Designing Games That Matter

Designing Games That Matter is a four-day intensive with game designer Avery Alder and Hannah Gehrels, exploring how to design tabletop games that are meaningful, dynamic, and transformative. We'll approach design in a playful, hands-on, purposeful, and experimental fashion. Participants will hone their critical design analysis, and discover ways to tell new stories and invite new people to the table. This intensive will utilize hands-on design labs, playstorming, personal reflection, and group discussion to keep participants engaged and inspired. Participants will leave with new project ideas, a repertoire of game design techniques and principles, and some hands-on design experience!

Program Objectives

Our hope is that this intensive will help you develop the skills to:

- Design new games through an adaptable, discovery-led, play-oriented approach.
- Establish a tactile, aesthetic, and social vision for your projects early in the design process.
- Discover the politics hidden within game mechanics and design choices.
- Articulate your own set of values and goals as a game designer.
- Utilize techiques like rapid prototyping and targeted playtesting to sustain momentum throughout the design and development process.
- Envision new approaches to the development and playtesting process.

Friday: Connect

5:30   Dinner

6:30   Welcome Session
Featuring a land acknowledgement and program opening with elder Joe Michael.

7:30   Exercise: Hope to Learn / Hope to Contribute

7:45   Free Play

Saturday: Intent & Vision

9:00   Breakfast

10:00   Community Agreements

11:00   Key Ideas
      Your design has a heart.
      The Big Three questions.
      All mechanics are political.
      How do we design for new politics?

12:00   Lunch

1:00   Game: Dream Askew

5:00   Dinner

6:00   Group Discussion
      What is the heart of Dream Askew? Mechanically? Thematically?
      What are the politics embedded in the mechanics of this game?
      How do the mechanics of this game express its politics?

6:30   Energizer

6:45   Key Ideas
      Flow & Rhythm & Pacing
      Creative Load
      Target Audience

7:30   Snack Break

7:45   Free Play

Sunday: Discovery & Adaptation

9:00   Breakfast

10:00 Check In

10:10 Key Ideas
       Zones of Use
       Playstorming

10:40 Design Lab
       Each participant will choose one:
       From Trinkets to Tabletop
       Starting From Wilderness

12:00 Lunch
       Hannah will introduce Stop/Start/Continue prompts.

1:00   Design Lab Reporting Partners
       What worked in your design lab? What didn't?

1:30   Group Discussion
       Where do we draw inspiration from?
       How do we go from initial inspiration to a fully-realized vision for play?
       How many ideas need to coalesce to form a dynamic game?

2:00   Mystery Time
       This time slot will be filled based on what participants have named as hopes,
       offerings, requests, questions, and concerns.

2:40   Key Ideas
       Rapid Prototyping
       Iterative Design

3:00   Snack

3:15   Design Lab
       Ambiguity and Metaphor

5:00   Dinner

6:00   Breakout Conversations
       Interest-based, participant-led breakout conversations!

7:30   Snack Break

7:45   Free Play

Monday: Development & Testing

9:00   Breakfast

10:00 Reporting Back: Breakout Conversations

10:45 Key Ideas
        Hacking Games
        Design Drift

11:00 Design Lab: Literally Hacking Games

12:00 Lunch

1:00   Group Discussion
        What is game development, and how is it different from initial design?
        What are some ways that game development can unfold?
        What are some of your individual development approaches?
        How do you know when a game is ready to share? To release?
        How can you scaffold and support players in managing their creative load?

1:50   Energizer

2:00   Breakout Groups: Development Lab
        In small groups, work on clarifying and developing a game design in progress.
        It can be a game brought from home or created in one of the design labs.
        If a group doesn't have a game to work with, they can develop a "hack" of Dream Askew.

3:00   Snack

3:15   Key Ideas
        Targeted Playtesting
        Curating Feedback

3:45   Breakout Groups: Targeted Playtesting & Workshop

5:00   Dinner

6:00   Self-Directed/Breakout Time

7:00   Group Discussion
        How do you balance the integrity of your original vision with innovative new ideas?
        How do you know when something isn't working?
        What do you actually do with playtesting data?
        How do you find your target audience?

