

# DIDACTIC GUIDELINES FOR TABLETOP GAME MANUALS AND VIDEO TUTORIALS

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## 1. Context

Even though the board game market has been steadily growing in recent years, there still is a lingering problem in the process of designing and producing new games: their manuals continue to display many ergonomic issues, especially due to the lack of academic research regarding the subject. This matter is so widespread that it has become a common trope amongst players – from casual to professionals (MACKLIN, 2015) – and researchers (HAM, 2016) that reading games' manuals is a laborious and uncomfortable task.

Another contributing factor, here in Brazil, is the lack of specific regulations targeted to enlighten professionals on how to design their manuals. This, in turn, allows each company, designer, publisher etc to elaborate their manuals following their own personal perspectives – which does not seem to be providing users with good experiences, as mentioned before. In parallel, there is a new niche of video tutorial about board games that seems to be gaining strength and popularity over the later part of the last decade.

Therefore, this paper's main objectives were:

- 1) Establishing possible guidelines that should be followed in order to adequately design and structure game's manuals;
- 2) Comparing the manuals with video tutorials in order to investigate whether any of them follow – by chance or not – those guidelines.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology was divided in three different steps: first, a documental research in order to select three games that have manuals and video tutorials available online; secondly, a bibliographical revision in ergonomics, psychology and linguistics in order to provide with inputs to help define the guidelines to be applied to those written and audiovisual documents; and lastly, a comparative analysis between the characteristics of the manuals and videos in order to determine if they comply with the previously determined guidelines.

### 2.1. The Selected Games

Three games were selected in order to provide a thorough analysis, each of them providing a different perspective that amounts to a diverse sample space – in hopes of shedding light on the current criteria being used to design the manuals and filming the videos.

The first one, *Coup*<sup>1</sup>, is an award winning card game that encourages players to bluff and cheat each other in order to be the last one standing. Due to its great popularity among players all around the world, many YouTube channels dedicated to reviewing games have filmed unofficial videos<sup>2</sup> explaining how the game works and playing some rounds to serve as examples;

The second, *Nemesis*, whose publisher made a partnership with a previously existing YouTube channel in order to produce an official video tutorial, amounting to over 50 minutes, offering an interesting counterpoint to the unofficial ones. This game was made viable via a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter, which resulted in them publishing updates on the development of the game, such as the prototype's manual, that was analysed alongside the final one.

The third, *Santorini*, whose publisher already had an YouTube channel, that is now solely devoted to posting video tutorial about the game, since its release. As opposed to *Nemesis*'s, this channel contains many short videos, each one detailing a single specific information instead of a long video explaining the whole game.

## 2.2. The Bibliographical Review

According to Brazilian legislation, namely the Code of Consumer Defense and Protection, any product sold within national territory must be accompanied by didactic instructions of usage:

**Art. 50.** Contracts warranty is complementary to legal warranty and will be made available through a written declaration. Sole paragraph. The terms of the warranty must be standardized and must make the nature of the warranty clear; what it consists of, as well as the procedure, time periods and the places for claiming the warranty, as well as any fees that must be paid by the consumer. This information must be handed to the consumer together with the instructions and installation manual and be easy to understand, with illustrations (CCDP, 2014).

However, it is not made clear what does "easy to understand<sup>3</sup>, with illustrations" mean, exactly. This situations allows for each company, designer, or publisher to interpret this information in the manner they see fit, which tends to vary a lot. Therefore, it was necessary to elicit what would be the characteristics of any given text that would render it easy to understand – and how the illustrations should be applied alongside it.

The *Programa Nacional do Livro Didático*<sup>4</sup> (2020) determines that for any text to be considered didactic, it must take into consideration and appeal to the reader's context and reality, while providing a significant learning opportunity that helps them accomplish something they desire. Gagné (1973) also states that in order for a student to take interest in what has to be learned, they must be informed beforehand how that new knowledge can be applied in practice in their lives. Even though those statements were intended for schooling systems, the mains message that can be taken from them is that the most important part of the learning process is to identify a clear objective that can be achieved after the lesson is done. Applying this principle to the games' manuals, it becomes clear that, before reading the rules that the manual contains, users should be informed of the game's objective, which is the task that they should be able to accomplish after reading the manual.

Another factor to be taken into consideration is the order in which the rules are displayed to the user. Broadbent (1977) explains that the understanding of a text is better achieved if the sequence of the words in the sentence corresponds to the sequence of events being described.

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<sup>1</sup> Short for *Coup d'État*, the premise in which the game is based.

<sup>2</sup> Not produced by the company that published the game.

<sup>3</sup> The portuguese version of the document specifically uses the translation of the word "didactic".

<sup>4</sup> Brazilian Textbook Program.

Furthermore, according to Jara in his article "A Closer Look at the (Rule-) Books: Framings and Paratexts in Tabletop Role-playing Games" (2011) another important factor in learning the rules of a game are the Framings (WOLF, 2006: 5) or Paratexts (GENETTE, 1997): complementary elements and informations whose *raison d'être*<sup>5</sup> is aiding the reader to experience a more immersive experience. They are many and varied, like book covers, authors notes or prefaces but, in the context of game manuals, the adequate paratexts would be an introduction that explains the universe in which the game is inserted and a glossary, if there are any terms that users may be unfamiliar with.

As for the illustrations, Tufte (2001) determines that any image, graphics or table used to further explain a text should be located near it, as to adequately contextualize the information in question, while not interrupting the reading flow. He explains that sacrificing the quality of the reading flow due to production limitations and specifications devalues the textual usability. This is further corroborated by Moraes (2003), who defends that manuals should adopt guidelines that favour usability over operational logistics.

### 2.3. Resulting Guidelines and Document Analysis

The previous bibliographical review resulted in the following guidelines:

- 1) The text should be preceded by an **introduction** that contextualizes the user in the game's universe.
- 2) If necessary, there should be a **Glossary** of key terms.
- 3) The first rule displayed should be the game's **objective**.
- 4) The remaining **rules should appear in the order in which they are going to play out** in the actual game – generally starting by game preparation and ending in endgame triggers and/or scores.
- 5) Whenever necessary, there should be **images close to the texts** that they are illustrating.

Of all the documents selected, **none of them** followed the previous guidelines to the letter. Some of them arranged the information in inadequate orders, didn't utilize enough images – or utilized them too far away from the texts they referred to – or displayed incomplete information.

Between the videos, though, the official ones were a lot more compliant with the guidelines than the unofficial ones, probably due to being produced by the same company that published the games.

### 3. Conclusions and Next Steps

Considering that none of the game designer had access to the guidelines here presented, at the time when they wrote the manuals, it is no surprise that they did not fully comply with them – even though the Nemesis final Handbook came close to doing so.

The video tutorials provide explanations for an important niche of players that simply don't want no interact with the manuals – or are not *able* to, in the cases of blind and illiterate people. Despite that, there are not many video tutorials online, and the ones available are mostly unofficial ones, that proved to be generally lacking in those specific regards, with few exceptions.

As for the next steps for this approach, those guidelines should be put to test, in order to identify if they provide any betterment for the users general performance while playing games.

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<sup>5</sup> "Reason of being", the philosophical meaning of something's or someone's existence.

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