

Maryann Westfall
LCC 6215 Game Design as a Cultural Practice
Race Board Games ó The Role of Dice
August 23, 2002

In a previous in-class report on The Oxford History of Board Games¹, a genealogy of board games was illustrated. This illustration indicated that games in which dice are the object (such as Yahtzee[®] or casino-type games) are stake-board games, and as such, are not truly board games. The board is merely used as a scorecard, and these games are games of chance, with little, if any, skill involved. Therefore, stake-board games are excluded from this discussion.

There are four types of play in board games:

- race — first player or team to reach the goal wins
- space — first player or team to complete a particular alignment or configuration wins
- chase — many-to-one capture theme
- displace — many-to-many capture theme

Race games are the subject of this short report.

DEFINING RACE GAMES

The objective in race games is typically to be the first player or team to reach the goal (attain position). Placement of pieces are symmetrical, and dice-bound (dictated by the number rolled on the dice). The primary interaction is one of ousting, either moving off one's own pieces as they reach the goal, or removing opponent's pieces, preventing them from reaching the goal first. Secondary methods of interaction can include blockading (preventing an opponent from movement). The field of action is one-dimensional, i.e. there is a linear path. In simple games, the path is singular, sometimes with shortcuts. The next level of race games is complex, in which branching structures are introduced into the path. Multiplex race games further add to this complexity, often by introducing more than one or two game pieces. And recently introduced are strategic race games, in which all movement is based on skill.

In terms of the role of dice, race games can be categorized as:

1. Chance — the dice is a random number generator, and is used to dictate placement and movement where either element exists. Simple race games fall into this category. An example is Snakes & Ladders^Æ, a game of movement in which all moves are dictated by the throw of the dice.
2. Chance/Skill — the dice is used as both a random number generator and a constraint to influence choice. Complex and multiplex race games fall into this category. There is a nebulous area of distinction between them, and can be characterized by the ratio of chance to skill. Sorry!^Æ and Pachisi might be

considered complex because while they offer some choice as to which path to take or which piece to move, there are few playing pieces per team with only a few simple rules on movement. Backgammon might be considered a multiplex game because there are many pieces to manage, and many constraints which require that more strategy is needed to decide movement.

3. Skill — the dice is used only to resolve conflict (ties) or as a constraint to influence choice (as opposed to dictating movement).

TYPES OF DIE (LOTS)

Binary lots are two-sided. The rare configurations are thrown very infrequently, and therefore are suited only for short-lived games of chance.

Astragals (quaternary lots) are six-sided forms with two opposing sides curved so that only four outcomes are possible on a hard surface: 1, 3, 4, 6.

Long dice usually have four marked sides on an elongated form, but have been known to have as many as twelve sides. The more sides to the form, the smoother it rolls.

Cube dice were first used in the 7th century b.c. in Egypt. Their use spread through the Roman Empire, and by the 6th century a.d., they had reached India (though they did not replace that culture's popular form of dice). Originally numbered randomly from 1 to 6, the universally accepted standard of opposite sides totalling seven probably occurred as a result of balancing the dice with the weight of the marks. Right-handed dice are indicated by viewing the lower right corner of the dice and reading the faces sequentially 1, 2, 3 in a clockwise direction. Left-handed dice are read 1, 2, 3 in a counterclockwise direction from the same lower right corner (though there is no accepted universality to this standard). The odds of cube dice are the same as with binary lots, but the frequency of the rare number combinations is increased. Cubed dice were presumably created to increase play time by allowing those rare number combinations to occur before players became bored with the game. Where binary lots are suited for short games of chance, cube dice are suited for longer play times.

A teetotum (originally called totum) is a four-sided spindle that can be spun instead of thrown. French, Latin and German (dried) versions were popular until the late 18th century, and had markings that indicated initials of their respective sayings. Later, an English version was adopted that consisted of three unmarked sides and one side marked with a \bar{i} . Hence, the name teetotums.

CONCLUSION

Race games of chance can be characterized as simple linear marked boards, with dice playing a central role in the interaction of the dice dictate placement and/or movement.

Race games of chance and skill can be characterized as having branching linear paths with more than three or four playing pieces. The role of the dice is the same as with race games of chance, and also may act as an external force that influences choice.

Race games of skill can be characterized as games in which the dice plays a minimal role ó it is used either to resolve conflict (as in ties), or to influence choice.

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