7:30 Snack Break

7:45 Free Play

Tuesday: Wrapping Up

9:00   Breakfast

10:00   Check In

10:15   Breakout Conversations: Moving Forward

11:15   Evaluations

12:00   Lunch

1:00   Final Farewells

Meet Your Facilitators

Avery Alder (she/her)

Avery Alder is a queer game designer hailing from Sinixt territory. Her work includes games like Monsterhearts, The Quiet Year, The Deep Forest, Dream Askew, Ribbon Drive, and a host of smaller, scrappier projects. She designs games that tug at the heartstrings, challenging the ways we look at relationships and community.

Hannah Gehrels (she/her)

Hannah Gehrels is a queer woman and settler originally from the unceded Anishinaabe territory of Thunder Bay, Ontario. She is the co-founder of the PEI Wild Child program which connects kids to nature through outdoor play. Hannah is committed to building a more inclusive world where differentness is valued, and she works towards shaping change in the direction of migrant justice, right relationship with our natural world, and flourishing queer communities. She has recently waded into the waters of the world of Roleplaying Games, but has a life-long love for games, imagination, and collaborative play.

Resources & Links

Games Discussed

Dream Askew
A game of queer strife amid the collapse. A GM-less game for 3-6 players.

Lady Blackbird
Lady Blackbird is on the run from an arranged marriage to Count Carlowe. She hired a smuggler skyship, The Owl, to take her from her palace on the Imperial world of Ilysium to the far reaches of the Remnants, so she could be with her once secret lover: the pirate king Uriah Flint. Lady Blackbird is an adventure module for 2-6 people.

Dialect
Dialect is a game about an isolated community, their language, and what it means for that language to be lost. In this game, you'll tell the story of the Isolation by building their language. New words will come from the fundamental aspects of the community: who they are, what they believe in, and how they respond to a changing world.

Star Crossed
Star Crossed is a two-player game about really, really wanting to, when you really, really can't. Playing Star Crossed will feel like being pulled in two directions at once–like when your head and heart are telling you two different things, or when what you want and what you believe in are impossible to reconcile. The game is simple, quick, and filled with delicious moments of excitement, tension, and occasional heartbreak. It uses a Jenga tower, just like Dread.

Dread
Dread is a game of horror and hope. Those who play will participate in a mutual telling of an original macabre tale. The goal of Dread is to sustain the delicate atmosphere that invokes the hand quivering emotion that lends its name to the game. It is the horror roleplaying game that uses Jenga instead of dice. Pull from the tower and you succeed.

Blades in the Dark
Blades in the Dark is a tabletop role-playing game about a crew of daring scoundrels seeking their fortunes on the haunted streets of an industrial-fantasy city. There are heists, chases, occult mysteries, dangerous bargains, bloody skirmishes, and, above all, riches to be had — if you're bold enough to seize them. This is a complex, intricate game!

Bluebeard's Bride
Bluebeard's Bride is an investigatory horror tabletop roleplaying game, written and designed by Whitney "Strix" Beltrán, Marissa Kelly, and Sarah Richardson, and based on the Bluebeard fairy tale. In this game you and your friends explore Bluebeard's home as the Bride, creating your own beautifully tragic version of the dark fairy tale. Investigate rooms, discover the truth of what happened, experience the nightmarish phantasmagoria of this broken place, and decide whether or not you are a faithful or disloyal bride.

Fiasco
FIASCO is an award-winning, GM-less game for 3-5 players, designed to be played in a few hours with six-sided dice and no preparation. During a game you will engineer and play out stupid, disastrous situations, usually at the intersection of greed, fear, and lust. It's like making your own Coen brothers movie, in about the same amount of time it'd take to watch one.

Laser Kittens
Laser Kittens is a storytelling game for 3-5 players. In this game you and your friends will take on the role of a litter of tiny kittens being fostered at the Knoll Street School for Wayward Kittens -- a big house where orphaned kittens learn to grow up to be awesome cats before they get adopted by their forever home! You'll learn important kitty lessons like how to lay in the sun, how to catch bugs, and most importantly, how to control your laser.

Innovation
A board game that Sam mentioned! This game by Carl Chudyk is a journey through innovations from the stone age through modern times. Each player builds a civilization based on various technologies, ideas, and cultural advancements, all represented by cards. Each of these cards has a unique power which will allow further advancement, point scoring, or even attacking other civilizations. Be careful though, as other civilizations may be able to benefit from your ideas as well!

