



Game Design as Play: Players as Designers

Games designed to be created by players as they play

Abstract

This document discusses the design and development of the **Game Design as Play: Players as Designers** research project. **Game Design as Play** is a project investigating games that are actively designed by their players during play through both a series of workshops and the development of a tabletop game called **making it up as we go along**.

making it up as we go along draws from the philosopher Peter Suber's Nomic (Suber, 1990), Bernie De Koven's concept of the Well-Played Game (De Koven, 2013), and concepts from critical pedagogy (Freire, 2017) and participatory art (Bishop, 2012), in an attempt to flatten the hierarchy between game designer and game player. Players take turns to add and remove rules from the game as they play, acting as both game designer and player, and by necessity engaging in a dialogue about game design and their shared interest in playing together.

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making it up as we go along: UK Games Expo 2023

Project Aim

The core aim of the **Game Design as Play** project is to explore the design and play of games where players are empowered to change the very rules and structure of the game as they are playing.

In doing so, the project aims to flatten the traditional hierarchy between game designer and player. Most games are designed such that the game designer sets out the rules and the structure, and the player plays within those rules and that structure. Players may have a significant degree of freedom to play within that structure, but it is rare that they are explicitly empowered to change it.

"Following directions socializes us;
making our own sets us free"

Anna Zilboorg – Knitting for Anarchists (Zilboorg, 2002)

Project Overview

As first conceived, the **Game Design as Play** project consisted of three related threads, all taking different approaches to explore the core concept of players modifying games as they play them:

- **Folk Games:** An investigation of the ways players naturally modify and adapt games via a series of Folk Games workshops.
- **making it up as we go along:** A tabletop game created to explore what kind of games arise when players are empowered to change a game's rules and structure, as they are playing the game.
- **what happens if I...:** An attempt to build a digital game to support real-time modification as the game is played.

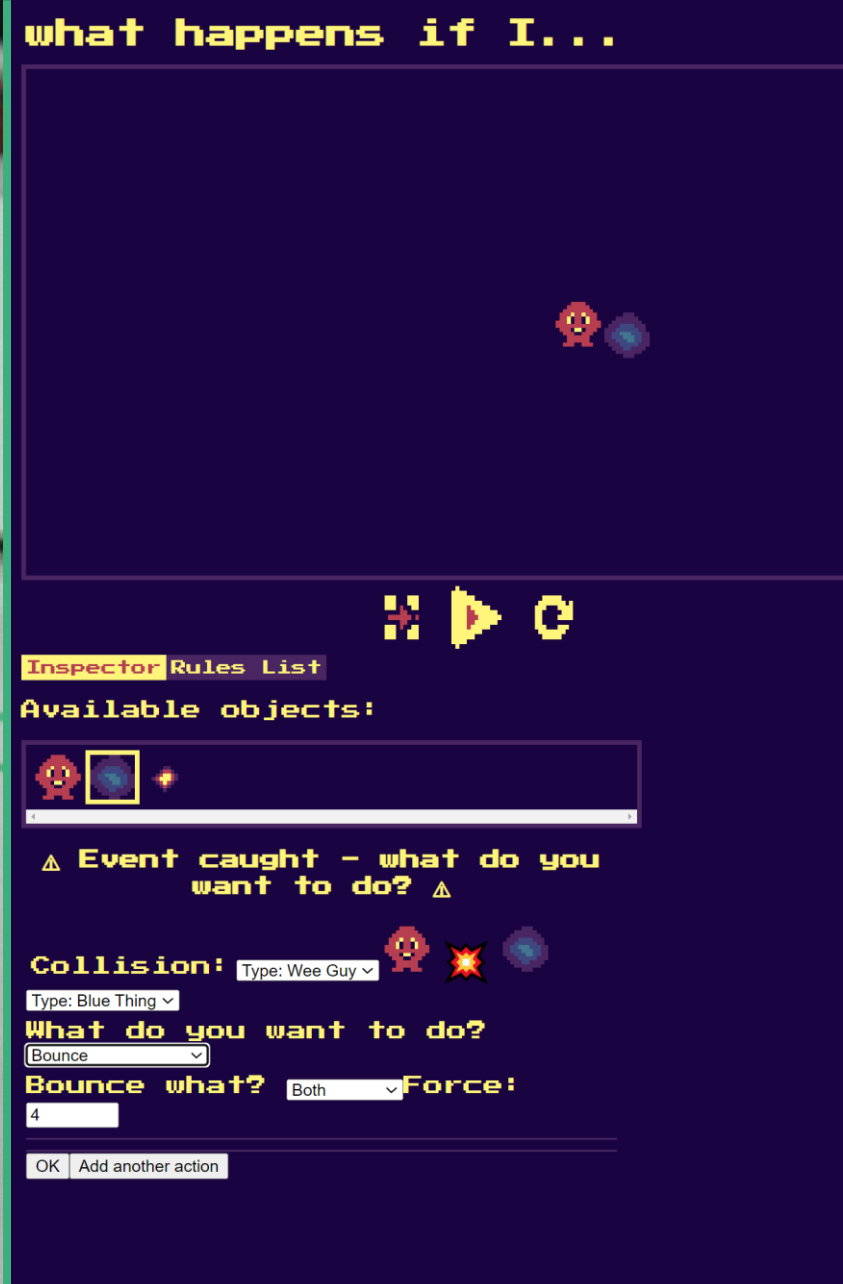
As it developed, **making it up as we go along** became the primary focus of the project, as it soon became apparent the game offered rich potential for exploring the 'players as designers' concept at the core of this project.



