

Last Man Standing: Risk and Elimination in Social Game Play

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ABSTRACT

This paper draws upon elements of contemporary board game design with a view to establishing ways in which cross-pollination between game media may foster innovative interpersonal mechanics. The ways in which loss is implemented in board game design are discussed and contrasted with the lack of genuine losing conditions in the majority of contemporary videogames. Examples are drawn of tabletop game mechanics which place a particular emphasis upon the interaction of players in order to bring about conflicts which highlight the antisocial nature of play as it occurs within the confines of Huizinga's magic circle [16]. Finally, it is argued that the combination of social negotiation and elimination commonly seen in board game design is one that holds particular potential for digital implementation, suggesting that virtual environments laden with a greater degree of social risk might invigorate the field of videogame design.

General Terms

Design, Human Factors.

Keywords

Digital games, board games, Game mechanics, loss, conflict.

1. INTRODUCTION

The suggestion that the field of videogame design is in a state of increasing stagnation is a familiar one and, indeed, has been for a number of years. As early as 1998 Greg Costikyan was bemoaning the "paucity of innovation in a field that was once known for originality and creativity". [7] The repetitive

retheming of familiar mechanics has become a staple for the videogame industry and one which has seen some commentators declare that the form has reached a point of maturation beyond which lie few, if any, innovative possibilities. [38] However, in his oft-cited paper which argues the relevance of the broader field of non-electronic gaming to videogame design, Costikyan suggests that a part of the problem lies in the blinkered approach taken by designers and developers whose experience of other forms of gaming may be limited.

One area where Costikyan identifies a growing level of creativity is that of contemporary board games, though, as he caustically reminds us, this innovation stems not from US - "Hasbro is fat and happy and basically doesn't give a fuck about innovation" - but from smaller publishers in Europe, particularly Germany. Contrasting the repackaged roll and move mechanics which have become synonymous with mass-market board games, an identifiable style of game design has emerged which mitigates the role of chance and places emphasis on simple rules, short playing time and social interaction between players through interpersonal mechanics such as auctions, trade and negotiation. These individuating characteristics have become associated with a genre now broadly referred to as Eurogames. Another area of board game design which Costikyan claims might also arouse the interest of online game developers is that of diplomatic games, epitomised by Alan Calhammer's classic game of negotiation, *Diplomacy*. [4] Although a strategic game, the central innovation of *Diplomacy* is that it is a game where the mechanics are somewhat secondary to the social mastery of a game which "depends utterly on negotiation and diplomacy" [7]. In both of these genres, there is a strong emphasis on the social interaction brought about by the mechanics of the game which are usually relatively simple and primarily designed to stimulate dynamic personal interactions.

Not surprisingly, those within the academic field of game studies have largely overlooked board games, perhaps due to the inaccurate perception of the genre as a niche in decline. However, whilst the attention of most scholars has been

focused upon the narrative progression of single player games and the social petri dishes of virtual worlds, the field of board games has undergone a signification transformation. Whilst still undoubtedly a niche hobby, the innovative influence of European design is being felt in the US, with designers such as Christian Peterson [30-32], Richard Borg [1; 2] and Kevin Wilson [46; 47] developing games which blend the elegant mechanics of Eurogames with the rich themes and direct conflict of US style designs. Whilst the relevance of this shift to digital game designers might not be immediately apparent, as Zagal et al. [51] note, the study of non-digital games may prove particularly fruitful for those wishing to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between mechanics and gameplay since the former are rendered significantly more transparent and accessible in the analogue world of cards, dice and meeple.¹ As my broader research project has largely been concerned with precisely this relationship between game mechanics and the social interactions which emerge from them [48; 49], this transparency combined with the social intimacy of tabletop games has proven of particular interest.