Ten Candles
Ten Candles is a zero-prep tabletop storytelling game designed for one-shot 2-4 hour sessions of tragic horror. It was released in December 2015 and is best played with one GM and 3-5 players. It is played by the light of ten tea light candles which provide atmosphere, act as a countdown timer for the game, and allow you to literally burn your character sheet away as you play. Ten Candles is described as a "tragic horror" game rather than survival horror for one main reason: in Ten Candles there are no survivors. In the final scene of the game, when only one candle remains, all of the characters will die. In this, Ten Candles is not a game about "winning" or beating the monsters. Instead, it is a game about what happens in the dark, and about those who try to survive within it.

Tarot

Tarot of the Silicon Dawn
99 cards. Based on the Thoth and Golden Dawn decks. Hidden images that only appear when the light hits it just right. Fully prepared to give you the finger. A modern Tarot with a graphic, sci-fi flavor. (currently out of print)

Next World Tarot
Featuring body outlaws, endangered cultures, and anti-colonial belief systems, THE NEXT WORLD TAROT envisions a world where justice relies on respect and revolutionary love. The Fool's Journey is about smashing systemic oppression, owning their truths, being accountable to the people and places that support them, and taking back a connection to their body that may have been lost through trauma or societal brainwashing. This box set includes 78 Tarot Cards and an accompanying Tarot Reader (Written and Illustrated by Cristy C. Road).

True Black Tarot
"A deck of unparalleled quality with a heart of timeless elegance."

Challenging Imposter Syndrome and Perfectionism

Crap Art Manifesto
Excerpt: It's easy to make crap art: Just sit down and do it! Try to forget your conceptions of what a "painting" or "drawing" looks like, or what a "song" sounds like, and make lots and lots. Don't spend too long on any one item. Afterwards, look or listen and discover what you've done. Perhaps you'll find something that appeals to you? If you do, you've won! If you don't, open your mind and try again!

Why Cheap Art?
From Bread & Puppet Theater, a manifesto! "Art is food. You can't eat it but it feeds you. Art has to be cheap & available to everybody. It needs to be everywhere because it is inside of the world." If this delights you, read their **short booklet** on the project!

Big Magic
Creative living beyond fear. Elizabeth Gilbert digs deep into her own generative process to share her wisdom and unique perspective about creativity. With profound empathy and radiant generosity, she offers potent insights into the mysterious nature of inspiration. She asks us to embrace our curiosity and let go of needless suffering. She shows us how to tackle what we most love, and how to face down what we most fear. She discusses the attitudes, approaches, and habits we need in order to live our most creative lives. Balancing between soulful spirituality and cheerful pragmatism, Gilbert encourages us to uncover the "strange jewels" that are hidden within each of us.

Brené Brown
"There is no greater threat to the critics and cynics and fearmongers than those of us who are willing to fall because we have learned how to rise." Brené Brown's name was listed on our resources sheet, though I'm not sure which specific talk or book would be most helpful in particular!

Reflections on Cultural Appropriation

James Mendez Hodes' Blog
Mendez has written a wealth of resources on how to make sense of cultural appropriation and cultural dialogue when playing, running, designing, or talking about games.

Braiding Sweetgrass
Robin Wall Kimmerer's book came up in conversation about the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural exchange. It's worth a read! As a botanist, Robin Wall Kimmerer has been trained to ask questions of nature with the tools of science. As a member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, she embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. In Braiding Sweetgrass, Kimmerer brings these two lenses of knowledge together to take us on "a journey that is every bit as mythic as it is scientific, as sacred as it is historical, as clever as it is wise" (Elizabeth Gilbert).

If You're Straight...
An invaluable tumblr post that provides a simple answer about whose stories we should be telling.

Writing The Other
While it started as a book, Writing the Other has evolved into a series of literature, workshops, and dialogues. It focuses on how to tell stories about people with life experiences unsimilar to your own.

Improv and Facilitation

Improv For Gamers

Based on the popular workshop series, this book provides a selection of fun and easy improv exercises designed to take your tabletop or live-action gaming group to a new level. Pick and choose exercises to develop a particular skill, or run through a variety of them at random! No improv experience required.

Games for Actors and Non-Actors

By Augusto Boal, founder of Theatre of the Oppressed. This book of exercises and invitations is where our "Someone Is The Bomb" icebreaker emerged from.

