DESIGNING INTERACTION

What We Can Learn From Modern Board Games

ROGER NGIM

Associate Director, Internal Communications

Yale University

March 17, 2017

AGENDA

🎲 Why talk about board games?

🎲 What is a modern board game?

🎲 A little bit about the study of games

🎲 Board games and design

The Settlers of Catan
(Klaus Teuber, 1995)

This is the first German strategy board game to become a hit in the United States (and worldwide) and what got me into modern board gaming. It is still very popular.
[Learn more](#)

My game room in my Connecticut home and part of my board game collection.
I currently own about 1,000 games and run a small weekly board game group.

A Sampling of Modern Board Games

The slides that follow will give you an idea of the type of board games I study and play. They are good but not necessarily the best games out there.

Flash Point: Fire Rescue
(Kevin Lanzing, 2011)
Learn more

Concordia
(Mac Gerdts, 2013)
Learn more

Smash Monster Rampage!
(Mike Swindall, 2010)
Learn more

Battle Sheep
(Francesco Rotta, 2010)
Learn more

North Wind
(Klaus Teuber, 2010)
Learn more

Casa Grande
(Günter Burkhardt, 2011)
Learn more

Scrabble
(Alfred Mosher Butts, 1948)

This slide is included only because it's my best Scrabble score ever. I pretty much quit playing the game after this because I'll never do better.

Why talk about board games?

- *Growing popularity*

- *Cultural artifact*

- *System modeling*

- *Human interaction*

- *Visual design*

Spiel Fair

Around 175,000 people from around the world attend this game convention, which takes place in October in Essen, Germany. Designers introduce their new games, which sell out almost instantly. [Learn more](#)

BoardgameGeek.con

This annual board game convention in Dallas draws more than 3,000 people every November. The convention features a library of thousands of old and new games, and a vendor hall showcasing new releases. The event sells out hours after registration opens. [Learn more](#) (Note: The link points to someone else's account of BGG.con 2016, not mine.)

