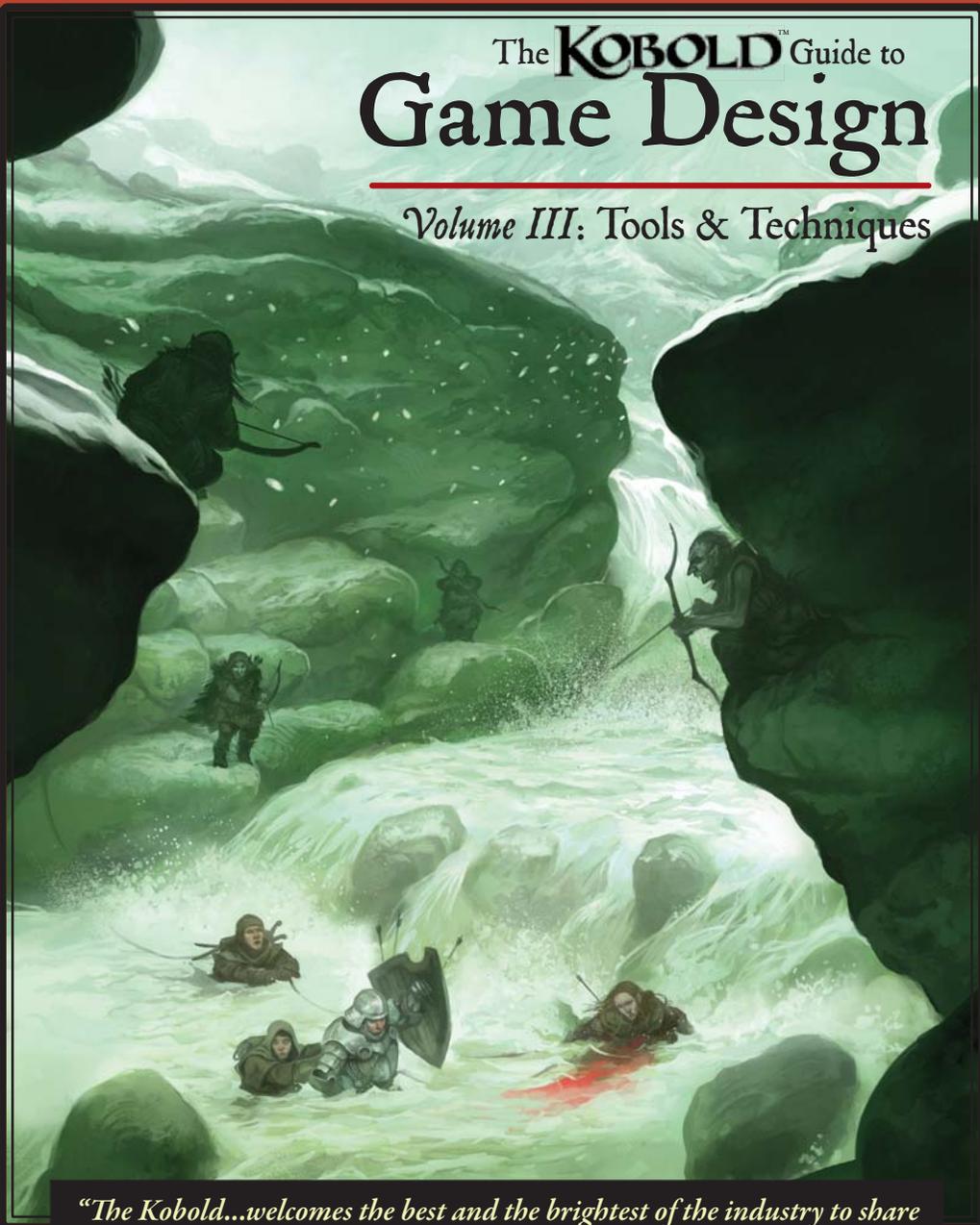


OPEN DESIGN™ presents

The **KOBOLD**™ Guide to Game Design

Volume III: Tools & Techniques



“The Kobold...welcomes the best and the brightest of the industry to share their knowledge of game design.” Jeff Grubb, FORGOTTEN REALMS designer

