

SKULL

INTERVIEW



GAME
DESIGNER



ILLUSTRATOR



TOM VURCHEV



What are your thoughts on this new pink edition?

Hello gentlemen, how are you?

H: Hi Hannah, thanks for the question. I will answer that... whatever is fine, is fine.

And you... Is it Thomas or Tom?

T: As I'm super smart I thought I would take a nickname; I'm known as Tom. But my birth name is Thomas, you can guess how easy it is to remain incognito.

Hello!

Can you introduce yourselves, please?

H: My name is Hervé Marly, and I'm a game designer thanks to SAJ (Game Designers Association). My parents wanted me to become a banker, but they finally accepted the professional path I had chosen for myself when my mom saw "Small Murders and Miscellaneous Facts" (a game that was never translated in English) in a store. I was so proud! Previously, I worked as a creative and graphic designer in advertising. But I have always been a gamer. I was lucky to befriend Bruno Faidutti (Citadels game designer, among others). He was the one to open the doors for me in the game industry, and Philippe des Pallières, (with whom I co-created The Werewolves of Millers Hollow), gave me the opportunity to establish myself up as a game designer for good.

T: As for me, I landed in the game world during the prehistoric time of modern games, with the self-publishing of "Jungle Speed" in the 90s, an ancient millennium when I stumbled upon an unknown gentleman at the time, Marc Nunes. Initially, I was a graphic designer, and I resumed that occupation to some degree with Skull, among others.

T: It looks like a new game compared to the one worn out at the bar. It has a nice shine! I'm very pleased; it needed to be reworked. I boosted the colors of the box cover and cards. The previous version was very dark.

H: The box had to be revamped, without question. We dared go for a pinkish color. Rethinking on the player mats proved worthwhile; previously, both sides were too similar, and harder to distinguish one from the other.

How was the Skull project born? What's the origin story of the game?

H: The idea for Skull came to me in 2002 when I was playing quite heavily the poker version of "Dealer's Choice" with Bruno Faidutti and his gang. I wanted to design a game that provides the sensations of poker, with simple rules, little equipment, and without betting money. And above all, I wanted a game where people talk, influence each other, and brainwash their opponents. "Blah blah blah... Don't do this... Don't do that... Don't listen to them; they're manipulating you... Yeap, you can flip my disc, but I'm warning you, it's a skull, but go ahead do it, do it... I told you so!" etc. What a joy! That's something you can't do when playing poker.

T: You weren't there when Skull started because...

Because I'm young!

T: Ha, ha, yes... It so happens that I wasn't involved in the game's artwork in 2011 either, which was then titled Skull & Roses. Each player played a biker gang. The players had identical skulls and roses but in different colors, and each back had a distinct biker tattoo.





H: Developing Skull took me a lot longer than I thought it would! Years... (But at the time, I had a “real” job, and designing the Werewolves of Millers Hollow with Philippe des Pallières was also time-consuming). My friends tested many prototypes that weren’t working; Mexican Duel, Russian Roulette, Moldavian Roulette, etc. I felt so foolish! (The current rule is v. 8.3!) So, for a long time, with all the setbacks, it was like taking two steps forward and one step back before I was able to finalize the rules, removing all but the essentials.

How did you come to meet Hervé and land on the project, Tom?

T: I met Hervé before he became a designer, when Bruno (Faidutti) used to organize his monthly party games and invited his friends to dinner. He makes great food, by the way! We used to test the new games of the month (might as well tell you that’s impossible today), and Hervé was a bit like a lead tester for Bruno. So I played with him a lot.

H: My Moldovan Roulette prototype had definitely caught Croc’s attention (the Claustrophobia game designer, former Space Cowboy and Asmodee Elder member) in 2010 during an event outside the Game Festival in Cannes. After a Homeric discussion, I agreed to let Philippe des Pallières publish my game with Lui-Même, his publishing company. And I never regretted doing so. Thanks to Philippe (who had this idea while riding my motorcycle), we baptized the game Skull and Roses, anchored in a somewhat rock’n’roll world of bikers. But now the game is simply titled Skull.