THE MAGIC CIRCLE

S Spoilsport
T Trifler
C Cheater

GAME *NOT GAME*
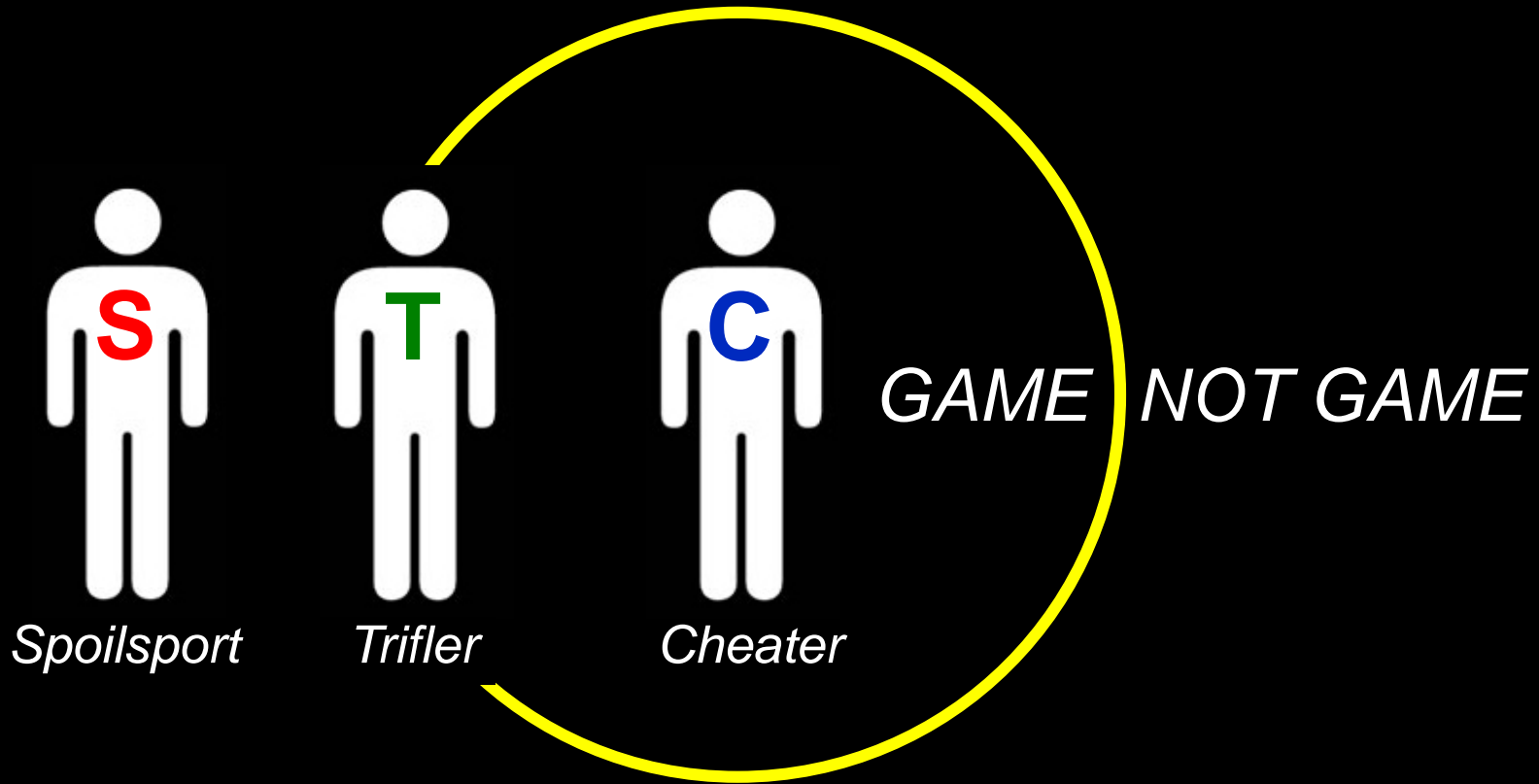
The magic circle is a term coined by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga (1938) that describes the virtual area of play. Within the circle, players' behavior is shaped by agreed upon rules. The spoilsport, trifler, and cheater are states of being in relation to the magic circle. Learn more

DEFINING A GAME

A **game** is a rule-based formal system with

- a variable and quantifiable outcome
- where different outcomes are assigned different values
- the player exerts effort in order to influence the outcome
- the player feels attached to the outcome
- the consequences of the activity are optional and negotiable

Jesper Juul, game theorist
From "Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds"
(MIT Press, 2005)
Learn more

What is a modern board game?

- *Geared toward older players*

- *Beautiful visual designs*

- *More complex game play*

- *Balanced, strategy driven*

- *Often thematic*

Also known as ...

- *Strategy board games*

- *Eurogames*

- *Tabletop games*

A few board game genres

Area control

Players battle over control of territory on the board; dominance usually wins

Blood Rage
(Eric M. Lang, 2015)

A few board game genres

Route planning

Plan and optimize routes
to connect points
on a map, sometimes
to transport goods

Ticket to Ride
(Alan R. Moon, 2004)
Learn more

A few board game genres

Worker Placement

Send your workers (usually people-shaped pieces)
to places on the board
to accomplish tasks
to fulfill game goals

Village
(Inka & Marcus Brand, 2011)
Learn more

A few board game genres

Dexterity

Use physical skill to manipulate game components

Flick 'em Up!
(Gaetan Beaujannot & Jean Yves Monpertius, 2011)
Learn more

A few board game genres

Party

A game for larger groups, often humorous and focused on social interaction

Codenames
(Vlaada Chvátil, 2015)
Learn more

How is a board game designed?

