

Don't worry, board games: video games can't steal what makes you great

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Surely there's nothing a board game can do that a video game can't do better, right? After all, board games are so limited. You have to fit them on a table, and make them out of real, tangible stuff. Video games can do whatever you can imagine! And the best video games should already be stealing from board games. I think game designers ought to be out-and-out burglars, pausing their larceny only to remix and rethink the latest haul of ideas. But there are also things that make board and card games great that can't be stolen. At least, not yet. Those elements that exist only within the sphere of real-life cards, smiles and dining room tables.

Bluffing

Whether it's lying to someone's face in Werewolf or feigning an offensive in a war game, bluffing and duplicity provides almost all table games with a low-level electric current. It even shows up in board games' most benign fiefdoms: German games like Settlers of Catan or Caverna, while ostensibly about the construction of peaceful settlements, will still see players protesting the fact that they're doing well to stop the table from uniting against them by snatching away resources that they need. We do this constantly, and we do it because it's fun.

It's not that video games can't do bluffing. From Street Fighter to StarCraft to Online Poker to EVE Online, you'll find feints and deception, and I'll drop anything to discuss Ubisoft's beautiful failure Ruse. It's just that video games are terrible at it. AI opponents are notoriously crap at bluffing, and lying over an internet connection is about as much fun as anything else in a long-distance relationship.

It's not just that video games lose out on the joy of table talk. More significant is that they lose out entirely on the phenomenal genre of

lying games. The Resistance is a contemporary example. Players all represent a group of people that must elect teams to go on missions, but which has been infiltrated by players which are double agents. Through failed missions and interrogations, the good guys have to figure out who they can trust before the bad guys sabotage three missions.

Physicality

One of the reasons put forward for the 21st century resurgence of board games pairs them up with vinyl records. In an increasingly digital culture we long for something tangible to lavish affection on, collect, customise or lend.

But it's not just that in existing as real-life objects, board games can be desirable in all-new ways. It's also offers radically different opportunities for designers.

Rampage (also known as Terror in Meeple City) is an on-the-nose example, but it'll do. This is a turn-based dexterity game that sees players racing to demolish a 3D city by flicking their personal godzilla-like monster around, chucking tiny wooden cars at one another, even placing their chin next to their monster and blowing as hard as they can. It's very silly. But when a game works mostly within the rules of our human bodies and the laws of physics, as this does, you also instantly get incredible complexity with hardly any rules at all.

Two Rooms and a Boom makes use of space on a much larger scale. It's a party game that divides players between two rooms, then allows tense hostage exchanges over the course of 15 minutes, after which a bomber player blows up, hopefully killing the president on the opposite team. Most of the game is talking (or more accurately, plotting, scheming, panicking and misleading), but

where you're standing, whether you can get privacy and your ability to read a room is vitally important.

Then there's 2012's Risk Legacy. Part board game, part advent calendar, this was a hugely successful reinterpretation of Risk that has players telling the story of their personal sci-fi world through consecutive games of Risk. From night to night players found megacities (scribbling their names on the board), place stickers showing which countries were eradicated, unpack new cards, unseal new, secret compartments in the box and even tear up existing components. By the end of the campaign your game would be utterly unique, and a treasured reminder of what a wonderful war you'd had.

Ownership

All board games allow players their creative streak, because the rules can be bent or broken wherever you like. "Modding" is the process of painstakingly tweaking or repurposing video games, and the way I like to put it is that every board game ships with the most powerful mod tools imaginable. Rather than sulking when they play a bad game, a table of board gamers will leap on the design like amateur mechanics. "How can we fix this?"

It was actually Dungeons & Dragons that first let me perform game design. Cracking open hardback books almost as tall as my torso I'd sketch stories, draft dungeons, sprinkle treasure and attach far too many details to my

pet antagonist (he was so troubled). Pen and paper roleplaying games are what I want to talk about here. Did you know they've evolved into a staggeringly broad and thought-provoking genre?

Let me illustrate just how much D&D has evolved. Monsters Hearts puts players in control of literally monstrous, sex-starved teenagers. Kaleidoscope sees players creating a fictitious arthouse film together, in less time than it would take to watch one. Fiasco remains the scene's breakthrough hit, allowing players to thread together a Coen brothers-style disaster in a game that's one-part improv, one-part dicking over your friends. Or perhaps you're in the mood for something more serious? Night Witches is by the very same publisher, and casts players as members of a real-life second world war Soviet bomber regiment made up of women flying outmoded planes.

Picking the protagonist's haircut and picking our way along some (mostly illusory) forking plots are as far as RPG video games go in offering players control. Next to pen and paper games, that's the narrative equivalent of letting us reach over in the car to beep the horn. Not only do pen and paper RPGs let us create every facet of a whole cast of characters, they let us create the story.

I can't wait for video games to get there. But until they do, you can pry my dice bag from my cold, dead hands.

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