choices.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A task that merely looks like chores, such as a quick, enjoyable action that is actually a meaningful choice, so it is not true excise.

KNOBS how much state players must maintain by hand; how much of it is automated

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Collaborative Actions

mechanics × procedures

An action happens only if several participants each do their own part.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The result must really need more than one agent, with outcomes depending on coordination and a way for them to coordinate.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'team' action that one player could do alone, or participants who simply do their own thing in parallel.

KNOBS number of participants; timing precision needed; how rewards are shared

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Physical Navigation

mechanics × procedures

The player finds their way through the game environment by actually moving through space.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs real-world goal locations, a way to confirm arrival, and obstacles that make the route matter. Designers must also decide whether speed and fitness should count.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are told to walk somewhere, but the goal could be completed from the sofa or the route never matters.

KNOBS distance between goal locations; how arrival is verified; time pressure

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No Direct Player Influence

mechanics × procedures

Games where the player barely or never directly controls what happens.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must cut players off from changing the game state, while still giving them something to do around it, such as betting, building an agent beforehand, or setting up an initial state. Their involvement has to be real enough that they stay emotionally invested.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with only a few trivial buttons that look like input but make no difference to the result, and nothing else for players to engage with.

KNOBS how much input players get, if any; whether they can prepare in advance or place bets

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Live Action Roleplaying

mechanics × procedures

A role-playing game where participants physically act out their heroes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must act in person, in character, with believable props and costumes, and communicate in-world. The design must handle gaps between what players know and what characters know.

JUST A LABEL WHEN People wear costumes but talk and act as themselves, so it is just a normal tabletop game in costume.

KNOBS how much in-character play is demanded; how real the props are; rules for out-of-game talk

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Role Selection

mechanics × procedures

The player chooses their abilities by picking one of a few ready-made roles.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The roles must differ in what they offer, so that choosing is a real decision with trade-offs. Rules must state who can choose what and when.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A choice among roles that are effectively identical or where one is clearly best, so selection does not matter.

KNOBS number and difference of roles; whether roles are exclusive; when selection happens

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Tick-Based Games

mechanics × procedures

Real-time games with long pauses between updates, leaving time to think.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Ticks must be long enough to plan within and must cap actions per tick. Someone or something must enforce the schedule.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Updates happen so fast or so freely that players act continuously, so it is simply real-time.

KNOBS tick length; actions allowed per tick; how unused actions are handled

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Bidding

mechanics × procedures

Players offer resources in competition for the right to make a purchase or trade.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need bid resources that are scarce and also matter elsewhere, a clear rule for who wins and a reward worth competing for. Caps or limited budgets keep it a real trade-off.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Bids are called, but resources are plentiful, so everyone can always outbid at no cost and nothing is given up.

KNOBS type and amount of bidding resource; whether the bid resource is spent or returned; what the reward is

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No-Ops

mechanics × procedures

Player actions that change nothing in the game state.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Waiting must be a legal choice, or a forced effect, and the game state must keep changing while the player waits so that waiting has a point. Whether it is voluntary or forced determines whether it feels like a strategic choice or a punishment.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pass button that is never worth using because the situation never rewards waiting, or a forced skip so rare that it never affects anyone.

KNOBS whether no-ops are voluntary or forced; how often and how long they last

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Tile-Laying

mechanics × procedures

Placing pieces where their position relative to those already laid matters.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Where a piece goes must matter for what follows, with relations to neighbors affecting play. Placement must vary between games.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Tiles are laid down but position has no effect, so it is decoration.

KNOBS placement rules; who places; how many tile types and how drawn

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Varying Turn Orders

mechanics × procedures

The order of turns changes during the game, by itself or by the players' choice.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Order must really change between rounds by rotation, score-based ranking or player choice, and the first slot must carry a real advantage or disadvantage for the variation to matter. Limit player-driven changes so they do not dominate.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rotating order in a game where acting first or last makes no difference, so the rotation changes nothing.

KNOBS how order is determined (rotation, score, bidding); how big the first-player advantage is; how many changes players may make

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Interruptibility

mechanics × procedures

The game's design lets one player step out for a while without spoiling the game for others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Stopping must not harm the player or others, which means saving state, pausing time, or having others covered by AI when someone leaves. It works only if the rest of the system also copes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pause or save option that still costs the player progress, or that wrecks the game for other players.

KNOBS where and how often saves/pauses are allowed; what covers an absent player

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Team Combos

mechanics × procedures

Coordinated actions by several players trigger an extra effect they would not have alone.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The extra effect must be big enough to justify coordinating, and players need to be able to notice or learn how to trigger it. Roles that differ, or timing windows, make it truly require several people.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players acting near each other get a small bonus that they would almost as easily get alone, so no one coordinates.

KNOBS size of the combo bonus; timing window; how many players and which abilities are required

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Interruptible Actions

mechanics × procedures

An action can be broken off before it has fully taken effect.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must have a delay or build-up in which others can respond, and there must be a means to stop them. The window should be long enough to react to.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An action that has a wind-up animation but cannot actually be stopped, so the wind-up is just decoration.

KNOBS length of the interruption window; what can interrupt; cost to the interrupted

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Asynchronous Gameplay

mechanics × procedures

Players do not need to play at the same time; each joins when convenient.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Game state must be kept while players are away, with turns or ticks that do not stall others, and ways to show who else is in the game. Handle waiting with long timers, recordings, AI or gifts left for others.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game is called asynchronous but still needs everyone online at once, or the world freezes and nothing happens in absence.

KNOBS turn or tick length; how long state persists; what substitutes absent players (AI, ghosts, gifts)

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Token Placement

mechanics × procedures

Players choose future actions by placing their tokens on them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Action slots must be fewer than the demand for them, so placing a token blocks others, and each player needs only a few tokens. A clear turn order for placement is required.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Every action slot is unlimited or open to everyone, so placing a token is just a bookkeeping step that blocks nobody.

KNOBS tokens per player; number and capacity of action slots; placement turn order

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Information Passing

mechanics × procedures

One character gives another information that can affect how the game goes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The information must change what players know or can do (a new goal, a clue, a better choice), and delivered through a channel such as dialogue or eavesdropping. It must be reliable or deliberately unreliable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Characters talk but say only flavour text, so players learn nothing that affects their decisions.

KNOBS how much and how useful the information is; how it is delivered; whether it can be false

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Mules

mechanics × procedures

Programs that take over monotonous, repetitive actions from the player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have repetitive tasks worth delegating, and the automation must be able to run them without the player. Limits on efficiency or risks keep it from replacing play entirely.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An auto-play button that does the task but is so weak or so restricted that players still do everything by hand.

KNOBS which tasks can be automated; how efficient; what risks come with it

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Physical Enactment

mechanics × procedures

The player personally performs actions that then happen in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a way to read or judge the body action, and a clear choice of which actions are enacted and which are abstracted. The physical demand has to be what decides outcomes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A motion-controller game where a button press or tiny flick does the same job as the gesture, so the movement is just decoration.

KNOBS which actions must be physically performed; how large and demanding the movement is; how strictly it is judged

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Game Time Manipulation

mechanics × procedures

Actions by which the player changes the flow of game time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have a state and timeline that can really be paused, sped up, slowed or rewound, and the ability must cost something or be limited. In multiplayer, decide whose time is affected so others keep their agency.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rewind or slow-motion button so cheap, or so rarely needed, that nobody changes decisions because of it, or a visual slowdown that changes nothing in the rules.

KNOBS which time effects exist (stop, slow, fast, reverse); how often and at what cost they can be used

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Polyathlons

mechanics × procedures

Goal of completing several challenges, each needing different skills.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each event must need a different skill and have a clear result that can be combined into a final score. The mix must make players be either generalists or specialists.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several events are listed, but they test the same skill, so it is really one game repeated.

KNOBS number of events; how different their skills are; how they are weighted in the total

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Trick Taking

mechanics × procedures

Several players play cards, and one of them wins that round.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Cards need ranked values with rules for following suit, a winner-determination rule, and a clear scoring goal (most, fewest, exact). A turn order must exist.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players play cards in a round but the winner is picked at random or the result changes nothing in scoring.

KNOBS goal (most, fewest or exact tricks); suit-following rules; trump use

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Quick Time Events

mechanics × procedures

The game shows a sequence of button presses that must be performed instantly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must be real-time, with clear prompts, fair time windows and meaningful consequences for failure. They work best where normal controls do not cover the situation.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Prompts appear but have no penalty or can't be failed, so they are a cutscene with a button press.

KNOBS sequence length; time window; penalty for failure

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Startgame

mechanics × procedures

The first stage in games that have clearly separated stages.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The opening needs few options and distinct goals from later phases, and starting conditions must be fair. A following phase must be clearly different so the structure is noticeable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A section called the opening that plays exactly like the rest of the game, so players never notice a phase.

KNOBS how many actions are available at the start; how long the phase lasts; how much starting positions differ

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Card Building

mechanics × procedures

Players themselves change the effects and properties of individual cards.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Modifications must be meaningful and cost something, with real choices between them, and cards must be reused so the investment pays off.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Cards have upgrade slots, but one upgrade is clearly best or the changes are too small to affect play.

KNOBS how many modifications a card can take; their cost; whether changes are permanent

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Auto-Aim

mechanics × procedures

The game partly aims for the player, making targeting easier.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The assist must really change hit results, such as pulling the crosshair or bending shots, in the situations where aiming is hard. Tune its strength against skill and fairness in multiplayer.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An aim assist option exists but is so weak it never changes a shot, or it only shows a marker without helping.

KNOBS assist strength and radius; type (reticle pull, bullet bend, lock-on); where it is active

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Awareness of Surroundings

mechanics × procedures

Computer-controlled characters notice everything important around them and react.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Agents must sense the relevant objects, agents and events and respond differently depending on them. Context-dependent reactions and memory make it more believable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Agents look like they see, but they ignore pick-ups, other agents or events and follow a fixed script regardless.

KNOBS what agents can perceive; sensing range; how rich their reactions and memory are

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Killcams

mechanics × procedures

Right after a kill, the player is shown a replay of it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must record the moments before a death and show them right away, with a clear camera choice and view style. The replay must show enough to explain how the death happened.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A replay plays but from a useless angle or too late, so the player learns nothing about what killed them.

KNOBS when the replay triggers; how long it is; camera angle; full screen or small inset

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Misfortune Mitigation

mechanics × procedures

The player can act to reduce their own risk of failure.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Bad luck must be possible and costly, and players need real options to reduce it, such as rerolls, known odds or a choice of action order. The options must cost something.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A mitigation option that is available but either always the obvious choice or so weak that it does not change outcomes.

KNOBS how many rerolls or extra chances; how much they cost; how well the odds are known

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Turnovers

mechanics × procedures

A game event ends one player's turn and immediately passes the turn to another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must carry a real chance of failure, and failure must end the turn immediately and cost the player their remaining actions. Players need to see that risk before they act.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A failure that is called a turnover but the player keeps acting or loses nothing meaningful.

KNOBS chance of failure per action; which failures end the turn

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Bag Building

mechanics × procedures

Players put tokens into a bag and later draw them back out.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must choose what goes into the bag and when to draw, with token types that really differ in value, so the contents change draw outcomes. Decide whether bags are personal or shared.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Tokens go in a bag but all are the same or are drawn without choices before, so bag contents don't matter.

KNOBS token types; when tokens are added and drawn; personal or shared bag

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Workshopping

mechanics × procedures

Techniques used before the game: building the world together or preparing for the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Sessions must have defined techniques to create characters, relationships and setting together, with enough time and facilitation for everyone to take part. The output must feed into play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A group discussion that produces nothing used in the game, or a handout read silently.

KNOBS length; techniques used; how much is created collectively; facilitator involvement

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Password Save Files

mechanics × procedures

A save that consists of a single password.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game state to save must be small enough to encode in a short code that players can write down and type in. The code must be generated from the state and accepted on entry.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A code that is just a level name anyone can guess, or one that does not actually restore the progress it claims to.

KNOBS what state the password encodes; its length and format; when it is shown

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Extra Turns

mechanics × procedures

A player takes another turn right after their own turn.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Specify the trigger (a reward, a roll, a card) and whether the player controls when it happens. Because it can double a player's actions, it must be balanced against how strong a single turn is.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An 'extra turn' that has nothing meaningful left to do, or comes only when the game is already decided.

KNOBS how often extra turns are granted; what triggers them and whether players choose when

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Meta-Techniques

mechanics × procedures

In role-playing, players tell each other something without passing it on to their characters.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must give players actual methods for signaling about rules or desired direction without speaking through characters, and players must be taught and use them. The method must suit the fiction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rule that says players may communicate out of character but gives no actual technique, so it is just ordinary talking.

KNOBS which technique types are offered; how intrusive they are

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Bag Management

mechanics × procedures

Players can remove or swap tokens in the bag without playing them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Removing or replacing tokens must really shift the odds, with a cost or limit so it is a decision. Choose how many tokens and what kinds can be manipulated.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players may remove tokens, but the effect on later draws is negligible or the action is free and obvious.

KNOBS how many tokens can be removed or replaced; cost of doing so; whether draws are blind

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Substitute Actions

mechanics × procedures

One action stands in for another, as if replacing it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The replacement action should keep as much meaning as the original, and players must be told and have a chance to practice it. Without a shared understanding it does not work.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A named stand-in action that nobody has been told about or that resembles nothing of the original, so people stop and explain what it means.

KNOBS how closely the action resembles the original; how much briefing and practice is given

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Warming-Up Roleplay Exercises

mechanics × procedures

Exercises before the game that help players get into their roles.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Exercises must target the specific roleplay skills the game demands, be short and low-pressure, and be done right before play with everyone participating. They should also teach any special rules used.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A generic icebreaker listed in the rulebook that people skip or that has nothing to do with the roles in the game.

KNOBS length; type of exercise; amount of group interaction; relevance to the game's roleplay demands

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Characters

mechanics × rules

A set of traits and properties that make up fictional people and creatures in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They need a persistent identity with data that changes and matters, which players can identify with or role-play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A named figure appears on screen, but there are no data or changes behind it, so it is just a skin.

KNOBS depth of personal data; how much players can customise; how much the character changes during play

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Privileged Abilities

mechanics × rules

Abilities that let someone do what others cannot.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The ability must open genuinely different tactics or goals, and access must be defined and balanced. Skilled play should not easily make up for its absence.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A special power is named, but it is weak or easily imitated, so privileged and ordinary agents play the same way.

KNOBS who gets the ability; its power; how often it can be used; how it is obtained

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Avatars

mechanics × rules

Figures in the game world through which the player acts; their fate depends on the player's success.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK One entity must be the player's main way to act and be affected, and its fate must matter to the player. The more defined the avatar, the more it limits how players can role-play it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character model is shown, but its fate doesn't touch the player's progress, or the player really controls many units, so the 'avatar' is only a picture.

KNOBS how much personality and detail the avatar has; how tightly its fate ties to player success; one or switching avatars

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Randomness

mechanics × rules

Events and effects in the game cannot be predicted exactly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Random outcomes must have known ranges and affect decisions that matter. The balance with player skill needs to be chosen deliberately.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Random rolls happen, but the results are trivial or always overridden by skill, so luck changes nothing.

KNOBS size of the random range; which events use it; probability distribution

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Algorithmic Agents

mechanics × rules

Animals, monsters, and other creatures whose behavior follows rules rather than player control.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must respond to the game state and produce actions that look purposeful and relate to the player's goals (hindering or helping). Behaviour needs enough variety to avoid being solved at once.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Entities repeat a fixed loop regardless of what the player does, so they behave like scenery.

KNOBS complexity and aggressiveness of behaviour; how much it reacts to the player; how many agents

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Improved Abilities

mechanics × rules

An ability the player already has starts working more effectively.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The improvement must noticeably change what actions achieve, be tied to progress or rewards, and be paced so it does not erase challenge. Players should be able to feel the difference.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A level-up that raises a stat so slightly or so evenly with enemy scaling that play feels exactly the same.

KNOBS size of each improvement; how often and by what route it is gained; whether players choose

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Skills

mechanics × rules

A measure of how likely a character is to succeed at a task; it grows with experience.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Skill values must visibly change the odds or the outcomes of actions, and different skills must matter in different situations. Players need some way to raise them and to see the effect.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A skill list on the character sheet whose values barely move the success chance, or a skill that nobody ever has reason to check or improve.

