

Tartarus: A Board Game Reflecting on Social Dynamics

Yucheng “Fifi” Xie

Parsons School Of Design: Design and Techonoly

New York, NY

xiey481@newschool.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the making and testing of *Tartarus*, a board game that aim to explore players interactions with each other and as group. Users’ experiences will be seen as reflections on how people interact with individuals and in group settings, how we as citizen contribute to society and response to authorities. However, this is only the beginning stage of the experiment, based on the uncontrollable variables such as participants

Author Keywords

Social Contract, Paternalism, Negative Liberty, Utilitarianism, Power Structure. Intergroup Conflict, Individual and collective interests.

INTRODUCTION

The game Tartarus aims to create an immersive experience for users that mimic real life scenarios to reflect on how people’s behaviors change based on the group dynamics and conflicts between their personal goals and group goals. The game will be divided in to three different stages, at the beginning stage, the game will only present one collective goal among the players. During the second stage, the game will present conflicts between players personal interests and the group interests as a whole. Lastly, the game will only focus on personal goals. The project hopes to observe and record different dynamics, interactions and outcome of the game as the stages of goals progresses.

Assumption

Based on Common Knowledge and research paper, before the actual experiment, I expect that as the rules emerges to a more individual benefits focused game, there will be more conflicts created between the players. In addition, as the conflicts increases the level of cooperation between the players shall decreases proportionally.

INSPIRATION

Based on people’s reactions towards Partenalism law, I wanted to push the boundaries and see how far will people willing to give up their rights to have convenience, protection and so forth, This slowly emerges to how will people’s behaviors change once their interests has conflicts with group interests and to what degrees will people be willing to compromise.

THE ROLES AND ASSETS

The roles and assets of the gamed are designed to relate back on the basic needs to survival and elements for a functional society(See Figure 1&2). Farmers produce food, Craftsmen produce shelter, Merchants provide money, and Scribes provide happiness. Each role will also have different amount of tokens to start with, this is to represent the inequality on resource distribution we have. The power structure is set at the beginning of the game, however, depends on the players and how they approach the game, this will shift as the players go along with the game.

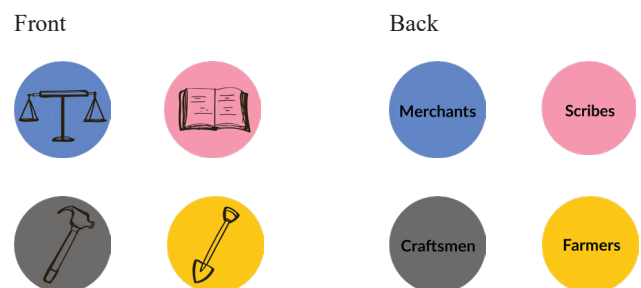


Figure 1

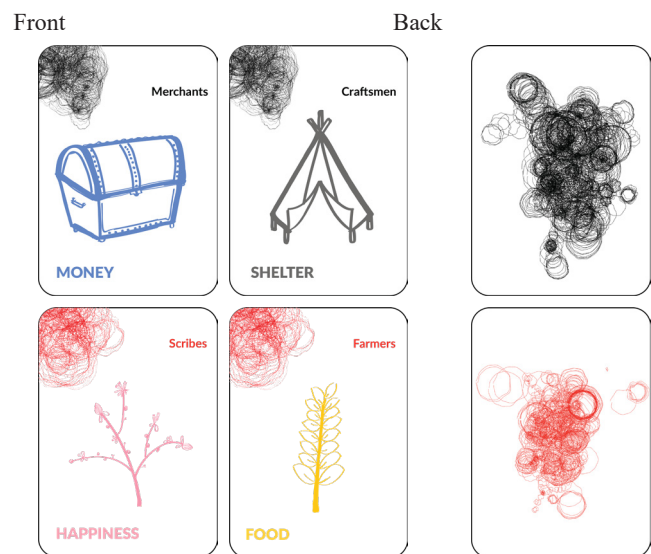


Figure 2

THE RULE BOOK

The rule book consists a sets of rule that restrain the players during the game and hope to drive to greater conflicts between them. The game is set in which there are two groups, and each group consist 3 to 4 players. Each player

gets assigned a role, and based on their roles, each player produce an essential element for their team to generate more members which are represented by tokens. The goal for the team is to have the most tokens.

Rule Sets: Stage One

Following are the rules of Stage One. At this stage, players only play for their team to win.

