

What Makes a Rulebook Accessible and Entertaining?

Recommendations of Best Practices

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Abstract

One of the first steps necessary for playing a board or role-playing game is to read the rules. There is an underlying assumption here that at least one person at the table has to know how to read. The cognitive load that rules can have on the players can be substantial and can impact the act of understanding the rules, as well as influence the play experience. Learning a game requires specialist literacy. The inability of players to learn the rules of a game through the rulebook might be a consequence of that material's cognitive expectation, not an inadequacy of the player. As such, this paper aims to propose best practices and initiate the discussion on the accessibility of rulebooks. To achieve this, several considerations were made around cognitive accessibility in games, cognitive load, and the effect that Easy Language can have on lowering it. We also discuss the definition of a rulebook, how rulebooks are used (and abused), and the underlying assumptions when designing rulebooks. These considerations allow us to conceptualise best practices for improving rulebook accessibility regarding visual, cognitive, physical, communication, socioeconomic, learning, and intersectional accessibility. However, some questions remain unanswered regarding how to create rulebooks that are accessible and entertaining, and as the best practices presented are conceptualisations, they still have to be validated in a real setting with a diverse group of players.

Keywords: best practices, board games, role-playing games, rulebook accessibility, technical writing.

要約

ボードゲームやロールプレイングゲームをプレイするために必要な最初のステップの一つは、ルールを読むことである。ここには、ゲームの少なくとも一人が読み方を知っていなければならないという前提がある。ルールがプレイヤーに与える認知的負荷は相当なものであり、ルールを理解する行為に影響を与えるだけでなく、プレイ体験にも影響を与えることがある。ゲームを学ぶには専門的なリテラシーが必要である。プレイヤーがルールブックを通してゲームのルールを学べないのは、プレイヤーの能力不足ではなく、その教材の認知的期待の結果かもしれない。このように、本稿の目的は、ベストプラクティスを提案し、ルールブックのアクセシビリティに関する議論を開始することである。そのために、ゲームにおける認知的アクセシビリティ、認知的負荷、イージーランゲージが認知的負荷を下げる効果について、いくつかの考察を行った。また、ルールブックの定義、ルールブックがどのように使用されるか（そして乱用されるか）、ルールブックを設計する際の基本的な前提についても議論する。これらの考察により、視覚的、認知的、身体的、コミュニケーション的、社会経済的、学習的、交差的アクセシビリティに関して、ルールブックのアクセシビリティを向上させるためのベストプラクティスを概念化することができる。しかし、アクセシブルで楽しいルールブックを作成する方法については、まだいくつかの疑問が残っている。また、提示されたベストプラクティスは概念的なものであるため、多様なプレイヤーがいる実際の環境で検証する必要がある。

キーワード: ベストプラクティス、ボードゲーム、ロールプレイングゲーム、ルールブックのアクセシビリティ、テクニカルライティング

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1. Introduction

When playing board or role-playing games, players experience a level of involvement that is very particular to them and cannot be achieved while playing video games, mainly because players have themselves to “activate” the various game components (Sousa et al. 2022). This requirement of activation puts an expectation on players that can be at odds with modern conceptions of accessibility. Accessibility relates to ensuring that all people have full and equal participation in society through eliminating and avoiding unnecessary barriers for those with and without impairments. Here, the use of the term “impairment” is intentional, as according to the social model of disability, it is not the impairment that is the primary contributor to social exclusion, but rather the problems caused by social, cultural, and environmental barriers (Oliver 2004). Here, impairment is individual and private. Disability originates from society, creating social exclusion (Shakespeare 2013).

Accessibility has been academically and publicly discussed in many areas, such as web accessibility, physical accessibility, and transportation accessibility. However, even though research has been conducted about game accessibility, it is usually in the frame of video games (Heron 2022; Heron et al. 2018a; Heron et al. 2018b). Academic research about board game accessibility is still scarce (Heron et al. 2018b; Sousa et al. 2022), and almost non-existent in the frame of tabletop role-playing games (TRPGs). There has been development in this topic, such as Heron (2024), but this work is an outlier and struggles to provide a coherent framework that is inclusive of all forms of tabletop gaming. A common area of inaccessibility not substantively addressed in Heron (2024), for example, is in the area of rulebooks and manuals, which might be considered the universal inaccessibility to analogue gaming.

There are several clear problems in the current design and execution of rulebooks: the writing of the rules can be complex and full of jargon, and this may not be accessible to newcomers. The higher the complexity of the game, the more assumptions are made regarding the game literacy of the players. This is coupled to the fact that even reading a relatively simple manual is a skill, as many players rely on someone else to teach a game, which can have several implications, especially if the teacher is not fully conversant with the subtleties of the rules. In fact, one might argue that the majority of board game instruction falls into the concept of being a kind of ‘folk game,’ that is, a game that is passed down informally from one person to another, and where the same game can have different house rules.

Although there is still no unanimous definition of what constitutes a technical document (or technical communication), for the purpose of this paper, a technical document is defined as one that describes the use and function of a service or product in a technical and specific manner.

According to Haramundanis (1992), there are three types of technical documents: marketing materials, reports, and instructional materials. In the latter category, the author mentions that they can refer to several types of manuals, including user manuals, instruction manuals, reference manuals, technical descriptions, functional specifications, and user interface specifications.

A rulebook is a document that explains the setup of the game, its components, how the game is played, how it ends, and where it is possible to find clues, adaptations to the rules, and to the game. Rulebooks seem to clearly belong to the categories of being user manuals and instructional manuals to guide and help players play and understand the game. Additionally, rulebooks often have a specific vocabulary (jargon) known by the community (board gamers or hobbyists). Due to these aspects, rulebooks can also be considered as a technical document.

Among the premises of technical writing are that the document must be accurate, usable, clearly written, and readable. These must all be considered too, in the frame of collaborative execution of shared mental model, not simply explaining a rule, but in a way that ensures everyone has the same understanding of how rules intersect. Given these crucial roles that a rulebook must fill, it is important that we develop a shared understanding of the best practices around rulebook accessibility.

