

The Implicit Rules of Board Games

– on the particulars of the lusory agreement

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ABSTRACT

Seeking to explore the implicit rules surrounding the playing of board games in order to facilitate design and add to the understanding of gamers and gaming, this paper describes the result of an interview study of eleven experienced board gamers. A set of implicit rules commonly used are outlined, along with the points of contention where the gamers do not agree or there exists significant discussion. These are further divided in categories of game-focused rules, group-focused rules and in-between rules. How violations of the implicit rules are handled by the players are discussed, as is the implications for computer gaming and game design.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

J.3.3 [Personal Computing]: General – games

General Terms

Design, Human Factors, Theory

Keywords

Board Games, Digital Games, Implicit Rules, Interview Study, Game Design, Gaming

1. INTRODUCTION

Games and play of different kinds have trained and entertained people since the dawn of man. Games are usually social affairs (there are solitaire games, but even those can be considered as part of a larger culture of gaming), where players form an agreement on a common activity, that of the game. This was dubbed the “magic circle” by early game scholar Huzingha in his seminal work “Homo Ludens” [10]. In entering the magic circle the players form an agreement on the common activity and the bounds thereof.

There are many definitions of “game” each with its own strengths and weaknesses. One of the most prolific is Salen &

Zimmerman’s from their book “*Rules of Play*” (which also contains an overview of the most established definitions): “A *game is a system in which players engage in an artificial conflict defined by rules, that results in a quantifiable outcome*” [21]. Most definitions mention rules, in one form or other, and it is rules that will be the focus of this article. According to David Parlett [18] the rules of a game *is* the game, but this leaves out the components of the game and the game’s cultural context.

The rules of a game can be divided into two categories; explicit rules, which are a part of the game artifact itself, and implicit rules [21][27] which are part of the social agreement between the players.

Explicit rules have several properties that mark them as such: they limit player action, they are explicit and unambiguous, shared by all players, fixed, binding and repeatable [21]. Implicit rules on the other hand are the “unwritten” rules of the game, and share none of the properties of explicit rules. They are often ambiguous, need not be shared by all players, can change as the game progresses, need not be binding and are hard to repeat from one game to the next as they can and will change with the context.

An implicit rule can be made explicit by stating it out loud and formulating it in unambiguous terms, but this is often difficult; many of the common implicit rules are vague and lend themselves poorly to such endeavors, if not, they would probably have been made explicit already. Instead, the implicit rules are often taken for granted and seldom if ever verbalized, except in cases of transgression. This is not always unproblematic, as different players and different groups of players can have radically different opinions on what the implicit rules entail, and how strictly they should be followed. But it is precisely this type of conflict that allows us to study implicit rules – if they are not contested or violated, they are practically invisible.

This article will look upon the common implicit rules between experienced players of “hobby” board games – Settlers [25], Puerto Rico [22] or Britannia [19] rather than Monopoly [15] or Trivial Pursuit [1]. It will also touch upon how transgressions are handled among players. Emphasis will be on the rules themselves and the points of contention between players. Implicit rules that are a part of the normal social contract between people and not unique to the gaming situation are however beyond the scope of the article.

Based on the belief that a thorough understanding of games, both digital and analog, cannot be complete without an understanding of the implicit rules as well as the explicit and the “human factor” surrounding them, the purpose of this article is to enhance the

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understanding of implicit rules in general, to further both the understanding of players and the design of games. The points of contention are just as interesting as the rules themselves, and the circumstances during which controversy can occur.

While this study is focused on players of board games (including card games/war games), digital games and gamers are not without implicit rules, such as keeping the player focused on the goals of the game – compare for example the practice of “griefing” [28]. Even if the hard-coded rules, as opposed to mutually upheld, make for some differences, the similarities are several; see also [27].

As computer games become more focused on multiplayer gaming, especially in groups that are less anonymous such as established friends playing Left4Dead [6] or Singstar [17], rules such as this will probably become more and more important in the digital domain. This also holds true for board games that are played over the computer medium (see e.g. Vassal¹ or Brettspielwelt²).

