

Maryann Westfall
LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice
The Oxford History of Board Games (in-class report)
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LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice focuses on games as cultural artifacts and on the elements of game design, especially electronic games. In developing skills for effective electronic game design, an understanding of traditional board games is useful. This report is an overview of traditional board games – their historical, social and psychological significance in our culture, and their general classification.

HISTORICAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BOARD GAMES

In The Oxford History of Board Games (Oxford University Press, 1999), author David Parlett asserts that while board games have been around for millenia, their development as children's toys is historically recent, and characteristic of western culture. Until recently, board games had been regarded as an integral part of a culture by its members, and its play primarily an adult activity. Indeed, the essence of board games can be traced all the way back to the need for primitive social groups to relive stories of the hunt and capture of food, or the defense against predators.

Up until the late 18th century, the aristocracy were the class that had expendable time. Therefore, the game parts became lavishly crafted works of art which the upper class could display in showy sitting rooms. It wasn't until the proliferation of stake board games and lotteries that board games were produced as toys and left for children – winning (and losing) money became serious business, and no longer the domain of board games. In addition, the prevailing thought at that time was that playing was childish and anti-work oriented. Board games were thus relegated to the status of "toy" in which only those with expendable time, primarily children, could be expected to indulge. Likewise, decoration of board games was aimed at children's aesthetics. This helps to explain the relative lack of serious research in the field.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF BOARD GAMES

Parlett assures us that "true games serve no conscious practical purpose beyond that of satisfying an urge to play which is sometimes regarded as instinct."¹ And yet, unconsciously, the urge to play can often be attributed to a desire to keep one's mind fit or to hone a skill set. When these desires come to the forefront of a player's mind, that is, the player becomes conscious of the practical need, then they are no longer "playing the game." Instead, the game is used as a tool. This report deals primarily with true game-playing.

Informal games approach play in that they are often undirected and occur through impromptu actions. Formal games, on the other hand, are more structured and characterized by having two important elements: an end or contest to achieve some goal, and a means or set of rules and equipment with which to achieve the goal. Thus, board

games are a class of formal games that serve to entertain through an agreed upon set of rules and equipment, while subconsciously testing and exercising the mind.

GENEALOGY OF BOARD GAMES

There are two primary groups of board games: *traditional* and *proprietary*. Several comparisons can be used to distinguish between these two classes. They can be thought of as either *evolved* (traditional games such as chess) or *invented* (proprietary games such as Monopoly®). But when one considers that Snakes & Ladders was “invented” recently (and considered proprietary although its roots go back hundreds of years) and XXX-opoly is considered evolved because of its enduring basic metaphor even though they are recently “invented,” one sees that there is enough overlap between these two distinctions that necessitate another method of identifying the two classes.

Another way of describing the two classes is by saying that traditional games are *abstract* and proprietary games are *representational*. With the traditional game of chinese checkers, the board pattern does not represent anything, but is an important network of lines and cells by which to navigate playing pieces. The thrill of play comes in strategizing the movement of playing pieces. This type of game often transcends cultural boundaries. CandyLand®, on the other hand, indulges its players in a fantasy world of sugary treats. The goal is achieved purely through luck (the roll of the die), and much of the play occurs in the imagination (my 5-year-old clearly and excitedly recounts the trail as it winds past the Lollipop Princess and ends at the Chocolate Castle). But in a culture that might not emphasize candy, there might be little excitement in playing CandyLand. And players with exuberant imaginations can assign role-playing attributes to something as dry as tic-tac-toe. Therefore, there is enough ambiguity over abstract vs. representational to require another method for distinction.

A third way of differentiating between the two board game groups is to say that all traditional games can be regarded as *positional*. That is, the patterns on the board are integral to the way the game is played, and the relative position of playing pieces to the board is important. As mentioned above, the fun part is in strategizing, and this can only occur through the use of the board where the playing pieces are moved. Backgammon is an example of a positional game. In proprietary games, as mentioned earlier, much of the playing occurs primarily in the imagination, when the representation of the game is based on a theme that is recognized by the players. So proprietary games can be regarded as *theme-based*. One can see how proprietary games can become, and are often (roughly 90% of them) quickly outdated. They rely heavily on recognition of a theme that appeals only to a small segment of the population, or whose representation is based on current (passing) trends. In designing games, then, it becomes incumbent upon the designer to keep in mind that if the game is theme-based, it must have an underlying structure that is involved, as in positional games, to be enduring, or its representation must be universally and timelessly accepted.

