Writing Game Rules

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This is easier than writing a game design document for an electronic game. The GDC must describe EVERYTHING about the game. The rules for the non-electronic game will refer to the components but do not have to fully describe the components.

Needed:

**Clarity.** Clear and concise—but clarity is uppermost, short rules that are ambiguous are a failure.

**You can’t please everyone.** No matter what you do, someone will always misunderstand the rules, perhaps deliberately. You’re trying for 99.9% success, not 100%. No matter how much detail you work into the rules, someone will misunderstand.

**Thorough.** Rules must be thorough—don’t leave anything out.

**Sequence of Play.** There are two typical ways of writing, the “Sequence of Play” and the “Reference” rules. The first assumes players will be trying to learn the game as they read the rules, a common occurrence even though it’s inefficient. The second, older, type assumes players will read the rules all the way through at least once, then try to play the game. The latter results in easier-to-look-up information. Sequence of Play is much more common now, especially for simple games, and is what I try to use.

Reference rules tend to be organized like an outline, with numbers for each section. SoP rules rely on formatting for division of sections, and rarely have numbers, or only at the top level.

**Direct.** Try to talk directly to the player. I have trouble with remembering not to use the older form, “the player does such-and-such” as opposed to the newer form, “you do such-and-such”. You can’t get too informal without losing clarity, but you can avoid over-formality.

**Examples of Play.** Examples, especially of the start of the game, help readers know whether they actually understand the rules. For some non-electronic games there are podcasts and videos to help players learn the game. For Britannia I’ve made a two-turn “historical walkthrough” of the start of the game, an 11+ minute podcast, but (as yet) no video.

Typical rules sections (SoP style):
**Introduction.** Summarizes the game, number of players, length, and the objective. Helps the reader decide whether the game is something he wants to try out.

**Components.** Describes what the players are getting out of the box, and what each part is for.

**Setup/Starting the Game.** How to distribute pieces and parts, and how to get going.

**Sequence of Play.** What happens each turn. Often includes "phases".

Then we have several sections that describe what the player can do as he moves through his turn. This can go on for a large part of the rules. For example, in many games there will be a "movement" section, and a "resolution of conflicts" section.

**Miscellaneous stuff.** Which doesn't seem to fit anywhere else.

**How the Game Ends/How to Win.** While this is mentioned in the introduction (at least the win part), here it is described in detail.

I like to add a small sidebar, "Rules often misunderstood or overlooked". But this is not in most rules sets.

**Variants/Optional Rules.** Some games have variations in how you can play. I'll sometimes put a rule that I tried but rejected in favor of another, into this section. Even though I didn't care for it, some players may prefer it. Further, I may have a diceless version and one that uses dice; whichever is the secondary version becomes an optional rule.

**Credits.** Who made the game, who playtested it.

By the way, I don’t worry about male/female pronouns. I despise the style that changes occasionally between “he” and “she”, because that’s terribly distracting. Nowadays it’s OK to use “their” rather than “his” to avoid gender, even though “their” is technically plural.

The assumption in any set of rules or instructions is that you can only do what the rules say you can do. It’s impossible to say all the things you cannot do--think about it. In video game terms, you can do whatever the computer allows, but nothing else. The problem in video games comes when the computer lets you do something you shouldn’t be able to, also known as "glitches" that players take advantage of (such as walking through a wall).