In this paper I want to explore further Costikyan's suggestion that we look closer at the design elements of board games by focusing on a couple of areas of particular interest. Firstly, I discuss the ways in which loss is implemented in board game design, contrasting this with the lack of genuine losing conditions in the majority of contemporary videogames. Secondly, I draw upon examples of tabletop game mechanics which place a particular emphasis upon the interaction of players in order to bring about multilogues² which highlight the antisocial nature of play as it occurs within the confines of Huizinga's magic circle. [16] Finally, I argue that the combination of social negotiation and elimination commonly seen in board game design, is one that holds particular potential for digital implementation as the communication tools available to designers become more efficient, suggesting that the implementation of environments laden with a greater degree of social risk might invigorate a field in which "the horizons...appear to be in a long contraction". [26]

2. THE IMMUTABLE LOSS

To dare, to take risks, to bear uncertainty, to endure tension – these are the essence of the play spirit. [16]

In questioning a strictly ludological approach to game studies, Janet Murray has noted that an emphasis on rule

structures as the predominant characteristic in games might lead to a tendency to ignore some of the unique elements which make contested play so engaging. [27] Amongst the elements Murray suggests might elude the formalist observer, are both winning and losing as player conditions that can be seen as distinctive of the game experience. Indeed, the lack of recognition of such an integral part of the traditional game model has allowed scholars to group games of emergence with those of progression in a way that suggests a somewhat superficial view of those elements which make multiplayer games such a distinct cultural artefact.³

Before the advent of solitary digital play, the valorisation of the efforts of one player over another which lead to an irreversible winning and losing condition formed an integral part of critical understandings of games [49]. Although Jonas Heide Smith has effectively questioned the assumption that players are always seeking to maximise the potential for victory in gameplay [40], still, there are few circumstances in which players might *voluntarily* lose a contested game.⁴ When the situation in a chess game is such that one player can clearly see that they are in a losing position and victory appears impossible, they will often voluntarily resign from play of the game. When adult players introduce young children to games they will sometimes purposely implement inefficient strategies to allow the child the pleasure of a win. By and large, though, players play a contest game with the goal of winning. Indeed, the traditional notion of the game hinges on the agreement that players will do their best to optimise their chances of victory and to avoid a loss. To ignore this imperative (the prelusory goal) is to become what Bernard Suits terms a 'trifler':

A trifler at chess is a quasi-player of the game who conforms to the rules of the game but whose moves, though all legal, are not directed to achieving checkmate. [42]

The winning condition of a game then, acts as a motivation to engage with the game mechanics and is a vital facet of the circumscribed nature of contested play. On the other hand, it is a peculiarity of gameplay (outside of sport) that the imperative to win is essential in creating the goal of play but often insignificant in terms of consequence. Winning is valorisation, yet too much emphasis on valorisation disrupts the spirit of play. As designer Reiner Knizia explains

¹ The term Meeple ("My People") refers to the player tokens in boardgames and stems from the humanoid appearance of the various labourers in the popular tile-laying game Carcassonne [50].

² A term used by simulation designer Richard Duke to describe the interaction of three or more players in a game environment. [13]

³ The terms 'progression' and 'emergence' are taken from the work of Jesper Juul who describes these two differing forms of gameplay in his book, *Half-Real: Video Games between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds*. [18]

⁴ Heide Smith's suggestion that players may have "reasons for losing a certain game on purpose" perhaps marks the division between the game and the playable artefact as a matter of player attitude over formal properties.

succinctly, "[we] all thrive to win - even though winning as such is utterly unimportant. It is the objective, the aspiration that counts". [24] Despite this apparent contradiction, as Juul points out, there needs to be *some* emotional attachment to the outcome of the game. Players are expected to acknowledge that winning is a positive outcome and losing a negative one. [18]

