

Preliminary Tasks

Master's in Game Design and Development

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Table of Contents

Task 1 - Creative Exercise (7 Pages)	Page 2
- Components and Board Layout	Page 2
- Rules	Page 3
- Content	Page 4
- Interpretation of "Thankfulness"	Page 5
- Testing	Page 6
- Game Dynamics	Page 8
Task 2 - Analytic Exercise (1000 words)	Page 9

Task 1 - Creative Exercise

For this task, I am proposing a casual and co-operative two player game themed around hiking. This game offers lite strategy elements and is designed to be easy to learn and quick to play, with meaningful replayability. The number of components is kept minimal to allow for portability, and the art style used aims to make it feel cosy and inviting.

Players move on their own unique path, with various obstacles and burdens to delay their movement. Different abilities will be given to counter these obstacles, which can be strategically exchanged between players. To win the game, all players must reach the end of their path within a certain turn limit.

This report aims to clearly explain how the game is played, as well as document the creation and testing process.

Components and Board Layout

Minimum number of components (2 player):

- Path Tiles: 12
- Movement Tokens: 14
- Player Tokens: 2
- Ability Cards: 8
- Burden Cards: 7

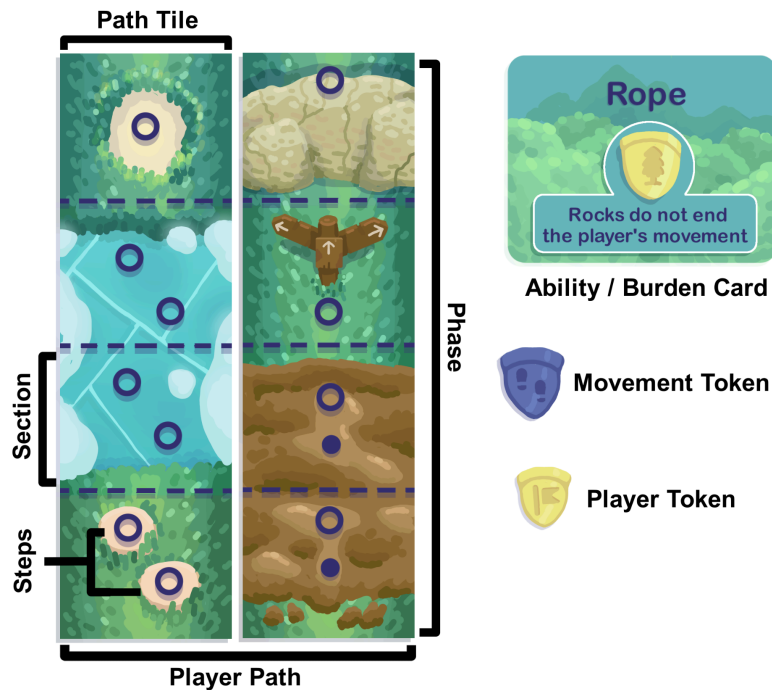


Figure 1 - Components and Layout of the Game

Rules

Starting the Game: To set up the game, each player receives:

- Two random ability cards.
- Two random path tiles. These are placed in front of the player to form the first phase of their path, as shown in Figure 1.

Turn Order: Each turn, the following actions occur:

1. Players receive two movement tokens. If both players are in line with each other, an additional token is given. This is based on their current section and phase.
2. Sharing stage: Players can give their abilities and movement tokens to others, if:
 - a. The giver is ahead of the receiver.
 - b. Both players agree on the exchange.
3. Movement stage: All players move on their personal path (see Movement). Players can move in any order they want.
4. A burden card is randomly drawn, and the players choose who takes it. Burdens:
 - a. can be removed at any time by discarding an ability.
 - b. can be given during the sharing stage, whether or not the giver is ahead.

Movement:

- A path consists of six path tiles, split into three phases. At the start of each phase, the player chooses which path tile to travel on. They cannot then move to the other tile unless adjacent movement is allowed.
- The path tile consists of a series of steps, which the player can move onto. A movement token is discarded for every step. The player token is placed on their current step to show their position.
- If a player does not use all their tokens, they are kept for the next turn.
- If adjacent movement is allowed and the player is on the last step of a section, they can choose to move to the next section of the other path tile.
- When the player reaches the end of a phase, two new tiles are instantly drawn. These are connected to the top of the previous phase so as to continue the path.

Finishing the Game:

- A player ends their path when they reach the last step of the third phase.
- When a player reaches the end:
 - Their burdens are discarded. They cannot take any new burdens later.
 - Their abilities and remaining tokens can be given to the other player.
- All players must reach the end of their path within eight turns to win.