Emergent Strategy

Emergent Strategy is radical self-help, society-help, and planet-help designed to shape the futures we want to live. Change is constant. The world is in a continual state of flux. It is a stream of ever-mutating, emergent patterns. Rather than steel ourselves against such change, this book teaches us to map, assess, and learn from the swirling structures around us in order to better understand and influence them as they happen. This is a resolutely materialist "spirituality" based equally on science and science fiction, a feminist and afro-futurist incantation to transform that which ultimately transforms us.

Safety Mechanics and Considerations

X-Card

A comprehensive guide on how to introduce and use the X-Card at your table. At the end of the article is a list of links, including how-to videos and articles about the effects of using the X-Card.

What I Say at the Beginning of a Game

A step-by-step guide for how to introduce a game and establish some player safety ground rules, from a veteran game master who runs a wide variety of games at conventions.

Safe Hearts

A guide to boundaries and vulnerability for a specific game: Monsterhearts. It includes an overview of the three circles of responsibility (to yourself, to the room, and to the characters).

Access Intimacy: The Missing Link

A personal essay about the experience of access intimacy, of someone truly understanding and supporting your access needs, written by a disabled woman.

Game Design

The Art of Playstorming
An overview of playstorming, a design technique created by Epidiah Ravachol that we put to work in our intensive.

What Are "The Big Three"?
A look at the origins, context, and meaning behind "the big three" questions we discussed throughout our intensive: what is your game about? what do the characters do? what do the players do?

Introducing New Players to Roleplaying Games

How To Get Started With Roleplaying!
This guide is written by my friend Hilary, who co-organized Terminal City Story Games with me. It incorporates many of the same main points I presented on the subject.

Teach Newcomers to Play
A guide for how to run an accessible, engaging first gaming session, and how to check-in with people about their interest in playing more games in the future.

We Are Here to Game
A script that designer/facilitator Ben Robbins presents to first-time players and public groups.

RPG Character Building Tips for Beginners
A few straightforward prompts for playing a character: be yourself, be your evil twin, recreate a familiar character, talk to your GM about it, use a catchy archetype and hook.

Tabletop RPG: Essential Tools for Your First Session
An overview of important things to have with you for any game. While the suggestion of a white-board depends on the kind of game that a group is playing, index cards and shareable snacks are both really important. I often like to cook a meal for my players beforehand.

Running an Introductory Roleplaying Game for Kids
A guide written by a father for how to run a simple, introductory roleplaying game for a nine year-old kid. Assumes a background in classic action-adventure roleplaying games.