Board games can take years of design development. It usually starts with concept sketches.
[Learn more](#)
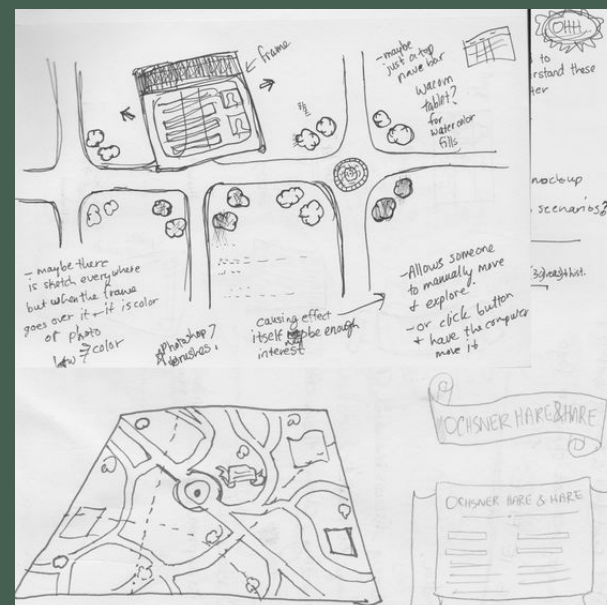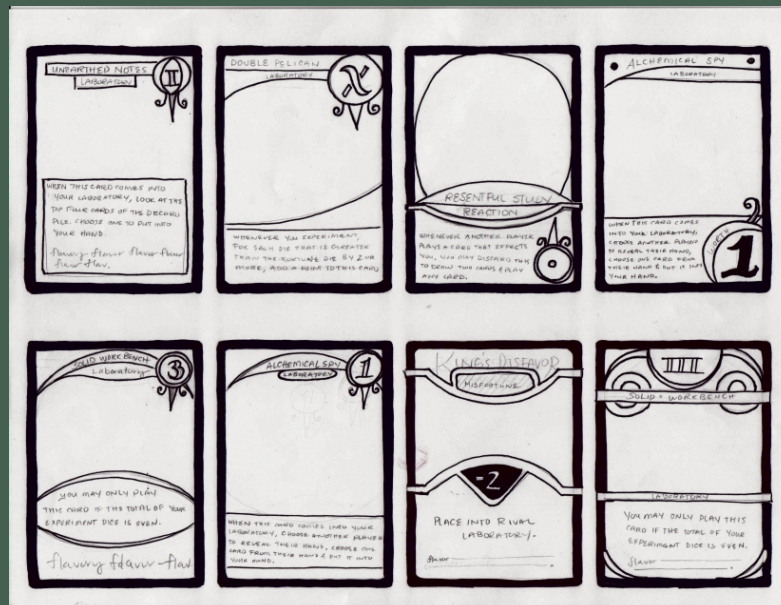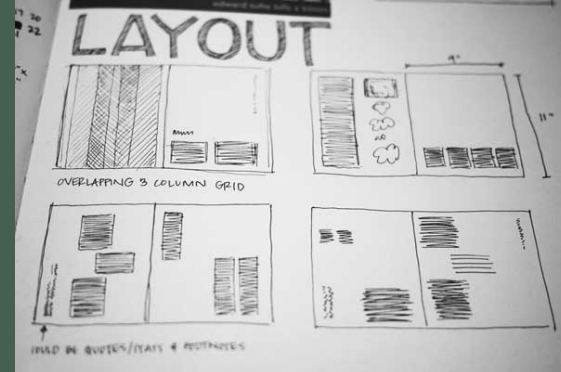
Game prototypes

