

GRASPING NETTLES GAME DESIGN GUIDE



BY ADAM BELL



(CREATE YOUR OWN WHEEL GAMES)

Overview

What is this?

This is a Game Design Guide based on the game *Grasping Nettles* by Adam Bell. It's a collection of my thoughts about the design decisions that led to the final product, and intended to be used by game designers in their pursuits of making new games of their own, or in making expansion content to the base game.

This is not a playable document, for that you can pick up a copy of the game itself at adamebell.itch.io/grasping-nettles. Free copies are there, so grab one if you need to. Instead, this is a reflection on the different rules of the game along with some commentary on how I think you might be able to use it to create something new.

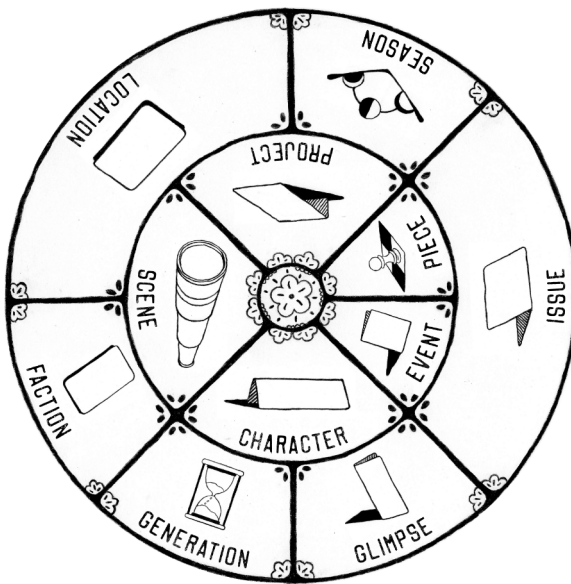
hey it's Adam, I'll be showing up over here to offer any designer commentary on how you can use whatever we're talking about in the left-hand column as well as some additional info on its creation.

I hope you've enjoyed your time with *Grasping Nettles* and am super excited to see what people create out of it!



The Wheel

Grasping Nettles revolves around a central game board referred to as the Wheel. You can find the files for making your own wheel in the style of ours on the itch page where you got this document (adamebell.itch.io/grasping-nettles-guide). Here it is in-line so we're on the same page:



Why is the Wheel shaped like this with the actions having different sizes? How did I choose this particular layout?

This is what felt good for my game to play, but in making your own games you can try different configurations to see the effect they have on play. As is, you can get to basically any space with a higher die roll, occasionally granting full creative control to the players.

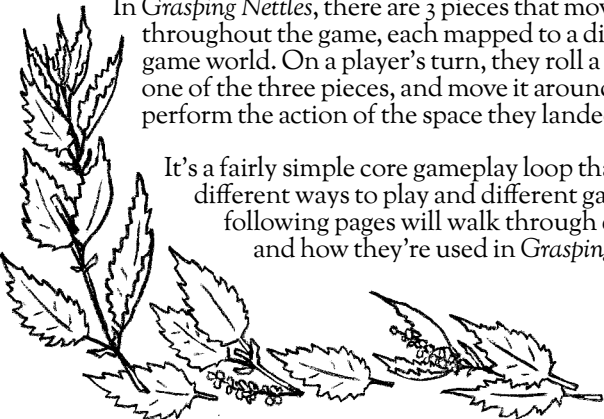


In *Grasping Nettles*, there are 3 pieces that move around the Wheel throughout the game, each mapped to a different faction in the game world. On a player's turn, they roll a six-sided die (d6), choose one of the three pieces, and move it around the wheel. They then perform the action of the space they landed on.

It's a fairly simple core gameplay loop that can offer a ton of different ways to play and different games to make. The following pages will walk through each of the mechanics and how they're used in *Grasping Nettles*.

My goals with the Wheel as the center of play were to provide creative restrictions to your play that don't feel limiting in any way. Roll-and-move is fairly reviled in the board game space but we love dealing with randomization in RPGS!

The inclusion of three pieces to choose from as well as multiple paths to move around the board were to help mitigate randomness and make it feel good in play.




Core Concepts

On Community


Grasping Nettles is all about telling the story of a community and the issues it faces over the course of generations. That is the lens through which the rest of the game is played, and it projects itself across the rest of the design decisions in the game: which actions to include, what to use as the focus for the pieces, and how to build the connective tissue between rounds of play.