2. Cognitive Accessibility in Games

Miesenberger et al. (2019) define cognitive accessibility as relating to information, communication, and websites that follow a predetermined structure, ideally using common knowledge expressions to ensure

that they are perceived by everyone. Information should be presented in such a manner that it is easy to read to avoid feelings of boredom, and inclusive to avoid unintentional offence. Sousa et al. (2023) expand upon this to argue that cognitive accessibility means making information and communication more comprehensible, intuitive, easy to process, and interactive for neurodivergent individuals (e.g., dyslexia, aphasia, and intellectual disabilities).

When developing cognitively accessible material, these considerations can help empower neurodivergent individuals, non-native speakers, and those with low literacy levels, as they promote independent understanding, learning, and discussion of the material (Miesenberger et al. 2019).

In terms of the cognitive accessibility of tabletop games, Heron (2024) draws upon the work of Cattell (1963), dividing cognition into fluid and crystallised intelligence. The former concerns “reasoning, learning, abstraction, and ability to solve problems” (Heron 2024, 83), and the latter refers to “recall, vocabulary, and drawing inferences from accumulated knowledge” (ibid.). According to the author, cognitive accessibility in tabletop games is achieved when people are able to play – and play well – a game. However, this is decoupled from the process that must be undertaken to learn a game – the method of instruction is conveniently marked as out of scope in Heron (2024). Building upon this work, we propose here that in order to have cognitive accessibility to be achieved in a tabletop game, the mechanism by which the rules themselves are understood must also be cognitively accessible.

To achieve this, rulebooks and other methods of formal instruction must be written and tested by a diverse group to guarantee that a common understanding of the rules is reached and that the latest version can be used and understood by all.

3. Cognitive Load

Reading is a complex cognitive process that involves decoding symbols, comprehending meaning, and integrating information with prior knowledge. Understanding what we read, known as reading comprehension, relies on various cognitive functions, including attention, memory, and executive functioning (Samuels and Eisenberg 1981). Cohesive reading comprehension is both a reflection of and a contributor to cognitive functioning, as it requires and simultaneously strengthens neural pathways associated with language processing, reasoning, and information retention (Locher and Pfost 2020). However, this process is also shaped by the concept of cognitive load, which refers to the mental effort required to process information. As explored by Genc and Gülözer (2013), effective reading comprehension depends on managing cognitive load efficiently, as an overwhelming amount of unclear information can hinder understanding and retention.

Cognitive Load Theory (CLT) aims to predict performances, design better materials, systems, and learning interventions (Plass, Brünken, and Moreno 2010). Based on CLT, Sweller (2010) systematised the existing evidence that supports the existence of three main categories of cognitive load: extraneous, intrinsic, and germane.

Intrinsic cognitive load refers to the inherent complexity of the material being learned (Sweller 2010). In the context of rulebooks, this might be seen as determined by the number of interacting elements that players must process simultaneously to understand the game’s mechanics. For example, a simple game like *Tic-Tac-Toe* has a low intrinsic cognitive load because it involves only a few rules and minimal element interactivity. In contrast, a complex game like *Gloomhaven* [Childres (2017); complexity 3.91/5 in terms of complexity on *Board Game Geek*]¹ or *Twilight Struggle* [Gupta and Mathews (2005); complexity 3.61/5] has a high intrinsic cognitive load due to the sheer number of rules, subsystems, and the interactions that players must manage.

The concept of element interactivity is central to intrinsic cognitive load, namely, considering the degree to which rules, components, and mechanics are interdependent in gaming. For instance,

¹ The complexity of a game, their weight, is determined by the board game community through a voting system and has a five-point scale: *light* if the average complexity is 1, *medium light* if its 2, *medium* if 3, *medium heavy* if 4, and *heavy* if 5. This has several implications as a game’s weight has different meanings to different people and BGG (Board Game Geek) doesn’t offer any definition, it’s based on individual perception.

understanding how combat works in a game may require knowledge of movement rules, character abilities, and resource management. If these elements are not clearly connected or explained, players may struggle to form a coherent mental model of the game. In this sense, high element interactivity can overwhelm working memory, especially for novice players who lack prior experience with similar games.

However, intrinsic cognitive load is not fixed. It can be influenced by the player's prior knowledge and the way information is presented, a factor that is complex to operationalise or anticipate in rulebook design processes. For example, a player familiar with deck-building mechanics will find it easier to learn a new deck-building game because they can rely on existing schemas, also mentioned in games research as part of 'gaming literacies' (Salen 2007). Similarly, breaking down complex rules into smaller, isolated components can reduce intrinsic cognitive load during the initial learning phase, allowing players to gradually build understanding before tackling the full complexity of the game.

Conversely, extraneous cognitive load is imposed by the way information is presented (Sweller 2010). In rulebooks, this often manifests as poor organisation, ambiguous language, or unnecessary complexity in explanations. As you can infer, this category is problematic in game rulebooks because complex presentation diverts mental resources away from understanding the game's mechanics. Consider a rulebook that introduces multiple new terms without definitions or uses inconsistent terminology. Players must expend extra effort to decode the text, leaving less capacity for processing the actual rules.

In a more complex manner, germane cognitive load refers to the mental effort devoted to building and automating schemas - the mental structures that organise and store knowledge (Sweller 2010). In the context of games, this involves understanding how rules and mechanics fit together to create a cohesive system. A traditional example could be learning how to play *Catan* (Teuber 1995; complexity 2.29/5) and how it involves not only memorising individual rules but also understanding how trading, resource management, and settlement placement interact to create strategic opportunities.

