

DUNE

HOUSE SECRETS

IGNACY TRZEWICZEK'S GAME DESIGNER JOURNAL

Breakdown of design process in Dune: House Secrets part 1

Dune: House Secrets is a story-driven game inspired by award-winning Detective: a modern crime board game. The game uses the same system to tell an engaging story, but at the same time, with some tweaks and changes in the rules, it brings a very different experience. In this article, I'd like to discuss a couple of these changes.

THE BOARD

Detective: a modern crime board game was all about putting players in the shoes of characters from procedural TV shows like CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. Players take the role of law enforcers and detectives. They visit the Lab to examine DNA samples, they visit Court and City Archives to dig in old files and cases, they visit Richmond PD to question suspects and witnesses. The game comes with a small board to help manifest this simple structure - Lab, Richmond PD, Court - this is your terrain, this is your playground, this is your procedure.

Dune: House Secrets invites player characters to Tel Gezer, a small city on Arrakis they never visited before. They are members of resistance on a secret mission. There is no structure, there is only unknown, there is only the fog of secret war.

In Dune: House Secrets, I decided to throw out the safety of well-known locations. I gave them the map of Tel Gezer, a big paper map like in RPG sessions. I marked on it 26 different locations - tavern, palace, landing pod, gallery, market, all different places—the whole big city, the city that is unknown to the newcomers. Instead of solid structure from Detective, they are given a handout with



I gave them a map with 26 different locations ...

things they need to explore and places they need to learn about.

It's a simple design change. Remove the board with four familiar locations and give a map with 26 unknown ones. Suddenly from the confident law enforcer, you turn into a traveler that visits a new place.

THE RESOURCES

In Detective, at the beginning of each game, characters add their ability tokens to the pool. This represents their skillset and how they can add value to the team by excelling in some areas. These tokens are then used in the game to dig deeper into some cards and learn more about certain plot elements.



Each time players spend resources, they feel the gravity of the action.

One of the characteristic elements in Dune is Fremen's frugality, their sacred care for water and spice. They are quite the opposite to today's society in which the word waste goes along with every day. I wanted to show it in the rules, both the scarcity of resources and the respect to what a person has. The ability tokens received one simple tweak. Once spent, they are gone. They don't replenish at the beginning of the next game.

Players begin the campaign with a few resource tokens. That is all they have for the whole 4 mission-long campaign. Each time they want to spend a token, they think twice. Each time they spend resources, they debate if this is the moment. Each time they spend resources, they feel the gravity of the action.

Welcome to Arrakis.

TAKING RISKS

In Detective players are law enforcers. Confidence is their unlimited resource. They can visit crime scenes, they can question witnesses, they can check police databases, they are in control of the situation.

In Dune: House Secrets, you play a rebel fighting against evil Harkonnens. You act





Your every action is a risk.

undercover, you run in shadows, you watch every step you take, and your every action is a risk.

To represent that with a simple mechanism, we decided to add a small Push your luck mechanism in the game. When taking certain actions, like passing behind guards or breaking into a Harkonnens building, players must take a risk test and draw a Consequence token. We have 2 good ones in the pool and 3 alert ones. When you draw the red one, the Consequence track moves, and if it ever reaches the final spot, the resistant forces are in trouble.

It's a simple mechanism added to the Detective system, but it adds this moment of uncertainty, the split-second-long thrill when you draw a token knowing that you are just doing something very risky...

EPILOGUE

These are three small changes, small tweaks in the Detective system we introduced in Dune: House Secrets that allowed us to change the feel of the game and help players immerse into Dune. They are no longer detectives. They are rebels in the city of Tel Gezer.

In the second part, I will discuss how we approached the Antares website and adjusted it to the world in which computers are not existing.

Ignacy Trzewiczek
2021



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Breakdown of design process in Dune: House Secrets part 2

In the previous article, I discussed most physical components of Dune: House Secrets and what their purpose was in the game, and how they helped immerse players in the story. Today we continue the breakdown of the design process - I'll discuss one deck and the website.