Folk games workshop
The Overkill Festival 2022



making it up as we go along
2023 Our Street Studio playtest



what happens if I...
2022 prototype

making it up as we go along

making it up as we go along is a game about changing the rules and inventing new ones, usually played as a physical/tabletop game. The game revolves around 5 rules written by the players themselves, which are repeatedly changed and modified as the game progresses.

The structure of the game is very simple, with most choices about the game's design, mechanics, and goals intentionally left open for the players to determine. Play is turn-based, with turns following a simple structure:

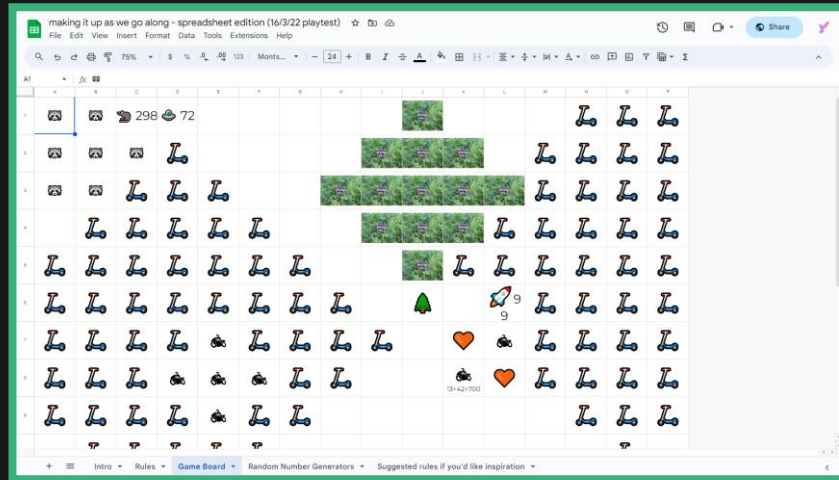
1. Remove an existing rule
2. Add a new rule
3. Play through the current active rules

The open nature of this structure gives rise to a variety of forms of play and player interactions, with individual games varying significantly in rules, content, and goals.

Game Formats

making it up as we go along is primarily intended to be played board game-style, with a group of players sat around a table with various props, and blank playing cards for writing rules on. As part of the development process however, I have developed other formats, most notably:

Online spreadsheet



Played using Google Sheets with players communicating over voice chat.

Drop in and play

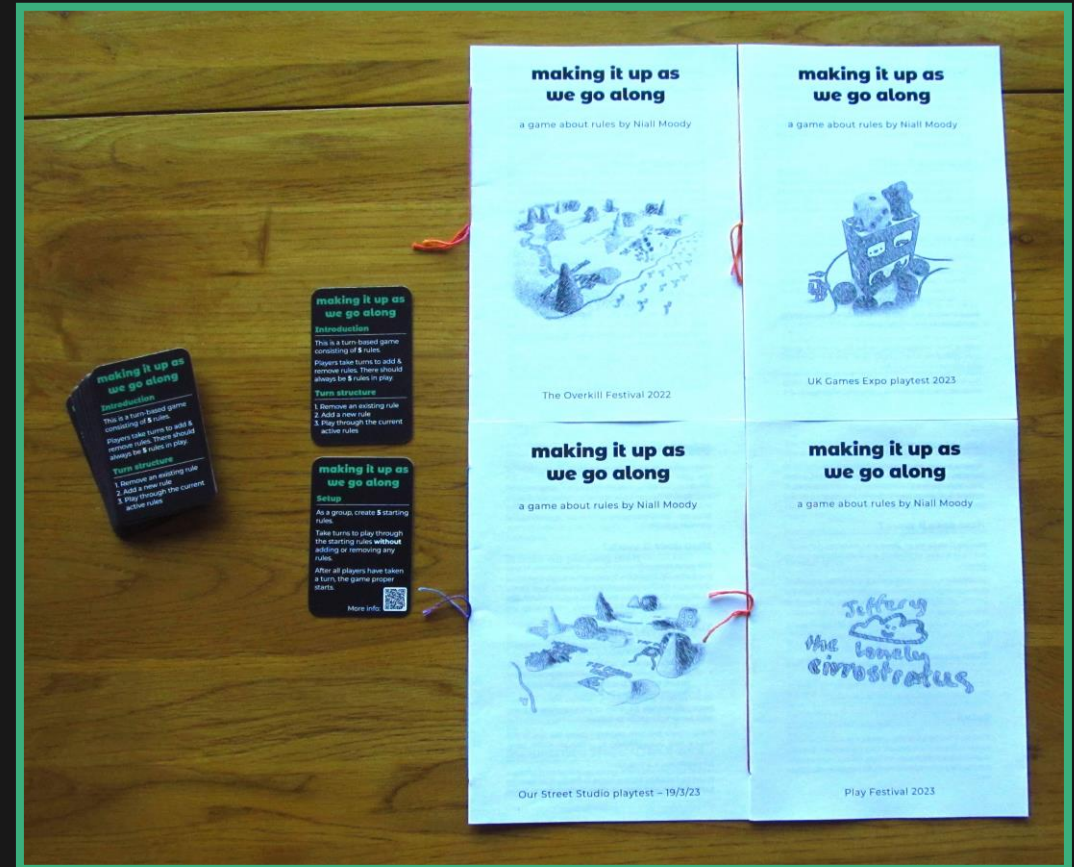


The game is set up in a public location, players stop by to play 1 turn, then move on.