The game is now immersed in a universe inspired by the Mexican “Dia de los Muertos,” thanks to the work of Philippe des Pallières and the exceptional illustration talent of Tom Vuarchex. I instantly loved Tom’s first drafts.

Why did you choose this theme, Tom?

T: The Day of the Dead theme, which I really liked, was not well known in France in 2013, unlike the United States. So we started with the Mexican skull, which immediately appealed to Philippe (des Pallières). I heavily researched the various death universes, how different cultures used to ornament their skulls, and the primitive theme. It speaks to everyone. It never goes out of fashion in terms of illustrations.

Philippe told me we had to make the contents indispensable because people make this type of game their own and adapt it, like the Werewolves of Millers Hollow. We wanted people to forget the old graphics. I was apprehensive at the beginning... With its biker theme, Skulls and Roses appealed



to “geeks.”

Each symbol means something.

T: And unlike the other versions, I wanted each set to have its “tribe.” Asia, Africa, Celts, Oceania, Voodoo, Mexican. On each back, the motif also means something. For example, the Celtic skull symbolizes protection against the enemy. Well, since then, I learned that the representation of Vikings wearing horns was a romanticized vision. But who cares? It speaks to everybody. Sometimes, I adapted History a bit to my needs. (LOL) Finding flowers was the hardest part. It doesn’t always work, but the thistle works well with the Celts, for example.

When the new version was released, even though the geeks missed the “bikers” aspect, they nevertheless loved it! Also, many players loved that the game was less “gendered.” It made me feel good because I wasn’t sure of myself.

Hervé, do you have anecdotes you would like to share with us about Skull?

H: I participated anonymously in a game of Skull during a session at “Paris Est Ludique.” I was distraught when I saw the first player start resolving the challenge without flipping his discs first! He told me it wasn’t necessary. I had to explain that the rule stated that you must always begin with your discs. But as we couldn’t find the rulebook, I ended up telling him that I was the game designer. This rule is one of the fundamentals of Skull. I had to demonstrate that the principle of bluffing relied on that! Which he only admitted reluctantly. My ego as a designer suffered a blow!



How many times a year, month, day, hour do you play Skull?

H: I'm always happy to play when someone asks me to. How many times a year? Not enough for my taste. Since the first prototypes of Skull, I have probably played more than 300 times.

T: I always enjoy playing the game, but I'm not too good at it!

Any advice to Skull players?

H: With a bit of gaming experience, one can anticipate that there are strategies to optimize the chances of winning at Skull. I will not go into details; the experienced players will understand what I'm saying.

Here are the seven commandments aimed at players who already know the rules.

1 Choose the first disk you put down according to your position in the turn.

2 If possible, put several discs on your mat; it is a significant advantage.

3 Adapt your strategy according to the number of remaining players. You must not play the same way at the game's beginning or end.

4 Make sure to keep more discs than the other players. But that shouldn't stop you from taking the risk of opening the bid. It's a bit unwise to lose with 4 discs still in hand.

The first player has a significant positional advantage. Even so more at the end of the game.

5 They are the one who can define the rest of the round. So it is sometimes vital to be the first player, even if it means taking the risk of losing a challenge to acquire that position.

6 If possible, try not to reveal all of your discs (if you have placed them all on your mat, it is possible that during the completion of a challenge, they will all be flipped).

7 As long as no one has won a challenge, play it safe. But you must take risks if a player has won their first challenge. Losing a disc is less severe than losing the game.

Important: There is always an irreducible part of good or bad luck!

T: Do not play against Hervé Marly, he is a very, very good player!

Is there anything else you would like to add?

H: One of the most powerful weapons in the game is rhetoric. Use it ad nauseam! Don't stop talking. Overwhelm your opponents with words. You can even tell the truth!

And first and foremost, have fun!

T: I have nothing to add.

A minute later and after two swigs of Breizh cola

T: On second thought, I have something to add.

Yes, Tom?

T: We have something of great importance to share! (LOL)

Well, in fact, in the beginning, we tried with Philippe (des Pallières) to put a voodoo skull on the box cover, and we went to various stores to show it. Everybody told us, "Great cover if you don't want to sell the game!" It was too scary!

By the way, what store is your favourite?

T: I love malls!

Thank you, Tom!



Thank you for your time, gentlemen!