These 10 Easy Steps Are All You Need To Start Larping!
An overview of what LARP (Live Action Role Playing) can entail, how to seek out and prepare for your first LARP, and things to expect when you dive into the game.
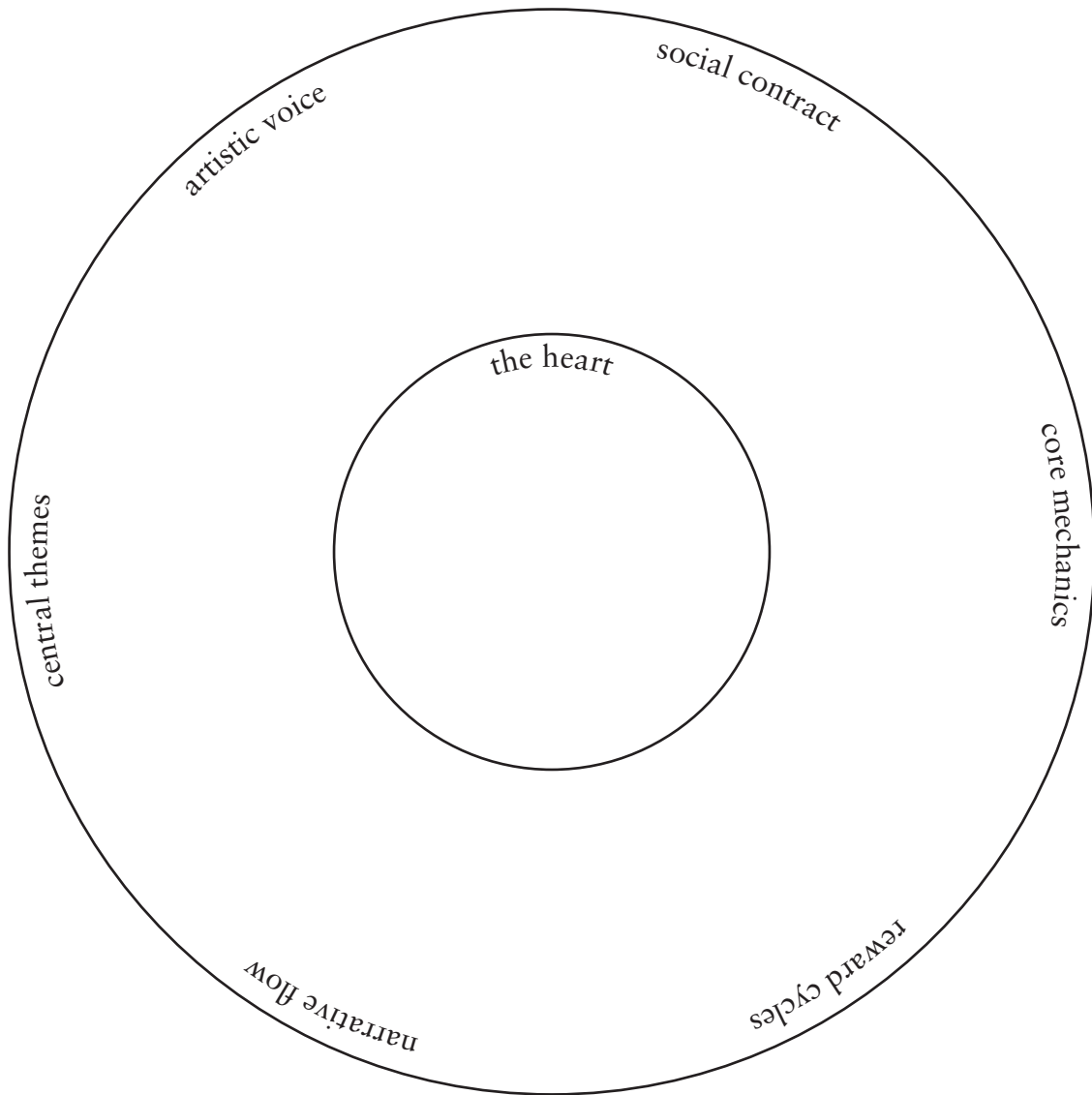
Why you should be using tabletop RPGs in your classroom (and beyond).
A look at implementing roleplaying games as part of programming at the Royal Ontario Museum.

Your game has a heart.

Discover how everything in your game flows to and from that heart.