Physical Documentation

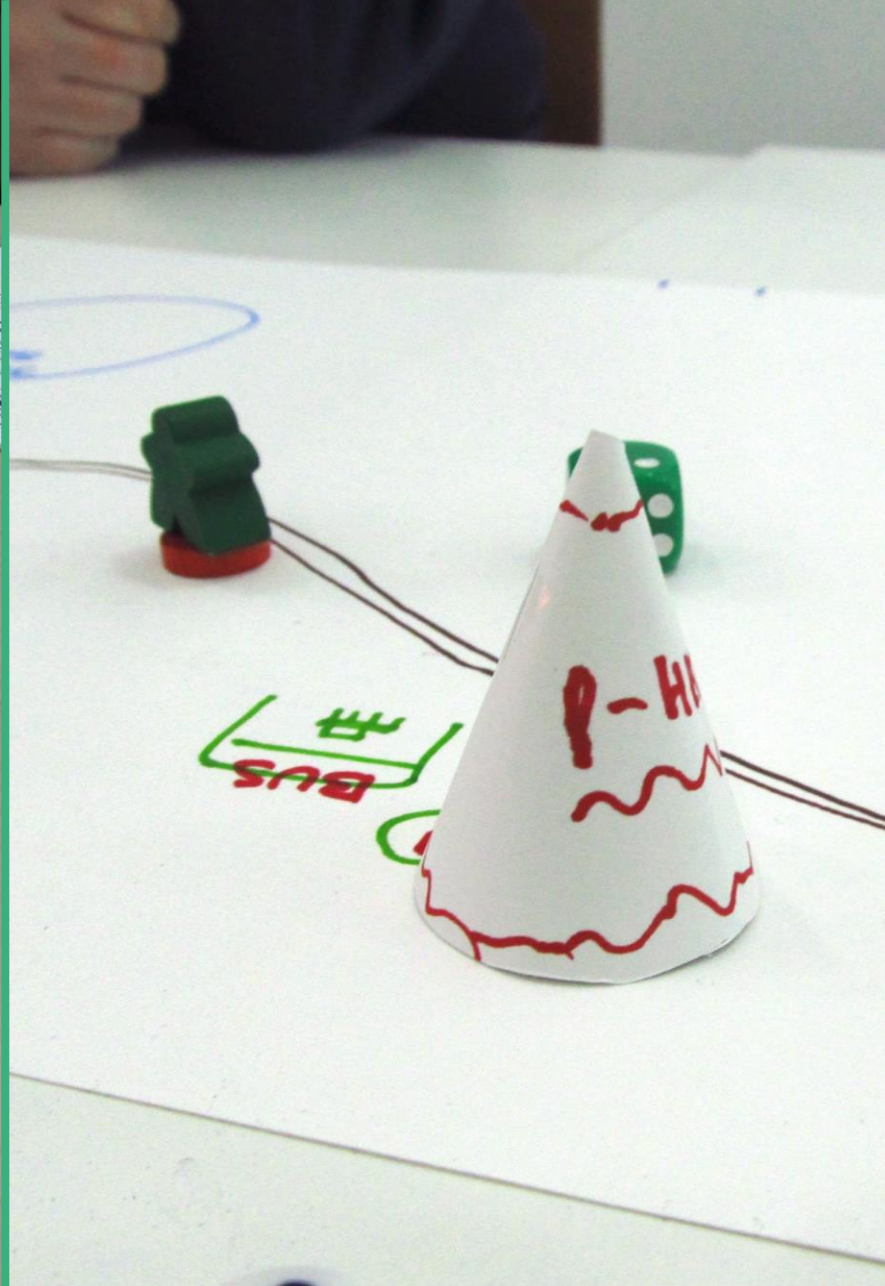
Over the course of the game's development I have developed a series of zines intended to introduce the game to new players, and offer rule suggestions for players who may be new to this style of play. These zines also function as a practical, physical document of the game's development.

In addition to the zines, I've had the core rules printed in a business card format, for easy dissemination at events.