Prototypes may or may not have a theme applied. They allow the game to be play tested.
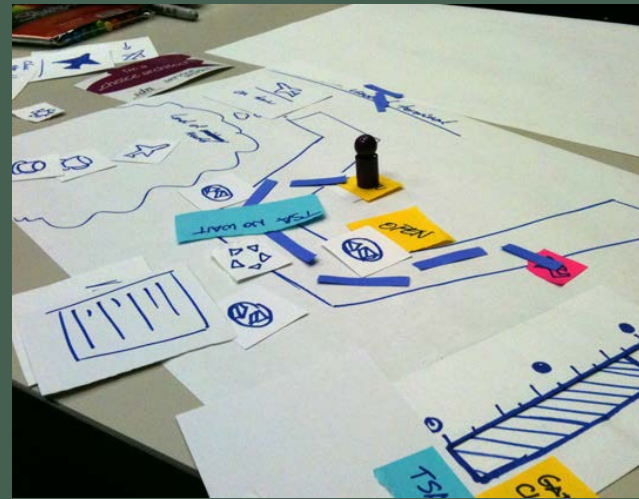
Play testing

Games must be extensively play tested to ensure the game is not "broken" (locks up or is too easily defeated). Designers enlist friends and family, and take prototypes to game conventions.

Visual design

The game publisher or independent designer hires an artist to illustrate the game board, cards, and other components. See some beautiful board game art here. Read about one young game artist, Shaz Yong, here.

Publishing and distribution

Very few people get rich creating board games. Even best-selling strategy board games have a niche audience. Smaller publishers and independent designers will be lucky to sell more than 1,000 copies. At the other end of the spectrum, the game that wins the Spiel des Jahres (German game of the year) could 500,000 copies or more.

Read tips about board game publishing from an insider here.

A closer look at design

Many board games use symbols and icons to remind players of the properties of game components or what actions are available. These symbols only work if they have inherent visual meaning and they "speak" a language understood by the player.

Below are examples of symbolic systems that are not particularly useful without memorizing what the symbols mean.

A closer look at design

On the other hand, using illustrations of recognizable objects can quickly convey an idea. This isn't always practical when you have very limited space (such as on a playing card).

A closer look at design

Because many games are published for a worldwide audience, many publishers try to eliminate text on game components to create language-independent editions.

They have created their own visual language system that is fairly consistent across publishers. Dedicated hobby gamers will know what the player aids on the right and below are telling them.

Fresco
(Wolfgang Panning, Marco Ruskowski, Marcel Süßelbeck, 2016)
Learn more

The Oracle of Delphi
(Stefan Feld, 2016)
Learn more

A closer look at design

This example, from the game Helvetia, shows "helpers" a player can enlist along the bottom of the board. Above each helper are icons that show the action the helper enables.

In the center of the board is a diagram that shows dependencies for the game's resources. For example, to create a steak, you need straw to feed a cow first.

Helvetia
(Matthias Cramer, 2011)
Learn more

A closer look at design

Some board game conventions are costs (in resource cubes) in an upper corner, and point values displayed in a gold shapes (often coins).

However, sometimes icons and symbols are not enough to convey the complexity of the action, as seen here in a series of cards from Grand Austria Hotel. The rulebook contains an extensive explanation of the icons.

Grand Austria Hotel
(Matthias Cramer, 2015)
Learn more

A closer look at design

Two cards from the Greek mythology-themed game Elysium. Notice the many symbols representing the card family, power, and various attributes.

A coin icon is used to represent money, and the laurel wreath represents victory points (the points collected to win the game).

In this case, the designers felt the icons and symbols were insufficient in themselves, so text was added at the bottom of each card.

Elysium
(Matthew Dunstan & Brett J. Gilbert, 2015)
Learn more

What makes good functional design in a board game?

- *Consistent system*

- *Use of conventions*

- *Recognizable symbols/icons*

- *Frequent appearance and placement*

- *Attractive and memorable graphics*

- *References, if needed (legends, quick guides)*

A word about printed game rules

Game publishers are experts at making complex rules understandable in a minimal number of pages.

They use a variety of techniques to summarize, gradually introduce, and visually organize rules.

One of the best practices is to briefly summarize sections in the margins to re-familiarize players who have a read the rules in the past.

Other publishers color code sections, use tables and charts, and follow conventions such as always italicizing examples of play.