Given the rise to prominence of e-sports [20] and online gaming tournaments, a discussion on implicit rules can prove especially fruitful, as the competitive nature of sports cannot have ambiguous rule sets. Given the scope of online gaming, umpires for every game would be unfeasible, necessitating solid coded rules to avoid friction between players.

Given that the players of digital games are relatively harder to study because of their geographical dispersion and the often anonymous and temporary nature of an online game (a conclusion also reached by [27]), this article aims to benefit both genres of games.

The field of game research is still relatively young and “*even the vocabulary and basic terminology is still being defined and discussed*” [29]. In this formative phase it is extra important that the entire spectrum of what could be studied regarding a game is explored, so that the nascent field is not bereft of important perspectives.

One way to categorize the study of games is to divide it into a study of either games (the study of the game artifact), gaming (the study of the activity) or gamers (the study of the players themselves) as proposed by Björk [5]. This article would fall closest to a study of gaming, since it looks at the actual activity as it occurs. But it also leans slightly towards the gamers, since it is very much concerned with how the gamers themselves construe their activity.

Stephen Sniderman explores the relationship between formal and unwritten rules in his article “*Unwritten Rules*” [23]. He challenges the notion that a game is an easily definable phenomenon with clear rules, and insists that the human factor is impossible to remove from the playing of a game. He lists some problematic areas, such as taking a “reasonable” amount of time for each move and following the etiquette for each game and context, but uses no systematic data except his own experience.

Someone who does use plenty of systematic data in her thorough examination of implicit rules, their negotiation and the friction they can cause is Linda Hughes in “*Beyond the Rules of the Game: Why Are Rooie Rules Nice?*” [9]. She has studied children

playing “Foursquare³” in the suburbs of Philadelphia, both through observation and interviews and produced a body of work on how rules are negotiated and the often indefinite nature thereof. The game of foursquare as played by youngsters in American schoolyards could be seen as far from the much more formalized play of experienced board gamers but it does show that the actual rules, explicit plus implicit, are a very malleable and indistinct thing, clearly illustrating that the reality of *gaming* (between players) is different from that of the *game* (as artifact).

This sentiment is echoed in Stewart John Woods “(Play) *Ground Rules: The Social Contract and the Magic Circle*” [27]. Woods has studied the social contract surrounding board games (in his essay also “face-to-face” or “social” games) via a questionnaire delivered to various online communities for board gamers. His main assertion is that although the explicit goal of the game is winning, there is an overarching “meta-goal” - that of enjoyment while playing – which requires an implicit understanding between the players.

Miguel Sicart has looked at the ethics of computer games in his book “*The Ethics of Computer Games*” [24]. While dealing with ethics and computer games in a wider perspective, it does include a section on the “good” or “ethical” gamer. Heavily influenced by Aristotelian virtue ethics [2], Sicart presents a normative list of “player virtues” that the good player should exhibit: sense of achievement, explorative curiosity, socializing nature, balanced aggression, care for game balance and sportsmanship. He also points out, that just as with the Aristotelian virtues, a player can either exhibit too much or not enough of the virtue in question. These virtues will be revisited in the discussion section of the article, to see how and if they can be applied to the empirical data presented in the study.

Throughout this article “gamer” and “player” are used interchangeably.

2. METHOD

The author of this article has extensive personal experience of games in general and board games in particular. This background is essential to the paper, as many of the rules discussed were first observed when they surfaced in controversies and discussions during play. This experience forms the grounding on which the interview questions were formulated and without it, the interviews would not have been possible.

The study was done as a series of in-depth interviews with a number of experienced board gamers. The format of the in-depth interview was chosen because it allows for eliciting answers to specific questions while still giving the participants an opportunity to add their own understanding and come up with data that had been overlooked in the analysis so far.

An interview-study was chosen over for example a questionnaire-study (which would have yielded more quantitative data) or more formal participatory observation (see e.g. [7]). A questionnaire approach was discarded because there was little material beyond the authors own experience upon which to construct the questionnaire, and much of the data that could have been gathered in a formal participatory observation would already be covered by the authors own experience. Also, it would have required a vast

¹ <http://www.vassalengine.org/community/index.php>

² <http://www.brettspielwelt.de/?nation=en>

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four_square

amount of observation to gather the same amount of data as with interviews.