Players take turns moving pieces around the Wheel, and then doing the action they land on. Each of the three pieces maps to a different Faction the players created in the world, and players are encouraged to perform their action using the piece's faction as a lens. Most actions simply require the player to invent something new about the world, with that player being fully in charge of the final details of the new thing.

The accumulation of details builds the world, and also gives life to a shared narrative of the community. Each new thing players learn about the world pushes the story of the community forward. A player may use the *Location* action to describe a bar that's always been in town, but the fact that we're learning about this bar now and through the lens of this faction naturally gets the table thinking of the stories that happen there.



What's with the name, you ask? I often name my games using snippets of idioms or other known phrases that get the message of the game across, and so was looking around for phrases related to dealing with the problems people face. *Grasp the Nettle* is an old phrase that refers to tackling a problem boldly to reduce how much it stings, but a community has more than one nettle to grasp.



Another Wheel game about community might have an entirely different slate of actions and focuses than *Grasping Nettles* has, which would have a butterfly effect into the stories told with that game. If you replace Factions with Districts, and Issues with Culture, you can end up with a game all about the different neighborhoods of a city where you learn about the different arts and music that they create and enjoy.

Making the Game

If you're sitting down to make your own wheel game, choosing the thematic cornerstone to build the rest of the game around is a very important step! My first step in designing *Grasping Nettles* was drawing the wheel and asking myself what the heck I just made. Then I thought it'd be neat for pieces to bounce around and do different actions. When I started thinking about what actions would be fun to play with, I wrote the four community tenets found in the first spread of the game which you can see to the right. The rest of the game as you know it followed easily.


Listing out "rules" of the game world helps to set the tone of play for the table, and gets everyone on the same page about the stories they're going to tell. If you're designing your own wheel game, setting your theme early will drive the rest of your design.

I
The community is not a monolith. Different factions influence it, each with their own goals, dreams, and visions for the future.

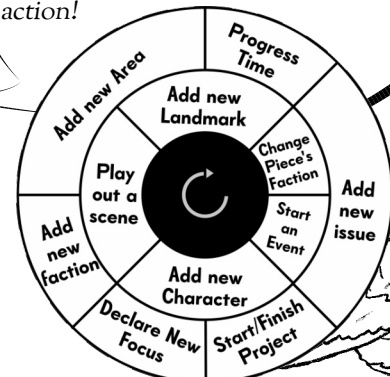
II
The community will face issues big and small. Clean solutions do not exist.

III
In the community live notable people about whom stories will be told, and just as many working towards great things without that level of recognition.

IV
The community lasts longer than any one person. Legacies are left, but generations move on.



Here's what the very first Wheel looked like. Generations, I believe, were added the next day. Area and Landmark held out a bit longer before combining into location after the first playtest. Glimpse was the last thing added shortly before the kickstarter and might just be my favorite action!



Turns & Beginnings

Taking Turns

In *Grasping Nettles*, players take turns coming up with new and cool things to add to the world. Here's the rules from the game:

On your turn, roll the die, choose one of the three faction pieces on the Wheel, and move exactly the number of spaces shown on the die. There are 3 rules of movement:

1. You must move orthogonally
2. You must move clockwise
3. You must not enter the space that you most recently left during your movement


The turn structure is an attempt to provide a platform for each player to contribute their own ideas to the world and narrative. There's a variety of reasons players may be too timid to contribute ideas to a game like this, but I've found that that's much less likely to happen when there's a turn structure that provides each player with their own dedicated time to think and create. It helps foster a cycle of creation and validation. When everyone oohs and ahhs the latest twist or change you've added to the story, that feels really good in play.

Rolling a d6 and moving one of the pieces around the board is intended to limit the possibilities slightly, and this is done for two reasons. The first is the simple idea that limitation can often breed creativity. The other is that by giving the player options on how to use the movement from their die usually gets them to hone in on exactly which action they want to take, and then they just figure out how to get one of the pieces to that space. That's usually when they remember that the piece you use is mapped to a faction, and their new creation gets that much more interesting!


However, a game with different goals and intentions than *Grasping Nettles* could make some tweaks to the turn structure or even do away with it entirely. Maybe each player gets their own piece, or rolls a different kind of die. Maybe instead of three pieces, each action on your wheel gets covered up and can't be selected again until it's cleared off somehow. If you want to change it but are stumped, just go play a few board games and steal mechanics from there.