Puerto Rico
(Andreas Seyfarth, 2002)
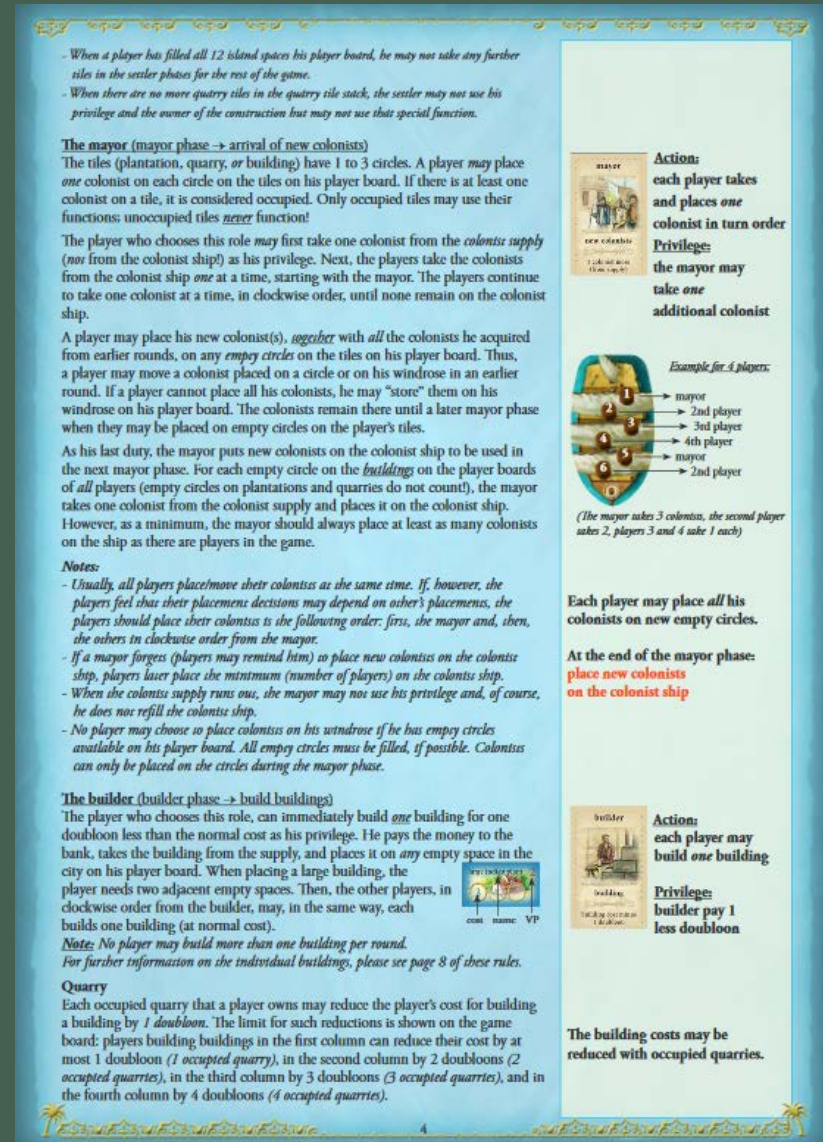
A word about printed game rules

This page from the rulebook for the game Alhambra shows how publisher Queen Games uses color-coding to organizer their rulebooks.

Queen Games produces some of the most visually beautiful games on the market and excellent best rulebooks.

Alhambra
(Dirk Henn, 2003)
Learn more

A few resources

- [Boardgamegeek.com](#) – online database with a wealth of information; free to use and create an account

- [Board Game Gift Guide](#) – A shopping guide from the 2016 holiday season; good place to start for newbies

- Where to buy (trusted online stores):

  [Miniature Market](#)
  [Cool Stuff Inc.](#)
  [Cardhaus Games](#)
  [Amazon](#)

  Online prices are usually better, but you can also find many modern strategy board games at Barnes & Noble, Target, Toys R Us, and local game stores.

DESIGNING INTERACTION

What We Can Learn From Modern Board Games

ROGER NGIM

Associate Director, Internal Communications

Yale University

March 17, 2017