There were eleven interviews in total with a length varying from half an hour to up to slightly more than an hour, carried out both over the phone and in person in an informal and open manner. Three of the respondents were interviewed in a group, allowing them to comment and discuss with each other, in a more focus-group manner. The respondents were fully informed of the essays scope and purpose and if and what they wanted to contribute. The interviews were not recorded; instead extensive notes were taken. The respondents were all white Swedish males in the range of 22-45 years of age who had been playing board games for many years (approx. range 3 - 15+ years). An effort was made to diversify the range with respect to gender, but it was unsuccessful - no consenting female gamer with comparable experience could be located at the time of the study. No effort was made to produce a statistically representative sample from the population of board gamers; instead the respondents were selected as to provide a diversity of experience. They were recruited from the author's extended social network and through three different gaming venues - two "board game nights" and one games convention.

Methodologically, inspiration was taken from grounded theory in that data was sought until a "critical mass" was reached and new respondents ceased to provide additional data [8]. The "categories" of grounded theory, here the rules themselves, emerged almost right away- many are discussed regularly among experienced players. As they emerged they were presented to the respondents so that alternate views could be secured and the level of dispute surrounding a rule could be gauged.

Two works were especially influential on the style and nature of the interviews; Thomsson's *Reflexiva Intervjuer* [26] (eng.: "Reflective Interviews") and Kvale's *Den kvalitativa forskningsintervjun* [13] (eng.: "The qualitative research interview"). The former emphasizes the informal, semi-structured interview where interviewer and respondent create knowledge together; exploring the subject while reflecting on what is brought forth. The latter is a pure method book aiming to improve the quality of research interviews.

3. RESULTS

Found below is the result of the interviews, a set of implicit rules that are more or less agreed upon between the gamers. They have been divided into three rough categories, depending on whether they are seen as closer to the game and its mechanics, the gamers and their group or fall somewhere in between.

Unsurprisingly, the results are not an exhaustive list of implicit rules in board games and it is doubtful that such a list could ever be compiled, but rather what came up as the most important issues for players of board games. It must also be recognized that many of the arguments cited could be drawn out endlessly (and often are) with points, counter-points and individual stances; found below is only the roughest outline and players occupy any number of positions between the extremes.

It is worth noting that none of the respondents mentioned outright cheating - a violation of the explicit rules, and when asked they stated that it was very uncommon, and that it never became an issue.

All quotes below have been edited heavily for brevity and readability, and have been completely anonymized. They are also translated from the original Swedish, and colloquial expressions have been cleared up as far as possible. This leaves the quotes far from verbatim, and might be seen rather as finer points explained as a gamer might explain them in his or her own words.

3.1 The Game-focused Rules

In this category we find rules that are closer to the game and directly relates to the formal, explicit rules of the game and its gameplay - the meeting between the gamers and the game rules[4]. The rules in this category came up early during the interviews, and almost every respondent had something to say on them - but while they are the subject of much debate, they are not necessarily the rules that cause the most friction between gamers.

Clear conventions benefit several of the rules below, leading to minimized friction between the gamers. Respondents cite a period "before and after" they managed to put clear conventions in place, and state that the exact nature of the conventions does not matter, as long as everyone agrees.

3.1.1 Strive towards game goals/optimize position

Cited as one of the more fundamental rules, it might at first appear obvious that each player is expected to strive towards the game goals (i.e. victory) and little else. One might say that this forms the basis of the gaming agreement, and that a game would be sorely lacking without adherence to this rule. Several other rules below can actually be derived from it. The reality of gaming interaction is somewhat more complicated and there are several exceptions. Lack of skill or limited information is one such exception, as no-one expects that all players will know exactly what do to in order to further his or her position at any given time.

"This really is all about intention; if a player intends to win, and doesn't 'goof around' it is alright, and of course it doesn't matter if it is actually a dumb move"

Testing new strategy is another; as many games are complicated affairs, players will sometimes want to try out alternative strategies that might or might not work. Thus, a player might take an unknown course of action over a known, efficient one.

A player's position in the game is not an exception - a player is expected to strive just as hard to win regardless of how far "behind" he or she might be.