KNOBS number of skills; how strongly a skill value shifts success odds; how fast skills grow

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Environmental Effects

mechanics × rules

In a certain part of the world, actions and events work differently than elsewhere.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each area needs a rule that alters actions, movement or events, and it should be noticeable and matter to choices of where to go.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Areas with a different look or label that behave exactly like all others.

KNOBS which areas have effects; effect type and strength; whether permanent or temporary

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Penalties

mechanics × rules

Unpleasant consequences for the player's position, progress, or abilities.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The effect must actually worsen the player's position, progress or abilities, and it must follow from specific events. It needs to be large enough to be felt but fair enough that it does not break the experience.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A penalty so small or so easily undone that players ignore it, or one that is announced but changes nothing in the game state.

KNOBS how severe; what triggers it; whether it can be recovered from

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Balancing Effects

mechanics × rules

Rules that shrink the leader's lead so the contest doesn't end too early.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must really give help to those behind or cost to those ahead, at the right game phase. Too strong and players feel effort is wasted; too weak and the gap stays.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A catch-up rule exists but gives such a small bonus that a leader still always wins, or it is only mentioned in the manual.

KNOBS strength of catch-up; when it applies (early, middle, late); preemptive or corrective

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Character Development

mechanics × rules

Over the course of the game, a character gains new skills and grows stronger.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Visible progress with clear triggers, improvements that actually change what the character can do, and some player choice in direction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Numbers go up but the experience of play stays the same, since challenges scale in step and no new options appear.

KNOBS growth rate; sources of progress; size of each improvement; amount of player choice

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Game Element Insertion

mechanics × rules

New game elements are added to a game already in progress.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Define what can be inserted, when, and by whom, and let the new elements really change the situation. Who controls the insertion shapes pacing and surprise.

JUST A LABEL WHEN New things appear, but they are the same as before or too weak to matter, so nothing changes.

KNOBS what is inserted; how often; who controls the insertion

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Evolving Rule Sets

mechanics × rules

New rules are added to the game as it goes on.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There has to be a channel to deliver new rules (patches, expansions, a game master, legacy-style carry-over) and the rule set must be large enough that changes alter what good play is. Players need to be told or able to find out what changed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A patch that only fixes bugs or adds cosmetic items, so the way anyone plays stays exactly the same.

KNOBS how often rules change; how big each change is and what it touches (new abilities, removals, balance)

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Ability Losses

mechanics × rules

The player loses abilities they once had, for example as a punishment.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The loss must have a clear trigger (a failure, an enemy effect, running out of a resource) and noticeably shrink what the player can do. The player also needs to see how it can be undone or worked around, or it just feels arbitrary.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'loss' is announced but the player can still do everything useful, or it lasts so briefly that it is ignored.

KNOBS which actions are lost; what triggers it; how long it lasts

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Game Servers

mechanics × rules

Computers or mechanisms on which each separate play of the game runs.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Implement the rules and let players join and leave instances reliably, handling non-player actions and state. Stability and scale shape what is possible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A server is mentioned, but the logic really runs on clients, so it adds no mediation or consistency.

KNOBS players per server; persistence of the world; rule enforcement versus simulation

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Spawning

mechanics × rules

The moment an avatar, unit, or other element appears in the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must say what appears, when, where and with what advantages or penalties. It must fit the pace of the game, such as reviving players or refilling enemies and resources.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Elements that reappear instantly in the same state with no cost or delay, so removal and death carry no consequence.

KNOBS what spawns; how often; delay before respawn; where it can happen; penalties on respawn

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Location-Fixed Abilities

mechanics × rules

Abilities are available only in certain places in the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Certain spots must give real, useful abilities that are not available elsewhere, and be limited or contestable. Movement rules should let players choose to reach them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Special spots exist but give weak bonuses or nobody needs them, so players walk past.

KNOBS how strong the ability is; how many such places; who can control them

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Destructible Objects

mechanics × rules

Items that can be broken or destroyed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must have a means and a reason to break the objects, and the breaking must change the game state, such as opening a path or giving loot. The object needs a visible durability.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Scenery that looks breakable but is not, or whose destruction changes nothing.

KNOBS durability; what destroys it; whether it comes back

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Fog of War

mechanics × rules

Unexplored or unseen parts of the world are hidden from the player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Hide parts of the world and make player entities with limited sight ranges reveal them, so lacking information truly affects choices. Decide whether terrain and units are hidden separately and whether revealed areas re-hide.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A dark overlay exists, but the map and enemies are fully known or revealed at once, so it never limits decisions.

KNOBS sight range of units; whether explored areas re-hide; separate fog for terrain versus units

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Installations

mechanics × rules

Large tools in the world that the player cannot move or carry away.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must give actions that are better or different from those available elsewhere, and be placed where players would want to go. Limits like cooldowns or cost keep them from dominating.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A large fixed object in the scenery that offers nothing that could not be done elsewhere, so no one needs to use it.

KNOBS where they are placed; what they offer; cooldown or cost of use

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Vehicles

mechanics × rules

Elements that let you move faster or differently than usual.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Vehicles must provide clearly different movement, speed, protection or weapons from walking, and be reachable at set places or buildable. The world must be shaped so the difference matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A model you sit in that moves like the avatar at the same speed and gives no new access or power.

KNOBS speed; terrain access (air, water); armor and weapons; spawn locations and numbers

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Ultra-Powerful Events

mechanics × rules

Events that players cannot influence in any way.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The event must really be beyond player action and have a visible effect on play. Players should know about it in advance if you want planning around it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An event shown as unstoppable that players can in fact prevent or ignore with little effort.

KNOBS when and how often it occurs; how large its effect is; whether it is announced

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Death Consequences

mechanics × rules

What changes in the game when a character dies.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The cost of dying must be big enough to make players avoid it yet small enough not to make them quit. Saving and reloading must be limited, or the penalty disappears.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Dying brings back the player on the spot with everything intact, so death is just a short animation.

KNOBS what is lost on death; how far away and how fast respawn is

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Difficulty Levels

mechanics × rules

A setting where the player chooses how hard the game will be.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each level must change the play in a meaningful way, such as the enemies' numbers, skill or the player's resources. Players must be able to pick and change the level.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A menu with easy, normal and hard that only change a name or a small number, so the games feel the same.

KNOBS what each level changes; how many levels; whether the level can be changed during play

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Player-Created Characters

mechanics × rules

Characters whose creation the player was able to influence in some way.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need real options, such as traits, equipment and skills, that change how the character plays. Designers must balance the freedom against the time and knowledge it demands.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A long creation screen with only cosmetic choices, so every character plays the same.

KNOBS number and depth of options; randomness in creation; when in the game customization happens

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Temporal Consistency

mechanics × rules

The order of events in the game matches the order of events in the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The design must remove or limit saving, reloading and free retries, so events stay as played. Lives or pauses must not let players erase outcomes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The story claims events are final, but players can reload a save and redo any moment freely.

KNOBS whether and when saves are allowed; number of retries; how events are permanent

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Decreased Abilities

mechanics × rules

An event after which an ability works worse than before.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The reduction must visibly change what the player can do and be tied to a cause the player understands. It should usually be limited in time or reversible, or it becomes a dead end.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A penalty so small that the odds of success barely move, or one that is always cured at once.

KNOBS size of the reduction; how long it lasts; how it is cured

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Irreversible Events

mechanics × rules

Events whose consequences cannot be undone in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK No other rule or action may push that part of the state back, and the game must be able to enforce this (system or facilitator). Players must also understand that it cannot be undone.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The event is called permanent but a later action, undo, reload or house rule quietly reverses it.

KNOBS which events are made permanent; how often they happen; how clearly players are warned

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Line of Sight

mechanics × rules

One game element must be able to see another directly.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The world needs things that block sight and actions that depend on seeing, such as shooting, stealth or detection. The blockers must be placed so that position matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A sight rule is declared but the map has almost no blockers, so everything can always see everything.

KNOBS how much cover or obstruction exists; sight range; which actions need sight

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Player/Character Skill Composites

mechanics × rules

An action's result depends on both the player's own skill and the character's attributes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each action's result must include a real contribution from the player's execution and from the character's attributes. Neither part should be able to cancel the other.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The character has stats, but the player's input decides everything, or the reverse, so one part is only for show.

KNOBS relative weight of player skill versus character stats in outcomes

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Privileged Movement

mechanics × rules

A way of moving that is available to some and unavailable to others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game world needs obstacles, restricted areas or travel costs that the special movement overcomes in a meaningful way. Its effect on goals like capture or evasion must be considered.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A unit has a flashy movement type, but the map offers no obstacles it bypasses, so it travels the same as everyone.

KNOBS which units can do it; what obstacles it ignores; duration or cost

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Controllers

mechanics × rules

Stationary world objects that provide actions available nowhere else.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A player must have to go to the controller to use it, and using it must have a useful effect on the world or on their abilities. Their location should matter so that fights or travel form around them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A lever or console is in the world, but it can be used from anywhere or does nothing significant.

KNOBS where they are placed; who can use them; what the effect is and its cost

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Variable Accuracy

mechanics × rules

A mechanic that imitates how hitting a target is sometimes easier and sometimes harder.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Shots must actually miss based on understandable factors the player can influence, and the current accuracy should be shown to them. The effect must be big enough to alter how they position and fire.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A crosshair that wiggles for show while every shot still lands exactly where aimed.

KNOBS spread size; penalty from moving or taking damage; time to aim; effect of skills and upgrades

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Dice

mechanics × rules

Physical cubes that give a random outcome from a set range, most often equally likely.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The kind and number of dice must match what is being decided, and outcomes must actually affect the game. Players can then learn the odds and use them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Rolls that are ignored or overridden, so the result never matters.

KNOBS type and number of dice; what the roll decides

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Equipment

mechanics × rules

Items that a character can wear or hold in their hands.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Items must change what the character can do when equipped, and there must be several to choose from with trade-offs, so choosing matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Items that can be equipped but give only cosmetic changes or are strictly better than every alternative.

KNOBS number of equippable items; strength of their bonuses; wear or limited uses

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Delayed Effects

mechanics × rules

The result of an action or event appears not at once but after some time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The gap must be long enough to be noticed and the effect must still matter when it lands. Whether players can see when it will happen decides if it brings planning or suspense.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A delay of a moment that players do not notice, or an effect that no longer matters when it arrives.

KNOBS length of the delay; whether the timing is shown

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Handicap Systems

mechanics × rules

Rules that make the game easier or harder for individual players to even out their chances.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The adjustments must change real quantities, such as resources, health, abilities or head starts, in proportion to the skill gap. Players must accept them, whether voluntary or enforced.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'difficulty' setting that only renames levels or tweaks a number too small to feel, so strong and weak players still have very unequal chances.

KNOBS size of advantage or penalty; which attribute is changed; voluntary vs enforced

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Enforced Agent Behavior

mechanics × rules

A character is forced to take certain actions so that their personality is kept or developed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must actually limit available actions or take control at set points, and the enforced behaviour must fit the character or story.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character described as loyal or cowardly whom the player can still make do anything.

KNOBS which actions are forbidden or forced; when control is taken; how strictly this applies

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Sanctioned Cheating

mechanics × rules

Cheating that the rules allow or that other players consider acceptable.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Offer specific rule-bending actions, decide who may use them and what happens if caught, and keep them out of the normal action menu. In multiplayer, detection risk and some hidden information make it matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A cheat menu that nobody needs or that has no effect on goals, or a 'cheat' that other players are never able to notice or object to.

KNOBS which cheats exist; who may use them; chance and penalty of being caught

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Actions Have Diegetically Social Consequences

mechanics × rules

A hero's deeds change how other characters in the world treat them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Characters or factions need defined norms and a system (a score or behaviour rules) that visibly changes how they treat the player after relevant actions. The reactions must carry real benefits or costs.

JUST A LABEL WHEN NPCs say different lines after a theft but treat the player exactly the same, so nothing in play changes.

KNOBS which actions count; how strongly NPCs react; how visible and lasting the reputation is

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Critical Hits

mechanics × rules

Strikes that deal noticeably more damage or give a special effect.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The chance must be low enough that it feels special but high enough to happen in normal play, and the extra effect must be clearly larger than an ordinary hit. It may depend on skill or weapon.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A hit is called critical and a number pops up, but the damage is barely different from a normal hit.

KNOBS chance of a critical; damage multiplier or extra effects; skill or weapon modifiers

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Dynamic Difficulty Adjustment

mechanics × rules

The game changes its difficulty by itself depending on how the player is doing.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must measure performance reliably and link it to parameters that really change the challenge, with changes gentle enough not to feel like cheating or to be easily gamed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A system that is switched on but whose adjustments are so small, or tied to a poor measure, that a good and a bad player face the same challenge.

KNOBS what performance is measured; how strongly and how quickly difficulty reacts; whether it is visible or optional

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Sets

mechanics × rules

Groups of game elements that are worth more together than apart.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Define clear combinations that give a win, score, or bonus bigger than the parts, and make the parts available with enough chance and trade to work toward. Progress toward completing sets should be visible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A set bonus so small, or pieces so easy to get, that players never go after the combination deliberately.

KNOBS which combinations count; bonus size; how rarely pieces appear

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Temporary Abilities

mechanics × rules

Abilities available only for a limited stretch of game time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The ability must be strong enough to change what players do and must truly expire. Players should face a choice about when to use it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'temporary' power lasts so long, or recurs so often, that it is effectively permanent.

KNOBS duration or number of uses; power level; how often it can be gained

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Geometric Progression

mechanics × rules

With each step of effort, the result is multiplied by the same factor.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear multiplier applied to a cost, reward or effect, with a ratio above or below 1 chosen on purpose. The numbers must be large enough that players notice the growth or decay and change how they invest.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A ratio so close to 1 or with such low starting values that the growth is invisible, so it plays like a flat linear increase.

KNOBS the common ratio; the starting value; where in the game it is applied (costs, rewards, scores)

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Permadeath

mechanics × rules

A character's death is irreversible and they cannot be brought back.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Death must truly remove the character with no respawn, and loading an earlier state must not be possible, or it loses meaning. The game must be built around the loss so it feels like a real stake.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A death that is advertised as permanent but can be undone by loading a save or a free revive, so it costs nothing.

KNOBS what can permanently die; whether there are extra chances; whether saves are allowed

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Vulnerabilities

mechanics × rules

Weak points that others can take advantage of.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Weaknesses must change damage or effects noticeably, differ between enemies or situations, and be discoverable or hideable so players adapt their choices. Counter options must exist.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A listed weakness with a negligible bonus, or one that applies to every enemy equally, so there is nothing to exploit.

KNOBS damage multiplier; which entities have which weakness; how obvious the weakness is; availability of exploiting weapons

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Player-Player Proximity

mechanics × rules

Rules depend on how close players are to each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must define what counts as near, which effects follow and how they are detected. It must also plan for the social contact this brings.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are told to stay close, but nothing in the rules reacts to the distance.

KNOBS distance threshold; what is triggered when entering, keeping or breaking proximity

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Unlocking

mechanics × rules

Gaining access to new abilities or game content.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Content must be truly withheld until a clear requirement is met, and players should know it exists. The unlocked item should be worth the effort.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An 'unlock' that gives something trivial or that was available all along, or a requirement so easy it is never felt.

KNOBS what is gated; the unlock requirement; how visible the locked content is

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Arithmetic Progression

mechanics × rules

Reward or risk grows in direct proportion to the effort invested.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each unit of effort must give the same increment, with no multipliers or thresholds. Players need to see the relation so they can plan.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The rule is called linear, but bonuses or thresholds are hidden in the numbers so the real curve is not linear.

KNOBS amount of reward per unit of effort; minimum or maximum investment

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Invulnerabilities

mechanics × rules

The ability to take no harm from attacks and other dangers.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Decide which damage types are blocked, for whom, and whether the immunity is permanent or timed. It only matters if the dangers it blocks are otherwise real, and if some others lack it so it is a privilege.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An entity is labeled immune but the threats it ignores never occur, or everyone has it, so it changes no decisions.

KNOBS which damage types are covered; who has it; how long it lasts

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Player-Location Proximity

mechanics × rules

Rules depend on whether the player is physically near a place.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs reliable position detection or self-reporting, defined places, and gameplay that truly depends on arriving there. The cost of travel has to be reasonable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Places are listed as targets, but the player's actual position is never checked or never changes anything.