Content

Path Tiles

Each path tile should take three or four turns to move across with two movement tokens and no abilities. This, alongside the burden system, will make sure that a player cannot complete their path in time without exchanging abilities and working as a team.

The sections of a path tile can have a terrain, which alters movement. All path tiles should contain one or two types of terrain. Having path tiles with too few or too many terrain types would discourage sharing abilities and make movement dull.

Terrain:

- Mud: Slows movement, with each step having additional sub-steps.
- Thin Ice: Players cannot end their turn on these steps.
- Rock: Ends the player's movement upon landing, losing any remaining tokens.
- Fork in the Path: Allows for adjacent movement.

Abilities

- Boots: When walking in mud, players can skip the sub-steps.
- Ice Skates: All consecutive ice steps can be crossed using one movement token.
- Climbing Rope: Rocks do not stop the player's movement.
- Multi-tool: Ignore the terrain of any section. Can only be used once per turn.
- Map: Allows for adjacent movement at any section, not just forks.
- Park Pass: The player can swap two path tiles as long as they are in the same phase and with no players on them. Can only be used once per turn.
- Water Flask: An additional movement token is received each turn.
- Compass: Can flip a path tile vertically if it is in their path and they are not on it.

With the correct abilities, a player should be able to cross a path tile in one or two turns.

Burdens

- Blisters: Earn one less movement token at the start of each turn.
- Injury: Negate one ability, chosen each time a player accepts the burden.
- Fog: Only one path tile is drawn and placed at each phase.
- Heatwave: The player cannot move on thin ice.
- Downpour: The player cannot move on mud.
- Blizzard: The player cannot move on rocks.
- Fallen Logs: The player cannot move to adjacent path tiles at fork steps.

Depending on the player's path, burdens can either have no effect or stop their movement completely. As such, sharing and discarding burdens is important.

Interpretation of “Thankfulness”

When analysing the theme of thankfulness and gratitude, I decided to focus on two interpretations. The first is being thankful for what one already has, while the second relates to showing gratitude to those who help. Both of these were considered when designing both the general gameplay loop and the individual rules for the game.

It is often said that one does not truly appreciate what they have until it is lost. In order to mirror this sentiment, I designed a game around losing and regaining abilities. When players give an ability, they presumably do not need it at their current position. However, they can soon find themselves in a situation where they would have greatly benefited from it.

Players are given their abilities at the start and cannot exchange them during the first turn (as all players are in line), This makes players more accustomed to their abilities, which makes their loss more noticeable. If the player later gets their abilities back, this loss should make them appreciate these abilities more.

The burden system adds on to the concept of appreciating what one has. Each burden removes movement options that the player would have considered standard. Since more of these are added with time, the player should feel their movement becoming more restricted. To get rid of them, the player must either get help from others or discard an ability.

The second type of thankfulness being focused on is showing gratitude to people who helped you, a concept emphasised through the sharing system. Given the variety of obstacles that the player will find on their path, they would not succeed unless they are helped by others. These situations will often be followed by an opportunity to help the other player. At this point, the player can repay the kindness they received.

The analytic exercise further explores how all the different systems at play are designed around thankfulness and empathy.

Testing

In the first version, the gameplay was not engaging. Movement was very linear and straightforward, and sharing abilities did not have enough strategy. About ten testing sessions were required to design the rules explained above. This section will explain the main problems found during these tests, and how the rules were adjusted to solve them.

Original	Players could give their abilities away at any time if they were in line or ahead of the receiver.
Problem	Players often received their abilities back instantly without experiencing their loss. This lessened the strategic element and the desired emotions.
Change	Abilities can only be given to players behind after everyone's movement.

Original	Only one path tile was drawn, which would often have branching routes. In addition, movement tokens did not carry over into the next turn
Problem	Movement was rather unengaging and straightforward, making the game feel childish. There was little strategy in planning a route.
Change	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Two path tiles are placed per phase to allow for more variety. Adjacent movement was then formalised to make better use of this layout.- The ability cards were redesigned to give multiple options for traversal.- Unused movement tokens carry over to the next turn. This made ending a player's movement early and sharing tokens more of a viable strategy.

Original	The path had steps that gave ability and burden cards, where the player could take a longer tile and get an ability, or a shorter one but get a burden.
Problem	The difficulty and pace of the game was too dependent on luck, as the path tiles being drawn determined how many abilities and burdens were at play.
Change	Ability cards are given at the start, while burdens are given over time.

Original	The path had steps that gave ability and burden cards, where the player could take a longer tile and get an ability, or a shorter one but get a burden.
Problem	The difficulty and pace of the game was too dependent on luck, as the path tiles being drawn determined how many abilities and burdens were at play.
Change	Ability cards are given at the start, while burdens are given over time.