by Wolfgang Baur, Monte Cook,
Ed Greenwood, Rob Heinsoo, and Colin McComb

Contents

Foreword	v
1. What is Design? <i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	1
2. Designing RPGs: Computer and Tabletop <i>by Colin McComb</i>	13
3. The Process of Creative Thought <i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	18
4. Creative Mania & Design Despair <i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	24
5. Seize the Hook <i>by Rob Heinsoo</i>	29
6. Basic Combat Systems for Tabletop Games <i>by Colin McComb</i>	41
7. Crafting a Dastardly Plot <i>by Ed Greenwood</i>	51
8. Location as a Fulcrum for Superior Design <i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	58
9. Myths & Realities of Game Balance <i>by Monte Cook</i>	64
10. Buckets in the Sandbox: Non-Linear and Event-Driven Design <i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	69

11. Collaboration and Design	76
<i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	
12. Failure and Recovery	82
<i>by Wolfgang Baur</i>	
Contributor Biographies	86

Foreword

Chimeras

The design of roleplaying games is a relatively new art as these things are measured, and it is one founded on a fundamental tension.

Most games are creatures entirely of rules: turns, sequence, resources, playing pieces, luck and probability, tactics. In extreme cases, such designs are matters of pure geometry and skill, such as chess or go. One mind is pitted against another, and a victory determined.

Roleplaying games (RPGs) sort of mess up that neat definition of game design. No one “wins.” RPGs are entertainments, closer to films and novels than to chess or go. A roleplaying game is, in fact, a chimera of rules elements and story elements, with both necessary to its character.

In this third volume of the **KOBOLD GUIDE TO GAME DESIGN**, we hear from masters of both rules and story, and examine the space in between. What makes a basic game tick? What were the ground rules and foundational decisions of the newest edition of **DUNGEONS & DRAGONS**?

More than that, this volume digs at the intersection of the two pillars of roleplaying design. When we add story elements to our games of pure tactics and mechanics, that matter of Gygaxian invention when wargaming met the freeform story play of David Wesely and Dave Arneson’s Braunstein—well, what then? How does one design mechanics for something as liquid and protean as story? How can rules be made to jump out of cases and be tools for creative play without victory conditions?

Frankly, what works in story, and what works in rules? Good RPG designers can do both, though most specialize in one pillar or the other.

The answers are here, from *New York Times*-bestselling author Ed Greenwood, from **FOURTH EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** lead design Rob Heinsoo, from **THIRD EDITION DUNGEONS & DRAGONS** lead designer Monte Cook, and from **PLANESCAPE: TORMENT** video game designer Colin McComb, as well as from yours truly. Let’s open up the seamy underbelly of this strange beast, neither book nor game, and yet popular for going on 40 years now.

Wolfgang Baur
April, 2010

1

What is Design?

Wolfgang Baur

The most obvious question when it comes time to think about game design is not, as you might expect, “What is design?”

The question I get most often is how to design, in particular how to approach the mathematical and mechanical elements of design. Some of that is addressed elsewhere in this volume.

The second most-common questions have to do with how to go about pitching design to a publisher, how to refine and playtest a failed design, and so forth. Prior volumes of the **KOBOLD Guides to Game Design** have addressed the practical elements.

To my mind, the first question—defining game design—is maybe less practical but is clearly more important to understanding what it means to design well and what it means to create novelty, excite gamers, and publish a breakthrough game or setting. If the work you do on design is entirely a matter of mechanical refinement, pitching, and playtest, you can be a successful game designer. You can be even more successful if you think about the underlying nature of design. I might go so far as to say that newcomers wonder about how, but veterans dwell on what and why, especially in those cases where the why seems to be changing as gaming culture changes.

So, I’ve come back to the question of what constitutes design more and more over the last year. I pretend to no particularly amazing insight into the universal