

The corridor essay

Designing ideas

When creating *The Corridor*, we had in mind creating a board game for up to four players with one loser instead of a winner. The game should have some kind of resource management and last less than 30 minutes. These conditions prompted interesting ideas in our team, that had a great impact on the design decisions we made later on. The most noteworthy of these were:

- Introducing backstabbing as a mechanic. In a game that shouldn't take more than 30 minutes to be played, there is no time to lose, and an interesting way to not to be the loser is making other players fail. This approach prompted us to think about the social experience we wanted to create while playing the game, as backstabbing brings with it interesting meta-game elements that will be discussed in this paper.
- Giving more power to the strategy than to the chance. The resource management allows players to contrive to clever tactics to play their round. Even if the resources they have can be more or less useful for them depending on the situation, they have freedom to use one or another or any of them, or discard a card and draw a new one if they don't find an interesting option.

In this essay, we pretend to explain the design process that we follow to shape *The Corridor* on the basis of these concepts.

Backstabbing

Based on folk games that ostracize one player from the social group, common games like tag are focused on one player that has to strive to get a good position in the group. In order to not to be "the one losing", the player has to make sure that other player gets its position.

When playtesting *The corridor* with four players, multiple fights arised in different positions. For example, two players fighting ahead and two in the back. Unspoken alliances appear, with the players in the back agreeing on not fighting until they catch up on the others or the players on the front help the stragglers using the distract card to slow down the zombies and prolong the game, giving the other players the opportunity to escape and increasing the emotion in the game. But when the danger is near, alliances break as spontaneously as they emerged. These decisions are not set in advanced. They are part of the metagame, that makes each game a different experience created by the players, and result in a pleasurable social interaction. The way we facilitate this to happen would be further address later.

Resource management

In a game about escaping, the randomness of a dice to decide how many positions the player can make up can create a feeling of unfairness. To prevent the player from this frustration we decided to provide the player with meaningful power to use their four actions per turn either to move, draw or use an action card. This way, we can also balance the movement of the player and the zombies, as players can always run four squares, except if they are tricked by other players or lagged by obstacles. Zombies can move from one to four positions per round, but the card with the four number appears less often in the deck. We also came up with a custom distribution in the action cards, so the Jump card to pass the obstacles appears more rarely than the ones that affect other players, promoting interaction.

With the idea of making The Corridor fast-paced and full of action, we decided to give clear feedback to the player about its position relative to the competitors and to the zombies horde. Players can always see on the board who is behind at the end of each round and, even though luck can go in their way, there is no point for implementing more catch-up features. Snowballing effects help to control the duration of the game and suits well the premise of "eliminating the weak". The opposite concept, that encourages "picking on the leader" and can be found in games like Munchkin, has been avoided, as the design of the action cards only allow players to "attack" meeples positioned in adjacent squares.

Actually, we introduced the card to Distract the horde with the intention of helping the last player to catch-up, but in the end we changed the balance again in favour of snowballing, by adding the Attract card, that is the only one that allows backstabbing from the distance and only makes things worse for the last player.

Another catch-up feature included that we should mention in this section was deciding that players can have a maximum of 5 action cards in their hands and they must discard one in order to be allowed to draw a new one. This way, we prevent the "rich" to have more and more power in a Monopoly style. We can observe different techniques for this in other popular Eurogames like Settlers.

Metagame: narratives, art and tension

As mentioned, the way players interact is powerful enough to extend the duration of the game. We found an example of this behaviour when one of our playtesters realized that he could push another to the horde at the beginning of the game, but he didn't. By the way, we have to mention that this issue should be solved by including in the rules a statement indicating that the zombies start the game behind a wall and players cannot interact with them until they first move and break this separation.

We have also commented how the loop reinforce interaction and backstabbing by promoting the use of cards instead of move. In this case, the chance element of how the cards are ordered can be attractive to players and led them to backstabbing even if their first intention was scaping. To run fast, jump cards

are precious, but on the way to trying to get one players will get much more push or trip cards, that they might want to use on others at some point.

But in this section we aim to describe the importance of the metagame in the game. To get into backstabbing mood we want players to blend with the situation and imagine that they really want to escape at all costs, tricking other players before they are tricked. We use an attractive pitch to facilitate players a context for this basic roleplay. By providing a backplot, we subtly shape the game, giving it depth and coherence. Players also have inner knowledge of how it feels and how to act during a zombies apocalypse, as it is a popular theme in fiction worlds. In addition, we use narratives to start the game, so players can start joking and interacting with each other within the zombies theme, and we resort to the same technique to decide which player is the loser in case the horde catches more than one player, giving an original closure to the experience.

Another element that we dedicated time on was the art of the game, designing decks and board cards that facilitate the immersion of the players, that appreciate and empathize with the elements of the gameworld, like the meeples they have to move forward, the physical zombie horde that moves as a block, unstoppable, destroying everything that is on its path, or the different decks that have their specific name.

The last thing that is worth mentioning is the use of the tension to keep excitement high during the gameplay. The zombies are positioned very close to the players and they start pursuing them from the beginning. Turns are short, making easier for other players to keep their attention focused even when they are not the ones making decisions. And at the end of each round the zombies move, so everybody can participate in drawing the movement card, reading it out loud, moving the zombies block ahead and even interpreting non-dead moans. The position of the first player opens a new room or part of the corridor, so players can only plan each time on the situation as far as they can see. Obstacles may appear in front of them, making them using movements or action cards to save them and being able to advance. Randomness and hidden elements work on behalf of enforcing the core loop as we designed it. We can include here the decision of making players keep for themselves the action cards they hold until they use it. This surprise factor would intrigue the players and make them wonder if someone can backstab them after their move or if they would manage to emerge unharmed for that round.

Conclusion

To conclude the reflection, we can say that we created a game that works and facilitates social interaction, as we have tested the physical prototype in different informal meetings. Not only the game duration is short, but also its rules can be learnt in a few minutes. From the loop design emerged the prototype, and we will soon provide an improved printable version to share this play experience with those interested on it.