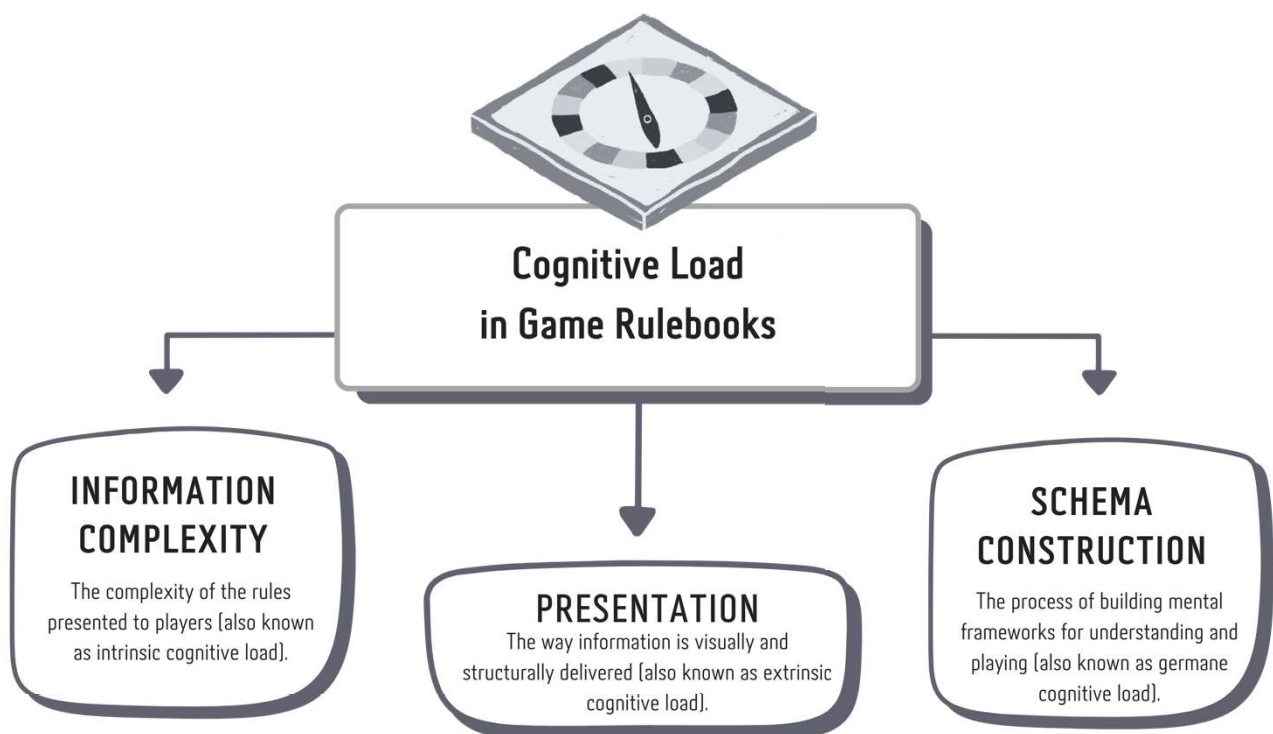


Fig. 1: Visual representation of the different categories of cognitive load and their interaction with game rulebooks' accessibility concerns. Source: Elaboration by the authors based on Sweller (2010).

It is important to mention that, according to Greenberg and Zheng (2023), germane cognitive load is essential for deep learning and long-term retention. However, it is dependent on the availability of working memory resources, being an additional layer atop other categories. If intrinsic or extraneous cognitive load is too high, players may not have sufficient mental capacity to engage in schema construction. This is why reducing extraneous cognitive load and managing intrinsic cognitive load are critical for fostering germane cognitive load, as it is a natural event to hypothesise its role in fostering the desired playing experience.

According to this framing, it is possible to emphasise the role of cognitive load in the act of understanding the rules that might enable a fully realised play experience, represented in Figure 1. Without being able to access these three layers of complexity, the decision-making abilities of players can be significantly impacted.

Despite CLT's potential role in enhancing information presentation in rulebooks, it is frequently approached through a lens that supposes a specific baseline of cognitive abilities in players. This assumption feeds into a certain "imagined player" notion – the ideal able person that the designers have in mind when conceptualising the game and its rules. From this premise, an important reflection can emerge: the inability of players to learn the rules of a game through its rulebook might, therefore, be related to cognitive load, rather than inadequacy of the player.

As a conclusive remark, cognitive load traces a double path in the framing our present study intends to set: (a) it can be used as a guiding and framing lens to adequately map rulebooks design to players' 'cognitive architecture'; and (b) it might signal individual differences between players, namely considering their unique cognitive profiles, that the design process needs to consider and accommodate.

4. Easy Language and Cognitive Load

According to Rink (2018; 2019), seven different barriers to communication can emerge between different groups: sensory, cognitive, motor, language, expert knowledge or expert language, cultural, and media. According to the definition provided by Maaß (2020), rulebooks can be contextualised with the expert language barrier, which is associated with the written text, assuming that particular knowledge is necessary or if the text uses particular expressions – language – that the reader is not familiar with. Applying this to rulebooks, the barrier can appear through the use of jargon, terms, or expressions that are particular to the hobby and may not be familiar to a person outside of it.

To produce an accessible text, it is necessary that it has the following six key features (Maaß and Rink 2018): (1) has to be *retrievable* by the readers; (2) has to be *perceptible* through the different sensory channels that the readers have at their disposal; (3) has to be *comprehensible* to the reader; (4) it has to be *linkable* to the previous knowledge so that the reader can recall information; (5) it has to be presented in a way that readers find *acceptable*; and (6) the information given must be given in a manner that is *action-enabling* to the users.

One strategy to prevent textual inaccessibility is through the use of Easy Language (EL). Initially, EL was developed for People with Intellectual Disabilities (PwID) and learning difficulties, but has since expanded to encompass people with dementia, prelingual hearing impairments, and aphasia (Hansen-Schirra and Maaß 2020). It also targets people who are functionally illiterate and non-native speakers (ibid).

