

Does Your Game Have Play?

An Exploration of Strategy in Gaming



Don't you hate it when you buy a new game only to learn that the game has "no play?" I'm not talking about confusing rules or unrealistic requirements. What I'm referring to is a game that has players doing little more than processing random events using arbitrary rules.

Choices! I need choices to be able to play a game, rather than having a game play me. This is where strategy comes in! Choices come under four categories of strategy, which are:

Planning

Planning is the first and most straight forward strategy found in games.

"I'll do this, so that when you do that, I can then..."

I judge these games on the plausibility/possibility of predicting what my opponent will do, and if the game is stable enough to rely on that prediction. Stability means that the game situation cannot dramatically change from one turn to the next. However, there can and should be situational changes. Otherwise, the player winning at the beginning of the game goes on to win.

Utilization

Utilization is the essence of most German-style games and is all about resource management. Whether it is pitting cavalry against infantry, trading corn for sheep, or the efficiency of railroads, using your resources to their fullest will determine the winner in Utilization games. These games should be judged based on the diversity and the balance of their resources. Diversity may be defined as resources that are collected, used, and valued in different manners. However, if one resource overpowers another, then the weaker resource is ultimately removed from consideration, thus reducing diversity.

Psychology

Even games with little strategy can have psychology as a saving grace. Games can include elements of bluffing, tricking, intimidating, deals, and bidding. All of which will increase the level of gamers' psychological interaction. The trick to any good psychology is in giving the gamer just enough information to make an educated guess, but not enough information to be certain. Too little data and it's just a stab in the dark. Too much and it becomes an issue of Utilization or Planning.

Multiple Build Paths

Multiple Build Paths involves having a variety of goals, or options, available to help achieve victory. This is different than Planning, which involves determining how to achieve these goals in a particular situation. For example, in popular CCGs, the game actually begins with players choosing a build path to construct their deck around. However, like the resources in Utilization, these goals must be diverse and balanced. This balance is generally missing from CCGs because of the multitude of cards, thus only allowing for a few of the total number of build paths to actually be competitive. Multiple Build Paths are most important since they lead to re-playability. However, Multiple Build Paths games are extremely rare because of the requirement of variety and balance.

Pitfalls of Strategy Games

Luck

Games with suspense usually have an element of luck, but luck should never dominate strategy.

King Making

When a player who has no chance of winning is able to choose who wins.

Drafting

When players deliberately play behind first place until the end when they jump ahead. This makes playing weakly a good tactic.

Snowball Effect

When a game excessively rewards success with more success and decides the game too early.

Final Round

When the final round out-weighs the importance of all previous rounds of a game. Often happens in a heavy Drafting game.

Lock Down

Denying a player's ability to do anything during their turn. Since this denies choice and human interaction, it is a detriment to any game.

Predestine

A predetermined outcome based on the components owned rather than game play.

Text Book

An unbeatable advantage because of player's previous knowledge.

Pacification

When players cannot directly affect other players. This deteriorates Planning and Psychological strategies.

I personally think that strategic Stand-Alone Card games are the future of hobby games. If done properly, a Stand-Alone Card game can give the balance, diversity, and interaction that will deliver all of these strategies.

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