Starting the Game


The start game procedure of *Grasping Nettles* is fairly simple. Use genre as a short-cut to get everyone on the same page as to the type of world they're interested in, and then have some free-form discussion to build up a broad pitch of the world. Once you've got an idea that everyone likes, you start taking turns. The first three turns have the special rule of placing a token on the Faction action, after which you're playing the full game. You could certainly play around with adding more structure to this early phase in your Wheel game, but getting past the introduction as fast as possible is what worked best in *Grasping Nettles*.



This procedure is easy to explain in less than a minute and is pretty much all you need to get started. My hope is for *Grasping Nettles* to one day be one of the go-to games people use to show how enjoyable tabletop rpgs can be. To succeed in that, the game must be as approachable as possible. In my experience, it's easiest to sell newer people games with a table presence that are easy to start playing. So that's what I made!



I've got a lot of funny thoughts about the difference between cooperation & collaboration in creative play. The simple version is that I see cooperation as making attempts to reach a consensus before committing new ideas to canon, whereas collaboration is an attempt to recognize that the sum of individual contributions will be greater than the whole. The turn structure *Grasping Nettles* exists to foster collaboration.



The first couple of drafts had a list of actions that you had to take before you got to the stuff with the Wheel. This was an attempt to provide some structure to get players to understand the different actions, but it ended up being more frustrating than helpful. Now, only the first 3 turns are limited. Factions are the lens through which we play, so it's important to get them out first. But, of course, I won't ever stop you from breaking the rules!

Game Actions

Why These Actions?

The actions in a Wheel Game are arguably the most important thing in the design. Explaining the themes of your game at the beginning lays the foundation, but it will fall flat if the actions available to the players don't build the rest of the picture.

With the configuration of the Wheel present in *Grasping Nettles*, there was room for 11 actions. Each asks the player to both flesh out the world and push the narrative forward, with a different balance of one or the other depending on the action. Here are some thoughts on the eleven actions.

Character - Having characters in the game puts a face & name to the actions of different factions and the response they have to the events and issues in the world. Everyone loves a good hero to root for, a villain to lambast, and especially characters somewhere in between who will surprise and shock us as the game goes on.

Event - At first glance Event and Issue might appear to be very similar actions, but Events offer more potential for levity. Sometimes good things happen!


Faction - Having factions in play immediately cuts through to the idea that this is not a unified community. You start the game by doing this action three times, which almost always sets off some initial conflict for players to play on. From there, it sits on the Wheel beckoning players to add more throughout the game. I've seen factions get added as a direct result of events in the game, or even subfactions of another to highlight internal divisions.

Generation - Advancing generations in play brings several benefits to *Grasping Nettles*. Firstly, it reinforces the idea that most of the community's problems won't be cleanly solved; some issues outlive the people trying to fix them. It also helps keep interest alive - once you start running out of ideas for things to add to the game world, a time skip will open fresh wells. This has the run-on effect of breaking up play into shorter increments and reminding players that they can stop playing while it's still fun.

Glimpse - The structure of this action is really inspired by the Hold a Discussion action from *The Quiet Year* by Avery Alder. Some of the coolest things in the games I've played have come from Glimpses, looking outside the community provides a ton of narrative juice.

Issue - Issues offer one of the primary ways the story in *Grasping Nettles* move forward. When an issue is added, it's almost always followed by a flurry of ideas for new projects, factions, characters, and everything else.

Location - *Grasping Nettles* isn't a map-drawing game, or even a game concerned overmuch about the physical details of the world you're building, but Locations still provide much needed physical context to the actions that are happening. It's very fun to think about a faction starting a Project to assassinate the Moon President, but knowing they're meeting in the backroom of a bar in a crashed spaceship takes it to the next level.



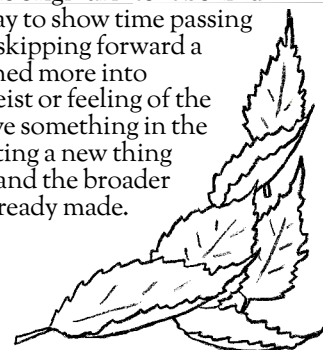
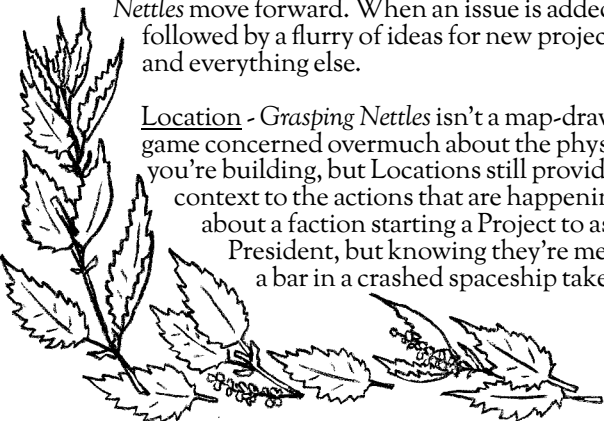
When I first designed *Grasping Nettles* I put the large, world-changing actions on the outside spaces of the Wheel and the more moment-to-moment narrative actions on the inside. I then forgot that I did this until I dug up my old notes when I started writing this guide. I think it's neat to find internal reasons behind design decisions you make and then promptly take for granted. It makes me want to take better notes while designing!