"Nothing is as frustrating as when someone goes 'I can't win, so I might as well do whatever', but people don't do that much"

So far, there seems to be a general consensus and little contention between players, but on the issue of excessive time-consuming game-state analysis, also known as "analysis paralysis", there is considerable argument. Some argue that it is perfectly all right to make a less-than-optimal move for the sake of limiting the time of one's turn, thereby increasing the experience for the other players, while others argue that all players should be given whatever time they need to make the best possible move, since the experience is lessened if you know that someone isn't playing his or her best.

"This is a really complicated issue, you want people to play their best, but at the same time not take forever, you know? With some people, this comes up all the time..."

Another major point of contention is how to value second, third etc. place compared to first place/winning. Should a player for

example forfeit a solid second place for a chance, however slim, at first place? Many players are firmly in the “first place or nothing” category and would gladly do so, others view the decision as more complicated, especially in games with many players. All agree that even if one has no chance of victory, one should strive to come as close as possible, even if the game does not recognize individual positions aside from the winner. Regardless, this is usually viewed as something that is up to each player, but allegedly arguments on this issue arise from time to time.

3.1.2 No Early Termination of the Game

A derivative of the rule above, the rule against causing the game to terminate early (unless you are in a winning position, of course) is also rather uncontested, but again, has important exceptions that sometimes are the subject of argument. One of these is whether a player is free to terminate the game if he perceives that he only stands to lose position from continued play. Some say that he should, since it is his “duty” to attempt to optimize his own position even if it means terminating the game, others say that he should not, since this robs other players (who might stand to change their position) of their experience.

This rule extends to hindering another (often in a winning position) from terminating the game (and thereby winning the game); a responsibility often handed down to the last player being able to do so.

“Let’s say that the player to my left [who will be next to make a move; it is implied that the game progresses clockwise around the table] will win on his turn unless someone makes a move that makes this impossible. Then it falls on me to make that move, since I’m the last person that can do it. The person to my right won’t, since he knows that I will.”

Players will at times find themselves in a situation where they must determine who will be victorious, without being able to better their own position. They are now in what is dubbed a “kingmaking” position which is generally considered a design flaw if it appears in a game.

3.1.3 Adhering to the Spirit of the Game

A complicated, contested issue with many levels. No agreement is to be found among players; some say that one should adhere, at least somewhat, to the “spirit of the game” while playing, others state that “if it’s possible in the game, then it’s possible in the game”. “A good game will be designed in such a manner that one adheres to the theme automatically”, these would say, while the aforementioned would argue that this is difficult, if not impossible. Aggression levels is also an issue here as players disagree on whether there is a level of aggression appropriate to a specific game. The same goes for the exploitation of flaws in the game’s system; some say that if it’s designed that way then fine, if it breaks the game then it breaks the game, others that obvious flaws should be avoided or circumvented somehow. The attitude seems to be influenced heavily by which type of games the gamer generally plays; it seems to be more of an issue in games with more theme.

“If I’m playing, say, Haunted House on the Hill, or Arkham Horror, then I want us to really experience the flavor of the game, and play like you’re supposed to. If someone treats it like just another game, it really ruins the experience.”

“People will sometimes refer to the ‘spirit of the game’ or the ‘theme’ to force you into a specific style of playing, but it just isn’t right- you have to be allowed to do whatever you want. If the game has such problems, I say it’s just bad design”

3.1.4 Taking Back a Move

Both contested and with significant exceptions, few gaming groups fail to discuss this at least once. Most seem to adopt a policy of “no takebacks”, but a significant number allows it if the next player hasn’t made his move yet. The specifics vary greatly between groups, though. Notable exceptions are (sometimes) made if someone makes a game-breaking mistake very early or if someone is a beginner. Then there is the system error exception, see below.

“Beginner or veteran, casual or serious, every board gamer has had at least one argument on takebacks. We try to be all hardcore about it, but we’re really not that consistent, and people take moves back in at least one out of two or three games.”

“Since we play wargames mostly, [a subcategory of board games] which are complicated and time-consuming, we are very casual with allowing people to undo their moves. Generally it is always accepted if the opponent hasn’t revealed any information yet or dice has been thrown, and sometimes, if the opponent agrees, even if that has happened. Seeing a 60-100 hour game go sour early on because of a mistake isn’t anything anyone wants, but as the endgame approaches we become stricter.”