Be careful not to overwork that heart, trying to bring life to too many complicated structures, unrelated subsystems, clever ideas, and elaborate backstories at once.
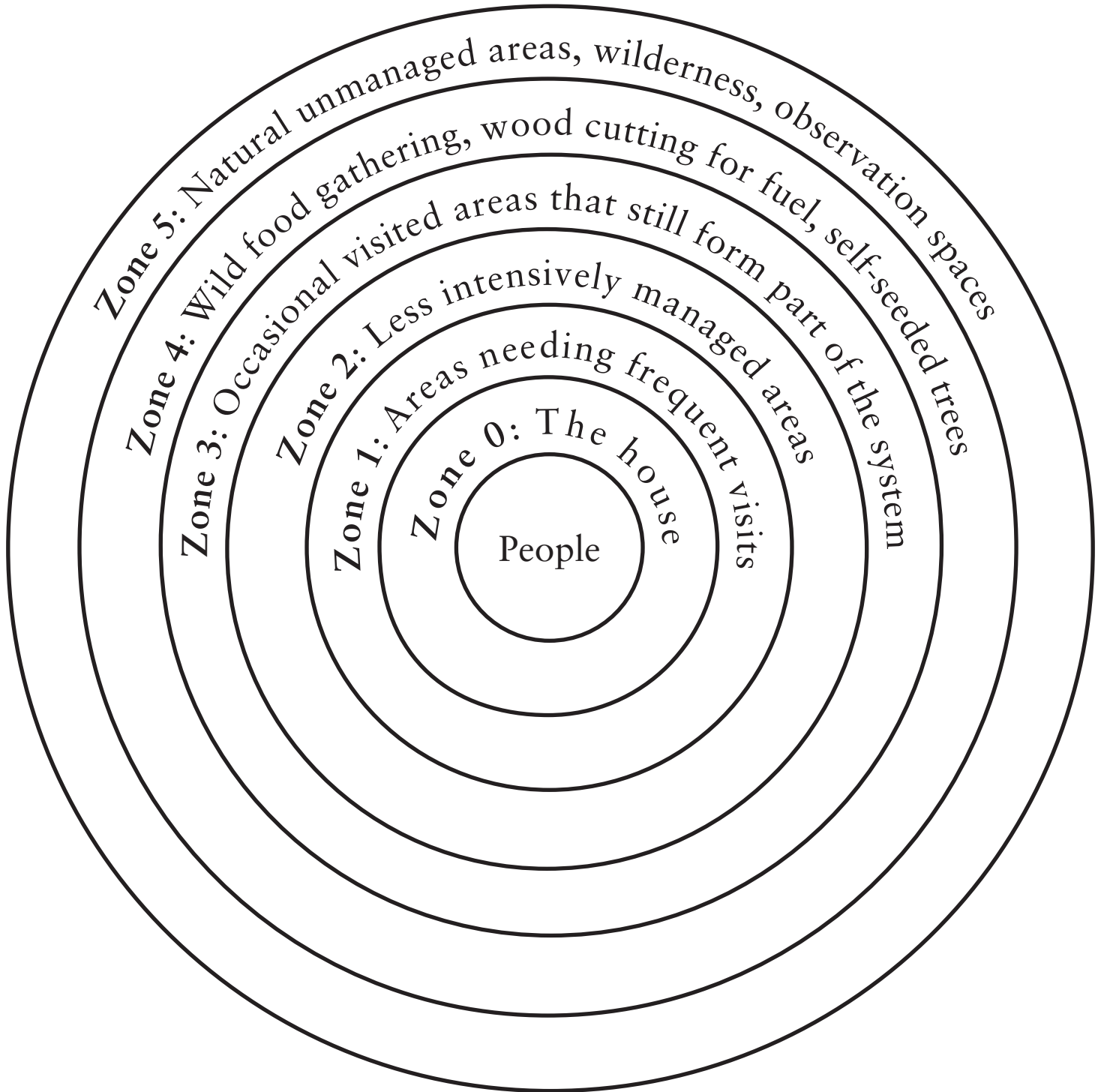
social contract

artistic voice

core mechanics

the heart

central themes

reward cycles

narrative flow

The Big Three

What is your game about?

What do the characters do?

What do the players do?