Piece - Without this action, you'd be stuck with the first three factions your group came up with for the entire duration of the game. With it, factions can have arcs where they rise and fall, often leaving the public consciousness for a while in favor of another group. There's always a chance, however, that they return to the spotlight later.

Project - Where *Glimpse* is structurally inspired by an action from the *Quiet Year*, *Project* is narratively inspired by the action of the same name. Projects help give the factions in the world and the players at the table the freedom to break free from the structure of the game and do something world-changing. The interplay between *Project* and *Issue* lays the groundwork for some great narrative beats.

Scene - First of all, big shoutouts to Viditya Voleti for 6e GMless's language about canvases that I borrowed heavily for the rules for setting scenes. Go read that if you haven't already. Scenes in *Grasping Nettles* are a great way to add personality and flavor to the content you've created.

Season - This might be the weirdest of the actions, and that's a good thing. The original intent behind this action was to offer a way to show time passing in a less extreme way than skipping forward a whole generation, but turned more into reflecting the current zeitgeist or feeling of the community. It's nice to have something in the game that's less about creating a new thing and more about analyzing and the broader reaction to all the things already made.



Generational Play

Let Me Explain

Part of the core pitch of *Grasping Nettles* is the concept of generational play. I never know if I should pitch it more as a worldbuilding game or a storytelling game, but the word Generation always makes it into the pitch. It's one of the things that sets it apart from other games in the genre—building the world while time in that world passes. The closest thing to it out of games that I've played would be *Microscope*, but *Microscope* has you flying forward and backward in time, instead of maintaining nice & steady forward progress.

If you're making your own Wheel Game, there's a chance you want to swap the generational play for something else that better meets your design goals. I want to lay out everything that advancing generations does for the experience of play to give you something to think about when changing it up.

1. Player-driven phase changes


- Because all three game pieces need to land on the Generation action for it to fully trigger, there's a certain group consensus that naturally evolves from the time that the first piece moves there to the last. When the first piece is sent there, you can often hear the player moving it mutter, "I think it's about that time." The other players will then usually nod and use their turns to either move another piece to the space or get out "one last idea" before the generation ends. Basically, the need for 3 distinct actions to push the game to the next phase diffuses the pressure away from players that want to move the game along.

2. Clear demarcation of playtime


- Once the start game procedures are out of the way, the Generation cycle splits the game into repeatable sections where you bounce between the "main phase" of moving around the wheel and doing actions and the "generation phase" of addressing all the notecards for the time skip. It explicitly prompts you to decide if this is the last phase of your session, and if so if it's the last session you'll ever play to make sure players remember that they're allowed to quit, and also that they're allowed to continue another day.

3. Refreshing the well of creative ideas


- In the games I've played, we usually hit the Generation button when we start running out of ideas for things to add. Deciding how much time to skip forward and then taking turns narrating what happens to each of the notecards creates a ton of fodder for new ideas. As an example, I once played a game about the moon colony established by Apollo 11. Our first generation skip was 100 years, into the 2070s. One of the first cards that got addressed was Neil Armstrong, with the simple update of "he's still alive and thriving," which drove us to so many other plot points about life-extending moon rocks throughout the rest of that Generation skip and in the next session of play.