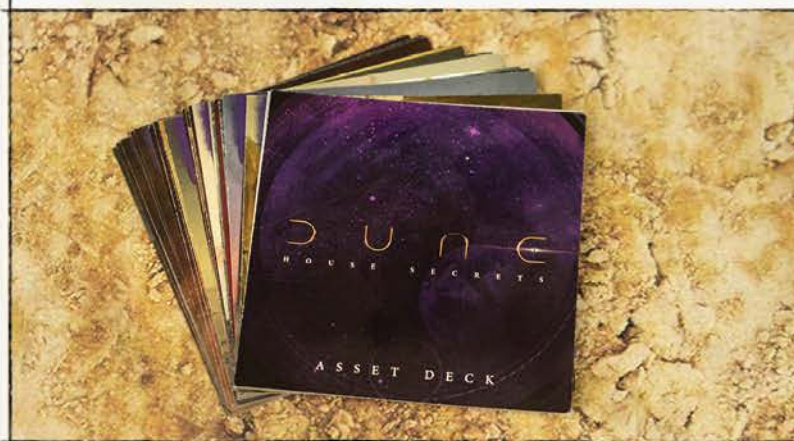
MINDMAP

One of the most famous components in Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game, were photos. A square-shaped deck of cards with portraits of every non-player character in the story. As the game progresses and players meet these witnesses, suspects, and consultants, the photos land on the wall creating the beautiful, insane mind map of correlations and interactions between story characters. Players are detectives. They must find the murderer. The photos and mind map does the purpose.

Your experience in Dune: House Secrets is quite different. In Dune: House Secrets, player characters are now rebels, not investigators. So while players are still challenged to explore a world and unravel a complex mystery, the story itself unfolds in a new, exciting way. When players are given visual glimpses into this world, it's less about building a mindmap of suspects and case evidence, and more about navigating this rich, foreign setting. We hired an army of illustrators to visualize the

various key characters and locations that you encounter during your missions. As the game progresses and players visit new places and cross paths with new people, they draw cards that transport them to the deep deserts of Arrakis and help to bring this immersive experience to vivid life.

This one small change in the art direction, moving from non-player character portraits into environmental artwork and location visualization is another small piece that adds to the new experience in Dune: House Secrets.



We hired an army of illustrators to visualize the various key characters and locations

ANTARES DATABASE

As mentioned in the previous article, Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game, is known for its integration with the website — the tool that allows players to log into a sort of FBI system and browse through databases, compare fingerprints of suspects, check DNA samples, and do other cool things.

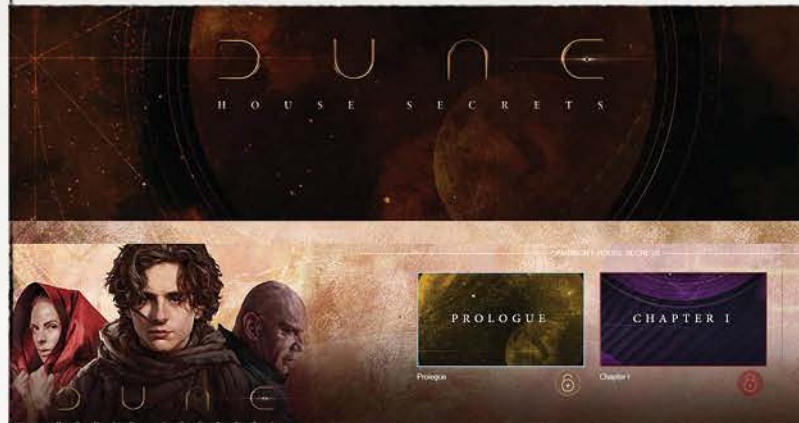
I guess you heard about The Butlerian Jihad, the war that ended up removing computers from human life in the Dune universe. That was one of our first topics when discussing the game with Legendary. What about the website that the Detective system uses? Will Dune: House Secrets use a companion website?

Yes, with the twist.

We decided we would use it as a tool for players, not player characters. Let me explain.

In Detective, the player uses Antares website, but they do it roleplaying as their character. It's their character who logs into the system and checks DNA samples.