3.1.5 Handling Mistakes

Not as much a contested issue as one where there are a lot of different conventions, each gaming group seems to develop its own policy when it comes to handling mistakes concerning the system of the game. What seems important here is not the exact method used, but rather that a method is actually used, that all players are familiar with. This is often not the case, and arguments arise on whether to reroll dice that end up on the floor or on uneven surfaces, whether to allow someone to draw a card that he or she would have been entitled to earlier, whether to retrace the steps to resolve an earlier mistake, and so on.

“If any dice goes on the floor or is misaligned in any way, we reroll all dice in that roll, no exceptions. It’s better to be strict like this than to invite arguments that always spoil the mood”

3.2 The Group-focused Rules

This category includes rules that are more focused on the group of people playing, and proper behavior while playing. The rules in this category seem to elicit much more friction between gamers than the rule-focused category, and less clear conventions exist. The respondents state that this “is more about the people than the game, so people become much more frustrated and/or angry when there is disagreement”.

3.2.1 No Early Exit

This is one of the least contested rules; you are in the game until it ends, unless an early exit was agreed upon beforehand or there is agreement among all players.

Note the difference between “early termination” and “early exit” – early exit is someone leaving the game before it is finished; early termination is causing the game to finish, within the established rules.

“Everyone hates a quitter, but it happens, particularly among gamers that are not that serious. It always leaves the game in a mess”

3.2.2 No unacceptable whining during game on your position or the quality of the game

Opinions differ greatly on how much and what type of whining is acceptable, but all seem to agree that whining really comes in two flavors- “acceptable” whining and “unacceptable” whining. Some whining is merely considered entertaining, while other whining is considered a bother. Which is which differs between groups of gamers, on who is doing the whining and the “tone” of whining; the exact variables are hard to pin down.

“Some people can whine and it’s like, everyone laughs and is entertained, some can’t and it’s really a pain in the ... , it is as simple as that.”

Whining on your position in the game seems more accepted than whining on the quality of the game though, which is generally said to be unacceptable, unless the game is really poor and the players “seem to be in agreement” on this.

“No whining on the game until afterwards, I’m serious, it can really ruin the mood. No exceptions, except perhaps, if the game is like completely broken, but then everyone can laugh as we just try to get through it and bash the game together”

3.2.3 No Serious After Game Gloating/Sulking

Players are expected to neither gloat (in case of victory) nor sulk (in case of losing), but only “serious” gloating or sulking counts. One respondent even went so far as stating that a player that seemed to unconcerned about his or her loss took away some of the fun of winning:

“If someone doesn’t care whether they win or lose, winning just isn’t as fun, I think. You have to care, but of course, they mustn’t care ‘for real’ so to speak.”

3.2.4 Gaming Etiquette

Different gamer groups have widely different views of etiquette when it comes to the eating of snacks around the gaming table, the handling of materials, taking pauses, and so on. Although etiquette certainly affects the game experience, it is better classified as belonging to the game’s social context and varies as much with the social structure of the group gathered to play as with the game they play.

“Usually the owner of the game decides whether it is ok to eat and drink at the table. Some are really anal about it, others don’t mind at all.”

3.3 The Rules In Between

These are the rules that fall somewhere in between the group and the rules, often concerning the boundary of the magic circle. These are perhaps the rules that cause the most caustic friction between gamers when they are transgressed, and it is difficult to find conventions on how to handle problems when they arise.

3.3.1 No Between Games “memory”

Basing your decisions in one game on what took place in another game is usually frowned upon, such as “attacking” another player because of what he or she did to you in an earlier game. Players

are however quick to point out that this is not the same thing as “knowing your enemy”, i.e. deducing details about another’s playing style and letting this guide your actions. The difference seems to lie in whether there’s a discernible pattern, or if it is just getting even for some past imagined slight.

“Someone does this and they are done in our group, completely. Some dude tried to defend himself with ‘I’m trying to teach people not to attack me’ but that doesn’t fly. It’s no problem if I’m like ‘Martin always goes for a [specific strategy], so I better counter this’ but this is different, it’s like he couldn’t separate the people, the game and the moment, so to speak.”