- **Starting:** Players will divide into two groups, within each group, the players gets to pick a card which indicates their role and how many tokens they start with. The player with the most tokens is the default ruler of the team, however, they can give up their right to rule. As for other players, if the default ruler does not give up their right to rule, the rest of the team can take the ruler's token (one at a time), and make themselves the player with the most token and therefore get the right to rule.
- **Order:** After the initial round of deciding the ruler, which ever team has the most tokens gets to go first, and within the team, the ruler always gets to go first and again last. The rest players' order follows by the amount of tokens they each have in a descending order.
- **Ruling:** As the ruler, during their turn they get to rearrange other player's assets.
- **Turn:** During each turn, the plays draws one asset card that correspond with their role. They also get to decide if they want to keep, trade or gift their assets. The players are also allowed to steal other team members' assets. If a player has a set of assets (meaning a set of all different type of asset that their team produce), they can trade it in with a token.
- **Migration:** Players get to decide if they want to migrant to the other team. If so, they have to contribute two sets of assets to the other team and if they get rejected, the player lose one set and the team get to keep the other.
- **Trading&Stealing:** During their turn, players are allowed trade one specific asset with a desire asset with another player with their consent. Or they can "steal" an asset from a desired player by randomly pick an asset card from their pile.

Stage One Play Test:

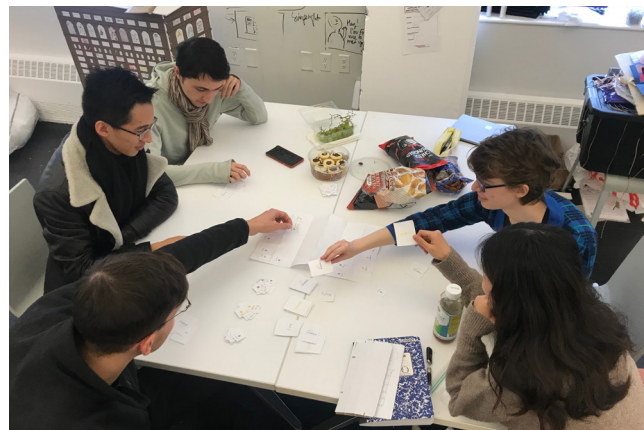


Figure 3

I've conducted three rounds of play tests during Stage One. Based on the three rounds of the play test (See Figure 3) on Stage One, there was no conflicts between the players in the same team. Even though in the rule sets people could be benefiting themselves by declaring their right to rule or take their teammates out so they get to rule. Everyone agreed on give up their chance to be the ruler and their assets for their team to win. Some players has said they didn't really care about their own winning or loosing, most players also agreed that they might get competitive if there is more at stake. However based on the current rule set they don't feel there is enough drive them to sabotage their team member but rather cooperate.

Rule Sets: Stage Two

This Stage the rule changes to where people will gain benefits from cooperate with others, however, player can only win as an individual. This is aim to encourage people to team up with others, yet still create conflict between them.

- The basic rules stays the same as stage one.
- You can only team up with someone who has different role with you
- If you team up with someone, collectively you guys will gain an extra turn at the end of each round. However, when your team has taken most of the board, the winner will only one of you who has most tokens on the board.
- During their collective turn, the players get to draw once between the two type assets they are assigned to. The players gets to decide who gets the assets. Even if they act as a team, only the players who have all the assets get to trade their assets for tokens, and their types of tokens only.
- Players are allowed to give their cards, during their collective turn, to their teammates. There is no limit on the type of cards nor the quantity of how many they are willing to exchange or give out to their teammate during their collective turn.

Stage Two Play Test:



Figure 4

During this stage, the players started to considering their chance of winning, and negotiating with other players to team up and therefore to increase their chances of winning.

Rule Sets: Stage Three

At this stage, there will be no team, the general rules stays the same, however, there will be no teams nor working with another players.

- There is no addition rules at this stage, the players only goal is to collect more assets card to trade in for more tokens to win. Teams and groups do not apply in this stage

Stage Three Play Test:



Figure 5

Players are definitely becoming the most competitive at this stage, however, there are still communication between them . People are still trading cards with each other, and will negotiate on terms. In addition, Even though people are not teaming up “officially”, nor they gain actual benefits from doing so. Players start to form a “common enemy” who is

ahead of the game, and targeted them.

VISUAL DESIGN



Figure 6



Figure 7

Through out the game, there is consisted visual identity (the chaotic circles) on all elements of the game. Each card are color coded with their them, their assets type that corresponds with each token, as well as both illustrations and written words to clarify their functions. The tokens also colored in the way the response to their assets type, on the front there are icons indicating their role, and on the back there are written words of each roles for clarification as well. (See Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 6, Figure 7). In addition, the board is also color coded with team color for

Stage One only.

OBSERVATION

In this section I will state in detail on every stages' play test.