In this sense, EL aims to reduce the complexity of the standard language for people with communication difficulties as mentioned above, to grant full access in all fields and areas of society and life (Hansen-Schirra and Maaß 2020; Sommer 2020).

Whereas plain language has no set of rules, EL does. One of the most widely used standards is the one developed by Inclusion Europe (2017), which identifies four different types of information: written, electronic, audio, and video. As this paper concerns written rulebooks, the focus will be on the standards of written information:

- Use simple and easy words, and explain necessary difficult words; the same applies to the use of initials.

- Give examples of what is being explained.
- Be consistent with the words used and avoid using metaphors and words from other languages.
- Use words as “few” and “many” instead of percentages and big numbers.
- Keep the sentences short, in active language, and speak directly to the person.
- Avoid using sentences in the negative form.
- Organise the information to be easy to understand and follow by grouping the information on the same topic together.
- Repeat information and the explanations of difficult words.

The authors group written information into nine different themes ([Inclusion Europe 2017](#)): (1) design and format; (2) writing; (3) words; (4) sentences; (5) organisation; (6) aspect; (7) images; (8) identification of the document as Easy-to-Read; and (9) standards for the English language.

Although illustrations, images, and graphics can enhance the accessibility of texts, their use has limitations, as they cannot represent every idea or concept ([Niediek 2016](#)). They might also be linked to cultural knowledge; may need to be learned to reduce misunderstandings; and are not accessible to those who don't recognise them without description (*ibid*). Due to this, they should be used primarily to complement plain or easy-to-read text.

In this context, it is also important to mention how fluid the concept of contextual clarity can be. Clear for some, might not be clear for others. This can be especially true when applied to PwID. Notwithstanding, EL texts can help reduce the cognitive load – intrinsic, extraneous and germane – as it simplifies and presents information in a more comprehensible, perceptible and readable manner.

5. Definition of Rulebook

Board games differ from other kinds of play experiences in that they act as a form of cardboard computers running on hardware made up of human understanding. A rulebook sets context, defines the starting state, and describes how that state is to be manipulated. Often, it will also define an endpoint at which a game is won or lost, although some games simply leave this up to a decision of the table – ‘play until you get bored.’ Games in this category include *Telestrations* ([Underdahl 2009](#)), *Cards Against Humanity* ([Temkin et al. 2011](#)), and *Funemployed* ([Leopold 2014](#)). Such games may come with formal winning conditions, but these are usually sidelined in favour of a more organic general sense of when it's time to stop playing.

A video game enforces the logic of the systems for you, barring the introduction of cheat codes and mods. A role-playing game has a looser relationship between players and rules, with whole systems being rendered irrelevant through referee fiat ([Sturdee, Gamboa, and Heron 2023](#)). What constitutes a rule is a topic of some nuance ([Bergström 2012](#)), with various models being used to formalise working definitions. As a general guideline, the rulebook of a game, board game or TRPG, defines the ‘general’ game mechanics that are expected to hold true by default. ‘When a character is struck by a sword, they take five points of damage. Damage does not get restored.’ However, other parts of the rules are often encoded into cards, player abilities or scenario design. The universal truth in rulebooks and rule-design is ‘the specific overrides the general.’ Damage does not get removed, for example, unless one has a spell called ‘heal.’ From this perspective, the rules for a game may exist in the manual, in the cards, in the spells available to wizards and priests, and in the specific design of character archetypes. In D&D, the *Player's Handbook* ([Crawford 2024](#)) represents the general rules of the game, but the *Dungeon Master's Guide* ([Wyatt et al. 2024](#)) and *Monster Manual* ([Crawford, Schneider, and De Armas 2025](#)) are each in themselves substantial rulebooks full of specific cases that override the general. Consider, for example, that there exist monsters that can change shape, giving them access to abilities and characteristics not inherent to their form – a dragon may become an elf with some, but not all, of the limitations implied. Or consider a magical ring of feather falling, which triggers automatically when the wearer plummets and ensures a slow, comfortable descent to the ground, negating any threat of gravity. There are over 900 pages of rules across the three core books of 2024 D&D. The loose relationship between rules and referees in many TRPGS is understandable when the task of learning every last intricacy is so intractable.

From another perspective, Stenros and Montola (2024) identify five different types of rules: formal, internal, social, external regulation and material. Formal rules are the explicit statements about the games, whereas internal rules are house rules — rules that the players created – and personal goals set for themselves (ibid). Social rules relate to the shared values and norms (social and cultural) that guide players during gameplay (ibid). In contrast, external regulation refers to the laws and rules that we must abide by in society and that affect gameplay (ibid). Lastly, material rules correspond to the physical embodiment of rules (e.g., arcade machines) and “the brute circumstance of play” (Stenros and Montola 2024, 8).

Board games don’t survive that degree of flexibility in rules – they are typically extremely fragile when it comes to rule modifications and re-interpretations. The design and balance of a board game might change entirely simply through the inadvertent flipping of a defined sequence of events. The rulebook is both a manual and a legally binding covenant – straying outside its bounds is to lose entitlement to the promised fun. The difference between ‘buy a card then take a coin’ and ‘take a coin then buy a card’ might be sufficiently large as to render the output as two completely different game experiences.

6. The Use and Abuse of Rulebooks

There is a tension in rulebook construction in that they simultaneously need to serve two large, contradictory goals. The first is that they serve as instructional material, educating players on the mechanisms and meaning of play. In this, they are traditionally expected to be read linearly, with the ordering of elements ideally reflecting the optimal experience of learning. The second goal is that they must also be reference material, allowing players to easily look up rules, jargon and concepts for confirmation or clarification. The instructional content around a game mechanism may be spread over several sections of a manual, being refined over time as a baseline understanding of the game is built. However, a reference tool needs to balance searchability against completeness. This problem is so fundamental to board games that several publishers, including Fantasy Flight Games, an early innovator, provide two different manuals in their games. One is a ‘learn to play’ document, outlining instructions linearly. The other is a reference document, with a formal index and alphabetised concepts (Figure 2).

