The Strategy Game Designer's Cheatsheet

Golden Rules

- Obvious choices should not be choices
- Players should understand the game mechanics
- Clear feedback on choices is required
- Give the player less variables, more choices
- Don't play known outcomes
- Offer risk-versus-reward type decisions.
- Don't offer systems that the player does not interact with

Strategic Scales

- Offense VS. Defense
  - Does your game play well either way or is it weighted towards one side?
  - Is playing defensively a viable option?
  - If defense is not a viable option, consider removing it.
- Strategy VS. Luck
  - Luck and strategy are opposites.
  - Give choices between a high-risk and low-risk.
  - Give choices between using a luck element and not using it at all.
  - There is no strategy in subjecting all players to a single luck element in which there is no decision making.
- Light VS. Heavy
- Many VS. Few
- Slow VS. Fast
- Power VS. Speed
- Power VS. Mobility
- Efficiency VS. Volume
- Diversity VS. Homogeny (Generalization VS. Specialization)

Ways To Play

- Inclusive Play - All players remain in the game until it ends.
- Exclusive Play - Individual players drop out of the game.
- Cooperative Play
  - Against the computer
  - Against the clock
  - With a common goal
- Competitive Play
  - Free-for-all
  - Teams and Alliances (either temporary or permanent)
  - Against AI players and/or human players

Considerations

- Options with drawbacks and benefits
  - There need not always be a "right" answer, but always clear consequences.
  - Consider making the keys to victory a hindrance during game play.
- Feedback Loops
  - Positive Feedback - Reward winners, punish losers. Speeds up the game.
- Visibility
  - Knowledge of the playing field
  - Knowledge of other players and their resources
  - Knowledge about the future play or rules of the game itself.
  - Randomized goals, game phases, or expectations of game play.
- Emergent Strategies
  - Is there only one right way to play or are there several viable approaches?
  - Strategies emerge when there are interactions between game components.
  - Do the components of the game only do one thing?
  - How can different parts of the game interact with each other in combinations?
- Keep or Play?
  - Consider adding reasons to not play resources immediately.
  - Penalty or a reward for holding on to something?
  - Resources may be best played at a specific time
- Reward strategic play, Punish thoughtlessness.

Ways To Win

- Elimination - Eliminate, destroy, move, or remove opponents, obstacles, targets, or non-playing characters. Consider a percentage of the whole.
- Acquisition - Acquire something or a certain level of something: money, resources, cards, tokens, opponents, or items on map.
- Points - "Points" are an abstract representation of value. Points can be awarded for anything. Points can be adjusted if the game is unbalanced.
- Physical Goal - Get to a location or several locations. (A "race").
- Abstinence - Win by not doing something or by doing something efficiently.
- Riddance - Get rid of something or "go out".
- Spacial Dominance - Possess or control an amount of physical area on a map.
- Key Target - Remove, destroy, create, acquire, or convert a key target or targets. Key targets can be per-game, per-player, or inter-player.
- Diplomacy - Win by default (lack of other players), resignation of opponents, declaration of a draw or tie, voting for a winner, or periodically voting for a loser.
- Time - Win by being the fastest or first.
- Combinations - Complete multiple simultaneous victory conditions.
- Variable - Complete one of several different victory conditions.

Ways To End

- Elimination - Remove all players or competitive forces from the game.
- Acquisition - A specific number or percentage of items or resources have been collected.
- Points - Score a number of points.
- Physical Goal - One or more players reach a specific physical goal or all players have reached the goal.
- Riddance - Get rid of something or "go out".
- Spacial Endings - All space or a specific portion of space is used up, controlled, or owned by players in general or by a specific player.
- Key Target - Capture, destroy, or collect specific target(s).
- Diplomacy - Players decide when the game is over: popular vote for a winner, a resignation, or a decision to draw or tie.
- Combinations ("And" Endings) - Meet two or more ending conditions.
- Variable ("Or" Endings) - Allow any number of multiple ending conditions.
- Exhaustion - Exhaust an available resource or all resources combined.
- Inability to Play - The game ends when one or all players cannot make a legal play.
- Time - A time limit expires.
- Random - Randomly determined before the game starts.