KNOBS trigger distance; number and spacing of locations; how position is verified

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Characteristics

mechanics × rules

Numbers and facts that describe an individual hero, item, or other creature in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Values must differ between entities and affect outcomes, and some of them must be changeable during play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Entities have stats, but all are identical or ignored by the rules.

KNOBS which stats exist; their ranges; how they change

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Cooldown

mechanics × rules

After use, an action is unavailable for some time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The wait must be long enough to hold back repeated use, and the player must have other useful things to do meanwhile. The remaining time should be visible or learnable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An ability has a cooldown so short that it can effectively be used continuously, or nothing else is worth doing while waiting.

KNOBS length of the wait; which actions are covered; shared or global cooldown

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Fixed Distributions

mechanics × rules

Guaranteed randomness: by known moments, a preset set of outcomes will have come up.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must draw from a limited pool without replacement (like a deck) or force a spread over a cycle, and let players know or track what has appeared. Visible history lets them predict what is left.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A shuffled deck that is reshuffled every draw or a random roll, so past results never constrain future ones.

KNOBS cycle length or pool size; whether players can see what has already been drawn

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Diegetically Tangible Game Items

mechanics × rules

Items that really exist inside the game world, which can be seen and picked up.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The items must take part in the game's physics or rules, blocking movement or sight or being moved and broken. Players must be able to interact with them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Objects that are drawn solid but can be walked through and do nothing.

KNOBS which items are solid; whether they can be moved or destroyed

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Events Timed to the Real World

mechanics × rules

Game events are triggered when a certain moment in real time arrives.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must run in real time or ticks and know the real date or time, and the event must offer something worth showing up for, with players told in advance.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A holiday theme that is only a visual reskin with no different gameplay or rewards, so nobody schedules around it.

KNOBS which real-world dates trigger events; event length; how far ahead players are told

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Friendly Fire

mechanics × rules

Attacks by members of the same team damage their own teammates.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Teams must exist, and damage rules must apply to allies, with real cost to hitting them. Players need to be in situations where stray hits are plausible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Friendly Fire is switched on, but damage to allies is trivial or ranges are so short that nobody ever worries about it.

KNOBS damage dealt to allies; area-of-effect size; whether the option is on at each difficulty

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Optional Rules

mechanics × rules

Rules that players themselves decide whether to use.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rule set must have clearly separate modules that can be added without breaking the core game. Too many options add confusion and production cost, so a small set that is easy to explain works best.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An option that is listed in the rulebook but changes nothing in play, or is so entangled with the core rules that nobody can use it without breaking the game.

KNOBS how many optional rules; when they can be chosen (before play, during play, by whom)

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Switches

mechanics × rules

World elements that players use to trigger events or actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The activation must change something that matters (open a path, alter hazards, change rules), and players must be able to find the switch and guess roughly what it does. Position and state handling are the main choices.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A lever that only plays an animation, or whose effect was already available some other way.

KNOBS number and placement of switches; what each does; whether reusable, timed, or one-shot

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Upgrades

mechanics × rules

Changes to items that make them more effective.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Upgrades must measurably improve an ability of existing equipment and cost players something, like scarce materials or an irreversible choice, so selection matters. Slots and acquisition rules must be clear.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A cosmetic or tiny numeric bump that no one can feel, or one upgrade so obviously best that every player takes it.

KNOBS size of the boost; cost and scarcity; number of upgrade slots; whether installing is reversible

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Character Levels

mechanics × rules

Stages of a hero's growth; each new one grants and strengthens abilities.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Clear thresholds, a meaningful reward at each step, and a sensible number of levels, with content for those who reach the top.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A level number is displayed but nothing is unlocked or improved when it rises.

KNOBS number of levels; points needed per level; what each level grants

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Orthogonal Differentiation

mechanics × rules

Entities differ in kind of abilities rather than in number: not stronger, but different.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each entity must be able to do something others cannot do at all, not just do the same thing better. The differences need to matter in play so that players need the entities for their special function.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Units with different names, looks and stat numbers, but who all do the same kind of thing, so they are just reskins with different values.

KNOBS how many entity types; how unique each ability is; how the sets are distributed among players

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Player Augmentations

mechanics × rules

Support that helps the player perform game actions better.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The help must truly change the success of specific actions, and must be tuned against the game's challenge. Designers must decide who gets it, so that it neither trivialises play nor feels useless.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An assist option exists but is so weak, or so hidden, that results are the same with or without it.

KNOBS strength of the help; which actions it affects; who receives it

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Player Kicking

mechanics × rules

A player is removed from the session by others' decision, not by the game's rules.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Someone must hold the power to kick, such as a moderator or a vote, with clear criteria and a defined length and scope. Without that, it will be unfair or ignored.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A kick button exists, but kicked players can rejoin immediately or nobody has the authority to use it.

KNOBS who may kick; vote threshold; duration and scope of the ban

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Shared Rewards

mechanics × rules

A goal where the reward must be split among several players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A reward must go to a group, with a clear rule on how it is divided or room to negotiate. Individual rewards on the side weaken it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A reward everyone gets in full anyway, so there is nothing to share or argue about.

KNOBS who shares; how it is divided; reward size

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Cosmetic Game Items

mechanics × rules

Items that differ from others only in appearance.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must change looks only, not abilities, and be visible to others, with enough variety or rarity that players want them. Players should be able to choose, show or collect them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An item is sold as cosmetic, but only one player sees it or it is not displayed anywhere.

KNOBS number of variants; rarity or cost; how they are obtained; how visible they are

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Varying Rule Sets

mechanics × rules

The game's rules change over time, but within a preset collection.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Clear triggers must change the active rules during play, such as random cards, locations, switches or new abilities, and players must be told about the changes. The shifts must alter what good play looks like.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rule list that technically has conditional clauses which never trigger in practice, so play stays the same throughout.

KNOBS how often rules change; trigger type (random, location, progress); how many rules can change at once

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Moveable Tiles

mechanics × rules

World elements that move, but not of their own will.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The tiles need clear movement rules, such as what triggers them and where they stop, and the level must be built so their movement matters, for example by carrying, blocking or opening routes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Tiles that move as decoration, on a path that never affects where players can go or what they can do.

KNOBS movement pattern, speed and what triggers it

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Negotiable Game Instance Duration

mechanics × rules

Players themselves agree on how long the whole session will last.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have an adjustable end condition and a point before play where players agree on it. The game must still work at different lengths.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A length setting that exists in the menu but is nearly always left at default, or one where a short setting breaks the game.

KNOBS which limits players can set: time, turns or score target

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Transferable Items

mechanics × rules

Items that can be passed from one character to another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be an action to give, drop or swap items, and a clear set of limits about which items and to whom. Items must have value to other players or characters to make transfers worthwhile.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An option to hand over items that is blocked for nearly everything useful, or covers items nobody wants.

KNOBS which items can be transferred; to whom; what limits apply (binding, class restrictions)

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Access Rewards

mechanics × rules

A reward that opens up content or actions that were unavailable before.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Some content must be actually locked at the start and opened by an achievement, and the opened content must be optional and worth wanting. The gate must be visible so players know what they are working toward.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The 'unlocked' area or action was available all along, or it is forced on the player so it is not an optional access at all.

KNOBS what is gated; what unlocks it; how soon new access arrives

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Context Dependent Reactions

mechanics × rules

Game characters respond differently to events and items depending on the situation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Agents must react to relevant conditions such as place, history or who is present, and those reactions must be seen to differ. This needs enough authored content or logic, or a human playing the agent.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Characters seem to react but use the same canned response whatever happens.

KNOBS how many context factors are checked; how many distinct responses are written; human or algorithmic control

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Critical Misses

mechanics × rules

Predefined random failures in combat that harm the attacker themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a small random chance that a failed attack has a real penalty, such as dropping the weapon or hitting the wrong target. It should be rare enough not to feel unfair.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A miss is called critical, but the result is exactly the same as an ordinary miss.

KNOBS chance of it happening; how severe the penalty is; skill or weapon modifiers

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Legacy Games

mechanics × rules

The results of one game permanently change the conditions of later games.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must specify lasting changes, such as new components or rules, that carry to later sessions, while a core of fixed rules keeps it the same game. Players must be able to track the changes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A campaign log or score is kept but nothing in the next session actually differs.

KNOBS how big and how frequent the permanent changes are; how much of the rule set stays fixed

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Anonymous Actions

mechanics × rules

Actions from which you cannot tell exactly which player performed them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must be pooled or hidden (shuffled cards, simultaneous play) so no one can trace the source, and the identity must matter to the outcome. Social channels must not leak who acted.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Actions are called anonymous but everyone can tell who did them from turn order or table talk.

KNOBS how contributions are mixed; whether identities are revealed afterwards; what penalty exists for revealing yourself

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Development Time

mechanics × rules

A set amount of game time needed for an event to produce its main effect.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The time must be fixed and known and must be long enough to make players plan around it. Showing progress makes waiting readable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A timer so short or so skippable that players never have to wait or plan.

KNOBS length of the time; whether it blocks other actions; whether progress is shown

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Possibility of Graceful Surrender

mechanics × rules

The player can give up or leave without spoiling the session for others.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Leaving must not break the game for the others. That means handling the leaver's resources, closing kingmaker loopholes, and rebalancing or substituting an AI for the departed player.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A quit button exists, but leaving ends the match, ruins it for others or counts as a punishable desertion, so players stay on or ragequit.

KNOBS what happens to the leaver's pieces and resources; whether an AI takes over; penalty for leaving

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Save Files

mechanics × rules

Files with data that can be used to restore the state of the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Build real storage and loading of the full or partial state, and decide how saving is triggered and how many slots exist. Slot limits and where saving is allowed decide whether it supports pauses or invites abuse.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A save that only records progress through a password or level number, or loads into a state that immediately kills the player, so it does not truly restore the game.

KNOBS number of slots; manual versus automatic saving; how much state is stored

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Save Points

mechanics × rules

Places in the world or between levels where the player can save the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Put saving at chosen locations or between levels, ideally in safe spots, and space them so retrying costs real effort. Decide whether saving is manual or automatic and how much state is stored.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Save points placed so densely, or saving allowed anywhere anyway, that they never limit anything or mark any progress.

KNOBS distance between save points; manual versus automatic; how much state is saved

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Zone of Control

mechanics × rules

A game element affects how the elements next to it can act.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Units must project effects onto neighboring spaces, such as forced stops, extra movement cost or attack penalties, strong enough to shape movement and positioning. Terrain and choke points should make it matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A highlighted area around units that has no effect on movement or combat.

KNOBS radius; effect strength (stop, extra cost, free attacks); which units generate it; exceptions

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Player-Artifact Proximity

mechanics × rules

Rules depend on how physically close the player is to certain objects.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a way to measure or verify closeness, a defined distance threshold, and events that really depend on it. The artifacts must matter to gameplay.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A proximity condition is claimed, but players can complete the task from anywhere or the check is never enforced.

KNOBS distance threshold; what is triggered on entering or leaving; how long players must stay near

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Always Vulnerable

mechanics × rules

A player's resources may be at risk even when they are not playing.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game world must keep running and allow harm to offline players' assets, with real losses possible. There should be no pause or protection for absent players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game claims offline risk but offline assets are protected or losses are trivial, so absence costs nothing.

KNOBS how much can be lost offline; how long protection lasts, if any

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Critical Failures

mechanics × rules

An especially severe outcome of random failure that an ordinary miss never produces.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The bad result must be clearly worse than an ordinary failure and happen rarely, from a defined random chance. It must have effects the player really feels.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A critical failure is announced, but its effect is the same as an ordinary failure.

KNOBS chance of it happening; how bad the effect is; which actions are covered

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Reward Widgets

mechanics × rules

Rewards placed around the world even though, by the world's logic, they should not be there.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must appear in the play area, be clickable or collectable, and be worth the effort of collecting. A time limit or auto-collect rule sets how much attention they demand.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A reward icon that pops up and gives nothing extra, or is collected automatically so that clicking is pointless.

KNOBS how often widgets appear; time before they auto-collect; reward size

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Setback Penalties

mechanics × rules

A penalty forces the player to repeat past actions or go back over the same path.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Failure must send players back to redo something that cost real effort. It should not remove them from the game, and the size of the loss decides how sharply it hurts.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'setback' that costs almost nothing to redo, such as a respawn a few steps back.

KNOBS how much progress is lost; how far back the player is sent

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Critical Successes

mechanics × rules

An action succeeds by chance and gives a special effect that would otherwise be impossible.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A rare random roll must give a clear extra benefit beyond normal success. The chance may be tied to skill or tools, and the bonus must be felt.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A roll is called a critical success, but it gives nothing extra over a normal success.

KNOBS chance of a critical; size of the bonus; skill or tool modifiers

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Artifact-Location Proximity

mechanics × rules

Rules depend on how close a real object is to a real place, detected by sensors.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Sensing hardware has to be reliable and tied to a clear game condition, such as delivering an item, and the sensing range and the thing that counts as 'near' must be chosen on purpose. A short delay or a required action on entering or leaving helps cover for sensor errors.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Objects carry tags or the place has a sensor, but the game never checks them, or the same result could be got by pressing a button, so carrying the object to the place means nothing.

KNOBS sensing technology and range; which objects trigger it; delay or extended action on entering or leaving

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Critical Results

mechanics × rules

An unusual random outcome of an action with an effect not available from an ordinary result.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The special outcomes must be unusual, come from the dice or random process, and do things ordinary results cannot. Their trigger must be clear so players understand what happened.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Rare outcomes are listed, but they only repeat what ordinary successes or failures already do.

KNOBS trigger chance or dice condition; size of effects; which actions can produce them

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Stack Seeding

mechanics × rules

Chosen cards are placed in set parts of the deck beforehand to steer random draws.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs drawing stacks and a rule that places certain cards in certain positions, at setup or in play. The seeding must be strong enough to shape what happens, not just reshuffled away.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rule that places key cards but then shuffles the whole stack again, so the seeding has no effect on what is drawn.

KNOBS which cards are placed; how deep in the stack; when seeding happens (setup or during play)

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Individual Penalties

mechanics × rules

A penalty that affects only one of the players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The penalty must hit only the player who earned it and be meaningful enough to affect their choices. How it interacts with shared rewards or teams should be clear.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A penalty so small or so easy to dodge that the player ignores it, or one that spreads to others anyway.

KNOBS size and type of the penalty; what triggers it; who chooses the target

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Trumps

mechanics × rules

In trick-taking card games, a suit that beats the cards of all other suits.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The trump suit must really override normal ranking and must be chosen in a way that matters, such as being fixed, random or bid. There must be a trick-taking game for it to modify.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A named trump suit that happens to rank the same as normal, or is so rare it almost never decides a trick.

KNOBS fixed vs. changing trump; how trump is chosen (random or bid)

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Player-Avatar Proximity

mechanics × rules

Rules take into account how close the player and their avatar are in reality.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must track both the real position of one side and the virtual position of the other, and base events on how they relate. Both positions have to matter to play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Both positions are tracked but the relation between them triggers nothing.

KNOBS distance threshold; how long proximity must hold; what it triggers

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Ambiguous Responses

mechanics × rules

Game-controlled characters reply in ways that can be understood in more than one way.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Responses need to be truly open to several readings with no signal telling which is meant, so players have to judge meaning. This requires some uncertainty to remain over time.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A line is vague in wording but the context makes its meaning obvious, so nobody is ever unsure.

KNOBS how many responses are ambiguous; how much context clarifies them

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Open-Ended Die Rolls

mechanics × rules

Some rolled values require rolling the dice again until a final result forms.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Certain results must trigger further rolls that add to the total, so the range has no fixed ceiling. The trigger value, the dice it applies to and any cap decide how often the extreme results happen.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A re-roll rule so rarely triggered, or so capped, that results never go beyond what a normal roll could give.

KNOBS which results trigger rerolls; which dice it applies to; whether there is a cap on repeats

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Sidegrades

mechanics × rules

Item improvements that help only in certain situations, not in general.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each option must give a gain in some situations and a loss in others, balanced so no option is best everywhere. Players need to be able to tell when each is useful.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'sidegrade' that is strictly better than the base item, or whose downside never matters, so it is just an upgrade.