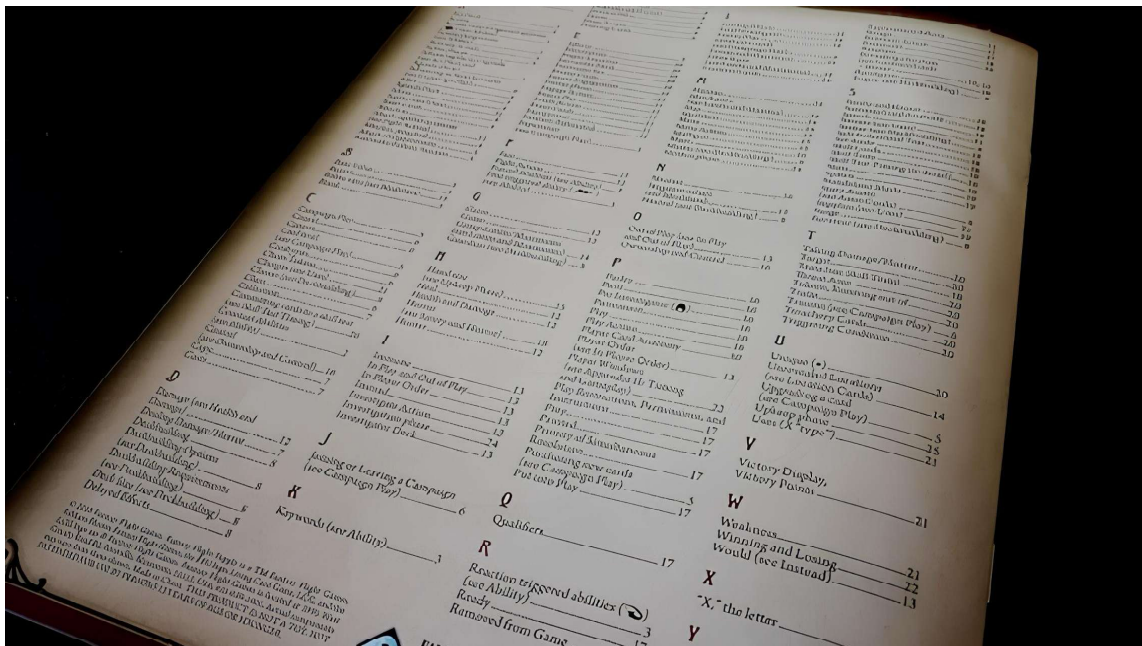


Fig. 2: Reference manual of *Arkham Horror: The Card Game* (French and Newman 2016). Source: Photo taken by the authors.

However, one must also be mindful of the fact that rulebooks often reflect a convention that is honoured ‘more in the breach than in the observance.’ As discussed above, only a small portion of the

people playing a game will have actually read either of these rulebooks in anything other than the most cursory fashion. Many board games are taught informally, with a person who ‘knows’ the game taking on the lion’s share of the educational burden. However, the precise and finicky nature of rulebooks creates an opportunity for, and indeed expectation of, entropy. Few are word-perfect on the games they play, with that becoming increasingly true the greater the level of complexity the game encodes. Most players will have a handle on something like *Dobble* [Blanchot et al. (2009); weighted 1.04/5 in terms of complexity on *Board Game Geek*]. Few could play *Twilight Struggle* [Gupta and Mathews (2005); 3.61/5 in complexity] without occasional reference to a manual to confirm understanding. In complex games, rules get missed or misinterpreted. Complex procedures are often only partially executed. The more complicated the instructions, the more likely they begin to groan under pressure. There are certain words in any board game manual that reflect pending stresses on the systems – ‘if,’ ‘unless,’ ‘except,’ ‘until,’ and so on. The more conditionals that are used in the explanation of a rule, the more failure points there are in the human processors executing the cardboard computer. This is what gives rise to the ‘folk game’ understanding previously discussed. Many people, when asked how they learned a game such as *Monopoly* (Darrow and Magie 1935), will say it was taught by a parent, sibling or friend. As such, most people play a somewhat home-brewed version of *Monopoly*, with numerous omissions and additions. Figure 3 shows what awaits a player of a brand-new copy of *Monopoly*.