3.3.2 No Metagaming

Breaking the boundary of the game by allowing undue outside influences to affect the game, or vice versa (such as threatening a player with off-game consequences if he or she takes (or doesn’t) a certain action in game) is considered very bad form, no exceptions, but players sometimes jest about such things.

“I don’t really want to bring it up since it’s such a cliché, but of course the example that always comes up is two spouses cooperating, or doing each other favors in the game. But it never happens that way, not in my experience. People joke about it, like ‘give it to me or the bed will be cold tonight’ or ‘remember who your game master⁴ is’, but everyone knows it’s not serious. If anyone ever did something like that it would be an instant gamebreaker.”

3.3.3 Table Talk, Deals and Cooperation

There seems to be little consensus here, as the amount of cooperation between players allowed depends largely on the game being played, but also on the playing-style of the particular group. Some games are designed specifically for a lot of deal making and diplomacy, in other games such is viewed with suspicion. Most players seem to agree on that an instant deal “I’ll give you this if you give me that” is binding, but that a deal that stretches over time “I’ll give you this now, if you do this next turn” is not, a sentiment that is echoed in the formal rules of many games. There is also the understanding that if the game rules do not mention the transfer of a given game token between players, it is not allowed.

If a game does not seem to be specifically geared toward cooperation and alliances, “undue” cooperation between two (or more, but this is unusual) players is considered bad form, even if it is completely within the rules. This holds true even if these two players stand to increase their respective chances of winning compared to the other players.

“It’s difficult to say which cooperation is ‘ok’ and which is ‘not ok’. I guess that if it’s more systematic, or excludes obviously better deals from other people, it is more ‘not ok’. But you can usually smell a couple of ‘co-ops’⁵ easily.”

Advice on how to play is a different type of table talk and is usually only allowed if someone is a real beginner, and it is considered good form to present possibilities rather than telling someone exactly what to do. There seems to be an exception for “advise” that is clearly beneficial for the advisor and doesn’t “trick” someone who is inexperienced. This seems closer to

⁴ A reference to role-playing see e.g. [7]

⁵ Translated colloquial expression

someone trying to talk someone else into a particular course of action, which is generally considered ok.

Advice from bystanders is generally unacceptable, but they are allowed to point out breaches of the rules or other misunderstandings, or to guide a beginner if he or she is asking for help.

“People can really clash when it comes to table talk; I’ve seen some vicious arguments. It’s largely a [gaming] cultural thing and can be very difficult when people from different circles play together. I mean, usually it works out, but I’ve seen people walk from the table over this”

3.3.4 Discussing rules

The respondents seem divided over how much argument should be allowed during a game if a rule (or more often, the interpretation of a rule) is in dispute. Some are inclined to postpone all argument to after the current game as to not ruin it, settling the dispute temporarily with e.g. a coin toss. Others claim that it is more important to get it right at once, and view a rules discussion as less problematic.

“I don’t do games where there are rules discussions; I don’t play with people who argue rules. Nothing is as frustrating as having to listen to two people who just won’t back down grind on and on over the same ground, the mood turning worse and worse as the argument drags on. I say just let the dice settle the matter and play on!”

“I think it is really important that you do not rush a decision; that would invalidate the game completely for me. People who want to decide important rules with a coin-toss perhaps don’t regard games as seriously.”

With the appearance of the Internet and sites dedicated to the discussion of games (such as Boardgamegeek⁶), coupled with the proliferation of Internet access, FAQs and rules clarifications posted online have made it possible to shorten rules discussions considerably – the players simply look up the game and see if there are others who have had the same problem.

“Earlier, rules discussions could go on forever, and some games were even avoided since we knew they would flare up as soon as the game hit the table, but nowadays you can find answers to almost anything online. If you’re in the correct forum, you might even get an answer directly from the designer!”

3.4 The Almighty Consensus Exception

One type of exception not mentioned above is one that covers all rules and situations, and even the gaming activity itself; the consensus exception. If everyone is in agreement, any rule can be bent or broken, sessions terminated and restarted, exceptions made, and so on. The common consensus between the players is what constitutes the gaming agreement, so it follows logically that if there is another consensus, it takes precedence.