If we look to board games, we can see three principal ways in which the results of player effort are quantified: through performance measurement, direct defeat or elimination. Scoring, an abstract measurement derived from the mechanics of a game, is perhaps the most common method of establishing the relative merit of a player's performance in a multiplayer game. In such games, obtaining the highest score *is* the preludery goal of the game towards which players engage their faculties. From a social perspective scoring has a significant advantage over eliminative gameplay in that it prolongs the engagement of all players until the cessation of play. In contemporary Eurogames which emphasise this socially conducive aspect of interpersonal play, the use of scoring, embodied by the ubiquitous *Kramerleiste*⁵, ensures that all players are involved in the outcome of the game until the moment of conclusion⁶. In the strategic board game *Puerto Rico* [35] for example, there are a number of ways to acquire victory points (shipping goods, building construction etc.) – but only one way to win, by the accumulation of these points. The “series of interesting decisions” [33] which Sid Meier considers so vital to sedentary gameplay involve the development of strategies and tactics to maximise score and hinder the similar efforts of contesting players. The result of this is an environment which, dependant upon the degree of direct conflict inherent in the game, can be characterised as more competitive than contested. The game ending is brought about by temporal limits, cumulative score, or by an arbitrary conclusion such as a fixed number of rounds. A summation of scores indicates the victor and the relative performance of the other players. In short, scoring is a convivial way to make sure all players are fully involved in the play of the game. In this way, although still involving the irreversible loss inherent in all contested play, the outcome of the game is a measurement of performance which mirrors that of progressive play where performance may, explicitly or otherwise, be measured by the degree of movement through the game world. Consequently, as Heide Smith notes, this structure allows players to valorise their own efforts independently of others in what he terms “personal victory”. [40]

⁵ Translated as ‘The Kramer track’, a scoring track which runs around the outside of the play area, first implemented by Wolfgang Kramer in *Das Große Unternehmen Erdgas*. [21] (Eggert [14] identifies the first use in Kramer’s *Heimlich und Co* [22]. however, other sources place the development slightly earlier.

⁶ This tension is amplified in games where scores are hidden. See *Euphrates & Tigris* [20]

A more emotively potent form of loss, and one in which it is hard to imagine a sense of personal victory, is that of direct defeat. Games which involve a direct defeat are those wherein the winning and, by inference, losing conditions of the game are embedded in the ludic structure of the game itself. Such games invariably involve a much higher degree of direct conflict and usually involve only two players whose efforts are entirely devoted to the defeat of the other player. An obvious example of these are to be found in wargames. Since there are two players in the majority of wargames and the victory conditions require one player to defeat the other, the game is over when this has occurred and one player is acknowledged as the victor. Consequently, the defeated player has lost the game. The result in such a game can be quantified⁷ but is more commonly perceived as casting one player in the role of winner and the other as loser. Once again, however, this form still involves the players throughout the entire play of the game. When the winning (and losing) conditions of the game are met, the game is over. The in-game ‘death’ of individual units may be suggested by the thematic overlay of the game structure however the player continues to have agency in the game world. As with scored games, the moment of valorisation occurs at the shared cessation of gameplay and confirms the outcome of play.

The extension of direct defeat into the realm of games with more than two players leads to the third form of loss commonly found in board games – elimination. Simply put, elimination is the threat of expulsion from the game world before the conclusion of play. Games employ a variety of themes which justify this approach. In games of simulated conflict elimination is inflicted upon the player whose forces have been depleted or destroyed (eg. *Risk* [23]), whilst in financial games it is often equated with bankruptcy (eg. *Monopoly* [10]). What makes elimination so interesting is the fact that, as a form of loss, it has effects which go beyond the magic circle that circumscribes play. In elimination games, incremental measures of performance are abandoned in favour of a more brutal form of quantification – an independent losing condition. Winning and losing the game become discrete events with autonomous criteria. Furthermore, as in life, the expulsion from play does not preclude other participants from continuing. In gaming terms, elimination *is* death. More importantly, the impetus to remove other players from the game is demanded by the rule structures and goals which make explicit that the winner of the game is the player who has affected the dismissal of all other players from the game – the last (wo)man standing.

In all of these situations there is a clear identification of the moment where the player has lost, which Bernard Suits frames as the natural conclusion to the play of the game:

Failing to win a game by virtue of losing it implies an

⁷ See, for example, *Backgammon*.

achievement, in the sense that the activity in question – playing the game – has been successfully, even though not victoriously, completed. [42]

As we shall see, this clear distinction is not so apparent in progressive game design where the possibility of absolute loss is undermined by the nature of progressive play, design choices and commercial considerations.