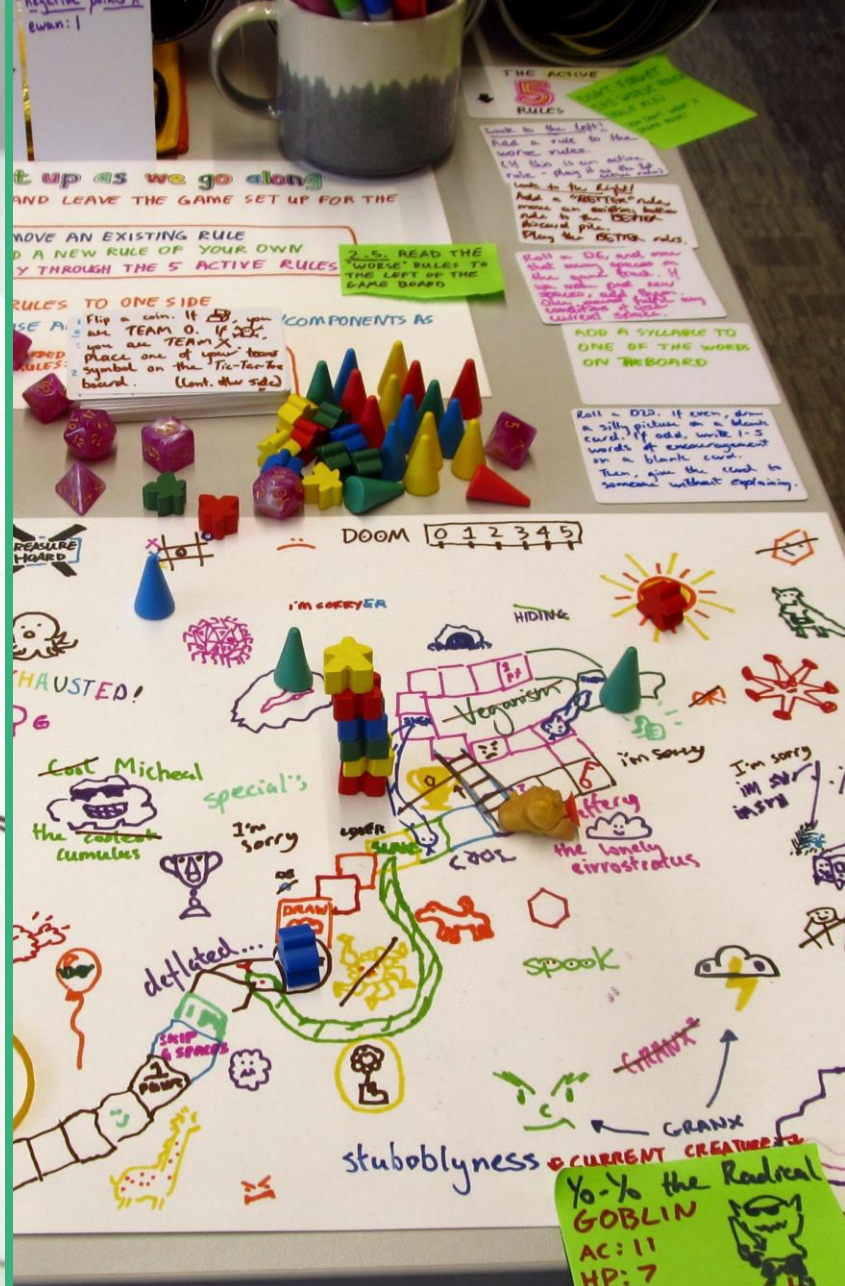




making it up as we go along
2022 Private playtest



making it up as we go along
2023 Our Street Studio playtest



making it up as we go along
2023 Abertay office playtest

Originality

making it up as we go along synthesizes two primary influences (Peter Suber's game Nomic (Suber, 1990), and Bernie De Koven's concept of the Well-Played Game (De Koven, 2013)) into a game that expands upon both influences.

Games in the Nomic genre tend to take place over long periods of time and involve significant 'rules lawyering' and discussions about the interpretation of rules. By contrast, **making it up as we go along** can be played within 1 hour, and seems to naturally generate more foundational discussions about the nature of communal play (e.g. 'what do we want to get out of this game?', 'how do we play well together?', 'how do we make a game that works for everyone at the table?'). As such, it forms a practical application of De Koven's ideas, and provides a formal structure for thinking through some of the questions that De Koven raises.

In aiming to flatten the hierarchy between game designer and player, the project mirrors similar attempts in fields such as Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2017) and Participatory Art (Bishop, 2012) to flatten hierarchies between students and teachers, and artists and audiences, respectively.

Significance

Compared to more established genres, this project focuses on a relatively under-explored form of game design. While Suber's publication of Nomic has, in effect, given rise to a small genre of Nomic games, that genre is relatively unknown outside of the small circle of players and game designers who are already familiar with the genre.

In its streamlining of Nomic's core design principle, **making it up as we go along** aims to make this style of game more widely accessible. It also shifts the focus away from Suber's interest in the legal, philosophical ramifications of his game (and AI researchers' interest in Nomic for its usefulness in training autonomous agents (Holland *et al.*, 2013)), towards fundamental questions of how and why we play together. As such, it has pedagogic potential; discussions of the nature of play and game design tend to occur quite naturally during play. It also raises the potential for insights into how people play when they are empowered to actively change the rules of the game they are playing.

Rigour

The development of **making it up as we go along** has taken place over multiple years, and has involved numerous playtests both private and public. These playtests have involved experienced game designers, academics, and members of the public, and the game has also been presented publicly in a workshop format.