KNOBS size of gain versus loss; how specialized; how it is unlocked

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Player/Character Awareness Consistency

mechanics × rules

The character knows about the world exactly what the player knows.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The interface and information rules must give the player only what the character knows, and the reverse. Any gap has to be closed on purpose.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The game claims the player sees through the character's eyes, but the UI shows hidden facts the character couldn't know.

KNOBS how much information the player has beyond the character's knowledge; what the interface reveals

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Repetition of Position Draws

mechanics × rules

If a position repeats during a game, the game ends in a draw.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rules must define what counts as the same position and how many repeats end the game, and someone or something must track the history. The draw must be a real result that players can aim for or avoid.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A rule that is written down but never checked or enforced, so endless loops continue.

KNOBS number of repeats that trigger the draw; what counts as identical state

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Coupled Games

mechanics × rules

Events in one game affect events in another, and they depend on each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a real data link, such as a score, item or result, that changes the state of the other game. Players need to notice and care about the effect.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Two games share a brand or login, but nothing that happens in one changes the other.

KNOBS which direction the effect goes; what is passed between them; how strong it is

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Revoke Rules

mechanics × rules

In trick-taking games: what to do if a player broke the rules of play.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The rule must say when a violation is detected, who decides, and what penalty applies. The penalty must be big enough to discourage breaking the rule yet allow play to continue.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A penalty written but never applied because violations are rarely checked, so breaking the rule costs nothing.

KNOBS size of the penalty; time allowed to challenge; who checks

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Units

mechanics × resources

Expendable pieces controlled by a player or the game, usually faceless and acting in groups.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be many similar controllable or opposing elements whose individual loss does not decide the game, with actions that matter at a group level. Counts and costs should make losing units meaningful as a resource.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A single unit renamed as a group, or many units so identical and disposable that no one cares about losing them.

KNOBS number of units; their cost and strength; how much autonomy they have

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Resources

mechanics × resources

Game elements that players spend to perform actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Resources must be required for actions and be limited enough that spending is a choice. They need visible quantities so players can plan with them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A counter named like a resource that no action needs and no loss reduces, so it has no use in play.

KNOBS what actions cost; starting amounts; income and loss rates

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Time Limits

mechanics × resources

Time allowed for an action, a goal, a game mode, or the whole game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The timer must be tied to a real consequence (failure, loss, elimination) and be short enough relative to the task that players must skip or trade off something. It must also be visible or otherwise noticed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A generous timer that nearly everyone beats with room to spare, or one with no penalty when it runs out.

KNOBS how much time is given; what happens at zero; how time can be gained or lost

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Weapons

mechanics × resources

Items used to cause death and destruction in the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Weapons must differ in damage, range, speed, ammo or special effects so choosing one matters, and the world must offer situations where each is better. Acquisition should feel earned.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several weapons with different names and models but identical stats and handling.

KNOBS damage; range; rate of fire; ammo limits; accuracy; special effects and unlock timing

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Tools

mechanics × resources

Elements that give actions in the world or make them easier to do.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A tool must open up a new action or clearly improve one, and players must have a reason to want it and a way to obtain and use it. Scarcity or wear makes the choice of tool matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A named item that only gives a cosmetic change or a tiny bonus nobody notices, or one that every character has from the start.

KNOBS which actions it enables or boosts; how common it is; whether it wears out

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Game Items

mechanics × resources

Objects inside the game world that can be carried or used.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each item should have identity and an effect or use that matters, and be carried, found or moved. Different agents may use them differently.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Items are collectable, but all do the same or nothing, so picking them up changes nothing.

KNOBS types and effects of items; how scarce they are; whether they wear out or can be dropped

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Rewards

mechanics × resources

What the player receives and experiences as pleasant.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Rewards must be tied to meaningful achievements and valued by players. Their size and timing should match the effort, so players feel they earned them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Rewards given for anything, or of no practical or emotional value, like a badge that changes nothing.

KNOBS reward size; how often they are given; what triggers them and how certain they are

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Cards

mechanics × resources

Elements used to hand out various resources without showing in advance how they are distributed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Decide what is printed, which card types exist and in what numbers; use shuffling or hidden hands so the randomness and secrecy matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Cards are used only as a menu or list, never shuffled or hidden, so a table would work just as well.

KNOBS deck size; number of each card type; information shown on each side

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Abstract Player Constructs

mechanics × resources

An unseen part of the game that stores the player's parameters and possible actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The construct must hold information that actually drives what players can do in the world (resources, abilities, units), and must be under player control. It needs a clear link to the game world to matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A player sheet or panel exists, but it only displays information and has no effect on what happens in the game world.

KNOBS what data it stores; how it connects to units and the world

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Health

mechanics × resources

A measure of how much damage a character can take before serious penalties.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Damage must reduce the value and reaching zero or thresholds must have real consequences. Sources of damage and ways to restore it need to be balanced so the number matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A health bar that never drops meaningfully or refills freely, so damage has no effect on play.

KNOBS maximum health; damage amounts; healing availability

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Damage

mechanics × resources

Harmful effects from actions or events that lead to bad consequences.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Damage must be tied to clear causes players can avoid, must be measured in a visible way, and must lead to a real consequence when it piles up. The amount per hit must be small enough to allow several failures.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A health bar that drops but is refilled so easily or so cheaply that taking hits never matters.

KNOBS damage per hit; how much health there is; how often damage sources occur

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Budgeted Action Points

mechanics × resources

Points the player spends to take actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Points must be scarce enough that players have to choose, actions must cost different amounts, and replenishment must be set clearly. If everything is affordable, there is no budget.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Points are shown, but they are so many and refill so fast that no choice is ever limited by them.

KNOBS points per turn or period; cost per action; refill rate; cap

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Regenerating Resources

mechanics × resources

Resources that accumulate by themselves as game time passes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear refill rate and usually a cap must be set, and the resource must matter enough that players spend it and wait for it. Refill speed should shape pacing of play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A resource that refills so quickly or so little that it never runs short, or one nobody needs, so the refill changes no decision.

KNOBS regeneration rate; cap size; what pauses or speeds up regeneration

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Tiles

mechanics × resources

Pieces used to hand out resources without showing beforehand what is where.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Tile types and counts must be chosen so they distribute resources or build the world in a way that matters. Hidden or randomised tiles need a known distribution.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Tiles are all identical in effect, so which one you get changes nothing.

KNOBS number of tiles; mix of types; hidden or shown

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Heterogeneous Game Element Ownership

mechanics × resources

Each player brings their own game elements to a new game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Components must differ enough in function that choosing and combining them matters, and the sets must be balanced or limited so that having more or rarer pieces does not decide the game. Players also need time and means to build and tune their own sets.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players bring their own pieces but all pieces are functionally the same or one set is clearly best, so ownership changes nothing in play.

KNOBS how much the elements differ in power; limits on set size or cost; how much players can customise

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Hands

mechanics × resources

A set of game elements of a certain kind that a player currently holds.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must hold hidden elements they can pick between, with a size limit and a clear way to refill. The elements held need to matter enough that choosing among them is a real decision.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A hand where the next play is forced or all cards are identical or visible, so holding them gives no choice.

KNOBS hand size; refill rule; whether hands are secret or open

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Drawing Stacks

mechanics × resources

A stack of cards or tiles in a set order, drawn from to determine an outcome.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The pile must be hidden and shuffled, and its mix of element types must be set on purpose so the odds are real. Players need reasons to care what comes next, such as hands to build or plans to make.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pile of cards that is never shuffled or whose contents are all the same, so what comes out is known and drawing changes no decision.

KNOBS what goes into the stack and in what mix; number of stacks; how it is seeded or shuffled

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Pick-Ups

mechanics × resources

Items lying in the game world, usually picked up by touching them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Items must be placed where reaching them costs something or means a choice, and they must give a gain that players care about. They should be visibly distinct so players can find and want them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Items lie everywhere in such quantity or with such trivial value that players grab them on autopilot and nothing is decided.

KNOBS how many are placed; where; how much each gives; whether they respawn and how fast

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Inventories

mechanics × resources

A place where everything a character carries is stored.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It needs limits (space, weight) and real actions (use, drop, equip, trade) so that managing items is a choice. The limits must be tight enough to force choosing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An item list with no limit and no actions beyond viewing, so carrying anything is free and no decision arises.

KNOBS capacity; what actions are available; how items are sorted and accessed

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Armor

mechanics × resources

Items that protect against damage.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Armor must reduce the damage taken in a measurable way, with costs or limits (weight, slots, class restrictions) so equipping choices matter. Combat needs to be dangerous enough that protection is valuable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Armor looks impressive and has a high number, but damage is so small or armor so abundant that it never changes outcomes.

KNOBS damage reduction per piece; who can wear which; weight and slot limits

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Decks

mechanics × resources

Sets of cards the game uses as a single whole; they can be shared or personal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The set of cards must be shaped so that what is left in the deck gives useful information and chance. Players should be able to see or learn what the deck holds.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pile of cards that is reshuffled every time, so no one can track anything and the order is irrelevant.

KNOBS number and mix of cards; one shared deck or one per player

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Non-Renewable Resources

mechanics × resources

Resources whose amount does not grow during the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be no generation or replenishment of the resource anywhere in the game, and there must be consumers that use it up. Without consumption, players can hoard it and the scarcity never bites.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A resource labelled as finite but with a hidden refill, or one so plentiful for the game's length that it never runs out and never changes decisions.

KNOBS starting amount; consumption rate; whether the limit is global or per player

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Abstract Player Construct Development

mechanics × resources

The player improves something outside the game world, such as a rating, rank, or reputation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a player-level structure that can be improved, with improvements that really change which options are open or how strong they are. Players should be able to see progress and ideally choose its direction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Numbers on a sheet go up, but they unlock nothing and change no decisions, so it is just a counter.

KNOBS what can be improved; cost and pace of improvement; how much choice players have over direction

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Lives

mechanics × resources

The number of attempts a player has before the game ends.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Failure must remove a life but not end the game at once, and running out must end it. Dangers must be real enough that lives are actually lost.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players have a number of lives but gain them so easily, or are so seldom hit, that losing one never matters.

KNOBS starting number of lives; how often they are lost; how they can be regained

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Loot

mechanics × resources

Items, usually random, that the player finds in the world as a reward.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Defeating or searching things must yield items with some randomness and enough variety that players want to check. Items must matter to later play, and distribution among players needs handling.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies drop items that are always the same or worthless, so killing them gives no reason to look.

KNOBS drop rate; spread of item quality; what kinds of items can drop; how it is shared

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Ammunition

mechanics × resources

Consumable items without which a weapon cannot be used.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Ammo must run out and be refilled by effort (pick-ups, trading, reloading), so players have to ration it. Several ammo types with different effects add meaningful choices.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Ammo is displayed but is effectively unlimited or always at hand, so shooting never involves a decision.

KNOBS ammo supply and cap; reload time; number of ammo types

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Extra Chances

mechanics × resources

You can try again if you are not happy with the result of an action.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Decide which events can be retried, how many retries exist, how they are earned or refilled, and whether retries can be stacked. The game state must allow trying again, and other players' actions must not make the retry impossible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A retry that is so limited, or so late, that players never actually use it to change an outcome.

KNOBS how many retries; how they are gained and which events they apply to

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Betting

mechanics × resources

A player stakes resources hoping to win on an uncertain outcome.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must own resources they can stake, and the outcome must be uncertain with payoffs related to perceived odds. Decide whether the economy is closed or open.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A bet is offered, but the payout is fixed and risk-free or the stake is trivial, so nobody weighs the choice.

KNOBS stake sizes; payout ratio; when the result is revealed; optional or forced

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Power-Ups

mechanics × resources

Collectible items that immediately give a benefit or advantage.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Pickups must sit in places worth reaching and respawn on some schedule. Their effects have to matter for current goals and be balanced against the other players' advantages.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Shiny items lie around but give a negligible bonus or one that is never needed, so players ignore them.

KNOBS spawn frequency and place; effect strength; effect duration or number of uses

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Resource Caps

mechanics × resources

Limits on how many resources can be stored or spent.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The cap must be low enough that players actually reach it, so it forces them to spend or lose income. It also has to apply to a resource that matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A cap set so high that nobody ever reaches it, so it never affects a decision.

KNOBS cap value per resource; whether caps can be raised

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Resource Locations

mechanics × resources

Areas of the world where resources are located.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Locations must be placed so that getting there costs something, such as distance, risk or rivals. Resources must be useful enough to be worth the trip.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A resource node placed right at the start where everyone gets it with no effort or trade-off.

KNOBS number, placement and richness of locations; access cost and who can take them

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Renewable Resources

mechanics × resources

Resources that are replenished in some way during the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a clear way the resource comes back (spawning, producing, timers) and a limit on speed or amount, so that using it is still a real choice. Players should be able to over-use it and suffer for it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Resources are called renewable, but they come back so fast or in such quantity that spending them has no cost.

KNOBS what renews; renewal speed and conditions; maximum stock

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Energy Penalties

mechanics × resources

A punishment that reduces a numeric supply the player needs to take actions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The value must matter for actions and lead to a worse outcome at some threshold; the loss must be large enough to notice and be recoverable or not by design.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A health bar that drops but regenerates instantly or never reaches a threshold, so nothing is at risk.

KNOBS amount lost per event; starting amount and maximum; recovery rate and threshold effects

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Memorabilia

mechanics × resources

Content or items earned in the game that remain available after it ends.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a durable item, such as a kept component or a produced record, tied to a specific game instance and actually handed to the player. It must carry some value in memory, status or later use.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A generic souvenir or a stats screen that nobody keeps, shows or cares about, and that is not tied to anything that happened in play.

KNOBS what is kept; how scarce or personal it is; whether it has use in later games

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Facilitating Rewards

mechanics × resources

Rewards that make later actions or progress through the game easier.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The reward must actually change what players can do or how easily they do it, such as new abilities, better tools, stronger skills or progress toward the end. The strength should match the effort required to earn it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A reward that looks like a power-up but gives a negligible bonus, so play is no easier than before.

KNOBS size of the ability or power boost; how often and how hard it is to earn

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Action Caps

mechanics × resources

The game limits how many actions can be taken per turn or per period of time.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The cap must be tighter than what players would like to do, so that they have to choose which actions to spend. It matters most in turn-based or tick-based play where the player cannot simply act faster.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A limit exists on paper but is so generous that it is never reached, so players never need to prioritize.

KNOBS number of actions per turn or period; whether the cap is per action type or total

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Deterioration

mechanics × resources

Items wear out from active use.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Wear must actually reduce an item's usefulness, and players must be able to fix, replace or manage items so that using them is a choice. The speed of wear must be noticeable but fair.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A durability bar that wears so slowly, or is repaired so cheaply, that players never think about it.

KNOBS wear per use; repair cost; what happens at zero durability

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Ephemeral Events

mechanics × resources

Events that exist in the game only for a limited time and then disappear.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Events must start and end by clear rules, last briefly in game time, and offer something that is not available otherwise.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An event that is announced as limited but lasts so long or repeats so often that missing it costs nothing.

KNOBS duration; frequency; what triggers them; what they offer

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Steadily Decreasing Resources

mechanics × resources

A supply that inevitably shrinks as the game goes on.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be no way to generate or refill the resource, and players must have a reason or requirement to use it. The depletion rate sets how long the game can last.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A resource meter that goes down but is refilled by pick-ups or regeneration, so it never really runs out.

KNOBS starting amount; consumption rate; whether anything can restore it

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Chargers

mechanics × resources

Places in the world where the player's resources change while they stay there.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The effect must be strong enough to be worth a detour, tied to a place, and must cost something (time, risk, exposure).

JUST A LABEL WHEN A glowing pad is placed on the map, but the effect is negligible or the pad is on the route anyway, so nobody chooses it.

KNOBS refill speed; size of the boost; number and placement of locations; exposure to risk

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Secret Resources

mechanics × resources

Resources whose existence or properties at least one player does not know.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Hide resources through fog, hands, or unrevealed placement, and make finding or knowing them valuable. Players need a reason to search or infer.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A hidden resource that is irrelevant to play or that players can always see anyway, so hiding changes nothing.

KNOBS how much is hidden; how many resources; how easy it is to discover them

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Shared Resources

mechanics × resources

Resources that several players can access during a game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Several players must be able to use or change the same resource, and the resource must be scarce or important enough that sharing creates tension or cooperation.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A common pool so plentiful that nobody has to negotiate or compete for it.