3. THE TRIVIALITY OF FAILURE

When the only consequence of failure is death, and death is instantly undone by loading a saved game, failure becomes nothing more than a minor, meaningless inconvenience. [29]

In his paper addressing some of the problems of approaching serious topics in games, Gonzala Frasca notes that dealing with death is particularly difficult in the context of gameplay. The binary win/lose nature of games, he suggests, combined with the potential for replayability, leaves little room for the genuine sense of loss which we associate with narrative forms, “[d]eath in computer games”, he observes “is always just a minor detail”. [15] Seven years on from this assertion, the discussion of virtual mortality has been revitalised by discussions surrounding socially oriented gameplay, particularly within MMORPGs. Indeed, the delicate balance between the triviality of death in virtual worlds and the need to imbue failure with genuine consequences has become a contentious issue for both players and developers. As Lisbeth Klastrup notes, this complication has largely led to reluctance on the part of developers to implement serious consequences for failure in game worlds where players have invested a significant amount of time and effort in the construction of characters.[19] Consequently, digital games of progression have strayed far from the emergent model of contested games which involve the potential for absolute loss as an inherent part of the uncertainty of gameplay. The losing condition which contributes to the risk of contested gameplay has been superseded by a market-driven approach which forbids ejecting players from a game permanently on the grounds that a player who is not playing, is not paying. Yet in her discussion of the nature of death in MMORPGs, Klastrup suggests that “[i]t would be fruitful to look even more closely at how the presence and staging of death, of making the context and consequence of death an occasional non-trivial experience, can encourage heroic, social and yet individualising behaviour.”

The unambiguous nature of the game conclusion seen in games of emergence lies in direct contrast to the model of progressive play which is so predominant in computer games. In the vast majority of digital games failure has replaced loss as the indicator of defeat, albeit in a rather temporary form. Whether missing an ambitious platform jump or being peppered with bullet spray, videogame players are accustomed to the untimely demise of avatars to which they are supposed to have

formed at least a degree of attachment. To counter this inconvenience, game developers have adopted a number of standard design ‘fixes’ which enable players to avoid genuine loss and continue with play. Most commonly, the progressive model of play punishes instances of failure with a death that can be easily overcome by a few clicks of the appropriate buttons. The explorative nature of this mechanic encourages a try-fail-retry cycle through the implementation of save games and restarts which, over numerous replays of the same experience, allows the player to develop the skillset required to overcome challenges and to progress in the game. The player is able to re-approach the encoded challenges of play and to develop refined strategies which take into account the previous attempts. Lauwaert et al. discuss this disruption in the temporal organization of gameplay by expanding upon Roger Callois’ classification of game elements [5], suggesting the terms *repens* and *repositio* to describe the “unexpected event” and the subsequent replay respectively. [25]⁸ This cycle *forces* the player to replay specific areas of the game, often multiple times, in order to develop an effective strategy. Whilst these traits go a long way to explaining the compelling nature of progressive play, this explorative cycle leads to a triviality in the consequences of game actions which tends to reduce the emotive impact of failure. [15]

The pleasure of progressive gameplay that is largely derived from this delicate balance of *repens* and *repositio* provides the player with novel challenges which may be overcome through reasoning, experience and skill development. However, the fragility of this equilibrium is highlighted when the player experiences the frustration of overly demanding play. Such a situation is commonly associated with a lack of balance in the game itself. In this case a player may simply abandon the game as the repetitive instances of failure cease to be enjoyable. [8] With the knowledge that a game of progression can, by design, be overcome, defeat is a decision made by the player to cease playing the game, to give up.⁹ Acknowledging this circumstance leads to a significant distinction: ultimately, in games of progression, defeat is a *voluntary* condition. Since the possibility of traversal is always present, the player makes a choice to abandon play that is not an emotionally charged moment of defeat or a natural consequence of game play, but merely the result of inadequate or unbalanced game design. As a result, games of progression have strayed far from their emergent forebears in eschewing any condition which

⁸ Interestingly, Lauwaert et al see these traits as being broadly associated with digital games where they might, more accurately, be seen as a facet of all games of progression.

