

Megagames 101: What to Expect

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19. June 2026

You've heard about Megagames. They're big, right? Like a big board game? Maybe a big TTRPG. Should you try a Megagame?

The answer is simple: yes.

I know you'll be wary. After all, you'll be investing a whole Saturday of your precious weekend and a fair dollop of money. That's even if you can find one near you.

The answer is still yes.

So... what is a Megagame?

The short answer is that nobody agrees.

The slightly longer answer is that a Megagame is an event where dozens, sometimes hundreds, of players gather together to take part in a shared simulation. That simulation might be a war, a political crisis, the collapse of civilisation, a zombie outbreak, the management of a space empire, or something else entirely.

If you're hoping for something more precise than that, I'm afraid you're out of luck.

A Megagame isn't really a board game. It isn't really a roleplaying game. It isn't really a wargame. It's a bit of all three, mixed together and scaled up until there are so many people involved that nobody quite knows what's going to happen next.

That's the point.

What will I find at the Megagame?

I can't answer that definitively, but then you know enough to understand why. Every Megagame is different. Each designer takes a real or imagined world and builds a model of the important things happening within it. The players then step into that world and make decisions as the people who live there.

There'll be teams sitting around tables, each representing some part of the game world. In a historical game these might be nations. In a fantasy game they might be kingdoms. In a science-fiction game they could be planets, corporations or alien species. Most Megagames begin with a situation that needs to be dealt with. Sometimes it is a military threat. Sometimes a political crisis. Sometimes an economic collapse, a zombie outbreak or the arrival of hostile aliens. Whatever form it takes, there is usually a crisis facing the players.

The designer's job is to create that world and model the important parts of it. The players' job is to decide what to do about the crisis.



Of course, life is never that simple. Different teams will have different objectives, different information and different ideas about what should happen next. One nation may want negotiation. Another may prefer military action. Scientists may want more time to investigate. Politicians may need immediate answers. Businesses may worry about the economy while the military worries about security.

This is why Megagames often contain elements that look familiar from other types of games. You might see military forces moving around a map under the direction of generals, looking rather like a wargame. You might see politicians negotiating treaties and alliances, looking rather like a roleplaying game. You might see resources represented by tokens, tracks or spreadsheets, helping players keep track of money, supplies, public opinion or scientific progress.

None of these mechanisms are really the point. They exist because they help represent the pressures and constraints of the world. The interesting part is what happens when dozens of intelligent people, each with their own priorities, try to deal with the same crisis at the same time.

The designer creates the situation. The players create the story.

But why "Mega"? Scale. The game is large enough that nobody can possibly know everything that is happening. Information is incomplete. Rumours spread. Plans collide. The famous "fog of war" emerges naturally. That's what makes a Megagame feel different.

What does it actually feel like?

Imagine walking into a room full of sixty strangers where teams are huddled around maps, briefing papers and spreadsheets. Conversations are happening everywhere. Somebody is trying to negotiate an alliance. Somebody else is trying to stop a war. Somewhere across the room a carefully crafted plan is already going wrong. Generals are hassling for reinforcements.

Everybody is busy. Everybody is talking. Everybody thinks they understand the situation. Most of them are wrong. That's normal.

For the next several hours you'll make plans, negotiate deals, send messages, attend meetings, react to crises and occasionally wonder how everything went so wrong.

Then you'll look across the room and realise that everyone else is having exactly the same experience.

What if I'm shy?

This is a common question I hear. Many people look at photographs of Megagames and see crowded rooms, animated discussions and dozens of strangers. Many wonder whether they've made a terrible mistake. The short answer is no.

Your average player tends to be thoughtful, curious and interested in things like strategy, history, politics, science fiction or complex systems. These are not always hobbies famous for attracting the loudest people in the room. More importantly, understanding yourself is an advantage. Some players gain energy from walking up to strangers, negotiating deals and making dramatic speeches. Others prefer analysing information, spotting patterns, planning strategy or quietly building relationships with a smaller number of people.



Both approaches can be extremely effective. A Megagame team usually needs communicators, planners, organisers, analysts, diplomats and decision-makers. Not everyone needs to stand on a chair and address the crowd. One of the pleasures of a Megagame is discovering how your natural strengths contribute to the team's success.