KNOBS who has access; how much is available; rate of use or refill

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Bases

mechanics × resources

Stationary objects in the game world that give players actions or resources.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each base must provide something useful that is tied to its place, and be buildable, capturable or destroyable so that holding it matters. Position should create real strategic differences.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A building is shown at a spot but gives nothing different from anywhere else, so ownership changes no choices.

KNOBS what each base gives; cost to build; whether it can be captured or destroyed

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Pay to Play

mechanics × resources

To play, you must pay in one form or another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Payment must be required to start or to continue playing, and it needs to be tied to something players want enough to pay. The price and timing have to fit what players find acceptable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A payment that is optional for cosmetic extras only, so nobody actually pays to play, or one required once at purchase, which is just ownership.

KNOBS price; when payment is demanded (entry, continue, extras); what each payment buys

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Free Gift Inventories

mechanics × resources

A set of items given to a player to hand out to others as they see fit.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Periodically grant gift items with some randomness, and let players choose recipients, often limited to friends or neighbors. The gifts need to be useful so giving matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A gift button exists, but the items are worthless or automatically sent, so nobody chooses and nothing is exchanged socially.

KNOBS how often gifts are granted; how random their contents are; who can receive them

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Illusionary Rewards

mechanics × resources

Rewards that do not help with goals and improve nothing.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The reward must still feel like a recognition to players, through look, status, information, or social value, even though it gives no gameplay benefit. Players need some reason to want it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A reward that changes the game state after all, or one so dull that no one notices or wants it.

KNOBS how attractive or visible the reward is; how hard it is to earn; how much social or story value it carries

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Increasing Rewards

mechanics × resources

The further the game progresses, the bigger or better the rewards.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Rewards must really grow in value that players can use or see, paced against rising difficulty or costs so they keep up. The growth should be noticeable between stages.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Rewards that are labelled bigger but are worth the same, or are cancelled out by matching cost increases so nothing feels better.

KNOBS growth rate per stage; reward type (resources or abilities); match to rising difficulty

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Individual Rewards

mechanics × resources

A reward that goes to only one player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The reward must go to a single player and matter enough that others want it for themselves. It creates competition only if players can compete for it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A reward given to one player that has no value or is quietly shared with everyone, so it makes no difference who gets it.

KNOBS size of the reward; who qualifies; how contested the winning is

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Parallel Lives

mechanics × resources

Losing one element does not stop the game, but losing all or a set number does.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must control several elements at risk at once, and losing one must hurt but not stop play. The elements should matter enough that players must decide which to protect, so threats come at them concurrently.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Several units where only one really matters, or ones so easily replaced that losing them never forces a choice.

KNOBS how many elements; how much each is worth; how many must be lost to end the game

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Collectible Card Games

mechanics × resources

Each player builds their own card collection and draws on it to pick cards for a session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Cards must differ in power or function, be acquired over time, and be built into decks, with new cards released regularly.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Cards are sold in packs, but all are nearly equal or a few dominate, so collecting and deckbuilding don't matter.

KNOBS rarity distribution; how cards are obtained; deck size; expansion frequency

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Sockets

mechanics × resources

Slots in an item where upgrades, such as gems, are inserted.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Socket counts must be limited and the upgrades must offer meaningfully different benefits, so that choosing what goes where is a real decision. Whether upgrades can be removed changes how risky the choice feels.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Sockets that always take the same single best upgrade, or are so plentiful that nothing needs to be chosen.

KNOBS sockets per item; types of sockets; whether upgrades are removable; how upgrades are obtained

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Sustenance Rewards

mechanics × resources

A reward that refills something constantly used up, such as health or fuel.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Something must be constantly draining so the refill matters, and the refills must arrive at a pace that keeps players near, but not at, running out. Timing and placement of supplies is the main design work.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Pickups that top up a resource nobody ever runs short of, so collecting them is pointless.

KNOBS drain rate; amount per pickup; how often and where supplies appear

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Non-Localized Resources

mechanics × resources

Resources that are at least partly not tied to a place in the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have a world in which other things have locations, and the resources must be held as abstract counts that cannot be seen, stolen or carried in space. Designers choose which resources and whether all or only acquired instances are abstract.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A counter in the interface that is still tied to a physical item players must go and fetch or guard in the world, so it behaves as a located resource anyway.

KNOBS which resources are abstract; whether all instances or only collected ones are non-localized

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Resource Sources

mechanics × resources

Places, abstract or real, within the world where resources can be found or obtained.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each source needs a clear way to obtain resources, with a cost, a limit or competition. Different sources should give different kinds or amounts so choosing among them matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A source that gives resources automatically with no action or limit, so it works like a number going up.

KNOBS yield per source; cost or effort to use it; number of sources and their types

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Converters

mechanics × resources

Elements that turn one resource into another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The exchange must have a clear ratio and cost, and the output must be worth more to the player than the input in some situations. Players need to decide when and how much to convert.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A conversion exists, but the rate is so good or bad that nobody ever uses it or everyone always does.

KNOBS conversion ratio; speed; what goes in and out

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No-Use Bonus

mechanics × resources

Unused actions are given a bonus so they get chosen more often later.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must be chosen from a shared set, and the bonus must grow enough over turns to shift the value of the neglected option. The reward type should matter to players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A bonus so small or so irrelevant that unpopular actions stay ignored, or one that arrives only after the action has already become attractive for other reasons.

KNOBS what resource is added; how much per unused turn; whether the bonus accumulates or resets

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Consumers

mechanics × resources

Game elements that use up resources.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Something must really be spent or drained, at a rate that matters to what players can do. Players must have to deal with that demand, by feeding it, controlling it or competing with it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Something is described as using resources, but the amount is trivial or nothing ever runs short.

KNOBS how much and how fast they consume; what they consume; whether players control them

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Asymmetric Resource Distribution

mechanics × resources

Players receive different sets of resources, so each has their own possibilities.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Resource differences must change what a player can do, with trade, scarcity or access to keep it interesting, and enough balance to stay fair enough. (The source page is a stub, so this is a best reading of the name.)

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players hold different amounts of some resource that has no use or can be freely swapped, so the gap changes nothing.

KNOBS how big the differences in starting or ongoing resources are; who gets what

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Containers

mechanics × resources

Game elements inside which other elements can be stored or hidden.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A container must limit or organise what it holds, through capacity, access or location, so that holding something changes what can be done with it. Players should have to choose what goes in and out.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A bag or chest exists, but it holds anything without limit and puts nothing in the way of using the contents.

KNOBS capacity; access rules; what can be put in

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Symmetric Resource Distribution

mechanics × resources

All players receive resources in equal amounts and on equal terms.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each player must start with, and have access to, equal amounts and kinds of resources. Equal sharing must also hold up over time.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The totals are equal on paper, but the resources are placed so some players can reach or use them more easily.

KNOBS amount and kind of starting resources; placement of resource sources

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Enemies

mechanics × conflict

Game elements that actively get in the way of the player reaching their goals.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Enemies must act against the player's goals with real consequences, and the player needs ways to face them; they also need to fit the theme to be recognised.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies drawn as threatening but too weak or passive to hurt or block anyone.

KNOBS number of enemies; their strength and behaviour; how they appear

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Traps

mechanics × conflict

Elements or events that kill or wound characters.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The hazard must be able to hurt the player in a way that matters, and be fair, either learnable by observation or memory or spotted by clues. The penalty has to be real for players to change their movement.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A hazard that does so little harm, or is so telegraphed, that players walk through it without any change in behaviour.

KNOBS damage or penalty; how well hidden it is; how often it triggers; whether it resets

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Obstacles

mechanics × conflict

Elements that block the shortest path between two places.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Obstacles must sit on routes players want to take and force a detour, a wait, or some action to bypass them. Whether they can be destroyed, moved or ignored by some players defines what they mean for play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Decoration placed off the routes that players take, or an object that can be walked through or around at no cost.

KNOBS size and placement; whether they can be removed or bypassed, and by whom

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Boss Monsters

mechanics × conflict

Powerful enemies that must be defeated to progress toward the goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A boss must differ in how it is fought, via special abilities, weak points or phases, not just extra health. It should be placed at a point of closure and be foreshadowed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A normal enemy is renamed 'Boss' with a bigger health bar, so the same tactics work and it feels like a slog.

KNOBS boss health and damage; special abilities and weak points; number of phases or lives; placement

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Red Herrings

mechanics × conflict

Items or information created to confuse or distract players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Decoys must look as plausible as the real clues and cost players something to check. The game must also have real uncertainty so that players cannot tell them apart at once.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A fake clue that is obviously irrelevant at first glance, so it is ignored and does not distract anyone.

KNOBS ratio of false to real clues; how convincing the decoys look; cost of following a false lead

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Achilles' Heels

mechanics × conflict

A strong enemy has a weak spot, and hitting it is the easiest way to win.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The target must be really resistant to normal attacks, with one specific weakness that is much more effective. Players must be able to discover it (clues, experimenting) and have the means to exploit it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A weak point is labeled on the enemy but normal attacks work just as well, so nobody needs to look for it.

KNOBS how much more damage the weak point takes; how hidden it is; what is needed to exploit it

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Incompatible Goals

mechanics × conflict

Goal: two or more goals that cannot be completed together because they exclude each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The goals must truly exclude each other in play, either for one player or between players, and be known to those pursuing them. Players need to feel the cost of choosing one over another.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Goals that are described as conflicting but can all be completed in the same game, so no choice has to be made.

KNOBS how many goals clash; whether they clash for one player or between players; how soon the conflict is visible

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Movement Limitations

mechanics × conflict

Changes that make moving worse than it was before.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Movement must already matter in the game, and the limitation must be felt in play, with players needing to plan around it. It should be tied to places, states or enemies.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A slowdown so small or so easily avoided that players ignore it and route exactly as before.

KNOBS how much speed or range is lost; how long it lasts; terrain costs

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Player Physical Prowess

mechanics × conflict

The game's outcome depends on how well players control their own bodies.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Tasks must really test strength, endurance, precision or reflexes, and be scored so that ability decides the result. The demand must be clearly measured.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game labelled 'active' where physical skill makes no difference to the result.

KNOBS how demanding the physical tasks are; time limits; how strictly performance is scored

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Ghosts

mechanics × conflict

Records of players' past attempts, including your own, become opponents in a new game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must record player actions and replay them in the same setup so the ghost's performance can be compared directly. Decide whether ghosts affect the player and whose runs get saved, and the setting needs a clear measure such as time or score.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A ghost that is always the same fixed, designer-made run, or one that is shown but has no way to compare or race, so there is nothing at stake against it.

KNOBS whose runs are saved and how they are chosen; whether the ghost can affect the player; whether runs are shared

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Ever Increasing Difficulty

mechanics × conflict

The more successfully the player plays, the harder the challenges become.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Success must feed back into a harder next challenge, such as stronger enemies, bigger waves or tougher levels, and the climb must be steady and outpace most players' skill. Without an end condition, or with one far away, the difficulty keeps rising instead of flattening.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies get bigger numbers or new skins, but skilled players still cruise through because nothing demands more skill.

KNOBS difficulty growth rate per success; step size and ceiling of the scaling curve

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Generic Adversaries

mechanics × conflict

Enemies that cannot be told apart from one another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK One template spawned in numbers, simple enough to be interchangeable, with a defined spawn timing and place. Some small random variation or loot variety helps stop them feeling flat.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Enemies that look different (new skins or names) but behave and fight exactly the same, or a single 'crowd' that never poses a threat.

KNOBS how many appear and how often they spawn; how strong they are; how much variation is allowed

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Quizzes

mechanics × conflict

A set of questions asked to players during the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Questions must fit the audience, be well written and have fair answer options. The number of questions and format should suit their role in the game.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Questions are shown but are so easy or guessable that knowledge makes no difference.

KNOBS number of questions; difficulty; multiple choice or free answer

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Waves

mechanics × conflict

Attacks at set times by a large number of identical enemies.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Groups of enemies must arrive on a schedule with pauses between, with escalating size or type, and defeat must threaten the player. Rests need to be long enough to prepare.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A steady trickle of enemies labeled as waves, with no clear groups, pauses or growth.

KNOBS wave size; time between waves; growth rate; enemy mix and resistances

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Game Worlds

mechanics × boundaries

Fictional worlds in which the game takes place.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The world must actually define where things are and how they move or interact, with boundaries and rules that tie into the actions. The fiction should explain and support the rules, not sit apart from them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A fictional setting used only as wallpaper or a title, while the rules would work the same on a plain grid.

KNOBS size and boundaries; continuous vs discrete space; what elements and resources are placed in it

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Levels

mechanics × boundaries

A part of the game where all the action takes place until a goal or end condition is reached.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each level needs boundaries, a goal or end condition, and real differences in content or play, not only looks. The number and order of levels shape pacing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Levels differ only in colors or theme, while the play stays the same.

KNOBS number of levels; how they differ; how much randomness; length of each

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Game Boards

mechanics × boundaries

A surface where it is easy to move elements and keep track of their positions relative to each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The layout must carry spatial relations that matter to the rules, such as movement, regions and positions. It should organize components the game needs.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A board is included, but it is just a backdrop; positions on it have no rule effect.

KNOBS size and layout; number and type of regions; connections between spaces

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Persistent Game Worlds

mechanics × boundaries

The world exists by itself, whether or not anyone is playing it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Servers or facilitators must keep the world running continuously, with state updated even when players are absent. Characters and items must be tracked over time.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A world that exists only while players are logged in or that resets each session, called persistent in marketing only.

KNOBS what state persists; how the world updates while players are away; reset schedule

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Extra-Game Consequences

mechanics × boundaries

Events in the game affect something outside it, for better or worse.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game's results must really feed into something outside the game state, such as prizes, money, the next game session's rules or another game. Players must know about the link and care about it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'real-world prize' or carry-over that players find worthless or that never actually changes anything outside the match.

KNOBS what outside thing results are tied to (money, rewards, future games); how large the stakes are

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Strategic Locations

mechanics × boundaries

Parts of the world where control or access gives an advantage.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The location must give a real advantage, such as resources, safety or access, and be noticeable to players. The advantage must be balanced between sides or contested.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A prominent landmark that gives no advantage when held, so players ignore it.

KNOBS size of the advantage; how many such places; how visible they are; how evenly they are distributed

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Inaccessible Areas

mechanics × boundaries

Places in the world that can be seen but not visited.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The areas must be visible and be blocked by a believable barrier, and the blocking must be reliable. If players are meant to get in later, a visible condition for access helps.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An area that looks blocked but can be reached by an exploit, or that is blocked with no visible reason so it feels like an arbitrary wall.

KNOBS how much of the world is blocked; what blocks it; whether and how access is later unlocked

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Territories

mechanics × boundaries

Parts of the world that belong to one of the inhabitants of the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Ownership must be clearly marked and able to change hands, and owning a territory must bring a benefit. Players need means to take or defend them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Regions have names and colours but owning them gives nothing, so nobody fights over them.

KNOBS number and size of territories; benefits of owning; cost of capturing

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Safe Havens

mechanics × boundaries

Places in the game world where game elements are safe from any threat.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The place must be truly shielded from traps, enemies and other players, by access rules or disabled hostile actions. It also needs a reason to go out again, such as risk and reward outside, or it just becomes a hiding spot.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pretty calm-looking area that enemies can still walk into or that still damages you, so it protects nothing.

KNOBS where havens are and how many; what they block; whether they expire or need a condition to enter

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Warp Zones

mechanics × boundaries

Links between distant places in the world that make them neighbors.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Entrances and exits must connect distant places with clear activation rules, and the shortcuts must matter for travel, loops or map topology. Their effect on obstacles and exploration should be considered.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A portal between two spots that are already next to each other, or one used only for cutscenes.

KNOBS number and placement; destinations; activation conditions; one-way or two-way; who can create them

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Conditional Passageways

mechanics × boundaries

A passage is open only if a condition is met, like a key, level, or quest.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The passage must be blocked for real until a condition is met, and the condition should require something the player does or gets. The player should be able to see the blockage and learn how to open it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A door looks locked but opens with a trivial action or no real requirement, or the player can walk around it.