⁹ Superficially, arcade style games of progression that limit the number of lives available to a player could be seen to imply a loss when the player runs out of lives and does not have the funds to complete the game. The option to continue or replay, however, is an example of *repositio*, merely with a price attached.

suggests absolute failure, loss or death. Conversely, board game designers frequently implement loss and, through the creative use of mechanics, can establish situations where it is not only the strategic skills of players that are being measured, but also their social skills.

4. A SOCIALLY NEGOTIATED DEATH

As affective as elimination from a tabletop game might be, the experience of ejection is tempered by the knowledge that players are acting within the separate place and time of Huizinga's magic circle. Within this imagined space, adoption of the lusory attitude requires that players seek to achieve victory by whatever means are available to them via the mechanics of the game. The playing field is a non-preferential one where players are expected to utilise the game mechanics to oust contestants until only one remains. Elimination, then, is an added risk taken by players who consent to enter the game world. As long as a multiplayer game is built upon clearly defined and visible system mechanics which determine the degree of agency of each player, such a risk is clearly an acceptable one. Indeed, it is an essential characteristic of the uncertainty of the game outcome, if amplified to a slight degree by the threat of premature expulsion. This outcome is a measure of the performance of each player as defined by the structure of the game mechanics. Such clear delineations can however, be blurred in games where mechanics which promote distinctly antisocial behaviour are employed.

Ronald Wetering's *Rette Sich Wer Kann* [44],¹⁰ though not strictly speaking a game of elimination (the game is scored) is a simple example of a game where social mechanics are foregrounded over tactical or strategic manipulation of the rule system. In the game, players control a number of survivors of a sinking ship. As the lifeboats escaping from the ship begin to sink, players vote for which will spring a leak, which players will be ejected from the boat (to a watery grave) and which boats will make progress to a distant island which offers the only chance of survival. Although each player may strategically analyse which moves will be most beneficial, the mechanics of the game are such that success is determined by the development of alliances which must be negotiated with other players and, often, abandoned with abrupt callousness. (In a disruptive break from theme which is reflective of European board game design however, players may continue to vote even when all their pieces are drowned or brought to safety.)

Dimma Davidoff's *Mafia* [11]¹¹ is an example of a game in which the socially negotiated elimination of players has the permanence of a virtual death. In the game, players take on the role of citizens who are tasked with tracking down a number of

mafia hitmen in their midst before all are eliminated. The identity of the hitmen is a mystery that players must attempt to unravel before they themselves are claimed as victims since here, players who have been eliminated are forbidden from participating in the game any further. As the only clues offered to players come in the form of extended negotiations and accusations in which these same hitmen take part, to effectively play *Mafia* is to focus entirely upon the observation and social manipulation of other players. Innocent players are often sentenced to death (and elimination) merely by the whim of a majority with sufficient collective momentum. The result is a game which, whilst undoubtedly a lot of fun to play, also provides insight into the nature of groupthink and conformity in social formations. Perhaps more significantly *Mafia* is a game in which the role of Huizinga's magic circle is complicated by the requirement that players draw on pre-existing social skills in play which consists almost entirely of a social metagame. Consequently, *Mafia* can be a highly charged and emotive experience in which players are often called upon to question their own ability to judge the behaviour of others.

Of course, the archetypal game of diplomatic negotiation is one that Costikyan allows to lend its name to the genre, Alan Calhammer's *Diplomacy*. [4] Most notably, *Diplomacy* is infamous for the intrusion of the 'real world' into the artificial boundaries of play. The game is set in the period leading up to the 1914-1918 World War, with players adopting the roles of the leaders of various European powers, all attempting to retain control of their respective countries. Once a player loses this control, they are eliminated from the game and since there is no random element beyond the initial allotment of roles, the game is one of pure negotiation. The result of this is an emphasis upon deceit, manipulation and backstabbing that leaves many first-time players aghast at the perceived philosophy of the game:

Loyalty, honesty, frankness, gratitude, chivalry, magnanimity - these are the hallmarks of the good friend, the good husband and father, the nice guy we all hope our daughters will marry. In the amoral world of *Diplomacy*, however, they are the hallmarks of the born loser.[36]

What makes *Diplomacy* of particular interest is this blurring of the line between the game world and the real which can form a pivotal part of gameplay. Indeed, as Sharpe notes, "[i]t is essential to know what goes on among the other players in their private lives - who knows whom, who is related to whom, who hates whose guts". That *Diplomacy* requires players to bring all their faculties to bear towards realisation of the game goal is an essential trait of the contested game. What makes *Diplomacy* so unique, however, is the focus upon the social metagame that is as much a part of gameplay as the simple map upon which the outcome of these negotiations unfold.

¹⁰ More commonly referred to as 'The Lifeboat Game' and recently reprinted in English as *Lifeboats* [45]

¹¹ *Werewolf* is an alternative name for the same game.

In games such as *Mafia* and *Diplomacy*, player elimination is the result of a series of negotiations where the faculties brought to bear upon gameplay consist almost entirely of social skills. With relatively simplistic rulesets, these two examples draw players into a game world where the capacity to remain in the play of the game depends upon an ability to manipulate, cajole, lie, persuade, befriend and betray. These are games of survival, of ruthless expediency, and, perhaps most importantly, they are games in which ethics, or at least the negation of them, play a pivotal role¹².

5. THE DIGITAL PLAYGROUND

If the eliminative voting mechanics of *Mafia* and *Rette Sich Wer Kann* sound familiar, it is not surprising. The phenomenon of reality television is replete with examples of spectatorial social elimination games whose popularity does not appear to be subsiding. As a game form, socially negotiated elimination works for both spectators and participants. Why then, has the development of social mechanics in contested digital games remained largely unexplored? The situation is perhaps best explained by the way in which computers have affected the development of the game form. As Crawford identifies, the processor-intensive nature of computers lends itself to hiding the complex calculations and mechanics which were previously a part of the process of gameplay. [9] When firing a gun players no longer need to consult complex tables in order to calculate range, line of sight and the effects of a particularly cold winter on troops. We simply pull a virtual trigger and the machine does the rest of the work and informs us instantly of the result. The mechanics that make the game work are largely invisible. Whilst in some game types (wargames are an obvious example), this is extremely useful for retaining immersion in the game, in social games the interaction between players *is* the central hook which generates the sense of immersion. How can computers really help here?

The function of the computer in games is restricted to two primary modes, those of the facilitation of challenges or the mediation of interpersonal play. [49] In the past, when computers have been used to mediate interpersonal contested play there has been a strong emphasis on utilising the processing power of machines to construct elaborate worlds and implement mechanics for direct conflict via avatars in these worlds. The mediating function of the computer and the presence of avatars effectively distances the player from other players, replacing direct social interaction with a mediated

¹² For further examples of games of social negotiation see Sid Sackson's *I'm the Boss* [34], Stefan Dorra's *Intrigue* [12] and, for a contemporary interpretation of *Diplomacy* in a fantasy setting, Christian T. Petersen's *A Game of Thrones* [30], based upon George R R Martin's novel of the same name.

game world which provides context for the conflict. For example, multiplayer real-time strategy games and first person shooters may offer the player rich possibilities for communication [3] but this interaction does not constitute the central conflict of the game.

One digital game which eschews this approach and is strongly reminiscent of the social mechanics discussed here is Eric Zimmerman's *Sissyfight 2000*. [52] The game, which depicts the ruthless world of the school playground, is a game of social elimination. Players taunt, 'scratch', and tease each other or tattle to the omnipresent teacher in an attempt to be the last remaining in the game. The schoolyard equivalent of game 'lives' is denoted by a measure of self-esteem, the loss of which results in elimination. As with *Mafia* and *Diplomacy*, the central hook of the game lies in the ability the ability to communicate directly with other players, to form alliances, to persuade, to manipulate and, of course, to betray:

If one or two girls are ganging up or using sneaky tactics to defeat you and your friends, don't taking it lying down and crying. Fight back! Go after them with a bigger group, or even just one other friend. Or tell everyone what meanies they are, so that the other girls will know to avoid them and not to trust them. Temporary alliances work well for one or two games, but to win in the long run, you gotta make friends who will watch your back. [37]

As this quote from the strategy guide clearly indicates, *Sissyfight* is a game which explicitly draws upon a social metagame to encourage success. Yet *Sissyfight* is a relatively unique phenomenon in online gaming. Aside from digital implementations of games such as *Diplomacy*, the use of mechanics which emphasise social conflict and negotiation in online environments has been relatively sparse. What then might immersive digital worlds be able to bring to games of social negotiation and perhaps more importantly, how can social negotiation inform videogame development?

6. AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL

Whilst not to detract from Zimmerman's innovative design, as an example of a socially negotiated game of elimination in digital form *Sissyfight* can be seen as relatively primitive. However, there is no doubt that it offers a first step towards implementing the kinds of social play discussed here. In the majority of online games, the typical approach to fostering social interaction has been through collaborative play. The guilds of MMORPGs and clans associated with First Person Shooters aim to promote convivial interaction between players who are teamed together against the game world or other players. The conflict in these examples is not usually manifest in social interaction but through mechanics which draw upon the processing power of computers as mediators and the technical/strategic ability of players, not on their social skills.

Looking back at the board game examples drawn upon we can

identify a number of characteristics which are used to bring the interpersonal dynamics of players to the fore in a competitive context and to increase the sense of risk associated with play of the game:

6.1 Intimacy

The play of a board game is generally an intimate experience involving a small number of players (usually less than ten) in a close-knit environment. In a face-to-face social environment, players commonly have some degree of acquaintance prior to play. If a game is to foreground social negotiation, it must, to a degree, allow players to know their competitors. The capacity to eliminate players in a world with hundreds of participants lacks the intimacy which makes social elimination so intriguing.

6.2 Rich Communication

Going hand-in-hand with the need for an intimate game world, games of social negotiation demand an environment where rich possibilities for nuanced communication between players are evident. Much of the pleasure of diplomatic, interpersonal play lies in the subversive manipulation of others and the interpretation of subtle clues which may lie in mannerisms and body language as much as the spoken word of the individual. Although this level of communication is perhaps not possible in a digital environment, players need to be able to communicate in ways that are as instinctive as possible.

6.3 Social/Strategic Decisions

Particularly evident in all the games of social negotiation described is the relative simplicity of the strategic decisions involved. The mechanics which underlie these games are invariably rather simple (i.e. “Who do I want out of the boat?”, “Who do I think is the Hitman?”) however, the information required by players to arrive at these decisions is largely dependent on the social interactions within the game. This blend of strategic and social decision making lies at the heart of social negotiation games.

6.4 Elimination and Survival

Although not essential to games of social negotiation, as discussed earlier, the possibility of expulsion from the game world is one that infuses gameplay with an element of risk which may serve to heighten the dramatic tension of play and force players further into patterns of antisocial or ethically challenging behaviour. It is also noteworthy that all of the games described here are essentially themed as games of survival as opposed to the dominant paradigm of videogames which emphasises conquest, progression and exploration. Again, this emphasis on survival over subjugation is one that acts to draw players into a gameworld where in-game actions might be instilled with a greater degree of urgency.

So, given these traits, how might an online game of social negotiation and survival unfold?

One can imagine a game of perhaps two hours duration which throws ten geographically distanced players together in a shared world. Perhaps that world consists only of a small luxury yacht cruising through a tropical seascape, richly rendered through the use of digital technology - a floating palace. This is a convivial, relaxing environment where players can spend time getting to know each other, socialising, perhaps exploring their new environment. Fully realised interactive entertainments on board provide playful distractions for the guests while a tropical island glimpsed in the distance suggests further surprises and possibilities not far ahead. Perhaps, however, there is a problem with the vessel the players inhabit. Maybe the yacht begins to sink. Sharks swim hungrily around the ailing craft. There are only a limited number of lifeboats. Perhaps players need to establish who will take those lifeboats and who will not. Who will live and who will be left behind to die. The boat sinks lower and lower while the sharks begin to pick off those who have failed to gain sufficient social capital amongst their fellow players...

