



DESIGNERS DIARY

The past decade in board games has seen an explosion in the level of complexity, creativity, and accessibility. Games are being designed at a record pace, and while not all of them are excellent, the number of solid, engaging titles coming out every year has been on the rise. As a relatively new publishing house, [Synapses Games](#) has the flexibility to find games that work outside of the traditional box. Their first release, [Incubation](#), is a fast, fun, family game about collecting and hatching dragon eggs for big rewards. Earlier this year, they followed it up with a deceptively strategic dexterity game, [Crazy Tower](#).

Synapses Games' third release has come out this autumn and it's generating a lot of buzz.

In *Cóatl*, players vie to become the next High Priest of the Aztec world by carving intricate and valuable feathered serpents. By connecting different coloured head, body, and tail segments they can earn points by fulfilling Temple and Prophecy cards. It is quick to learn, but offers a lot of variability and strategy each time you play.

Cóatl is the first design from Pascale Brassard and Etienne Dubois-Roy. We chatted with them about their process and experience turning the game into a reality.



“For quite some time, we had in mind to develop a board game together as a hobby, instead of watching TV. Before C6atl, we had a few ideas but nothing that brought enough motivation to really sit together with the intent of designing a board game. C6atl was really our first board game design,” explained Brassard.

One of the attractive elements in the game are the thick, chunky serpent segments that players acquire to build their C6atls. For Brassard and Dubois-Roy, the idea of constructing tactile designs drove their initial concepts.

“The very first idea for C6atl was to “build snakes in front of us, with different parts that we would assemble”. As soon as this idea was shared to Etienne, he added the idea that some cards could give direction on how to build the snakes, with color patterns. The components were not developed yet, but were already part of the idea.”



Like most prototypes, C6atl went through many different iterations before ending on the design that hit the table. During the process, the design team experimented with many components before landing on the final design.

“Before taking time to make a 3D model of the different snake parts, we rapidly sketched some cards and try the game mechanics with Lego blocks that we lined up,” remembered Brassard.

“We were instantly very excited about the game play. The potential of the game seemed very high to us and we were really motivated about pursuing the design. I developed a flat body part and 3D printed a few of them to get the feel of the parts moving together. The first iteration could only fit together on one side (not reversible). The second iteration was improved by

giving the 3D snake shape and by modifying the end so that it would fit on both sides.”



The design team wanted to create components that not only looked good, but move and slither like a snake on the table. Trust me, it’s impossible not to play with the C6atls you create in between your turns.

“However early on, the movement of the snake was a little too limited. Also, at this time, the Aztec theme was not developed yet, so snakes were not feathered and the head and tail were really simple. The last iteration implemented the feathers, the QuetzalCóatl head and tail, and the angle of rotation allowed between two parts was increased to obtain this great wavy movement.”



Once the theme had been settled, it was really important to both Brassard and Dubois-Roy to research the subject and make sure all of the elements were both respectful and accurate.

“Etienne has a Master’s Degree in history, so the accuracy of the historical background is really important to him. All the elements of the game have been developed to fit with the Aztec culture,” said Brassard.

“A fun anecdote about Cóatl is how we came up with the name of the game. We were developing the game around snakes and were looking for its title, so that it would fit in French and English. I tried to find words in the lexical field of “snake” and found ‘Asclepios’. Etienne thought it was not a good match, thinking this god may be sometimes represented with a snake, but it’s not so much related to the theme. However, this made him think about what snake-god it could be, and QuetzalCóatl immediately came to his mind. His face illuminated and I instantly shared his enthusiasm. We were so happy to find the theme and the name of the game, we went through a second super-motivated design phase, after a few months. A lot of features of the game were added because we wanted to stick to the theme, and a lot of features were refined for the same purpose.”

The first-time design team worked well together, but with any creative project there are bumps along the road that must be overcome. For Brassard and Dupuis-Roy, having too many ideas actually complicated the process.



“One of the biggest challenges working on the game itself was to focus on its main elements. It’s easy to add features, cards, special actions, bonuses and by-pass solutions for an identified problem. But then the game loses its core and the fun is dissolved with useless distractions. We needed to keep it as simple as possible, focusing on what the core of the game really is,” said Brassard.

Aside from the design itself, the realities of everyday life can get in the way of working on a project. Most designers are not able to work full-time at their craft, and it forces them to make time for the creative process.

“Another big challenge when working on the project was conciliating our work, our three-kid-family and all the different events to promote our game. Events are often during weekends and we needed to find someone to take care of our kids, while they were complaining that we were always leaving.”

When you first set out to design a game, it can be tempting to try and create a complex masterpiece, like a young author trying to write the great American novel on their first attempt. The team behind Cóatl had a different approach.



“Cóatl is simple, yet beautiful with its unique material. Its audience is almost everybody. Our biggest hope is that it becomes a real hit for casual players and families and a great filler for gamers. The strategy is easy to understand and fun to play.”

Brassard and Dupuis-Roy found one of the most rewarding elements of the process was being able to complete it together.

“Being two in this adventure was a real advantage. We could challenge and bolster our partner’s idea a lot faster than what can be done alone. It was also very beneficial to have another person to up the keep the pace and motivation.”

Cóatl is now available at your friendly local game store and on [Tabletopia](#).



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