KNOBS what is required to open it; how visible the requirement is; whether it stays open or can close again

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Extra-Game Input

mechanics × boundaries

The game's state changes something outside it, and neither a player nor the rules does so.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Pick the outside source (real-world time, other games, non-players, facilitators), and give the game rules for accepting and processing that input. Players must be able to see how the source affects play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A feature that reads an outside signal but never lets it change anything meaningful in the game state.

KNOBS which outside sources are allowed; how strongly their input alters the game state

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Private Game Spaces

mechanics × boundaries

Parts of the game space directly controlled by only one player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Other players' actions must truly be blocked or limited in that space. The designer decides what visitors may do and how spaces interact with the shared game.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Each player has a named area, but others can attack, alter or sabotage it freely, so it gives no safety.

KNOBS who may enter or act; what visitors may do; whether the space is permanent or temporary

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Scenes

mechanics × boundaries

A part of the game tied to a specific place and time within the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Define each scene's location, who is present and how it ends, whether by a time limit, a condition, or a game master's call. Scenes must differ in setting or situation to feel like separate units.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Chapter labels over one continuous stretch of play where nothing about place, cast, or situation changes between them.

KNOBS scene length; how scene ends are decided; how many characters and locations per scene

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Check Points

mechanics × boundaries

Places in the game world that mark progress toward the goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Placement along a route that matches the goal, clear signalling, and a real effect when reached (progress counted, order or area control).

JUST A LABEL WHEN A marker is visible, but reaching it changes no state, so skipping it costs nothing.

KNOBS number and spacing; whether order is forced; how visible they are; what happens on reaching them

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Spawn Points

mechanics × boundaries

Places where characters, units, or enemies appear.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Placement must take safety, fairness between sides and strategic value into account, since spawn locations draw camping and attacks. Safe zones or protection are often needed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A marked point that all elements simply appear from with no influence on fighting, routes or balance, or one placed so far from anything that nobody cares about it.

KNOBS where they are placed; how many there are; whether they are fixed or moving; protection around them

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Choke Points

mechanics × boundaries

Places on the map where the way into other areas can be blocked.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The narrow passage must be the main (or only) route, with few alternatives, and the surroundings must make blocking or holding it worthwhile.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A narrow spot exists, but there is an equally easy bypass, so nobody needs to pass it or defend it.

KNOBS width and length of the passage; number of alternative routes; who controls it

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Purchasable Game Advantages

mechanics × boundaries

The player can spend real money to gain advantages in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Goods must be tied to meaningful game effects, with prices and transfer rules defined. The designer must accept the effect on balance and on other players' sense of effort.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A shop exists, but items are cosmetic or trivially available through play, so buying gives no real edge.

KNOBS what can be bought; prices; power of purchases; tradability

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Transport Routes

mechanics × boundaries

A path that must be traveled to reach certain places in the game world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Routes must be the actual way between key places, with no free shortcut, and take meaningful time or effort. Something on or about the journey, such as hazards, choices or waiting, makes the travel matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A corridor that players can bypass or skip with instant travel, so it adds only a loading pause.

KNOBS route length; number of alternative routes; whether shortcuts or fast travel exist

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Flanking Routes

mechanics × boundaries

Alternative paths to the needed place that others may not know about.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Add alternative paths to key locations that are less obvious or less defended than the main route. For them to matter, defenders must be unable to guard everything and the routes must lead to something worth reaching.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Extra paths that are as obvious as the main route or all covered by the same defenders, so nobody surprises anyone.

KNOBS how many alternate routes; how hidden, narrow or long they are compared with the main route

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Self-Service Kiosks

mechanics × boundaries

Places in the game world where players make deals or get services themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Place them at chosen spots with services that players actually need, such as trading, healing, or quests, and let their stock refill or limit it. Their location should shape movement.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A kiosk whose service is never needed or is available everywhere else, so no one has to go there.

KNOBS what services; where placed; stock and refill rate; prices

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Procedurally Generated Game Worlds

mechanics × boundaries

Worlds built by an algorithm rather than drawn by hand by an author.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The generator needs good rules, parameters and randomness that produce varied yet playable worlds. Balance checks or seeds help keep results fair and reproducible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Worlds are generated, but outputs look nearly identical or are broken, so the variety adds no new play.

KNOBS generator parameters; amount of randomness; seed use; balance constraints

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Sniper Locations

mechanics × boundaries

Places in the game world that are good for shooting from far away.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The spot needs a long sightline over a useful area and relative safety, for instance through height, cover or hard access. Counterplay such as flanking routes or kill replays keeps it from dominating.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A high ledge with a nice view that is exposed from every side or overlooks nothing worth shooting at, so nobody gains from using it.

KNOBS sightline length; amount of cover; how hard it is to reach; how many counter-routes exist

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Meta Servers

mechanics × boundaries

Servers that assign players to game servers and store shared data about them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The service must really connect players to game servers, remember their data across sessions and offer features like friend lookup. It needs enough players to make the routing worthwhile.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A server list or login screen that only lists servers and neither routes players nor stores anything across sessions.

KNOBS what the server stores and offers: matchmaking, friend lists, global rankings

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Reconfigurable Game Worlds

mechanics × boundaries

The world's basic layout can change during a session or between sessions.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The world must be made of parts that can be rearranged, and either the rules or the players must actually rearrange them. Changes have to alter what choices are good, not just how things look.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A world that is re-skinned or has cosmetic changes, but the layout and routes play out the same every time.

KNOBS what can change; when it changes (between games or during play); who triggers the change and how often

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Quick Travel

mechanics × boundaries

Ways to reach another place in the world, skipping intermediate points.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Travel points must be reachable, with rules for when it works and what it costs. The world should have enough distance that the shortcut matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A map teleport exists, but the world is so small or the travel so restricted that nobody needs it.

KNOBS where it is available; cost; unlock conditions; one-way or two-way

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Time Limited Game Instances

mechanics × boundaries

The game's rules themselves limit how long a single game can last.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clock or a turn/action count must be built in so the session truly ends at a known point, with end and scoring rules that work when time runs out. The cap should be clear to players before they start.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A timer shown on screen that never ends the session or changes who wins, so players can ignore it.

KNOBS length of the session cap; whether players can choose it

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Real World Gameplay Spaces

mechanics × boundaries

Features of the real physical place where the game is played affect the play itself.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Actions must be bound to specific physical places or distances, so that moving the body matters for what you can do. Distances, boundaries and the space's features must actually be used by the rules.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game played in a room or park where the place is only a backdrop and any spot would work equally well.

KNOBS size and shape of the space; which actions are allowed only inside it or at certain spots

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Secret Areas

mechanics × boundaries

Parts of the game world that are hard to notice.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Hide areas behind obstacles or hidden triggers, give subtle clues, and put something worth finding inside. Players must be able to find them with effort.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An 'area' that is empty or trivially visible, or one that cannot actually be found, so searching earns nothing.

KNOBS how well hidden; clue strength; reward inside; how many

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Landmarks

mechanics × boundaries

Noticeable objects in the game world that make it easier to find your way.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Objects must stand out and be visible from many places so players can use them to orient. They must be spread across the space and be distinguishable from each other.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Many similar tall objects or decorations that look alike, so players still get lost.

KNOBS how many; how large and distinctive; where placed; how often visible

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Hiding Places

mechanics × boundaries

Places in the game where a person or thing can be hidden.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Seekers must truly be less able to notice things in them, and there must be enough, well-placed spots to make concealment a real option without making it trivial. Players should be able to judge how good a spot is.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Decorative crates or bushes that do not block sight or detection, so hiding in them is no safer than standing in the open.

KNOBS number, size and placement of hiding spots; how well they hide; how clearly players can tell they are hidden

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Instances

mechanics × boundaries

Parts of the world are created for a particular group of players when they are needed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The system must create isolated copies on demand with a set group size, and the content must be worth entering as a group. Access conditions (group size, timing) should be clear.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A zone called an instance that everyone still shares, so crowding and interference are the same as before.

KNOBS group size required; how often and when instances open; content and difficulty inside

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Invisible Walls

mechanics × boundaries

Barriers that stop you from passing but do not stop you from looking.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Collision must reliably stop movement at the edge while the view carries beyond it, and placement should be where players do not expect to go. The more natural the edge looks, the less it breaks immersion.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A boundary players can walk through, or one that is obvious and unexplained so it simply looks like a bug.

KNOBS where the walls are placed; how much is visible beyond; how they are disguised

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Shrinking Game Worlds

mechanics × boundaries

The game world gets smaller and smaller as the game goes on.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Parts of the world must be permanently removed on a schedule or by player action, forcing players closer together. Shrinkage needs to be irreversible and fast enough to matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A map whose edges close only cosmetically or so slowly that the game ends before anyone feels it.

KNOBS how fast and in what order the world shrinks; what triggers it

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Illusion of Open Space

mechanics × boundaries

The world looks more spacious than it really is: there are fewer playable zones than it seems.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The unreachable scenery must look credible, be consistent with the setting, and be blocked in ways players do not easily notice. It breaks down if the blocks are obvious or conflict with the theme.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A flat backdrop or map edge that obviously ends, so players see the limit at once and the world does not feel bigger.

KNOBS how much unreachable scenery is shown; how the blocks are disguised; level of detail of distant areas

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Real Life Activities Affect Game State

mechanics × boundaries

Ordinary life activities unrelated to the game change its state.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The design must pick which everyday activities count, measure them reliably, and map them to clear state changes. Players need to see the link between what they did and what the game did in response.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that only shows your steps or activity as a decorative number, while nothing in play depends on it.

KNOBS which activities count; how they are measured and converted into game state changes

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Persistent Game World Changes

mechanics × boundaries

Changes in the game world that do not revert on their own.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Player actions must alter the world state and that state must be kept, not reverted by resets or temporary instances. There must be ways to change the world, such as building, destroying or moving things.

JUST A LABEL WHEN World changes that vanish on reload or after a short time, or that are only visual and do not affect later gameplay.

KNOBS which changes persist; for how long; whether and when the world resets

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Quick Returns

mechanics × boundaries

World design where returning to a point is much easier than getting there.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It should open only after the outward journey, so return is cheaper than getting there. It must link to places players actually revisit.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A shortcut exists but is as long as the original route or opens before the journey, so nothing is saved.

KNOBS when it unlocks; how fast; which places it connects

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Vehicle Sections

mechanics × boundaries

Game areas designed for driving or flying a vehicle.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The terrain scale, obstacles and routes must suit vehicle speed and abilities, and vehicles must be available there. Walking through should be clearly worse than driving.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A big open area with a car parked in it where walking is just as fast and the layout is the same.

KNOBS size of area; vehicle availability; density of obstacles and choke points; speed difference versus walking

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Laning

mechanics × boundaries

All movement follows a few set routes, which makes the game more predictable.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The map must offer a small fixed set of routes between areas, such as bases, and make leaving them hard or pointless. The lanes must lead to real choices and meetings between opponents.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Paths are drawn but players can walk anywhere, so the lanes are ignored.

KNOBS number of lanes; their width and length; how blocked the space between lanes is

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Visits

mechanics × boundaries

A temporary stay in a part of the world controlled by another player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be private player spaces, a way to be allowed in (friends or neighbors), and a small set of allowed actions, preferably helpful ones. The visit should also leave the owner something to see or gain.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A view-only gallery of another player's space where the visitor can do nothing and nobody notices the visit.

KNOBS who can visit; which actions visitors have; daily action caps; benefits to host and visitor

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Configurable Gameplay Areas

mechanics × boundaries

A physical play space that can be assembled differently from session to session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The area must be built from rearrangeable pieces or markers, and the changes must alter distances, routes or length of play. Someone must be responsible for setting it up each time.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The board can technically be rearranged, but players always use the same standard layout, or every layout plays the same.

KNOBS how many layout variants; who sets it up; how much the layout can vary

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Galleries

mechanics × boundaries

Raised platforms from which narrow passages are easy to keep in view.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Build elevated positions overlooking a narrow route that enemies must follow for some distance, with height giving a real advantage. Alternate routes can offset the advantage.

JUST A LABEL WHEN There is a raised ledge, but the enemy can bypass it or it gives no combat edge, so the height means nothing.

KNOBS height and length of the overlook; availability of flanking routes; cover

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Fake Game Cancellations

mechanics × boundaries

The game pretends to be shut down so it can later surprise players with a continuation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a believable cancellation message through some channel, and contact details collected beforehand so players can be reached again. It only fits games meant to blur the line between game and real life.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A cancellation notice so unconvincing, or with no way to contact players again, that nobody is surprised or it simply ends the game.

KNOBS how convincing and through which channel the cancellation is announced; how long before players are re-contacted

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Hybrid Gameplay Spaces

mechanics × boundaries

The game is played at once in a real place and in a virtual or abstract one.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a real link between physical places and virtual ones (sensors, overlays, or rules), so that where the player physically is changes what happens in the game. Both parts of the space need to matter for play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game set in a real location that only uses it as a backdrop, where the virtual part ignores where players actually are.

KNOBS how strongly physical position affects the virtual state; the sensing or overlay method; size of the real area

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Backtracking Levels

mechanics × boundaries

The player must finish a level and then return along the same path.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must detect reaching the far end and then require a trip back, ideally with something changed or earned so the return is not just repeated walking. No shortcuts back.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are told to 'go back', but a teleport or instant exit takes them there, so the return trip has no content.

KNOBS level length; what changes on the return; whether shortcuts exist

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Scores

mechanics × outcome

Numbers used in the game to decide who wins.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Define what raises or lowers the number, by how much, and what values trigger events or end the game. Players must see the score as tied to the actual goal for it to drive play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A score shown on screen that does not determine winning, ranking, or any decision, so players ignore it.

KNOBS points per action; end threshold; public versus hidden; penalties

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Player Elimination

mechanics × outcome

A player is forcibly removed from the game before it ends for everyone.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Clear elimination conditions are needed, together with a plan for what eliminated players do, such as spectating, and for how long the others keep playing. Game length must keep waiting time acceptable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are 'out' in name but are respawned at once or keep playing, so being eliminated costs nothing.

KNOBS how easily and how early players can be eliminated; what eliminated players can still do

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Unwinnable Games

mechanics × outcome

Games that have no winning conditions at all.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The system needs no reachable winning state, plus something that guarantees play ends, such as rising difficulty, a survive goal or a time limit, and some way to compare results like scores. Otherwise players have no reason to continue.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that calls itself endless but actually has a final boss, a victory screen or a reachable completion state.

KNOBS how fast difficulty rises; length of time limit or resource drain; presence of score tables

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Progress Indicators

mechanics × outcome

Show how close the player is to finishing, beyond the arrangement of the elements themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must show measurements tied to real goals, at the right moment and in a readable way. The information has to help players decide what to do next.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A bar is on screen but is cosmetic, misleading or unrelated to actual goals, so it does not guide anything.

KNOBS what is measured; how precisely; when it is shown; to whom

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Tied Results

mechanics × outcome

Two or more results are counted as equal and have the same consequences.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Results must be coarse enough that equal values can happen, and the rules must say that equal means equal. The game needs several competitors to compare.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Scores are so fine-grained that ties essentially never happen, so tie rules are never used.

KNOBS scoring granularity; whether ties share rewards or are broken

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Winner determined after Gameplay Ends

mechanics × outcome

The winners are decided only after the gameplay has finished.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a clear end trigger and a scoring or comparison step afterward, and the standings must stay hard to calculate during play, through hidden scores or complexity. Otherwise the result is known early.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A final tally that merely confirms a leader who was obvious and uncatchable long before the end.

KNOBS end trigger; how visible scores are; scoring formula; hidden versus open information

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Last Man Standing

mechanics × outcome

Goal: knock out rivals until you are the only surviving player or team.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players must be able to eliminate each other (lives, health, or removal) with goals that conflict. The game ends or moves on when only one remains, and it should handle what eliminated players do.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Players are called survivors but cannot really remove each other, so the winner is decided by something else.

KNOBS how easily players are eliminated; how many lives; whether alliances or surrender are allowed

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Tiebreakers

mechanics × outcome

Rules for separating results that would otherwise be equal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The secondary rule must be clear in advance and rarely tie itself. It should feel fair to players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A tiebreaker rule exists but ties on it are just as common, so ties remain.