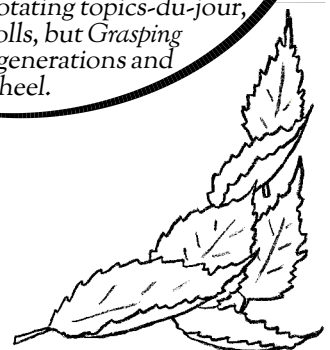
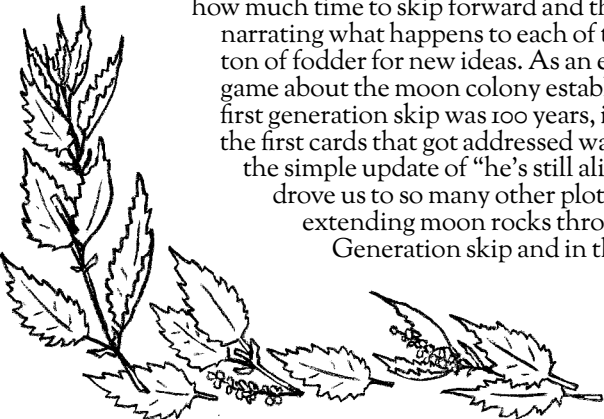
The first draft or two of the rules for advancing generations featured another example of early attempts to provide structure that was mostly just frustrating. I had an ordered list of notecard types that you were supposed to go through, resolving all of one type before starting on the next. Much more satisfaction came from opening it up and resolving things in the order that felt best!



While this stuff might be interesting, you don't need to use it like a checklist to measure your game design against. It's not even stuff I necessarily actively think about while designing! For me, a lot of this stuff comes from gut-feel when I'm writing the game and then the smarter-sounding details come afterwards when I'm trying to figure out why it worked so well. It's a strategy that has worked for me so far!



A lot of mechanics in *trpgs* are secretly conduits for refreshing the well of creative ideas. It's easier to come up with an answer to "what happens when I fail/succeed at this" than "what happens when I try this." Games like *Grasping Nettles* that aren't about quests or derring-do need to find other ways to refresh the well. Similar games might use card prompts, rotating topics-du-jour, or even dice rolls, but *Grasping Nettles* has generations and the Wheel.



Quick Nettles & License

Writing Quick Nettles

Quick Nettles are intended to get players started with the game in a premade world of your creation, that they can then take and make their own. Players will read out the descriptions of each thing you create and write them each down on notecards on their table. Then, they'll perform the game action Generation Advance to move your world forward in time and start building off of it from there.

First, write a brief overview of the setting & tone your world is trying to invoke. Include some details about how big the community you're suggesting (anywhere from a little village to a whole planet is cool), and then create stuff for your world that players could create using the actions of the game. Those are Locations, Issues, Events, Glimpses, Seasons, Factions, and Characters.

You can do whatever you want out of those, but you'll need at least 3 factions. Ideally the first 3 things listed are those factions, but who could stop you from breaking the rules? The things you write will be presented to the players in whatever order you choose, so consider that while writing the final draft.


Licensing Information

You have my express permission to make cool new games based on *Grasping Nettles* and content that's compatible with it. If you do, please just include whichever text below is relevant somewhere in your game.

If your product declares compatibility with *Grasping Nettles*, state the following in your legal text and on any websites from which a commercial product is sold: "[product name] is compatible with *Grasping Nettles*, but is an independent production by [publisher name] and is not affiliated with Adam Bell or adamebell.games."

If your product is based on the mechanics of *Grasping Nettles*, state the following in your legal text and on any websites from which a commercial product is sold: "[product name] is based on *Grasping Nettles*, but is an independent production by [publisher name] and is not affiliated with Adam Bell or adamebell.games."


Sadly I don't currently have a snappy name for any hacks of this game, but if one comes up I'll certainly come back and update this document. I've referred to them as "Wheel Games" throughout this document but I don't know if that has quite the consumer-facing marketing power as something like "Powered By The Apocalypse" or "Marked&Made", so I'll keep stewing on it. Let me know if you have any ideas! I'm super excited to see if people make anything using this document. Feel free to post on the discussion boards or reach out to me on twitter with any thoughts or ideas you had while reading this!



I was heavily inspired to include some sort of quickplay option by the *Easy Streets* supplement for the excellent game *i'm sorry did you say street magic* by Caro Asercion. I've lately become a strong believer in giving players the tools to skip parts of your game they don't feel like engaging with, and *Quick Nettles* do just that with the game starting steps. Some days you want to get right to it.



The itch page for this document should contain an template for your *Quick Nettles* if you wanted to simply release one in the style of all of the wonderful ones in the core book. I do have to shout out my wonderful artist and partner Sashah for drawing such nice little nettles and the rest of the art adorning the pages. The game and this guide wouldn't be half as pleasant to look at if it weren't for them. They even drew this face!



Unless you're a big corporation here to rip me off, there's zero chance I'll ever take legal action against you if you don't include this licensing text. It's mostly here to cover your ass and mine because the world of copyright is weird and wobbly and designed to mostly work against small creators like me and (i presume) you. I'm not a lawyer at all, though, and am mostly just taking this language from other games' license agreements!