In Dune: House Secrets, the player characters cannot use an in-world website during their adventure, because there is no such thing as a website to access within the Dune universe. May it be in Portland



The website - a guide into the rich lore of Dune.

or Poland, only the players themselves can access our website for their own purposes, so we needed to find an authentic way to use the website to enrich the gameplay.

How's that?

We decided we would use the website as a guide into the rich lore of Dune. We use it to educate players about the Houses, conflicts, politics, and all things their character living on Arrakis already knows, but players living in Dallas don't.

Also, being aware that so many players will be discovering the world of Dune for the first time, and we cannot leave them behind, we decided that the Learn History feature is a must.

Beautifully animated cutscenes, two minute long videos assist players in some crucial moments educating them about





Beautifully animated cutscenes assist players in crucial moments.

Atreides, Harkonnenns, Geidi Prime, and other important facts. Facts important to understand the depth and all layers of political plot we have in the game. Not only does this material establish the existing Dune canon, but also explains new stories exclusive to the game.

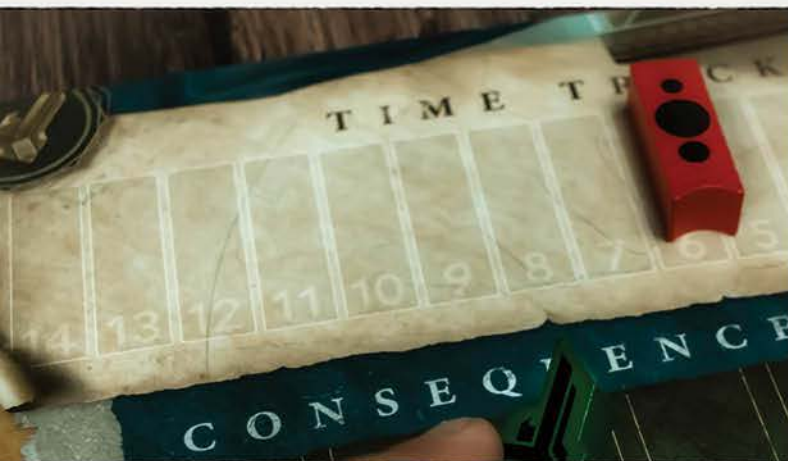
These videos are visually stunning, but more importantly, they make the complex mythology of Dune more accessible and help players comfortably navigate this world and solve the mystery on their own terms.

FINAL REPORT

At the end of each game of Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game, players must complete the Final Report and answer questions. They answer who was murdered and what the motive was. Although this element seems absolutely mandatory in the murder mystery game, we've struggled with it for years. What we see in the feedback and playtesting is one big issue: players have a blast feeling like they're awesome detectives for three hours, only to give a few wrong answers during the Final Report at the end and learn they weren't that awesome, after all. The positive energy, the fun, the amazing memories, and the experiences are all gone in a split second. You finish a 3-hour game session, and the game leaves a bad taste in the mouth... all because you gave one wrong answer at the end.

We played with this system and changed it for the Vienna Connection game, and then, seeing very positive feedback, we followed up this design direction in Dune: House Secrets.

In Dune: House Secrets, we went for the concept of the RPG campaign. When you play a tabletop roleplaying game, the game sessions flow, one after another, without



You get to play, enjoy the story, and wait for more.

Victory Points or the Game Master judging your efforts and achievements with some Final Score. You just get to play, enjoy the story, and wait for more.

At the end of each mission of Dune: House Secrets, players read the epilogue together and choose one topic that interests them the most. The one plot element they feel is most important, but they just scratched the surface. They ask Zarzur, one of the leaders of the Fremen rebellion, to tell them more about this particular element and help them prepare for the next game session.

We know this is an unexpected shift for all of you who've played Detective before, but it's a natural and satisfying conclusion for the game and anyone who has played tabletop RPGs.

FINAL WORDS

It's fascinating for me, as a designer, how much you can play with the system, how much you can tweak and change even in such a simple game mechanic like Detective. How we - designers - achieve our goals, specific player experience by changing a few small elements here and there, and how it was possible to change a full-blown investigative best-seller into a brand new beast about sabotage and rebellion.

I wish you all the best with the game, and I hope that you and your friends will have a great game night on Arrakis.

Ignacy Trzewiczek
2021