KNOBS which secondary criteria are used and in what order

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Winning by Ending Gameplay

mechanics × outcome

The player who reaches a state that itself ends the game wins.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a specific achievable end condition that declares a winner at once, plus rules for simultaneous achievement or ties. The goal must be within reach of competing players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A goal that exists on paper but the game ends by timer anyway, or the winner is decided by a later count.

KNOBS threshold needed (score, targets, survivors); tiebreaker rules; time cap

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Game Over

mechanics × outcome

An event after which the player can no longer take part in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Define clear triggers such as losing lives or elimination, with real exclusion from play. The risk must be credible.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A Game Over screen appears, but the player instantly resumes with no loss, so there is no exclusion.

KNOBS what triggers it; how easily it can be reached; whether and how play can resume

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Shared Penalties

mechanics × outcome

A goal to meet a requirement, or else the penalty falls on several players at once.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A failure must hit a group or common pool, so that everyone has a stake in avoiding it. Decide how it is divided or whether players can negotiate it.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A penalty labelled as shared but hitting each player individually, or so mild that nobody cares to coordinate.

KNOBS who shares it; its size; how it is split or negotiated

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High Score Lists

mechanics × outcome

Results are saved after a game so they can be compared.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Results must be saved and shown where players will see them, be comparable across attempts, and be ordered fairly with ties handled. Someone must care about the comparison, whether themselves, friends, or the world.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A list that resets on exit, is hidden in a menu, or is full of unreachable or fake entries so no one tries to beat it.

KNOBS how many entries are kept; who can see them (local, friends, global); time-limited versus all-time lists

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End State Scoring

mechanics × outcome

Points are added up only after the game has ended.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A large share of points must be hidden or uncounted until the end and depend on the final state, so players cannot easily calculate standings.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A final tally that merely repeats a score everyone already knows, so the end changes nothing.

KNOBS how many points are held until the end; how hidden the scoring is; what final conditions give points

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Game Termination Penalties

mechanics × outcome

A player is removed from the game early as a punishment while the others' game continues.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Elimination must really remove the player from play, with no cheap way back (no free continues, easy rejoin or endless extra chances). The trigger, such as losing the last life or health hitting zero, must be clear and plausibly threatening.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'Game Over' screen that drops you back a few seconds earlier with everything kept, so nothing is actually lost.

KNOBS what triggers elimination; how easy it is to rejoin or continue

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Grind Achievements

mechanics × outcome

Rewards for repeating the same action many times.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A counter requires many repetitions of an action, set high enough to reflect real dedication but still reachable by persevering. Repeated tasks should vary or be meaningful or they are only chores.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A threshold so low it's reached by accident, or one that counts something players already do constantly, so it marks no extra effort.

KNOBS required count; whether tasks must differ or be the same; how visible the progress is

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Goal Achievements

mechanics × outcome

Goal: complete a game task in order to earn an achievement reward.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Goals must be real, challenging and require skill, and the achievements must be recorded persistently and, ideally, be visible to others. Difficulty must be high enough that getting one reflects mastery rather than luck or routine play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A badge for something trivial or automatic, such as finishing the tutorial, which changes nothing about how people play.

KNOBS which goals have achievements; how hard they are; who can see them

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Secret Scoring Mechanisms

mechanics × outcome

Ways to earn points that are revealed only when used or in the final count.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Offer hidden ways to score that are revealed only when used or at final count, and make them large enough to change who wins. It needs a multiplayer game with a visible leader to disturb.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Hidden points that are tiny or that everyone can already deduce, so the leader is still obvious.

KNOBS size of hidden points; how many hidden scoring routes; when they are revealed

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Closure Points

mechanics × outcome

Moments when part of the game state is removed or becomes unavailable.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Reaching them must actually remove or lock part of the game state, and players must see what is ending.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'level complete' screen appears, but everything carries over and can be revisited, so nothing really closes.

KNOBS how often they occur; reversibility; how clearly they are signalled

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Handicap Achievements

mechanics × outcome

A reward for a goal completed while voluntarily making the game harder.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The restriction must really raise difficulty, such as limited weapons or time limits, and be optional, with the achievement recorded and visible. It needs a base game strong enough to support the harder play.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A 'challenge' whose handicap is trivial or cosmetic and makes no difference to how you play.

KNOBS kind and severity of the restriction; which goals it applies to

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Social Rewards

mechanics × outcome

Rewards that raise a player's standing among people rather than giving an in-game benefit.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The reward must be visible to other players, through lists, titles or shown achievements, and must be something that others actually respect. It should not change the in-game balance.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A badge that only the owner ever sees, or one handed out for trivial actions so that it earns no recognition from anyone.

KNOBS how visible rewards are to others; how hard they are to earn; how many kinds exist

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Testing Achievements

mechanics × outcome

A reward for the player simply trying out some action.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The tested activities should be optional ones players might otherwise skip, and trying should be cheap. The reward should be noticeable enough to nudge behavior.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The achievement is for something every player does anyway, so it never changes what anyone tries.

KNOBS which activities are included; how easy the trigger is; how visible the reward is

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Life Penalties

mechanics × outcome

A punishment the player receives upon losing a life.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs Lives and a clear trigger for losing one, either a direct hit or full damage. Losing a life must move the player closer to game end, with respawn in between.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A life counter drops but players can regain lives freely or ignore it, so failure costs nothing.

KNOBS what triggers a life loss; how many lives exist; whether lives can be regained

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Fake Game Overs

mechanics × outcome

The game announces that everything is over when in fact it is not.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a believable game over presentation, then a clear resumption of play. It fits only games where a real game over exists and carries weight, so the fake can shock players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game over screen that is obviously fake or comes with no loss, so players feel no sense of failure.

KNOBS how convincing the fake ending is; how and when play resumes

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Predetermined Story Structures

mechanics × drama

The order in which the story is presented is fixed before the session begins.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Story beats need triggers tied to player progress, and the narrative must connect to goals, characters and clues. The designer must decide how much player choice may bend the order.

JUST A LABEL WHEN There are cutscenes and text, but they are skippable decoration that neither guide goals nor react to what the player does.

KNOBS how linear the story is; how many branches; how story events are triggered

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Narration Structures

mechanics × drama

The structure of stories that the game contains or can generate.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Events and goals must be linked to the story so that progress moves it forward. The structure needs points of tension and closure that gameplay actually reaches.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A story told in intro text and cutscenes that has no link to the goals or actions, so play would be identical without it.

KNOBS how tightly the story is tied to goals; how linear or branching it is

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Non-Player Characters

mechanics × drama

Characters in the game world that players do not control.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a world for NPCs to live in, and each NPC needs a clear role and recognizable look. Whether they act as agents with goals or only as scenery or story devices decides how much they matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Figures standing in the world that do nothing, say nothing and affect nothing, so they are scenery with a name tag.

KNOBS how many NPCs; what role each has; whether they have agency and goals

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Cutscenes

mechanics × drama

Story clips during which the player can do nothing.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must carry information the player needs and be placed at points where a pause fits, such as before a challenge or at a change of place. Their length and the ability to skip them decide whether they help or annoy.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A long cinematic that adds no new information and changes no state, which players simply skip.

KNOBS length; frequency; whether they can be skipped

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Player Characters

mechanics × drama

Characters the player directly controls and through whom they take part in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The character needs its own traits, abilities and a role in the story that give the player something to act through and care about. The link between player knowledge and character knowledge needs to be handled.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A named figure on screen with no traits, history or effect on play, which is really just a cursor.

KNOBS how detailed the character is; its power compared with others; how much the player can shape it

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Storytelling

mechanics × drama

Stories that are told inside the game itself.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs agents, places and conflicts that carry a story, and a way to deliver it that does not break the game's own world. Choose between a fixed story and one that follows what players do.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A story told only in a manual or intro that has no connection to actions in play, so it could be removed without changing anything.

KNOBS fixed vs. adaptive story; how it is delivered (cutscenes, environment, facilitator); how often it appears

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Props

mechanics × drama

World objects that exist only for appearance and play no part in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They need to fit the setting and be visually distinct from usable items. They work best when they also provide mood, landmarks or clues.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Objects are scattered randomly with no theme, or look like usable items so players waste time on them.

KNOBS how many; where placed; how distinct from usable items

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Replays

mechanics × drama

Recordings of a past game that can be watched again.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must record enough state or input to replay faithfully, and players must be able to find and watch the result. Playback is only useful if there is something worth reviewing or sharing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A replay button that records poorly, drifts from what happened, or cannot be viewed, shared or used for anything.

KNOBS what is recorded; who controls recording; how long recordings are kept and how they are shared

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Loyalty

mechanics × drama

The drive to keep your word and support a person, group or cause within the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a character, faction or cause to be loyal to, with a cost for breaking it and tempting reasons to do so. Without that choice it is only background story.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The story says you serve a faction but nothing in play rewards or punishes staying with it.

KNOBS what penalties follow betrayal; how many competing loyalties; how tempting the alternatives are

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Helpers

mechanics × drama

Characters not controlled by players who help the player.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Decide what each helper can do and where or when it appears, so the help matches a real moment of need, such as a puzzle, a shortage, or a lack of information. The help must be useful enough to rely on but limited enough that players still have to make their own choices.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character stands in the world with a friendly name and model but only repeats flavor lines, so players gain nothing and never need to consult it.

KNOBS how much and what kind of help they give; how often, where and when they are available; what it costs the player to use them

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Detective Structures

mechanics × drama

The player knows exactly as much as one particular hero does.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must truly limit what the player knows to what their one character perceives, and give clues through the world. It works best with a single player.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The player controls one character but the interface shows information the character could not know.

KNOBS how much the character knows; how clues are spread over the game



MacGuffins

mechanics × drama

Game elements the story revolves around and that drive the narrative forward.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A chosen object or character must be what goals such as capture, deliver or protect point to, so story and play both depend on it. It need not be detailed, only important to the goals.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The story mentions a special object but no goal or action in the game involves it.

KNOBS which goals refer to it; how present it is in the world; how its importance is shown



Gossip

mechanics × drama

Game characters pass information to each other by word of mouth.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Information in the world must be uncertain, so statements can be true, false or partial and players can't instantly check them. Someone must actually pass messages along, and acting on them must matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Idle chatter lines that repeat facts already known or never affect any decision, so it is flavour text only.

KNOBS who talks to whom; how reliable the information is; what topics it covers



Alien Space Bats

mechanics × drama

A silly or supernatural explanation for why the game world differs from ours.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The fantastic element must have visible consequences in the world and its gameplay (new items, abilities, enemies), kept consistent with the theme. Introduced mid-game, it should be explained by the story.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A mention of magic or aliens is in the backstory, but the world and rules play exactly like the real-world version.

KNOBS how big a departure from reality; when it appears; how many new elements it brings



Campaigns

mechanics × drama

A chain of pre-designed game episodes played in order.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The parts must be linked by shared story, carried-over progress and connecting material, so they feel like one arc. Decide what state carries over between parts.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Levels are grouped under a 'campaign' title but nothing carries over and nothing links them, so they are just a list.

KNOBS number and length of parts; what carries over; amount of story between parts



Adventures

mechanics × drama

Pre-designed events and challenges used to build the content of a play session.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs ready settings, events, characters and goals that can be used with little preparation, and ideally structure (quests, scenes) plus room for a game master to adapt when players go off-script.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pile of lore and locations is labeled an adventure, but it has no goals or events for players to run into, so a group can't actually play it.

KNOBS how scripted or open the content is; length; how many are linked into a sequence



Finale Levels

mechanics × drama

Levels built to feel like the conclusion of a storyline.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Build the last area to resolve the narrative arc, with harder play and a boss or climax, positioned so it feels like the end. The difficulty and story should peak together.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The last level is just another ordinary level with a credits screen, with no rise in challenge or sense of closure.

KNOBS difficulty spike of the final level; how much story resolution it carries



Summary Updates

mechanics × drama

A recap of events before or after the game itself to bring the player up to speed.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The summary must give players what they need to know about the setting or the consequences, at the right time and in short enough form to be read. It fits games with a planned story.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A recap screen that repeats what the player already knows, or one so long that it is skipped without being read.

KNOBS when it appears; how long it is; how much information it contains



Feelies

mechanics × drama

Real physical items packaged with the game that strengthen the impression it makes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Props must fit the game's world and tone and ideally carry clues, backstory or help, so that using them deepens immersion. They must be made to match the theme of the game.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Generic box extras, such as stickers or a poster, with no link to the story or play, so they add nothing to the experience.

KNOBS how many props; how themed they are and whether they carry clues or helpful information



Phasing

mechanics × drama

In one session, world elements are removed or changed for some players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The design must define the phases, the triggers for entering and leaving them, and whether players share a phase. Gameplay must also be tied to what each phase shows, so the difference actually matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Different players see slightly different scenery, but nothing in their goals, options or story differs, so nobody notices or cares.

KNOBS how many phases exist; what triggers entering and leaving; whether players share a phase

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Scripted Information Sequences

mechanics × drama

A preset chain of events plays out while the player can still act.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Place scripted events at particular points so players can still act, give reasons for them to watch, such as clues or threats, and decide how interruptible they are.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A cutscene in disguise, where the player is locked in place or the world is frozen, so there is no gameplay during the sequence.

KNOBS how interruptible; trigger location; whether they threaten the player; clue content

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Character Alignments

mechanics × drama

A system classing heroes as good, evil, or neutral by their moral stance.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Alignments must be linked to what characters can do or how others treat them, and breaking one's alignment must have an effect.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A moral label appears on the character sheet but never affects rules, NPC reactions or penalties.

KNOBS number and axes of alignments; penalties for acting against them; whether alignment can be changed

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Companion Quests

mechanics × drama

Goal: complete a quest built around the player's companion.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Triggers that players can notice, goals that matter to the companion's story, and rewards that change the companion or the relationship.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A companion has a quest on the list, but it is generic, has no story link to them, and changes nothing about them.

KNOBS number of quests per companion; triggers; rewards and effect on the companion

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Non-Consistent Narration

mechanics × drama

Narration in the game whose parts do not agree with each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Story elements must be repeated or contradict the game world's history, with instances or phasing isolating the inconsistency so that only the players inside it see it. It must be a deliberate trade-off for the sake of reuse or scale.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A story that is just sloppy and contradictory by accident, with no reuse or purpose behind it, which only breaks immersion without giving anything back.

KNOBS how much story content is reused; how isolated each player's copy is (instancing or phasing)

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Player Aids

mechanics × drama

Handouts with extra information about the game world or the current situation.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The aid must hold information players can use or react to, and be given at a well-chosen moment. Its look and material should fit the fiction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A handout that only repeats what the players already know and is thrown away unread.

KNOBS what information it holds; when it is handed out; its material and visual design

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Melodramatic Structures

mechanics × drama

The story is built so the player or viewer knows more than any character.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must show events from several viewpoints or add commentary, and this extra knowledge must change how the player reads what the character does. The perspective shifts have to be large enough to matter.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with several playable characters or a wide camera that shows the player nothing beyond what the current character already knows.

KNOBS how often the viewpoint switches; how much the player is told beyond the character

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Contextualized Conversational Responses

mechanics × drama

A character replies in conversation taking into account everything currently happening in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Replies must be chosen from relevant game state, such as who is speaking, where, and what has happened, using rules or authored dialogue per character or place. Players should notice that the replies fit.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A character has many lines, but they are picked at random or ignore what just happened.

KNOBS how many state variables affect replies; how much dialogue is written; per-character or per-location variants

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Contextualization

mechanics × drama

A scene interrupts the current one to show important information, like a memory or a look ahead.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be a clear signal for starting and ending such scenes and someone with authority to call them. They must give information that changes how the current scene is understood.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A scene break is announced, but it just repeats what players already know and changes nothing about the main scene.

KNOBS who may trigger it; how often; flashback or flash-forward; which characters take part

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Game State Overviews

mechanics × interface

Information that gives more than you can see just by looking at the game elements.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Collect scattered information into views such as maps or panels that support planning, and make them accurate and easy to read. They should show things players can't see directly.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An overview screen exists, but it shows only what is visible anyway or is too cluttered to use.

KNOBS what information is included; level of detail; how accessible it is during play

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Game State Indicators

mechanics × interface

An indicator, not the game world itself, tells about the game or other players.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Show information players really need, in a form they can read quickly and tied to decisions. Choose what is shown beyond what the avatar could sense.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An indicator is on screen, but it shows something irrelevant or duplicates what is already obvious.