Permaculture Zones of Use

Zone 5: Natural unmanaged areas, wilderness, observation spaces

Zone 4: Wild food gathering, wood cutting for fuel, self-seeded trees

Zone 3: Occasional visited areas that still form part of the system

Zone 2: Less intensively managed areas

Zone 1: Areas needing frequent visits

Zone 0: The house

People

Game Design Zones of Use

Zone 5: Genre Expectations, Story Intuition, Popular Culture, Lived Experiences

Zone 4: Supplements, Adventures, Outside Reference Materials

Zone 3: The Rulebook, Teaching Tools, Situational Subsystems

Zone 2: Reference Sheets, Charts, Character Moves

Zone 1: Dice, Tokens, Character Sheets, Maps

Zone 0: The Play Space

Players
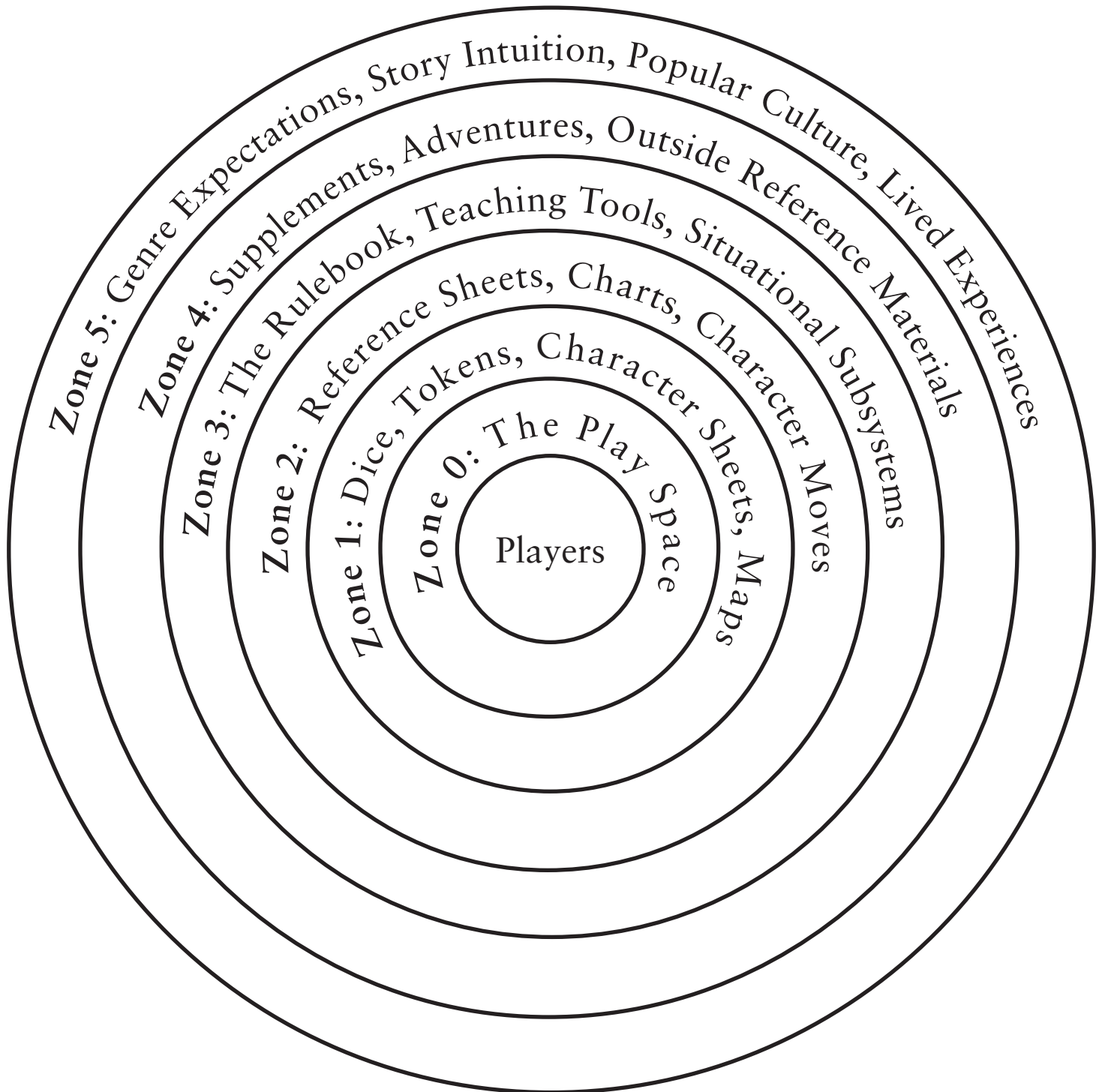
Ambiguity & Metaphor: Themes

drag queens	the hero's journey	alien contact	dating
apocalypse	car racing	exorcism	a big heist
sea monsters	an interview	spies	gardening
party vibes	revolution	body horror	shapeshifters
war crimes	sexuality	the carnival	witches
migration	acting	scientific ethics	cartography

Ambiguity & Metaphor: Mechanics

you can remove events from the canon	everyone determines the outcome privately	rolling the dice generates questions instead of answers	the meaning of a metaphor can be contested or redefined during play
roll the dice but don't look at the results	events happen in non-chronological order	how players feel changes what happens in the story	outcomes determine the strength and certainty of your memories
there are times when you aren't allowed to talk	uncertainties act as a resource or bonus	characters are built of a series of questions	a resource or token pool that tracks multiple different things simultaneously
adjust the metaphor slider during play	you can't answer a question the same scene it's asked	looking at the outcome changes it	everyone else knows how a conflict resolves for your character, but you don't
set up conflicts but don't resolve them	symbolic tokens that don't have a concrete effect	outcomes/results are contingent on future events	initial impressions are written down and tokens are placed on them
there are branching timelines	trading roles but not characters	you can bid your credibility as a resource	play involves crossing items off a list until only one item remains