If you're worried about exposing your abilities to a room full of strangers, remember this: everyone else is trying to work out what they're doing too. Nobody is judging you as closely as you imagine. They're far too busy dealing with their own problems.

Do I need special skills?

No.

Nor do you need a funny voice, roleplaying experience, acting experience, a history degree or a background in wargaming. Of course, if you have any of those things, you'll probably find them useful. Some players love getting into character. Others spend the day treating the game as a giant strategy puzzle. Both approaches work perfectly well.

If your role says you're the Prime Minister, you aren't trying to perform an accurate impersonation. You simply need to make decisions as you think the Prime Minister would.

The briefing tells you what you're trying to achieve. The rules help you work out how to achieve it.

And if you want to do something the rules don't quite cover? Talk to Control. That's the team of facilitators running the game. Helping players attempt unexpected things is part of their job.

Do I need to know the rules beforehand?

Yes and no.

Most Megagames are designed with newcomers in mind. You'll receive a briefing before the game begins and there will be organisers available throughout the day to answer questions.

It certainly helps to read the briefing and rules beforehand, but let's be realistic. Many people arrive having done less preparation than they intended. Nobody expects you to memorise everything in a rulebook. You'll learn quickly on the day.



Will I be any good at it?

Almost certainly not. At least not at first. The good news is that nobody else is any good at it either. The scale of a Megagame means that information is always incomplete, plans rarely survive contact with reality and events move faster than any individual can fully understand. This is normal.

A successful first Megagame is not one where everything goes according to plan. It's one where you throw yourself into the experience and discover afterwards that the story everyone remembers is the disaster you accidentally helped create.

OK, so how do I succeed?

First, ask yourself a question.

What do you actually mean by "succeed"? It's important to remember that Megagames aren't zero-sum. Everybody can win. Everybody can lose.

You will probably start the day with objectives that look daunting and no clear idea how you're supposed to achieve them. That's normal.

Talk to your teammates. Talk to other teams. Find out what people want. Find out what they're planning. Find out what they're worried about. Gradually you'll start to understand your role, your opportunities and your problems. Then somebody will do something unexpected. You'll adapt. Then somebody else will do something unexpected. You'll adapt again. A Megagame isn't usually about finding the perfect plan. It's about making the best decisions you can in a situation that keeps changing.

A friend once gave me some Megagame advice: "If you're not talking, you're probably wasting time."

That's a slight exaggeration, but only a slight one. Go and speak to people. Ask questions. Explore possibilities. Just remember to drink some water occasionally.

What makes Megagames special?

Most games present a challenge designed by the author. Megagames present a situation. The interesting part is what the players do with it.

No organiser knows exactly how the day will unfold. They may have spent months researching history or lovingly creating an imagined world, but once the game begins the players take over. No player knows exactly how the day will unfold either.

The result is a unique shared experience that exists only for that group of people on that day. Ask ten players what happened during a Megagame and you'll often get ten different stories. They're all true.

Interested in the deeper theory?

Of course, nothing is ever quite that simple.

When I said that nobody agrees what a Megagame is, I wasn't entirely joking. If you gather ten Megagamers in a room and ask for a definition, you'll probably get twelve answers. I've spent rather more time thinking about this than is probably healthy.

My own view is that Megagames belong to a broader family called Social Simulation Games – games that use large numbers of players interacting to create situations that couldn't be scripted in advance. If that sounds interesting, I've written quite a lot about it elsewhere. If it sounds suspiciously like homework, don't worry. You don't need any of it to enjoy a Megagame.

What should I bring?

An open mind. A willingness to work with others, to talk to strangers and to make decisions with incomplete information. You'll need lunch. History, politics and alien invasions have an unfortunate tendency to continue through lunchtime. Also bring standard things like pen and paper but mainly bring just buckets of enthusiasm.

So, should I try one?

If you enjoy strategy, problem-solving, teamwork, negotiation, politics, history, science fiction, roleplaying, board games or simply fresh experiences, then yes. Absolutely yes.

Your first Megagame will be confusing. You will probably miss important information. You will probably spend part of the day wondering what is happening.

Then the day will end, everyone will gather for the debrief and you'll hear the full story for the first time. Your mind will be whirling and you absolutely will not know what happened. You'll be exhausted and thoroughly certain that you want to sign up for the next one.

That's usually the moment when people decide they want to come back. You'll be hooked as a Megagamer.