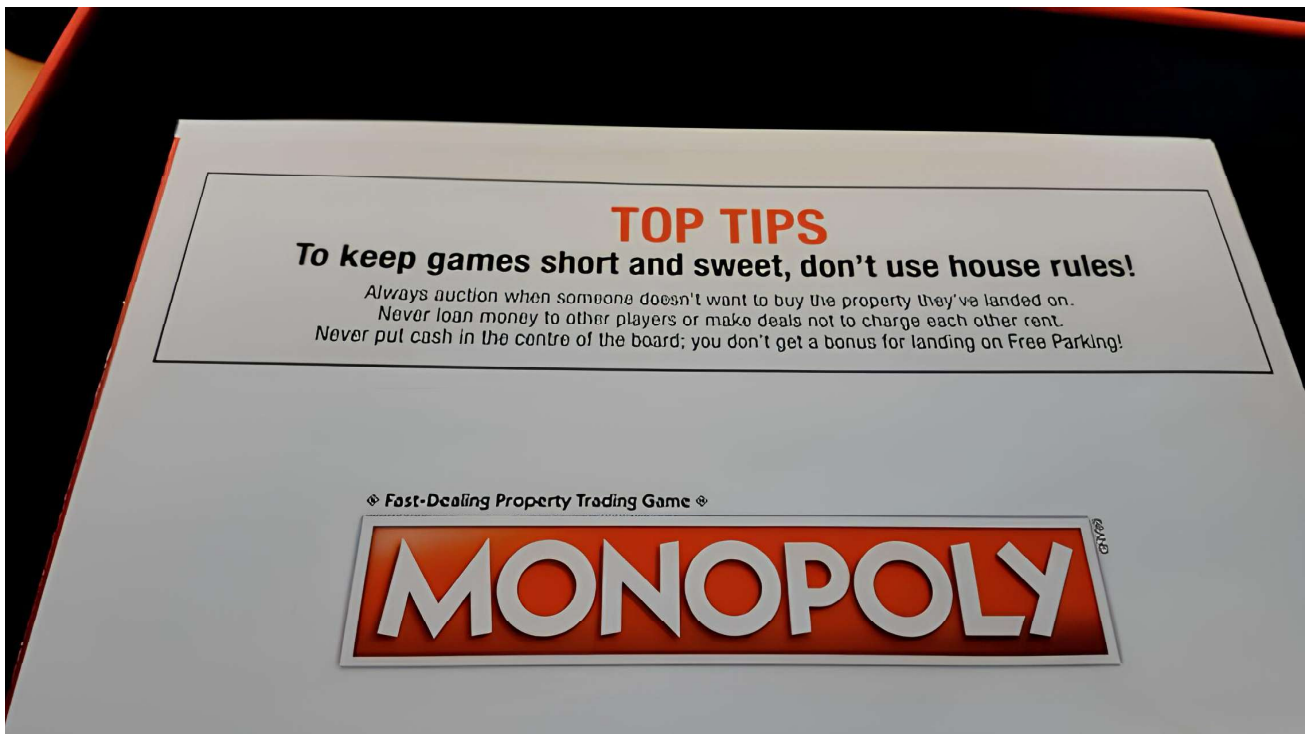


Fig. 3: *Monopoly*'s rulebook. Source: Photo taken by the authors.

If rulebooks represent the covenant between the designer and the player, the actual experience of play often falls outside the bounds of the intended experience. Rulebooks, paradoxically, are the most important part of an analogue game, the most impactful on player experience, and yet their role is often the least examined aspect.

7. Assumptions in Rulebook Design

Some of the assumptions made in rulebook design are down to the simple nature of gaming – nobody wants a forty-minute homework exercise before they get to have fun. Some of it is down to long-standing conventions in the design of rulebooks. Much of this, in turn, is down to the expected audience.

Rulebooks might be more useful considered in the frame of academic papers or legal judgements – they require a degree of subject literacy in order for someone to properly parse what is in front of them. The level of literacy required is not excessive, but it can be off-putting to see the level and intensity of jargon that is to be seen in even manuals for ‘family-friendly’ games. Some of this is due to the nature of how rules are articulated in manuals, but some of it is also down to the skills that go into assessing the applicability and consequences of rules in a game design.

One thing that comes with experience in game systems is an intuitive sense of the ‘why’ of a rule. When a rulebook says a card must be played ‘face-down,’ or turns be taken in initiative order, experience layers on an understanding of consequence. A face-down card is secret until it is flipped over. If it is secret, it follows that there must be a need for players to be kept in the dark as to what card a player has played down. If there is intended to be a discontinuity between player and played card, then it follows that the rule is intended to permit deceit, or a ‘fog of war,’ or bluffing. If initiative order in a combat is to be enforced, there must be tactical or strategic considerations at play. None of these are complex deductions, but the perceived intention behind a rule plays an important part in players gaining a holistic understanding of how rules mesh together. Part of the whole ‘gestalt’ of a rules system is the extent to which rules imply affordances, which in turn imply higher-level dynamics. These, in turn, may define, implicitly, an ‘ethos’ to the rules that is not precisely articulated in the specific rules. If the rules say ‘discard unplayed cards face down,’ then it implies that other players are not permitted to pick up a discarded hand to see what it contains. In poker, if a player folds, there is a social contract that they do not get to see the hands against which they folded – that information must be paid for through wagering. There is a distinction here between the rules of a game versus a more ephemeral ‘rules of play’ as expressed through a holistic appreciation of what rules are **for**.

However, to even get to that point, it’s necessary to wrestle with specific rules that may not necessarily be immediately intuitive to novice players, even in simple scenarios. *Dixit* [Roubira (2008); complexity of 1.19/5] is a whimsical card game of storytelling through art. Anyone can learn how to play it in a few minutes. The manual is a double-sided sheet that contains only a few rules. And yet, even given the family-friendly nature of the game, the manual is replete with phrases and terms that are never fully explained. For example, the inventory lists ‘36 voting tokens in 6 different colours.’ A setup section references ‘make a draw pile,’ which is clear enough to a gamer, but one of several terms used to reference cards in different contexts. The word ‘images’ is used interchangeably with ‘cards,’ such as in ‘Shuffle the 84 images and give 6 of them to each player. Make a draw pile with the remaining cards.’ In context, cards are obviously images, but it takes a degree of confidence to make that deductive leap. ‘One player is the storyteller for the turn’ – turn, rounds, and actions are terms used commonly in rulebooks and only rarely properly defined. It’s even more rare that their use is consistent between games – a turn in one game may be defined as an action, or a round, in another. The result of all this is that rulebooks often impart only a partial understanding of a game upon initial reading, and this often results in game flow-breaking interruptions while players try to find the specific subsection where an edge case in play can be adjudicated. Those running RPGs often adopt some variation of a ‘sixty-second rule,’ which means if the answer can’t be found within sixty seconds of opening a rulebook, you make a decision on the fly and resolve to deal with it during downtime. However, such ‘off the cuff’ rules interpretation can lead to inconsistent play experiences and frustrations if someone is found to be disadvantaged by a bad call. For some games, players must choose between smooth play and correct play until the rulebook has been fully parsed by all.