Stage 1

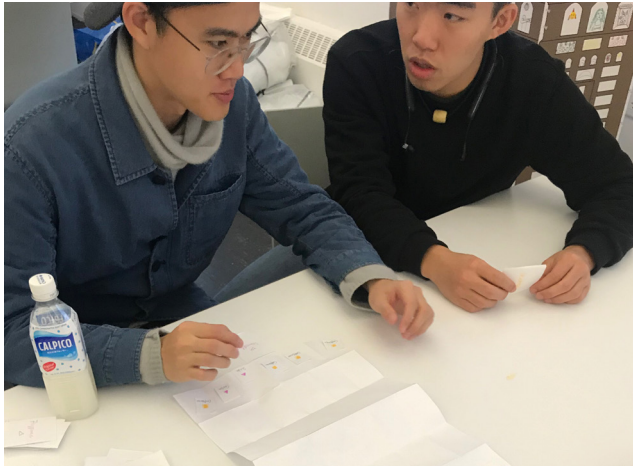


Figure 8

In this stage, since the overall goal of the game is for the whole team to win, no conflicts between the players have shown during the play tests. Not one player has shown any sign that they wanted to win for themselves or getting more assets for themselves. People seem to work out a system at the very beginning to elect one person who already has the advantage in the team and give all their assets to that person so their team can win first. No one had complaint about that why their assets weren't equal to start with. People don't seem to care about themselves, nor how many assets they will gain or lose. Couple people have expressed that since they can't actually "win", they don't feel there is a need to gain anything for themselves, as long as their team wins, they are happy to contribute, even more so, they are volunteer to contribute and give up their assets for the team.

Stage 2



Figure 9

In Stage Two, most players started to team up is because they do collectively get an extra turn and extra assets. Even though only one person gets to hold on to the card they gained collectively, and only one person to trade in for tokens. People seem to be pretty okay with it. They will negotiate on turns as to who gets the token next time. As for trading assets across the game. Only a few people decided to steal, people are much more comfortable in trading with others. One player has said, "Let me trade with you, so at least I get a card back." In other cases, players will promise during their next turn they will reserve an asset they haven't drawn yet to another player since they currently do not have any cards. There was one comment: "That's how Credit Crisis happens."

Stage 3



Figure 10

In Stage Three, players seem to be more competitive and engaged in the game. One interesting phenomenon occurred is that players will form a common enemy, who is leading in the game. Based on previous rounds, people are leaning towards trading instead of stealing. However, at Stage Three, players started with trading heavily, until one player has shown clear advantage, the rest of the players decided to target that player and started to steal her assets instead of the rest of the players.

CONCLUSION

From the series of play and observing, it seems that even if the conflicts increase tremendously, people are still finding ways to work together to reach their own goal. The interests (game goal) shifts do cause different types of reactions and how players interact with each other. From solely donating their assets to the group, people started to negotiate deals, forming small groups based on their common interest, not helping others not for their own benefits but for their common enemy. However, the data sample is very small. In addition, there are many variables that aren't included in this experiment such as: each play group's dynamic, players' relationships with one another. Every player's personality,

how they react in situations involve conflicts, their personal, cultural, religious background, etc.,. The observation and conclusion is only based on the specific play tests I've conducted and witnessed. The conclusion might not fit in every situation, nor should be used as an general guideline on intergroup conflicts.

FUTURE

In the future I hope to improve the game mechanism based on the play tests and feedbacks I received from the participants to make this game more enjoyable. In addition, I hope to connect with experts on the topics and gain more insights on how this game can be improved as a tool for research in the field.

CITATION

Lists of references and researched this project was inspired and built on:

- Group behavior: one for the team
<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research-dossiers/reconciling-conflicting-interests/group-behaviour-one-for-the-team>
- Introduction to Philosophy
http://www.qcc.cuny.edu/SocialSciences/ppecorino/INTRO_TEXT/default.htm
- One More Step
Halevy, Nir, et al. "One More Step." EmeraldInsight, www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/abs/10.1108/S1534-0856%282011%290000014007.
- Reconciling conflicting interests
<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/research-dossiers/reconciling-conflicting-interests>
- Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group, and Collective Interests.
Bornstein, Gary. "Intergroup Conflict: Individual, Group, and Collective Interests." 1 May 2013.
- On Liberty
Mill, John Stuart. On Liberty. Penguin Books, 2010.
- Leviathan
Hobbes, Thomas, and Noel Malcolm. Leviathan. Clarendon Press, 2012.
- Perceiving Intergroup Conflict: From Game Models to Mental Templates
Halevy, Nir, et al. "Perceiving Intergroup Conflict: From Game Models to Mental Templates." Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency, journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0146167206291947.