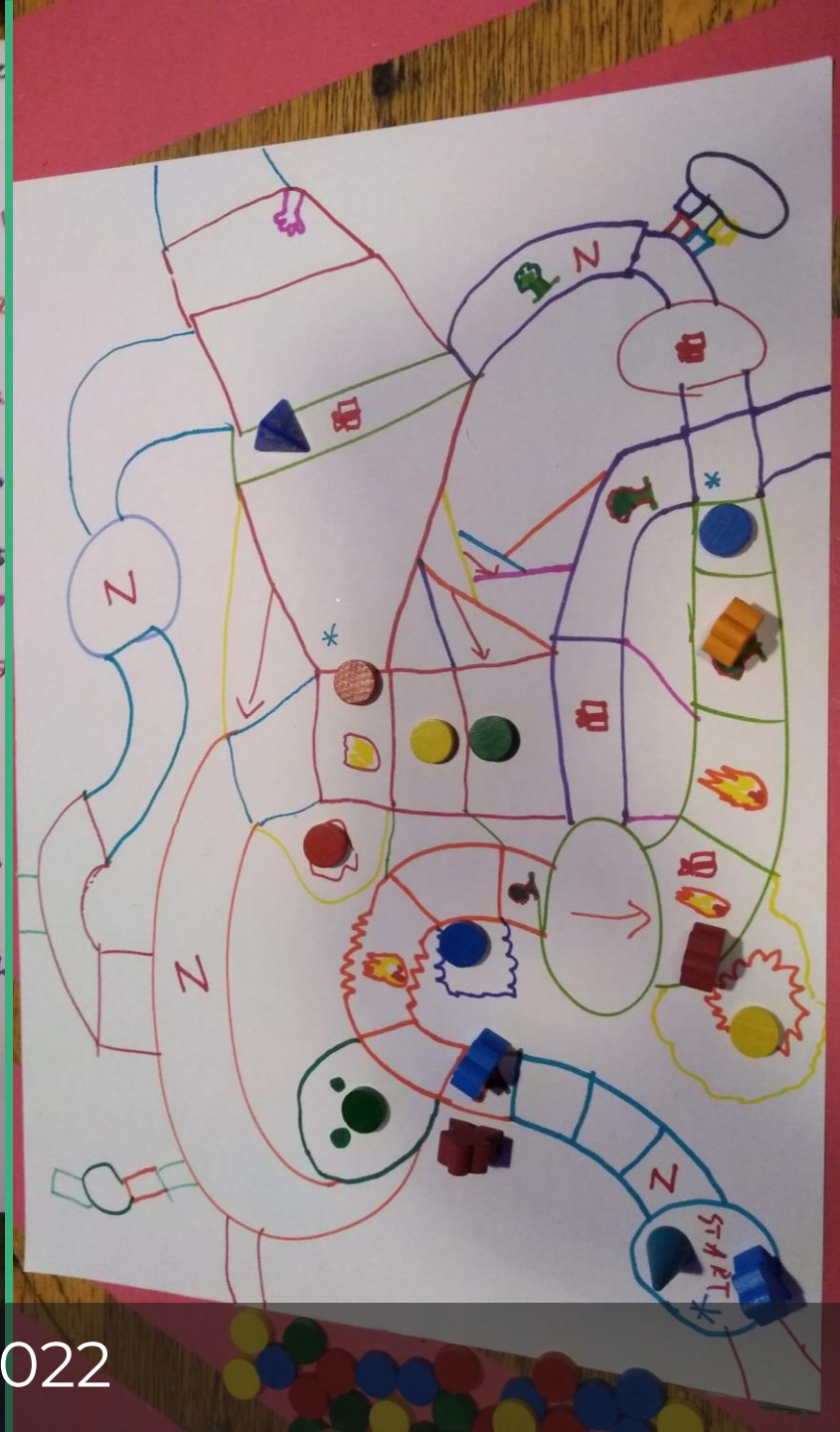
Throughout this process the game has been developed in an iterative fashion, responding to the outcomes of each playtest. One notable example is the game's exhibition at the 2023 UK Games Expo, which led directly to the game's current, streamlined format.

The game's development has drawn explicitly on the work of Suber and De Koven, in addition to the work undertaken in both TTRPG and LARP communities to develop safety tools for games where players have significant agency (Shaw and Bryant-Monk, 2023).



RULES

1. PLAYERS TAKE TURNS
2. ON YOUR TURN YOU CAN ADD A NEW RULE OR MODIFY AN EXISTING RULE
- AND/OR
3. TAKE AN ACTION
4. ACTIONS ARE DEFINED BY RULES
5. PLAYERS HAVE A PAWN & CAN MOVE IT ALONG THE PATH BY ROLLING A D6 (AN ACTION).
6. PLAYERS MUST DRAW A 4 LEGGED ANIMAL AND PLACE IT FACE DOWN ON TABLE (AN ACTION)
7. WHENEVER A DICE SHOWS A 2, → THE PLAYER MOVES 1 FIELD BACK.
8. THROUGH THE BLUE BOARD THE PLAYER CLOSEST TO 20 IS THE NEXT ONE TO PLAY.
9. WHEN YOU SET ON A FIELD WITH A CHIP (YOU GET 3 POINTS) INTO GAME IT TO A DRAWING ON THE PATH.
9. WHEN AN ARROW IS ON THE FIELD YOU HAVE TO FOLLOW THAT DIRECTION
10. IF YOU ARE CHANGING AN EXISTING RULE, YOU CAN ALSO ADD 1 NEW RULE
11. IF YOU LAND ON A TREE, DRAW AN ANIMAL CARD
12. WHEN YOU GET AN ANIMAL CARD YOU MUST ACT ON THE ACTION OR NAME THE HOUSE FOR A POINT
13. THE SAME IS WON (4+) WHEN YOU HAVE 10+ POINTS
14. ON YOUR TURN, ROLL A D6 TO MOVE GHOST MARIE
15. IF YOU ENCOUNTER THE MATH GHOST, ROLL A DIE, 1-3-5 GET A POINT, 2-4-6 LOSE A POINT
16. AFTER THE PLAYERS TURN THE ACTIVE PLAYER NEED TO EXPAND THE BOARD BY 1 FIELD
17. IF YOU ROLL A 2, TAKE 2 CARD, PICK ONE & DISCARD ANOTHER
18. LAND ON FIRE, ROLL A DIE, LOSE THAT # OF PUNK
19. LAND ON TRAFFIC LIGHT, ROLL DIE AND GET A POINT



making it up as we go along: The Overkill Festival 2022

Dissemination & Impact

Folk Games:

- **Workshop:** Overkill Festival 2022

making it up as we go along:

- **Workshop:** Overkill Festival 2022
- **Drop-in and play:** UK Games Expo 2023
- **Public playtest:** UK Games Expo 2023
- **Talk:** Play – Creative Gaming Festival 2023
- **Workshop:** Play – Creative Gaming Festival 2023
- **Talk:** Board Game Studies Colloquium 2024 (at time of writing TBC: April)

Reflection

The most unexpected outcome of this research was the realisation of just how well **making it up as we go along** works as a pedagogical tool. Because the game is so freeform, and players have so much agency to define a playthrough, it becomes almost impossible to play without engaging in detailed discussions about what players want to get out of it.

These discussions frequently engage in fundamental questions surrounding games and play (*“what are we playing for?”*, *“how do we decide who wins?”*, *“do games need a winner to be worth our time?”*, etc.). In more traditional games these kind of questions are typically answered by the game’s designer, and largely accepted by players as just the way things are. **making it up as we go along** refuses to answer such questions though, instead forcing players to come up with their own answers. Although it was not designed as a teaching tool, this aspect of the game means that in practice it frequently functions as a kind of discursive, informal game design education for players who have perhaps not considered such questions before.

Future Directions

what happens if I...

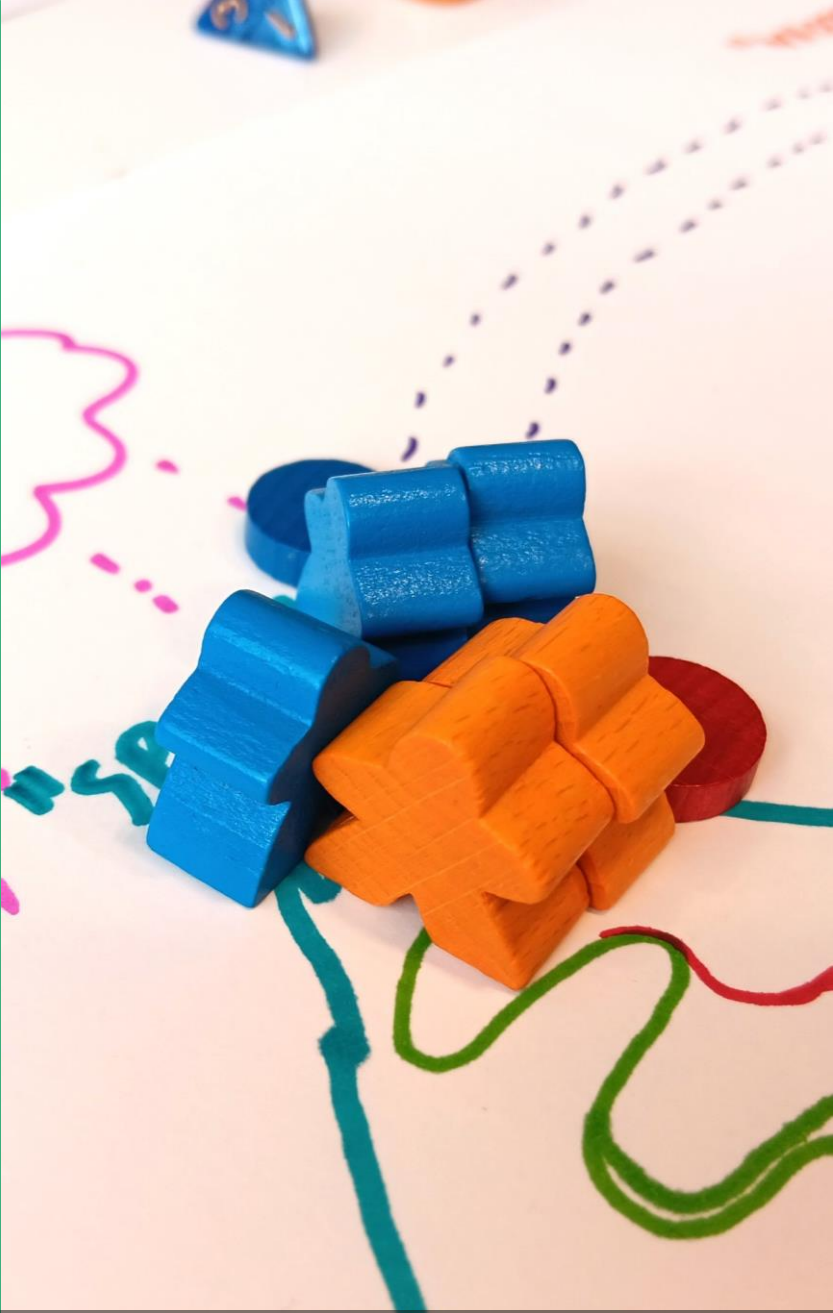
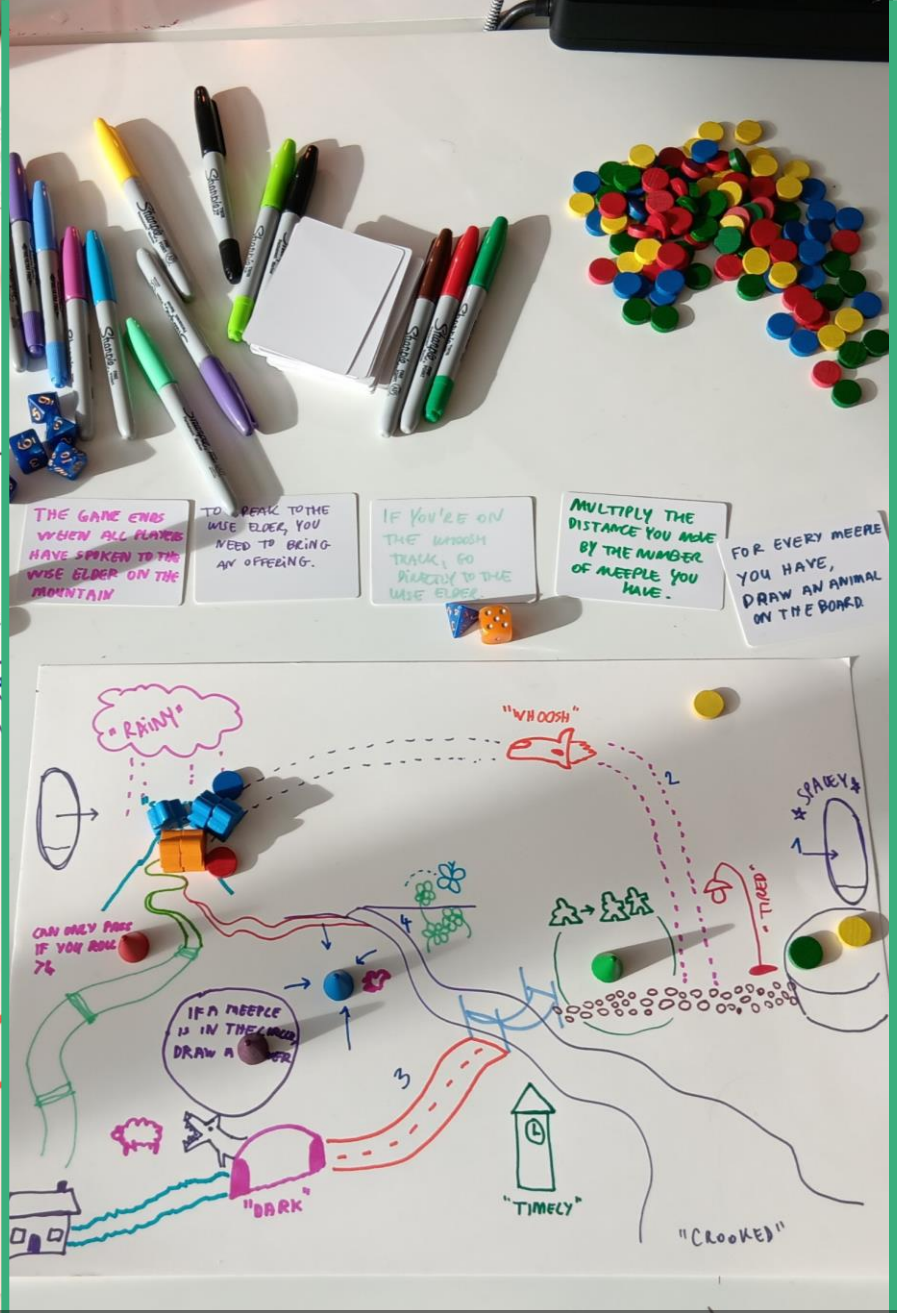
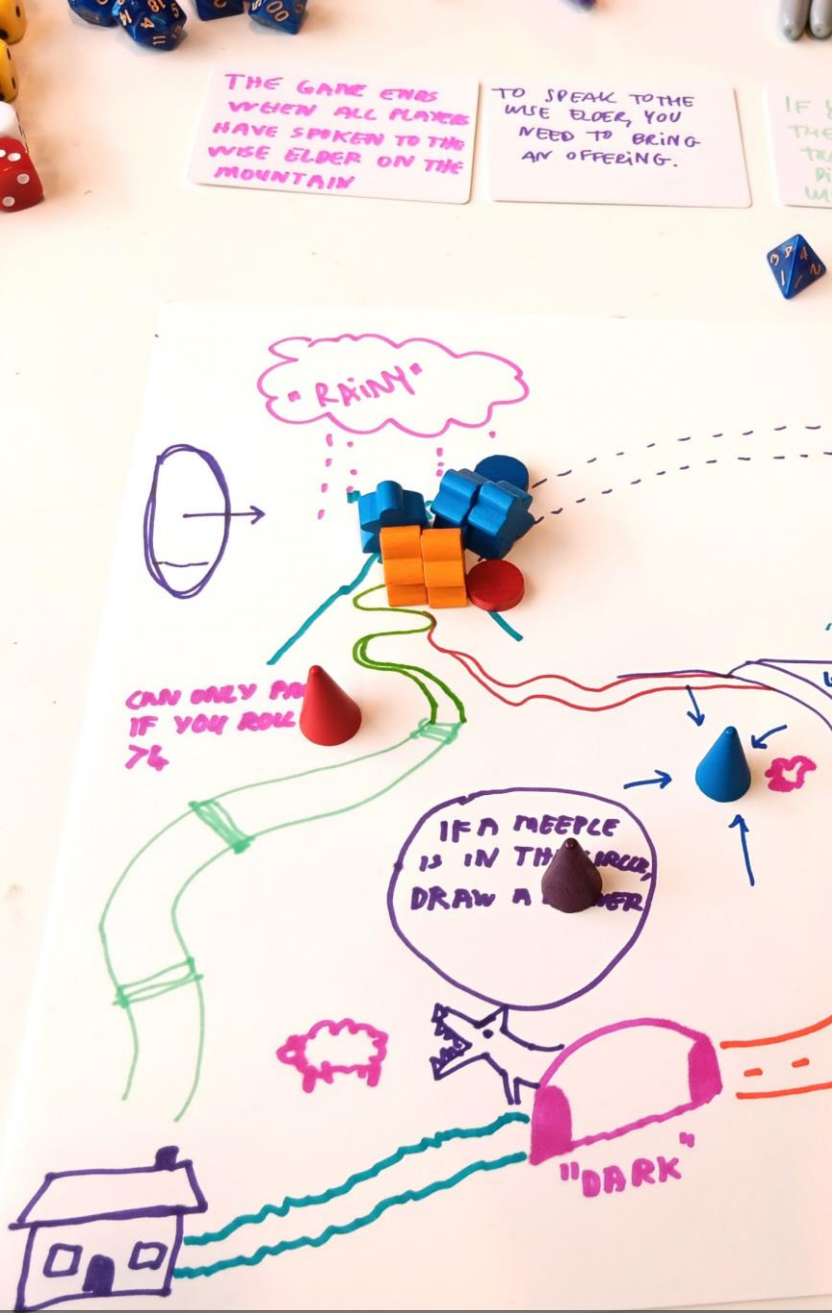
One of the original 3 threads of the Game Design as Play project, **what happens if I...** was intended as an exploration of the project's core ideas in a digital domain.