“Of course, if everyone is in agreement, any rule can be changed, I mean, if it is ok with everyone, why shouldn’t we, it’s our game? It doesn’t happen that often, but it does happen that everyone is like, ‘let’s drop this bullshit, it isn’t working’”

Some state however that sometimes they feel that they should finish what they started, and can do something else next time, even if they and everyone else really think differently.

“Once I’m set, I’m set, and while I might disagree with for example a particular rule, I usually think that we owe it to the designer to play it to the finish, there might be things that we’ve overlooked.”

The respondents also mention that it can be difficult to check for consensus on for example terminating a game early, because of the “no whining” rule above.

“Not until afterwards did we discover that everyone thought the game was horrendous, and that no-one would have minded if we quit early, but no-one wanted to spoil the experience by saying so mid-game.”

3.5 Violating the Implicit Rules

The issue of transgression of the implicit rules is a complicated one and did not come up spontaneously during the interviews. When asked, the respondents agree that it is very complicated and that there exists little consensus or consistency among players.

“Oh, we don’t talk about that much in the open, but of course it happens that so-and-so is badmouthed behind his or her back and such things, there is no open atmosphere on these issues [the punishment of transgressors]”

The nature of transgression and the treatment thereof seems to differ somewhat between the three different categories of implicit rules:

For the game-focused rules it appears to be mostly an issue of finding an agreement on the issues mentioned. Many agree that it does not matter which, just as long as everyone knows what the agreement is. Friction mostly occurs when there is disagreement during an ongoing game and not in between games. According to the respondents they feel that rules in this category are either self-evident, such as “strive towards game goals/optimize position” or does not elicit strong reactions because one position isn’t viewed as more right than another.

The group-focused rules on the other hand were surrounded by much more friction and spirited conflict. With these rules, people’s positions were much more firm and subsequently believed that their position was more “right” than those of others. Since these rules are closer to social rules, transgressors are viewed in a much worse light than with the game-focused rules, and the transgression is more commonly attributed to shortcomings of a player’s personality rather than knowledge of the implicit rules. Given this, the amount of “hard feelings” was considerably greater.

The rules that caused the most acerbic emotions were however those that fell between the two and concerned both the gameplay and the social contract. The reason is unclear, but a hypothesis is that players who break these rules are viewed as breaking both sets of rules, the group-focused and the game-focused. When asked about the rules that caused serious problems for continued enjoyment of the activity together with a certain person or group, it is these rules that were cited first and foremost.

There appears to be five main means of “punishing” transgressors in ascending order of seriousness:

⁶ <http://www.boardgamegeek.com/>

1. Verbal rebuke during an ongoing game; “you shouldn’t do that”, or often “we don’t do it like that”. The most common form of “punishment” when there is disagreement. Sometimes leads to further discussion, which might lead to more serious conflict.
2. Verbal rebuke between games; considered more serious than a rebuke during a game, (which might seem counter-intuitive since someone stands to lose more face if it is done openly) probably because “*if you need to take your time to talk to someone outside the game, then it’s really a problem*”. Rare.
3. Badmouthing between games; sans the offending party. Occurs frequently according to the respondents, when players “vent” regarding a troublesome player. Also used to reinforce the players’ collective understanding regarding the behavior.
4. Exclusion from future games; allegedly rarely explicit, players just tend to avoid other players who regularly violate the implicit rules, or go by an incompatible set of rules.
5. Termination of an ongoing game; “leaving the table” is rare but not unheard of, and considered a very strong reaction. So strong, that the person doing it sometimes is considered as violating the “no early exit” rule, earning rebuke in turn.

4. DISCUSSION

This study set out to explore the (more or less) implicit rules that players of board games adopt when playing, what rules are commonly agreed upon and what rules are contested/problematic. Several such rules have been identified and laid out, complete with points of contention and degree of consensus.

From the results above, it is clear that the board gamers in the sample regularly discuss and argue about the “implicit” rules of gaming. This shows that so called “implicit” rules often are made more explicit, but because of the difficulties inherent in formalizing them completely, different players/groups form different conventions and arguments ensue. But it needs to be repeated that this very fact is what makes the implicit rules observable – implicit rules which are never broken or called into question remain completely implicit and below the surface.

