

Mark Bacon

Game Design 101

Pratt / Jones-Brewster

Word Count: 482

A Learning Curve, A Pattern, A Strategy

I found backgammon, from the onset, a generally confusing game. It goes in a different direction for each player, has a variety of new terms, some odd mechanics, and a few different rules of movement. Personally, it took me about 20 or so minutes to have a general understanding of how the rules work, and over the past week or so of playing it, I've been attempting to learn some strategies. One complicated concept was understanding what the 'bar' was, then having to 'bear off' when all your checkers were on the home board. Despite the confusion, figuring it out was incredibly rewarding, and seeing the patterns within the game even more-so. Most of the time I spent playing backgammon was against a CPU, and about an hour or so were spent playing with a friend.

Playing with a CPU was both annoying and educational. If you increase the difficulty, the CPU, obviously, gets better and makes fast and efficient moves. However, on lower difficulties, I was able to get an understanding of the game's mechanics. Once I found I had a pretty good grasp on movement direction, bearing off, what checkers to move, etc. I was able to learn from the CPU... which was not something I expected to do. For example, in backgammon your goal is to get all your checkers onto 6 specific spikes on the home board, and then, once this condition is met, proceed to 'bear off'; get all your chips off the board. My strategy at the start was to get my checkers all onto my home board, without paying any attention to which spikes I was putting them on. Then, I would begin to bear off, hopefully winning the game efficiently. However, whilst playing with the CPU, I noticed that it moved checkers within its home board, not having them all there yet, over to the spike such that a roll of 1 could move their checkers. I soon realized that if I move all my checkers to the home board, they are all on a variety of spikes. Thus, when I begin to 'bear off', I need more than just a 1 to roll, and it ends up taking more time to get my checkers off the board. This type of movement also allows you to leave checkers in places where you can still move them, thus leaving opportunities to capture the opponent's checkers and stall them further. This way, I do not need to rely on several roles to move a checker from a high-numbered spike.

Playing against a friend, I utilized these strategies and it went surprisingly well! I was able to practice the actual strategies and found they gave me an upper hand, at least much more than just playing with no strategy!