Original	Burdens could only be discarded when a player reaches the end, and could only be given to players that are ahead.
Problem	A player could become stuck based on luck without a possible option to negate it, particularly if the other player had already finished their path.
Change	Burdens can be shared without considering who is in front. In addition, players can remove a burden by discarding an ability.

In addition to the changes made to the rules, various smaller balancing adjustments were made. For instance, players initially had three movement tokens at the start of each turn. This made movement too fast, especially when combined with water flask ability and the additional token. Due to time restrictions, the game was designed around having only two players. While the general rules of the game can work with more people, the balancing would likely need to be readjusted.

Due to the quantity of tests needed, they were conducted by simulating both players. Twelve path tiles were designed for the tests, which experienced significant changes with each play test. To allow for rapid prototyping, a simple placeholder art style was used. The final version of the tiles can be seen in Figure 2.

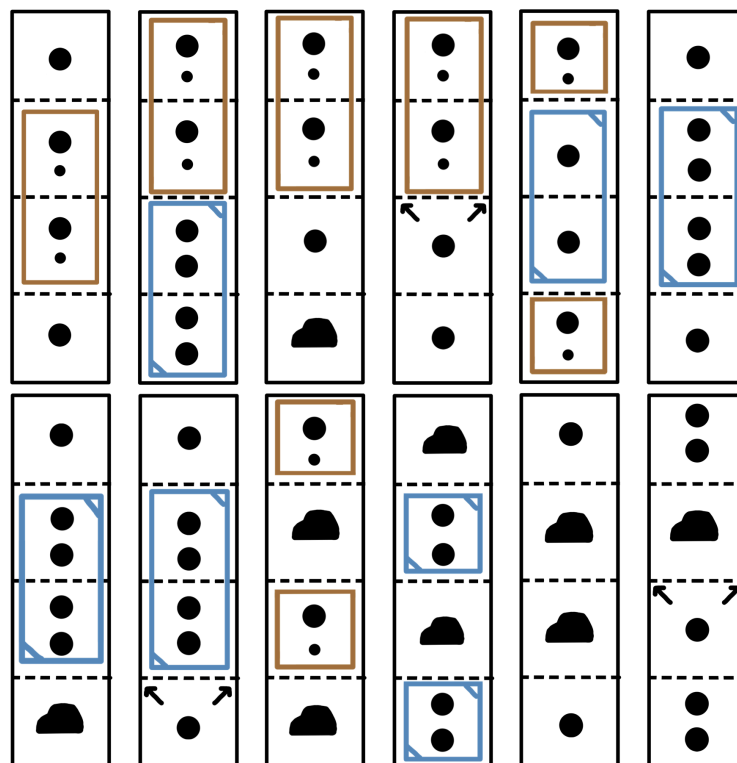


Figure 2 - Layout of the Path Tiles (Placeholder Art)

Game Dynamics

Despite its simplistic design, the player is constantly presented with small choices. This gives the game its lite strategy element. The aim of this section is to highlight the different dynamics and strategies that occur in a typical game by analysing the main actions that take place during a single turn.

Setup: Two players are involved, who will be referred to as A and B. At this point in the game both players are in phase 2, with A being slightly ahead of B. A has the compass and rope abilities, while B has the skates and water flask.

Sharing Phase : A gives B the rope ability since B is being slowed down by rocks.

To encourage sharing between players, abilities should have a different value for different players. Depending on the path tiles, an ability can be either useless or completely change how a player crosses a phase. Certain abilities can also synergise to form more complex routes, such as the map and park pass which let players swap a tile and move onto it in the middle of a phase. Sharing would also require planning a route beforehand, considering all the possibilities that different abilities would open.

Player A moves: They reveal that both new tiles contain ice. Since they have the heatwave burden, they end their turn early on the first section of the new phase.

The randomness in the path tiles, abilities and burdens drawn can completely alter how the game is played, which allows for replay value. However, there should always be a way to mitigate luck by changing strategies. For instance, player A could have discarded the compass to remove the burden card and continue moving. This keeps the game interesting, since getting a rough phase or burden provides a challenge.

Player B moves: Using the ropes and flask ability, they have enough movement tokens to overtake A. However, they end their movement early to be in line with them.

While the movement is deliberately simple, planning a route still needs some strategic thinking. The player must not only consider what movement is possible given their abilities, but also the movement of all other players. The bonus movement token incentivises ending in line with others, while the turn limit encourages moving as far as possible. Moreover, they may want to be ahead or behind other players in order to share an ability. Since unused tokens are saved, such strategies are encouraged. The turn limit is generous and is not meant to make the game too challenging. Instead, it makes players engage with the different systems, finding the best possible route.