In *Rules of Play*, authors Salen & Zimmerman [21] describe a collection of player types with their own approach towards rules, both explicit and implicit – the “standard player”, “dedicated player”, “unsportsmanlike player”, “the cheat” and the “spoilsport”. Given that the respondents insisted that many of the mentioned rules were different for different players, and perhaps more importantly, caused different amounts of friction depending on the players, this perspective might prove useful when digging further into these issues. Salen & Zimmerman [21] focuses completely on the individual, however, and many of the respondents mentioned that there existed huge differences among “groups” of players. A similar categorization of players can be found in “Players who suit MUDs” [3] and is more geared towards groups of players, but is focused on a very specialized type of computer gaming.

Looking at the results in the light of Sicart’s player virtues [24] mentioned in the introduction, the results do seem to support this

view, at least in part. A good example would be the virtue of “sense of achievement” the sentiments of which are echoed in the paragraph on “acceptable sulking/gloating” above. However, given the propensity to inhabit vastly different positions on the scale of more/less of a specific virtue, it is doubtful that one could ever pinpoint a specific point where a player is at his or her “most good”. Players are relational beings, and what is considered virtuous in one gaming group might be completely inappropriate in another.

Going back to Wood’s study [27], it is clear that his findings in many cases support those in this article, for example when it comes to the ambiguity surrounding the adherence to the goal of the game or that surrounding deception. To avoid confusion it is probably best to point out that his definition of table talk is not shared by the respondents, who define it as “talk that concerns the ongoing game”, quite the opposite of Wood’s, who places similar concerns under “deception”. With similar focus but complementary methods, these two works should give a plausible overview of the issues surrounding the specific social contract/magic circle of games.

In earlier work by the author [15], gameplay properties are combined into aesthetical ideals of gameplay; player experience preferences articulated in what properties give rise to them in a game. One of these ideals is the “Fundamentals” of game design that contain properties that would benefit any game. It is possible that the degree to which a game is prone to conflict over implicit rules (by having rules open to interpretation, for example) could be construed as another property of the fundamentals ideal.

Hopefully, a study such as this can be used by players themselves, in order to form a basis for discussions on rules and gaming; hopefully reducing time-consuming and experience-lessening arguments during, before and after the actual gaming event.

While the explicit rules of the game usually come from the designer of the game, the more or less implicit rules arise from the players themselves to a much greater degree, leading to the conclusion that knowing about these rules lead to a greater understanding of the players and what is actually happening in the gaming situation.

One of the main benefits however, that might lead to tangible results and heighten the gaming experience for players of board games is the insight that good design actually can reduce the need for ambiguous argument and contention-prone implicit rules, but in order to create such design solutions, one must first understand where the points of contention are. It is probably never possible to design a game that eliminates such conflicts completely, but a designer could go far towards limiting at least the conflicts arising from the game-focused implicit rules. Further research on games and gaming along similar lines could very well be focused on these design solutions.

Role-playing games are different enough to require a whole different set of rules however, while there might be some overlap. They are also helped by the presence of a game master in his or her arbitrator role who can settle disputes and make calls on what is acceptable [7].

What is written above is significantly less applicable in games with one or two players, and the perspective is mainly that of gaming with more than two players. For a solitaire game this is obvious, as no common agreement is necessary. With two players,

beyond the fact that it should be easier to form an agreement, issues concerning the termination of the game, kingmaking, table talk, the value of position, etc. becomes more or less moot.

It is worth mentioning that the study does not address the reasons behind why a certain rule is used; just that it is indeed used. In many cases this is self-evident, but a follow-up study could perhaps reveal further insights in this matter. The roots of specific gaming conventions could also be interesting to dig into, but might be hard to find.

Despite the presence of cooperative games where the players strive towards a common goal - with or without a “traitor” player - (e.g. Lord of the Rings [11], Shadows over Camelot [14] or Battlestar Galactica [12]), this perspective have not been included in the study, mainly because they were not that commonly played among the respondents. How/if the implicit rules change when playing such games needs more data and perhaps its own dedicated study.

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