It was put on the back burner when **making it up as we go along** became this project's primary focus, but it would form a good jumping-off point for further work into a digital equivalent of **making it up as we go along**.

Crowd-designed games

A second direction would be to draw on my work with crowd-driven games (Moody and Sez nec, 2018) (Moody, Bozdog and MacLeod, 2018) to explore the possibility of creating games simultaneously played and designed by a large audience.

Such an approach would surely present significant challenges, but could perhaps draw on recent developments in interactive gameshow design (Sedgebeer and McNeil, no date).



making it up as we go along: Play – Creative Gaming Festival 2023

Links

making it up as we go along: [Main itch.io page \(zine downloads etc.\)](#)

Game Design as Play: [Research project public overview](#)

Folk Games: [Public collection of folk games collated for the project](#)

what happens if I...: [Early prototype web app](#)

niallmoody.com: [Personal site](#)

Acknowledgements

A project like this could not exist without collaboration, and it is indebted to the following people:

- Ren Wednesday
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- Caitlin Smith
- Rhoda Ellis
- Dr William Kavanagh
- Kayleigh MacLeod
- Gaz Robinson
- Ewan Fisher
- Robin Griffiths
- Dr Lynn Love
- Prof Robin Sloan

References

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Freire, P. (2017) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Reprint. New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

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Suber, P. (1990) *Nomic: A Game of Self-Amendment*. Available at: <https://web.archive.org/web/20200310063900/http://legacy.earlham.edu/~peters/writing/nomic.htm> (Accessed: 6 July 2023).

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The **5** Rules
↓

Each player chooses their favourite rule. If your rule was chosen, +1 or 2 points

whoever ends on odd number of points wins

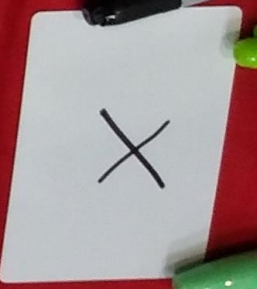
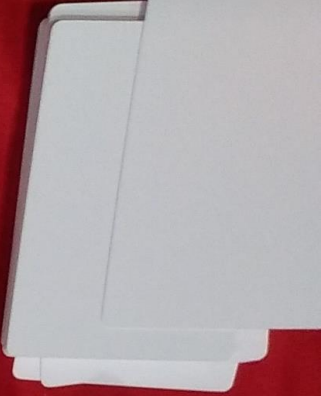
DRAW AN ANIMAL ON THE BOARD

if you break a rule you get -1 point

you may not touch anything blue on the board

Choose a

Hand-drawn board with words: **WORD**, **Smite**, **SPARRROW**, **ALBERTA**, **legus**, **Trust**, **reese**. Includes a Sharpie marker, blue cones, and colorful letter tiles. A large red outline contains the text: "Hide the Smallest object on the table somewhere on the table, then someone else must find it". A purple tile is labeled "REMOVED".



ROLL A D20. IF YOU COME TO THE NEAREST ANY RED MARKS

making it up as we go along: UK Games Expo 2023 Playtest