A third group of games can be identified in which the physical presence of a marked board or surface on which to play is insignificant to the actual play, but is merely a “scorecard” for keeping track of the play. These are called stake-board games, and include games like Cribbage, Tripoley and casino-type games.

In addition, a fourth group of games can also be identified which do not technically have a board but require pen and paper, or some other form of indicating a specifically marked surface on which play occurs. These include games like tic-tac-toe and are considered board games, and for lack of a predefined term, I call these *makeshift* board games.

1. Informal

- 2. Formal =
 - |2A. Sports
 - |2B. Non-sports =
 - |2Ba. Other Games (Dice, cards, etc.)
 - |2Bb. Board Games =
 - |1. Traditional
 - |2. Proprietary
 - |3. “Makeshift”

STRUCTURE OF BOARD GAMES

Board games are representative of the types of activities in which early man engaged. With this in mind, they can be broken down into four types:

RACE — First player or team to reach the goal wins. In race games, the path is one-dimensional. In simple games, the path is linear and the roll of the dice dictate the movement, with no opportunity for skill. These games, like Snakes & Ladders, are considered games of pure chance. The next level of race games is complex, in which branching structures are introduced into the board, introducing some skill requirement. Pachisi is an example of this. Multiplex race games further add to this complexity, often by introducing more than one or two game pieces. Backgammon is an example. And recently introduced are strategic race games, in which all movement is based on skill with dice only used (if at all) for pieces’ entry.

SPACE — First player or team to complete a particular alignment or configuration wins. Wykersham[®], a long version of tic-tac-toe with additional restrictions, is an example. The path is two-dimensional, allowing for movement backwards and sometimes sideways. Moves are not dice-bound, and there is usually a many-to-many relationship between opponents. Alignments or configurations are:

- align — in a line
- connect — a line connecting two sides or specific points
- traverse — all pieces must cross to the other side of the board
- attain — one piece must cross to the other side

configuration — complex alignment of shape or area instead of line
restriction — placement that denies opponent opportunity to move
occupation — configuration or placement with the most of one side

CHASE — Has a many-to-one capture theme. It is the only type of game in which bilateral asymmetry is employed. That is, one side has more pieces than the other from the outset. Fox & Hounds, an example, uses checkers equipment. Four hounds chase one fox until he can no longer make legal moves to escape.

DISPLACE — Like a chase game, but with many-to-many capture theme; opponents begin with equal resources. Parlett classifies the different displace games by the level of functionality of the playing pieces:

Linear — one-dimensional board; no differentiation of pieces (Mancala).

Undifferentiated — pieces are differentiated to ownership only (Chinese checkers).

Semi-differentiated — pieces begin with same power, but can be promoted to another level of power (checkers).

Differentiated — pieces may begin with various different powers (chess).

Components

PLAYING PIECE — the marker that is moved on the board.

Field of action — the surface in which markers' positions are significant. They can be:

linear — play is unidirectional (from point A to point Z) on a path; the path can be simple or complex with loops, branching and shortcuts.

areal — play is multi-directional.

reticular — falls somewhere in between unilinear and areal. It can be looped or be areal with limited movement. The movement in Chinese checkers occurs over a wide area, but movement is constrained to adjacent diagonal moves.

PLACEMENT — playing pieces are either placed only, or placed and moved. In games in which there is no choice for placement, the placement is called an entry. Movement is either dice-bound (on a numbered space corresponding to the dice) or free.

INTERACTION — there are five ways to interact with the opponent's playing piece:

capturing — permanent removal

ousting — forcing opponent to move

blockading — preventing an opponent from moving

demotion — reducing power of opponent's playing piece

conversion — changing ownership of playing piece

OBJECTIVE — depending on the type of board game, up to three objectives are possible:

1. to attain an advantageous spatial position

2. to command the board by overwhelming the opposition (in a subtractive method)

3. to command the board by occupying a majority position (in an additive method)

The following table shows a mapping of the different components of board games to the type of game in which they are found:

Type	Field	Placement/ Primary Movement	Interaction	Objective
Race	linear	equal/dice-bound	ousting	attain position (get to end first)
Space	areal	equal/free	blockade; capture; oust	attain position (make pattern first); overwhelm; occupation
Chase	reticular	asymmetrical/free	capture	attain position; overwhelm
Displace	any	equal/free	capture	overwhelm

As an aside, dice are conspicuously absent from the list of components and from the diagrammatic overview of game types. Parlett includes whole chapters to dice in his book, and further analysis of dice should be studied with other reference material due to the complex nature of the subject.

¹ The Oxford History of Board Games, Parlett, David, (Oxford University Press, 1999), pg. 2.

² *ibid*, pg. 2.