

How the boundary between board and video games is blurring

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Innovative games in both mediums are borrowing mechanics from each other. And this time, it seems to be working out

It's easy to paint board games and video games as natural enemies. At one end of the stereotype are the traditional gamers arguing over increasingly obscure interpretations of the rules and turning to manuals thicker than a phone book to arbitrate; at the other end are the video gamers, dazzled by bright lights, surrounded by mountains of technology, and winning by virtue of reaction times rather than any actual thinking.

Of course, both stereotypes are wrong, and the overlap between board gamers and video gamers is huge. And for good reason: each medium provides its own unique joys.

A good board game sees you and some friends crowded around a table, while themes and gameplay combine to make you architects of your own stories; a good video game presents you with a fully-realised world, a set of rules for how you interact with it, and a fluidity which enables pure escapism.

Really, both are far too broad to sum up in any single stereotype. The differences between an essentially abstract, tightly constrained and dizzyingly competitive board game like chess and a deeply thematic, sprawling co-operative game like Eldritch Horror are only matched by the differences between something like impressionistic wanderer Proteus and space simulation Elite: Dangerous.

But increasingly too, crossover games have been nibbling away at the differences between board and video games. On the one hand, video games have been learning lessons from board games; and on the other, board games have been incorporating automation

and technology to make them more fun and easier to play.

Neither of those trends are new. After all, you could play Monopoly on your Atari if you wanted board games mixed in with your video games, and tech-led gimmicks have never been far from the board game shop (remember Dream Phone?) The difference now is that they're good.

Cardboard to screen ...

Perhaps the most obvious example of the crossover is the growing number of really good tablet versions of board games. Ticket to Ride, Lords of Waterdeep and Pandemic, to name just a few, all take games of moderate complexity, with plenty of small pieces and a relatively important set of rules to keep track of and fit them perfectly on an iPad or Android tablet.

The immediate advantage is to replicate the "travel editions" of simpler games, and offer up a version of the game that can be played on a train, while flying, or in a car. Passing an iPad around airline-style seats is much easier than setting up a board, after all.

But the ports, as these versions are known, have also served to introduce a whole new group of people to the games, with their low costs, strong tutorials and single player modes (ideal for learning the game) all serving to boost the accessibility of the games.

And the success of the ports has led to a whole new wave of board-game style games coming to tablets and other devices, led by Blizzard's Hearthstone, a collectible card game for iPads and PCs.

Hearthstone takes the core concept of a creature combat card game and presents it in a slick free-to-play format, letting players

collect cards using either in-game currency or real money, before building decks and duelling an AI or other humans.

In classic Blizzard style, the core game is actually remarkably conservative, borrowing most of its mechanics from the twenty-year-old Magic: The Gathering. But the level of polish on the game (and the fact that it costs nothing to start playing) makes it much more welcoming to new players than the often-impenetrable card game does, and a smattering of systems which would be impossible to carry out with paper cards makes the case for it being a truly hybrid game.

For instance, there is a card which copies a random card from the opponent's deck; a card which enters play as one of 8 other random cards; and best of all, a card which limits turns to just 15 seconds while it is in play, turning a previously leisurely game into a hectic scramble to do everything needed.

... and back again

But the exchange isn't a one-way street. Video games have lessons to impart to board games as well, and increasingly board game designers are paying attention.

To be fair to the designers, the history of incorporating technology in tabletop games is rather less positive than the history of making digital versions of board games. In the latter camp, the worst you would see is the occasional shoddy adaptation, but the former led to some true abominations.

Take Sony's Eye of Judgement, an early game for the PlayStation 3 which used the console's camera accessory to let players play a collectible card game over the web. When a card was played onto the nine-by-nine grid the game was built on, the camera would recognise it, and an animated version of the monster it represents would show up on screen.

But the game was beset with issues from launch: a poor online multiplayer service and no local multiplayer made it a hassle to play games, while an anti-cheat system ensured that building and registering new decks was a chore.

A generation later, and things look rosier. Part of the reason is that, as the barrier to entry for good hardware has dropped, the ability to incorporate tech features has been opened up to smaller games designers, rather than being something only affordable to companies expecting sales in the hundreds of thousands of units.

Golem Arcana, for instance, is a miniatures game along the lines of Warhammer or X-Wing, letting players set up small skirmishes with richly detailed figures. The game combines with a tablet and a bluetooth stylus to push almost all the rules decisions and randomisation – of which there is much – to the device, letting players get on with actually having fun.

It doesn't work perfectly, because you end up in the odd position of having to replicate the game state twice over, once on screen and once on the table, but unlike the first attempts to do a hybrid game, the technology feels like it adds to the fun, rather than getting in the way of it.

The forthcoming XCom board game gets the balance right, letting four players co-operate in saving the world from an alien invasion while a companion app tosses an element of randomisation into the mix – and lets one player pretend they're hooked into the global defence network for real.

Video games and board games are never going to blur into one, and nor should they. But if the stage is set for each to learn lessons from the other, a golden age for both could be ahead.

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