KNOBS what is displayed; update speed and prominence; diegetic versus non-diegetic

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Geospatial Game Widgets

mechanics × interface

Interface elements tied to a place in the world but not part of it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Information must be attached to a location or object in the world, positioned so it is seen when needed, and it should actually help players decide something. Accept that it breaks the fiction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A marker or label that repeats what is already obvious on screen, or one placed in a HUD corner far from the thing it describes.

KNOBS what information is shown; where and when it appears; whether it shows through walls or only in view

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Diegetically Outstanding Features

mechanics × interface

Parts of the world stand out by shape, color, or texture and hint at what can be done with them.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The feature must stand out from its surroundings and mean something consistent, so that players learn what it signals. It should still fit the world.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Something is shiny or colored differently but the look has no link to what it is or does.

KNOBS how strongly it stands out; how reliably it signals the same thing

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Mediated Gameplay

mechanics × interface

Players act in the game and communicate with each other through a technical system.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The design needs a game system or server that takes player input, decides what it means, and decides what each player gets to see. The designer must choose what the system shows, hides and delays.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game that runs on a computer or network but lets players see and change everything directly, so the system filters or interprets nothing.

KNOBS how much the system filters and delays what players see and do

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Bookkeeping Tokens

mechanics × interface

Tokens don't represent world objects but simply store data about the game state.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Tokens must correspond to values the game really tracks and be easy to read and update, with a choice of public or hidden. Too many cause extra chores for players.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Tokens are on the table but players track values in their heads or on paper anyway, so the tokens are only decoration.

KNOBS what values are tracked; how many tokens; public or hidden

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Third-Person Views

mechanics × interface

The camera follows a chosen object and moves with it, rather than seeing through the hero's eyes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The camera must follow a chosen entity smoothly and show enough surroundings to play. Controls must fit the camera angle.

JUST A LABEL WHEN The camera sits behind the character but is so fixed or so cramped that it gives no extra view of surroundings.

KNOBS camera distance and angle; follow smoothness; which entity is followed

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Communication Channels

mechanics × interface

The game provides ways for players to send messages to each other.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Channels must reach the right people at the right time and fit the pace of the game, with ways to filter noise.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A channel is offered but is too slow, too noisy or unavailable when coordination is needed.

KNOBS channel types; audience scope; delay; filtering and moderation

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First-Person Views

mechanics × interface

The world is shown as a creature inside that world would see it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Needs an avatar in the game world and a camera or presentation that shows only what that avatar could perceive, including line of sight. For immersion, movement and aiming should respond naturally.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A camera placed at the character's head height that still shows the player things the avatar could not perceive, such as through walls.

KNOBS field of view and what the avatar can see; whether players can switch viewpoints

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Traces

mechanics × interface

World elements that lead the player to places that matter in the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The marks must be noticeable but not obvious, and reliably (or deliberately unreliably) connect to something in play such as enemies, loot or traps. Players must be able to read them and act on them.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Decorative marks that sit in the world but correspond to nothing, so following them gets players nowhere.

KNOBS how visible they are; how reliable they are; how long they last; whether players can alter them

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Chat Channels

mechanics × interface

Channels where players exchange messages directly inside the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Useful channel types (local, team, global), a way to find the right audience, and rules about who may speak and what.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A chat box exists, but it is empty, hidden, or so noisy and mixed that nobody uses it for coordinating.

KNOBS types and scope of channels; moderation or filtering; friend lists

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Dialogues

mechanics × interface

Conversations inside the game world that the game system controls.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Replies must lead somewhere, giving information or changing the game state, and the system must handle what players can say. The choices should fit the characters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A conversation tree where every option leads to the same answer and nothing changes.

KNOBS number of branches; how choices affect the game state

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God Views

mechanics × interface

The world is shown without being tied to any object inside it.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A camera players can move freely over the world, independent of units, with enough detail to be useful. Decide what stays hidden (fog of war) so there is still uncertainty.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A zoomed-out camera that is actually locked to a character or a fixed spot, so the player still sees only what that character sees.

KNOBS camera freedom and zoom range; how much is hidden by fog of war; number of display modes

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Split-Screen Views

mechanics × interface

The screen is divided into parts, each constantly showing its own view of the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must run on a shared screen with real-time play, with a layout that gives each view enough space to be readable. It should adapt when the number of players changes.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A divided screen where the views are so small or the same that players cannot play independently, or one view is only a static picture.

KNOBS number of views; layout; size of each view; whether it changes with joining players

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Extra-Game Broadcasting

mechanics × interface

Game events are sent out through channels other than the one where the game is played.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Decide which events get sent, when and through what channel, and put players in control of sharing so it does not feel like spam. Events like achievements, rewards and uncertain moments are worth sending.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A share button or notification stream that sends trivial events nobody wants to see, so no one outside the game ever reacts.

KNOBS which events are broadcast; how often and through which channel

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Crosshairs

mechanics × interface

An on-screen mark that helps aim a weapon or choose a target more precisely.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The marker must show where an action will land, with fixed or movable placement, and match how aiming really works. It can also carry accuracy or target information.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A crosshair is drawn on screen, but it is not where shots actually go, so it does not help aiming.

KNOBS fixed or movable; auto-aim strength; how much accuracy or target information it shows

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Equipment Slots

mechanics × interface

Spaces where the player puts the items they want to use.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Slots must be limited and specialised so that choosing for one means giving up another, and items must differ enough to make that a real trade-off.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Slots that can always be filled with the same best items so there is never a choice.

KNOBS number and types of slots; whether they replace or add to an inventory; how much items differ

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Score Tracks

mechanics × interface

A strip on which the players' points are marked.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Provide a track with enough spaces, a rule for overflow or shared spots, and public visibility. It gains meaning when it also affects turn order or tiebreaks.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A track that only mirrors a number kept elsewhere, is hidden or rarely consulted, so no one reacts to what it shows.

KNOBS track length; what happens at the end or on shared spots; whether position affects turn order or ties

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Gameplay Statistics

mechanics × interface

Records of values and events that can be viewed during or after the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must track meaningful events or values and make them reachable by players during or after play, and players must care about them, for example to compare or review. Presentation should be readable and persistent.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A stats screen full of numbers that nobody looks at or can use, or records that are lost as soon as the session ends.

KNOBS what is recorded; how long it is kept and who can see it

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Vision Modes

mechanics × interface

The same view of the world is shown in different ways, such as thermal vision.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each mode must reveal information the normal view hides, such as hidden objects or clues, and have a cost, limit or tradeoff so switching is a real decision. Otherwise one mode wins permanently.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A colored filter that shows exactly the same information as the normal view.

KNOBS what each mode reveals; energy or duration limits; how many modes exist; how they are unlocked

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Discard Piles

mechanics × interface

A place where cards or tiles are put after they have been played.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The pile must have a rule for whether it is open or closed and whether cards come back. Its contents must matter, for example by refilling the deck or being searchable.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A pile where used cards just sit, nobody looks at it and it never affects play.

KNOBS open or closed; whether cards can be retrieved; whether it refills the deck

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God Fingers

mechanics × interface

An interface element showing where the player is currently acting on the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A pointer that works anywhere in the world and is unaffected by it, with actions tied to what it selects or points at. The input handling must be responsive and the available actions clear.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A cursor that appears but can only click menus, or one that merely shows position without letting players act on the world.

KNOBS which actions the pointer allows; selection modes; its range and precision

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HUD Interfaces

mechanics × interface

Information and action buttons are shown over the picture of the world, as if on glass before the eyes.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK It must show the information players need at the moments they need it without cluttering the view, and update reliably with the game state. What it includes should match what the design wants players to track.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A screen overlay with decorative or redundant elements that tell the player nothing useful for decisions.

KNOBS what information is shown; how large and prominent; whether it fits the game world

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Non-Diegetic Features

mechanics × interface

Parts of the game's presentation that do not fit into its fictional world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game needs a world with a fiction and then must show information that does not belong to it, such as indicators, markers or notifications. Placement and prominence decide how much they break consistency.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A HUD element dressed up as an in-world object so it looks diegetic, or an indicator that duplicates what the world already shows and adds nothing.

KNOBS how much non-diegetic information is shown; how prominent it is and whether it can be hidden

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Cameras

mechanics × interface

Abstract objects that define the point from which the game world is seen.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The camera type (follow or fixed, over-shoulder or overhead) must be chosen to match what players need to see, and control must not burden them. It affects surprise and tension through what is hidden.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A camera is present but it is fixed to show everything or is so awkward that it gets in the way, and view makes no difference to play.

KNOBS camera type and angle; player control or automatic; field of view

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Game Lobbies

mechanics × interface

A place where players gather before a game starts.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Provide a place to find players and games, choose settings, and communicate before starting. It needs server infrastructure and communication tools.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A lobby screen exists, but it only auto-assigns players with no choice or talk, so it is just a loading screen.

KNOBS lobby scope; communication tools; filters and matchmaking options

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Mini-maps

mechanics × interface

A small map showing the game world in broad outline.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The map must show the player's position and relevant things in the world in a readable way, and the world must be big enough that overview is needed. What it shows or hides should be chosen deliberately.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A small map that is too vague or too cluttered to read, or a world so small that nobody ever looks at it.

KNOBS how much it shows: zoom, markers, hidden areas

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Point of Interest Indicators

mechanics × interface

Hints that guide the player to important places and objects in the world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The indicator must be clear and well timed, pointing at things that really matter. The game has to decide how much help it gives so it doesn't ruin exploration.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A marker is always on screen but is ignored, or points at things that don't matter.

KNOBS how many things are marked; how obvious the marker is; when it appears

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Alarms

mechanics × interface

Warnings about an important change in the game, like fuel running low or guards spotting the hero.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK A clear trigger and a perceivable signal, plus a real consequence (enemies converge, a timer starts) so players must react. Players should know what raised the alarm and whether it can be stopped.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A siren sounds but nothing in play changes, so players ignore it.

KNOBS what triggers it; how loud or visible; what penalty follows; whether it can be reset

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Auxiliary Game Screens

mechanics × interface

The game uses several separate screens, such as a TV and a phone at once.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each screen must show information that differs from, or adds to, the main screen, such as private data or overviews, so that looking at it affects decisions. Decide whether it shows shared overviews or private facts.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A second screen only mirrors the main one or shows decoration, so no one needs to look at it.

KNOBS what information goes on the screens; shared or private; number of screens

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Crossmedia Gameplay

mechanics × interface

One session is played across several different kinds of media at once.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Each medium must be given a distinct job that the others cannot do, and the media must be linked by shared game state or goals. Players need clear ways to move between media without friction.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with a companion website or app that only shows ads or duplicates information, so dropping it changes nothing in play.

KNOBS how many media are used; how much each one contributes to the game state

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Drafting Spreads

mechanics × interface

The options players take turns choosing from are laid out in view of everyone.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The display must show several different elements that are refilled in a clear way. Their values must differ so that choosing and watching others matters.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A display where all cards are alike or the order is fixed, so picking is not a decision.

KNOBS number of cards shown; how it is refilled; extra cost to pick deeper ones

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Mimetic Interfaces

mechanics × interface

Sensors judge how accurately the player copies movements, and this is part of the game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The sensors must measure real physical movement and the game must score how well it is done. Tolerance should be tuned so players can learn gradually.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A game with a themed controller, such as a plastic guitar, where pressing buttons gives the same result and the physical action is not really measured.

KNOBS how strictly the performance is judged; how tolerant the early levels are

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Near Miss Indicators

mechanics × interface

After a failure, the player sees how close they or others came to the goal.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must measure closeness to success and show it clearly after a failure. It needs to be informative enough that players use it for their next attempt.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A generic failure message, or a near-miss display that shows the same thing whether the miss was narrow or wide.

KNOBS how precisely the near-miss is measured and shown; how often it is displayed

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Picture-in-Picture Views

mechanics × interface

One image or view is shown inside another.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The inset must show information players really need during play that the main view cannot, in a place and size that does not hide the main action. Its content should change what players decide.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A small window duplicates what the main view already shows, or is too tiny or cluttered to read, so nobody uses it.

KNOBS what it shows; its size and position; whether players can move, resize or switch it

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Emotes

mechanics × interface

Commands with which a player shows their hero's feelings without affecting the game's course.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need a simple way to trigger the actions, visible to nearby others, and a reason to use them such as social play or role-playing.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A few emote buttons that nobody sees, or whose output is the same canned animation that carries no personal expression.

KNOBS freeform or fixed list; how many emotes; who sees them and how they are labelled

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First Player Tokens

mechanics × interface

A token shows who goes first in the turn order.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have a changing turn order across rounds and the token must be passed according to clear rules. For orders with more than two positions, more markers or an order track may be needed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A token that stays with one player or is ignored because the order never changes.

KNOBS how the token is passed; how many positions in the order need markers

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Goal Indicators

mechanics × interface

Information that shows the player what their current goals are.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK They must give accurate, timely information about goals and progress toward them, in a form players can read at a glance. The information must connect to something players can act on.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A quest log or marker that is vague, outdated or hidden, so players still don't know what to do or how close they are.

KNOBS how much detail is shown; how precise (exact vs vague); how often it is updated

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Tooltips

mechanics × interface

An explanation shown when the player pays attention to a game element.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The text must contain information that actually helps decisions, appear at the right moment and with the right delay, and not flood the player. It should cover the elements players are likely to be unsure about.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A popup that merely repeats the item's name or flavour text and teaches nothing about how it works.

KNOBS which elements get tips; how much detail; hover delay before showing

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Outcome Indicators

mechanics × interface

Extra signals about how an action ended, beyond its effect in the world.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be an outcome that players cannot easily read from the world itself, and the indicator must report it clearly and at the right time. The detail level can be varied to keep some uncertainty.

JUST A LABEL WHEN An indicator that repeats what is already obvious on screen, or one that appears too late or too vaguely to help players understand what happened.

KNOBS what outcomes are indicated; how precise the information is; how long and when it is shown

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Explicit Random Seeds

mechanics × interface

The player can enter the number from which the game builds its randomness.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The game must have a seeded random generator and show a clear way for players to enter and share the seed. The same seed then has to give the same results every time.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A seed field exists, but the game mixes in the clock or other randomness, so identical seeds give different worlds.

KNOBS what the seed controls (whole world, level layout, just a setup); how visible the seed input is

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Loading Hints

mechanics × interface

Game tips that are shown while the game is loading.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK There must be waiting moments, and the hints must be useful, correct and varied enough to be read. They should connect to what the player will do next.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Vague or repeated tips, or generic lore lines, that teach nothing about play.

KNOBS how many hints; how they are chosen; how long they display

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Rabbit Hole Invitations

mechanics × interface

A vague invitation that draws a person into a particular game.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The cryptic messages must be placed where target players will find them and be intriguing enough to follow. Several are spread over media and time since individual ones may be missed.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A clue is posted, but it is too obscure or in the wrong place, so nobody finds or follows it.

KNOBS how many; where posted; how cryptic; timing

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Current Player Tokens

mechanics × interface

A token showing whose turn it is.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The token must be clearly visible and the rules must say exactly when it passes. It is most useful when turns are long or players act out of turn.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A token that sits on the table but is passed late or ignored, while players still ask whose turn it is.

KNOBS token size and visibility; the exact moment it is handed over

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Meta-Postures

mechanics × interface

Agreed poses and gestures convey information about the game without breaking character.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The gestures must be few, easy to learn, clearly different from each other and visible without breaking the fiction. Everyone must know the meanings.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A list of gestures on paper that players forget or ignore, so they keep speaking out of character anyway.

KNOBS how many gestures; how distinct and how visible they are

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Self-Reported Positioning

mechanics × interface

The player's physical location matters in the game, but the player reports it to the game themselves.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK Players need a way to report their location, and the game should use that location for something. Trust or checks decide whether reports can be false.

JUST A LABEL WHEN A check-in button whose reported place has no effect on anything in the game.

KNOBS how location is reported; how often; whether reports are checked

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Prompting Techniques

mechanics × interface

In role-playing: lines that hint how to change the scene without leaving character.

NEEDS TO REALLY WORK The group needs shared, easily noticed signals that fit the fiction, learned before play. Different scenes may need different prompts.

JUST A LABEL WHEN Signals are listed in the rulebook, but nobody notices or uses them, so players still break character to change scenes.

KNOBS which signals exist; how subtle they are; who may use them

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