

# FINDING THE

## Takeaways from My First Year in Game Design

This year, I ventured into game design, and it's been one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. Reflecting on how I got here, I hope to inspire others to create their own games and share tips on exploring this vibrant community.

by Craig Carpenter, [imcraig.com](http://imcraig.com)



### When fireballs ignite creativity

As an 80s kid, I dove into anything that sparked my imagination: Choose Your Own Adventure stories, bad techno music on a Casio keyboard and filming stop-motion battles with dismantled He-Man toys and ketchup. I even tried building a hot air balloon I saw on Mr. Wizard's World that fused to our roof as a flaming lump of duct tape and plastic bags.

What did I want to be when I grew up? I found the answer in the movie "Big." I dreamt of my own Zoltar wish: to design toys, games and jump around

on a giant floor piano. That year, I got Fireball

Island, where you roll marbles over your opponents' explorers, literally knocking them off their path to victory. Inspired, I built a supersized cardboard game called Trap that overtook our kitchen table.

### Reconnecting with tangible experiences

Over time I pursued 3D animation, photography and a design startup. While I loved bringing ideas to life through a screen, freelancing became isolating. It was just me and a glowing monitor every day. As deadlines mounted, I found it hard to prioritize what I truly enjoyed. Discovering the tabletop community rekindled parts of my life I had ignored. It reminded me how important it is to connect with people, step away from the digital world and embrace real, shared experiences. Those moments of laughter became the perfect antidote to loneliness, helping me reconnect and feel alive again.

### The value of conventions and organizations

Joining GAMA and the Game Designers of North Carolina has been invaluable. GAMA Designer Day and UnPub events allowed me to meet publishers, experienced designers and playtesters in person. These gatherings delivered quick, actionable feedback

on prototypes and helped me refine my games. Like a great die roll, the support and expertise available through these networks can open doors to mentorship, collaboration and publishing opportunities. Sharing rides and accommodations with peers has helped cut costs, and I encourage fellow designers to seek out grants and scholarships.

### The power of play

Playtesting my games beyond friends and family has also been transformative. The gaming community has shaped both my designs and my growth as a creator. It's full of welcoming people who advocate for inclusivity – from passionate players to seasoned publishers. The connections formed, the joy of shared play and the sense of community make the gaming world special. I hadn't realized how much I missed the kind of laughter that makes your sides ache. This facilitation of fun extends beyond play – building relationships and enriching lives through shared experiences.

### Choosing a path to publishing

While making games just for fun has been great, I felt an itch to share my creations with more people. Deciding how to manufacture, publish and scale was tough, so I created a scoresheet to evaluate my options. I've learned there's no one-size-fits-all path, and each approach has unique benefits and challenges.

## Key

- Creative Freedom
- Risk & Stress
- Time Investment
- Risk & Stress
- Marketing Expertise & Effort
- Financial Risk & Reward

### Creative Hobbyist and Print & Play

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It's great to dip your toes into publishing with maximum creative control that allows testing ideas before larger investments. They offer immediate feedback and a broader reach, but it can be limiting to rely on players to make components.

### Small batch production

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Producing limited quantities of games offers a personal connection with players. Managing every detail has challenges, but it's rewarding to see your work come to life and connect with super fans.

### Crowdfunding

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With a polished product and a willingness to hustle for visibility, crowdfunding is great. A successful campaign builds a loyal fanbase and covers production costs, but requires planning, marketing and awareness to succeed.

### Pitch to established companies

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Partnering with a large company is best if you want to focus on design and avoid the business side. It requires a mature prototype, and creative control is limited. Even with a contract, there's no guarantee the game will be released, but you can gain credibility and connect with industry professionals.

### Launch your own publishing company

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This entrepreneurial path demands significant time, money and energy. Setting up a business, managing customers, manufacturing and marketing all require effort. Burnout and losing the creative spark are real possibilities. The financial rewards can be great, but it also means handling the risks and non-creative responsibilities.

### Finding balance, flexibility and happiness

The board game industry moves slowly, and breaking through with a physical product in such a saturated market is challenging, but rewarding. Through trial and error, I've learned that working in the tabletop game industry isn't just about the game – it's also about me. What do I truly value? How much time, money and energy can I realistically invest? Do I want full control, or am I willing to compromise for greater reach? It takes time to refine a game and find the right audience. Patience has been essential, and as I learn and grow, my games improve alongside the relationships I've built in the community. Just like in Fireball Island, you must choose the path that feels right for where you are now. It's okay if you have a bad roll and life hurls flaming red marbles at you. You can always pivot and find a better path. The most important thing is to take that first step and have fun along the way. Progress doesn't happen overnight, but persistence pays off.

The world of game design is expansive and welcoming, offering endless opportunities for you to join in and bring your ideas to life.

So, what's your next move?