Task 2 - Analytic Exercise

As an interactive artform where player behaviour is unpredictable, it is difficult to convey an intended experience or emotion through gameplay. In the provided resources, this issue is addressed from two opposing perspectives. The MDA framework by Hunicke et al. explains how any game can be designed around a desired aesthetic from a theoretical view. Meanwhile, Jenova Chen gives a practical example of how one game was designed around an emotional response. This essay aims to show how the board game was designed around inciting certain emotions, using the techniques described in both resources.

Interpreting Thankfulness as an Aesthetic

The first step was to specify which emotions should be invoked. This was crucial as it would alter the entire design. Both resources discussed this topic.

Hunicke emphasises the importance of specificity in this regard, as using vague terms would not sufficiently direct the design of the game. Similarly, the provided theme of thankfulness was too broad. As a result, this was broken down into two specific interpretations, appreciating what one has and showing gratitude to those who help.

As the game is not single-player, the intended experience between players also had to be defined. Chen highlighted how in many cooperative multiplayer games, players do not feel a sense of connection and comradery. This is because these games emphasise the action and combat, rather than communication between players. To contrast this, the proposed game should be focused on empathy and solidarity between players.

The Sharing System

Once the intended experience was decided on, the MDA framework was used to develop and adjust the rules of the game. To showcase this, the following rule can be considered: "The player giving abilities must be ahead of the receiver."

Both players want to move in line with each other, due to the additional token. When a player is moving faster than the other, they have both the opportunity and motivation to help reduce this gap. This requires understanding their situation, and how it can be helped. As such, players are more empathetic to those lagging behind.

After giving an ability, they cannot get them back until the other player overtakes them. Since the player cannot view the entire path, they are likely to find a scenario where

said ability could have been used. This makes the player feel its loss, and appreciate it more when they get it back.

For the player that is lagging behind, receiving an ability can be a significant boost and let them move faster. This means they will eventually overtake the other player. This gives them the opportunity to repay the help they received, showing gratitude.

The Burden System

In Journey, the emotional intensity of the game follows a three act structure. The intensity slowly increases over time, with various rises and dips to keep the player engaged. This is suddenly decreased during the darkest hour, which better accentuates the final rise in intensity during the climax. Chen referred to this as emotional catharsis, and emphasises the importance of having such a strong change in intensity. The emotional intensity in the board game also changes with time, due to the burden system.

At the start, the players have flexibility in movement, which lets them move at a relatively fast pace. No burdens are given for the first movement turn so that players become accustomed to this.

When burdens are introduced, players need to decide who would be less affected by them. These will then need to be exchanged constantly based on the paths ahead. The result is that empathy between players is required. As more burdens are added, the player's movement options are significantly restricted. This acts as their lowest moment, and gives the game a rising difficulty curve.

The climax and emotional catharsis of the game occurs when one player is close to reaching the end. At this point the player should take as many burdens as possible. When these are discarded, the remaining player should have the same freedom of movement they had in the beginning. Since the player had lost this freedom, they now have a better appreciation for it. The player that ends their path also gets catharsis by giving away their remaining abilities. This acts as a final show of gratitude.

The Movement Token System

In order for the themes of empathy and gratefulness to land, one player should not move too far ahead of the other. The token system was designed to avoid this issue.

During the talk, Chen advised that feedback should be given to players that act in the intended way. For the board game, an additional movement token is given to players if

they end their turn in line with each other. This token can significantly speed up their movement across the board. As such, players are encouraged to stay close together.

In addition, any aspects that contradict the intended experience are considered distractions and should be removed or adjusted. This is mirrored in the MDA framework, where small changes can have a significant effect on the aesthetic of the game. During testing, a change was made to keep unused tokens for the next turn. This meant that players were not punished for choosing to stay behind.

Playtesting

Both resources mentioned the importance of playtesting. MDA uses tuning to make iterative adjustments, ensuring that the aesthetic goals are met. Meanwhile, Journey's development was prolonged because playtesters did not feel the intended emotions during the ending.

This highlights a flaw in the development of the proposed game. The testing sessions were primarily held solo, as this made it faster to iterate on the rules. However, it does not give an accurate view of how players engage with the game on an emotional basis.

Summary

By following the advice from Journey's development and the MDA framework, I was able to design a board around the feelings of gratitude and solidarity. Each mechanic introduced was carefully considered, to ensure that it conveyed the correct emotions and at the right intensity.