Often encoded in manuals too are gendered assumptions about players. It is very common, for example, for a game to reference ‘he’ as a default for ‘he/she/they,’ and sometimes manuals will even have extensive footnotes explaining why that’s fine rather than simply adopting more inclusive language. *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (Darwin et al. 2009) justifies it on the grounds of ‘elegance’: ‘We have chosen to use the masculine pronoun as the generic pronoun instead of the less elegant he/she.’ *Meeple Circus* (Cauchy 2017) says, ‘male pronouns have been used for simplicity and readability’; however, this does show that there is an encoded expectation that the ideal able players of these games are also, by and large, expected to be male. Other games have opted for non-gendered pronouns in the rulebook. For

example, in the English version of *Carcassonne: Star Wars* (Wrede 2015), the use of the third person singular is avoided, having opted for the use of ‘the players’ or ‘you’ when speaking directly to the reader. *Kingdomino* (Cathala 2016) also avoids the third person singular in the English version. However, in the rulebooks for languages in which nouns are gendered, *Kingdomino* adopts the masculine noun as universal. For example, ‘the player’ (in English) is translated to ‘el jugador’ (Spanish). We couldn’t find any disclaimer made about this choice.

Increasingly, modern games have become better at resolving this and also by reducing definitional uncertainty through the use of explanatory images. However, rulebooks still assume literacy on the part of players, often a degree of numeracy, an ability to juxtapose complex ideas and to ascertain precise relationships between game elements from densely interrelated documents.

More complex games may require you to wield rules with all the deftness of a fencer, linking them together and building atop them to create powerful synergies that can dominate your opponents. In this, even the tiniest misinterpretation of a single word might be the difference between this being possible and impossible. ‘Do X and then Y’ versus ‘Do X and Y’ may have tremendous differences in how they are executed on the table. It is the assumption at the heart of rulebooks that a player will be able to interpret, understand and act on this complex information in a timely, enjoyable way.

Although a comprehensive analysis of concrete good and bad practices is beyond the scope of this paper, readers are directed to Barros and Casimiro (2024) and Heron (2024), where these issues are thoroughly outlined.

8. Best Practices Recommendations

To help identify the best practices for improving rulebook accessibility, the accessibility teardown conceptualised by Heron (2024) will be adapted, with elements added and revised to correspond to the specificities of rulebooks of board games and RPGs. In the accessibility teardown, seven categories are considered: visual, cognitive, emotional, physical, communication, socioeconomic and intersectional accessibility. Of all of them, only emotional accessibility will not be mentioned, as that is primarily a product of the rule dynamics in play. When discussing rulebooks, it is also necessary to include learning accessibility. The proposed best practices are presented below.

Visual Accessibility

Applied to rulebooks, visual accessibility refers to considerations for players who are colour blind, the colour contrast of the colours used, and the readability of the text.

Table 1 — Recommendations for Visual Accessibility.

Consideration	Explanation
Colour blindness	When developing a rulebook, it is important to recognise that there may be some players who are colour-blind. In this sense, when referring to specific tokens, it is recommended to refer to them according to their roles (or identifiable characteristics) and not by their colours. For example: “the farmer can trade fruit”, rather than “the yellow player can trade fruit”.
Contrast	To help with visual clarity, it is important that the colour contrast is tested to ensure that it does not affect the readability of the text. Equally relevant to help with visual association is to have a clear match between component colours and manual colours.
Readability	For the rulebook to be readable, it is important to have the following considerations: use a simple font, preferably sans serif; avoid using small font size, consider using 12 or above; avoid using font ornamentation - usually used in historical games - and background images, as it restraints readability; avoid having a large amount of unbroken text, instead proper paragraph breaks, line breaks, white space should be used; use clear and perceptible icons, for example with unique silhouettes.

Cognitive Accessibility

In this context, this category relates to having the text according to the EL guidelines, ensuring the flow and clarity of the text, avoiding the use of jargon, or, if needed, explaining it, and having concise text.

Table 2 — Recommendations for Cognitive Accessibility.

Consideration	Explanation
Easy language	As mentioned previously, the use of easy language in rulebooks has the potential to reduce the cognitive load of the text. To achieve this, the easy language general rules, as well as those of written texts, should be followed.
Flow	When writing the rules and instructions for the game, it is important to ensure that it is well-organised and structured. To achieve this, it should: contextualise the player's role, present the rules and instructions in an orderly, logical, and functional manner; break the text up with images and have them linked to icons; and refrain from using complex conditionals (e.g. ifs, buts, excepts, etc.).
Clarity	The text should be as clear as possible and with no unambiguous phrasing. The same should apply to definitions, that is, they should be as clear as possible so as not to leave any doubt or allow for other interpretations and assumptions.
Jargon	The use of jargon can hinder the comprehension of the rules for beginners. If jargon must be used, definitions should be given, either in the rulebook glossary or in a separate document.
Consistency	It should be decided what terms to use and their definitions (e.g. using rounds, actions, or turns). Once a term has been used, it should be used throughout the text whenever referring to what it represents. As such, synonyms should not be used unless referring to something else.

Physical Accessibility

In this context, this category relates to the size of the rulebook, the ease of finding the key elements, and having a digital version of the manual.

Table 3 — Recommendations for Physical Accessibility.

Consideration	Explanation
Manual size	The manual should be A5 or A4 to ease its manoeuvre and to allow enough space for text and images without everything being cramped and without legibility.
Find elements	It should be easy to find the key elements and information in the document. This can be done through the use of headings, bold words and having a resume section, either at the end or in a second column next to the text it refers to.
Digital version	A digital version of the manual will allow more people to have access to it. However, this will only be completely true if the document, preferably .pdf, is in an accessible format (e.g. for screen readers) and with accessibility features (e.g. alternative texts for images).

Communication Accessibility

In this context, this category relates to how the instructions are presented and determines whether it is necessary to use cultural references.

Table 4 — Recommendations for Communication Accessibility.

Consideration	Explanation
Instructions	The rulebook should neither be a purely written text nor have only graphical instructions. Instead, a middle ground should be found where there is only the essential information, written in a straightforward manner, with graphical and image instructions that complement the written information. The rules can also be complemented by video instructions with examples on how to play the game.