All this naturally, in the spirit of fun.

Of course this author is not, by any means, a game designer and doubtless those who are might be able to see numerous flaws in this simple model or perhaps, more productively, ways in which it might be expanded to take further advantage of the strengths of the digital medium. My intention here has merely been to hint at the possibilities that this type of gameplay might involve. The successful implementation of European game designs such as *Settlers of Catan* [43] and *Carcassonne* [50] on home game consoles suggests that players are comfortable absorbing themselves in the play of a social game that may only take an hour or two. There appears to be no obvious reason that the same players might not also choose to immerse themselves in a distinctly antisocial game.

7. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE ANTI-SOCIAL GAMEWORLD

[T]he primary evolutionary function of social play... might well be to serve as catalyst for the development of antisocial play. This antisocial play then promotes a more sophisticated reflection and awareness of self-other distinctions. [28]

In his analysis of antagonism in games of conflict, Jonas Heide Smith identifies three categories of social tension which might arise independently of game mechanics, those of cheating, local norm violation and grief play. It is rare, he suggests, that “the actual conflict emerging from the game mechanics causes strife” [39]. In the games discussed in this paper, the social conflict that is engendered is entirely intra-mechanical in nature – these are games whose rule structures and goals *compel* players to engage in socially negotiated

conflict with outcomes that bridge the boundary between the game world and the real. The ability to independently or collaboratively bring about the elimination of a player from a game through this process of social negotiation effectively blurs clear distinctions about what is acceptable behaviour within the context of game play. In her discussion of the relationship between cheating and the magic circle Mia Consalvo questions how play, games and ethics come together. [6] In the play of social games which deliberately goad players into antisocial conduct, we can see how social play can function as an exploration of ethical behaviour. Ironically, in an environment of media panic that continues to emphasise the ‘antisocial’ nature of digital gameplay, it is tempting to suggest that games are not antisocial enough.

Whilst it is commonly argued that a defining feature of games is replayability, in games of progression, this characteristic merely allows the player to repeat encoded sequences, bringing instrumental reasoning and skill-development to bear in overcoming the challenges presented by the game. Thus, elimination and in-game death are merely trivial stumbling blocks upon the way to mastery. Progressive games are “purchased, used and eventually cast away like most other consumable goods” [17]. In contrast, the seemingly infinite replayability of multiplayer games stems from the nuanced interactions between players which sees every iteration of the game as a unique occurrence. The rules and mechanics provide a framework for interaction which demands other human beings against whom we may measure our wits, acquired expertise and social (or antisocial) skills.

Although virtual worlds and their kin appear to play to this strength, the ongoing achievements in this area seem harnessed to the idea that a fully realised graphical world filled with thousands of players is the inevitable future of multiplayer games – certainly it is a cost-effective one. But MMORPGs are still essentially playgrounds of progression, they do not seek to simulate subsets of reality in creative ways but to emulate (if in a fantastic setting) through the creation of a game world in which the system is far larger than the player. This is only one understanding of immersion. The race to literalise Neal Stephenson’s “metaverse” [41] in a profitable form coupled with the reluctance of developers to implement virtual death in a virtual life has stripped the potency of the losing condition which Murray suggests is so important to our understandings of games to the point where it is hard to see how they can be described as such. Conversely, the appeal of intimate multiplayer games lies in the uniqueness of each iteration, the emotive involvement in the winning/losing condition and in the encounter with the other player which transforms the dry rulesets of formalist understanding into the social world of the game. This is a game world where the immersion stems from the experience of playing with another human being in an intimate, highly structured environment, a sense of immersion which does not require a fully realised world, merely fully realised relationships. In these games fortunes may rise and fall, errors may have irreversible

consequences, and loss can be meaningful. In combination, these elements provide an aesthetic of risk that, according to Johan Huizinga, “is the essence of the play spirit.”

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