Consideration	Explanation
Cultural references	When developing an accessible rulebook, it is recommended to have in attention the use of culture-independent icons, so as not to produce assumptions, as icons can be culturally specific. From the same point of view, it is necessary to have caution with the use of references that are only recognized in a particular part of the world or to a specific group of people (e.g. names of restaurants/franchises, cartoons, pop culture).

Socioeconomic Accessibility

In this context, this category relates to representation, the pronouns used and having suggestions for alternative components.

Table 5 — Recommendations for Socioeconomic Accessibility.

Consideration	Explanation
Representation	The nature of how players and their characters are represented in a manual can be problematic. Example turns using only the names of Western males, for example (Bill, Bob and Jim), rather than reflecting a more inclusive outlook (Bill, Emily and Mohammad). The roles permitted to players too may reflect heteronormative, gendered or culturally biased assumptions. An example female player who takes on the role of a passive healer, or carelessly assigning a traitor role to an underrepresented demographic.
Pronouns	Although there has been a recognized change in the default pronouns used when referring to the player, there are still some news games where the default pronouns are masculine. Although this may not be the case with the English language, other languages have difficulties in finding the most adequate pronouns due to language-specificities (e.g. Portuguese).
Alternate components	Some games offer opportunities for replacing provided game tokens with more general alternatives, and players with disabilities can appreciate some guidance. Consider suggestions for how to replace paper money with, for example, paperclips or poker chips. Other suggestions may include replacing identical meeples with other tokens that offer tactile differentiation, or using physical annotations (stickers or coloured threads, as one option) to supplement components that require additional channels of information to identify.

Learning Accessibility

In this context, this category relates to deconstructing stigma related to having an accessible version of the rulebook, using videos to explain the rules, having a document dedicated to player aids, and having an explicit note on whether players can use house rules to improve accessibility.

Table 6 — Recommendations for Learning Accessibility.

Consideration	Explanation
Deconstruct stigma	Accessibility support often comes with a stigma, and there are things manuals often do that reinforce negative perceptions. Referencing ‘beginner’ and ‘normal’ rules, for example, can be considered infantilising in a way that calling them ‘standard’ and ‘advanced’ does not. Many board gamers are sticklers for the rules as written and resistant to making accommodations not explicitly supported in the rules. Encoding ‘takeback’ mechanics or identifying areas in which variation is permitted can remove much of the stigma of seeking support at the table.
Videos	Tutorial videos can be a good and easy addition to the rulebooks. Videos tend to be easier to learn from as it is a condensed version of the rules, where the person also demonstrates how the game is played. Moreover, this substitutes the need for having someone in the group to read, learn and comprehend the rules and how the game is played.
Player aid	Having a booklet with player aids, where rules and tips are summarised, can be a useful tool when playing the first few times. This will allow to, potentially, get more familiar with the game, speed the decision process and give independence to new players.
House-rules	It should be indicated whether players can or cannot use house-rules. Notwithstanding, house-rules can help to customise the game and personalise it according to the support needs of the players.

Intersectional Accessibility

All of the above considerations intersect with each other and are necessary to reduce the associated cognitive load that rules can have. Some of these connections are mentioned below.

For instance, cognitive accessibility is directly linked to communication and learning accessibility, as each consideration will have an impact and influence on the others. Readability is directly linked to easy language guidelines, as it will improve comprehension and perceptibility, which in turn relates to flow, clarity, instructions, and, possibly, player aids.

At the same time, visual, cognitive and physical accessibility interrelate. Large text may make a rulebook more readable, but at the cost of expanding the size of a manual, which may have readability implications or even make a manual unwieldy for those with physical impairments. The use of iconography can create considerable density of information for those with visual impairments, but the cognitive cost may make such icons problematic in other contexts. Many accessibility considerations require the consideration of trade-offs, and there is no best practice that can exist without an understanding of the specific needs of impacted user groups.

9. Conclusion

To develop accessible rulebooks, it is crucial to have in mind the impact that they will have on one's cognitive load. As rulebooks are mainly texts that rely heavily on reading, and considering that reading is a complex cognitive process, to develop an accessible rulebook is, by implication, a process of working to reduce its cognitive load within intersectional complexities.

This reduction can be achieved through the use of EL rules, as its main aim is to reduce the complexity of the standard language for people with communication difficulties (e.g., neurodivergents, non-native speakers, functionally illiterate). However, there are many other considerations, as we have discussed.

Rulebooks usually set the context, define the starting state, as well as the end-point at which a game is won, or lost (although sometimes the decision can be left to the table), and how that state is to be manipulated. Although the role of the manual is clear, there are some conflicting views regarding the role of the rules. On the one hand, they should be used as instructional materials, where their aim is to educate players on the mechanisms and meaning of play. On the other hand, rulebooks should also be used as a reference material that allows players to easily look up rules for confirmation or clarification.

Adding to the constraints of producing accessible rulebooks are the inherent assumptions that people have while designing them. For instance, the assumption that the player is male, abled, and usually white, fuelling the idea of white privilege in the board game industry ([Trammell 2023](#)).

To deal with these complex multivariate issues, we have outlined a series of best-practice guidance, drawn from extensive work in the board gaming space ([Heron 2024](#)), to offer a perspective that can help maximise rulebook effectiveness while optimising for cognitive load.

Some questions remain unanswered regarding how to create rulebooks that are accessible and entertaining. We have yet to integrate best practices for technical writing within the specific frame of instructional material. We have not considered alternate forms of instruction, such as 'learn to play' videos – a topic worthy of dissection in its own right, or mentioned the areas where modern board game design has improved. The role and consistency of jargon likewise deserve a fuller treatment, as it is both an important way to deliver dense information quickly and a primary source of inaccessibility. Some publishers have moved to entirely digital propositions for their rules – digital PDFs or apps with tutorials – and this has both positive and negative connotations for rulebook design. We believe this paper marks an important start to a conversation regarding the universal inaccessibility in tabletop gaming, but it is not the final word by any stretch.

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