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Schools of Design and Their Core Priorities


Oliver Kiley [@Mezmorki](#) | JUN 17, 2014 1:04 PM

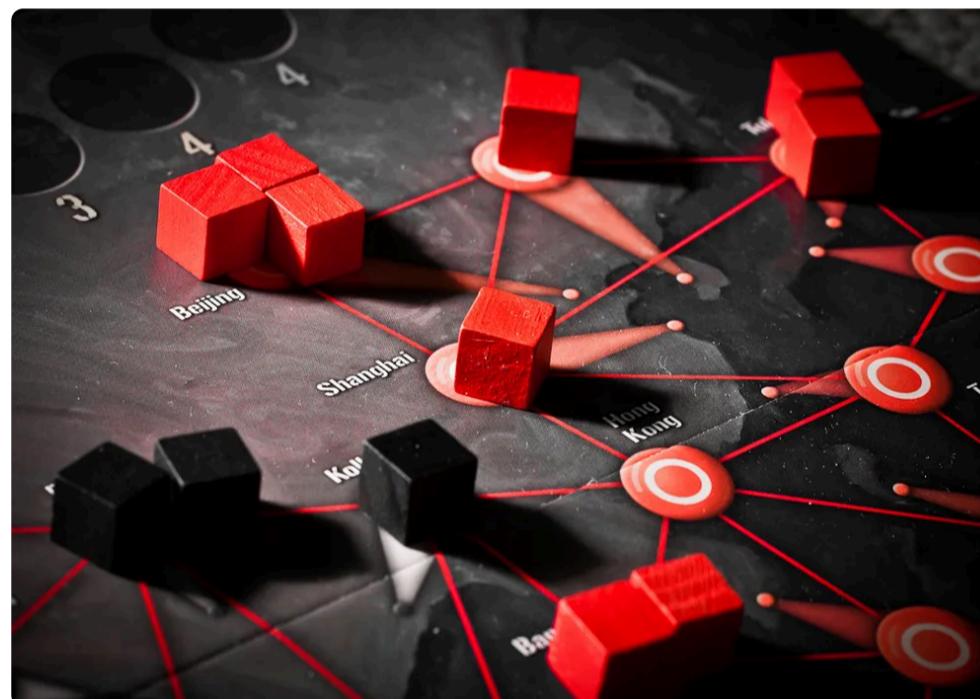
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One of the regular topics on this blog has to do with the classification of games and the pursuit of a theory or framework that describes the operation and resulting experience of playing board games.

This interest is not driven by the assumption that we'll ever find a perfect system for actually classifying games. Rather, I feel the pursuit of such classification efforts and building a framework for understanding generates interesting discussion, builds knowledge, and creates insights that can be of value on their own.

I've discussed, in an earlier blog post, the idea of trying to define broader categories of games (e.g. What makes a euro a euro?). I want to return to this topic but bring in some other insights and references that I've come across, which will hopefully provide a more tangible and comprehensive picture.

This is a monstrous post ... you have been warned!



What a tangled web we weave...

Core Priorities & Design Schools

A landmark post from way back in 2007 by [Jezztek](#) brought up the topic of "**Core Priorities**" in a game's design and how these core priorities related to different **Schools of Design** or design philosophies. I think he nailed the idea, but it also had some gaps. Here's the start of his text wall to start the discussion:

Jeremy Kalgreen @Jezztek wrote:

The problem is that when people try to define 'Ameritrash' they tend to use expressions of the quality 'Ameritrash' instead of trying to define the core of 'Ameritrash'. It's like if I were to ask 10 people to define 'dog' using one quality. I might get responses like: 4 legs, fur, floppy ears, wagging tail and so forth. Then the contrarians would go through each quality one at a time and find counterexamples or bleed examples: I knew a three legged dog once, so that means he stopped being a dog? Cats have four legs too, so do they qualify as dog? What about hairless breeds, are they not dogs? And thus the contrarians would assume the label of "dog" must be meaningless.

So to solve this dilemma we need to pan out a bit and attack the problem one level up.

Let me start at the very beginning. When we talk about Ameritrash vs Euros first of all we are not talking about the geographic location of the game's design or production. Ameritrash games can come from anywhere, Euros likewise. So why do the names have a geographic component? Because these labels are about one thing, Design Philosophy, and these design philosophies are movements. While these movements have their roots geographically, they have both spread well around the globe, but the names remain fixed on the geographic heart of movements they represent.

Ok, so what exactly is the design philosophy that drives Ameritrash vs. Euro games? When a designer is making a game he or she has a series of choices to make, and often these choices are something of a zero sum game. You can't have it all, so to speak. And as a designer you need to have priorities as to what you feel is most important, and are willing to build your choices around. Each side has its "Core Priority" that really defines its design philosophy.

I agree with this wholeheartedly; and especially so from a game designer standpoint. I think the notion of Core Priorities inevitably relates directly to designer intent, and in turn a game's intended audience and their preferences. And as the quote says, you can't have it all. What elements and characteristics a designer chooses to prioritize over others has an impact on how the game is received by its intended (or unintended!) audiences. This is important.

So, understanding the core priority of a given genre of games sheds insight on how the mechanics, theme connection, and interactivity manifest. Furthermore, these Core Priorities can be a useful nomenclature for understanding what different "Schools of Design" are attempting to achieve, and how the intersection of these schools give rise to different hybrid forms of games.

As an overview of where this post is going, here are the design schools and associated core priorities that will be discussed:

- **Ameritrash School ~ Drama**
 - **German Family School ~ Engagement**
 - **Eurogame School ~ Challenge**
 - **Wargame School ~ Realism**
 - **Abstract School ~ Minimalism**
-

Ameritrash Games: Drama



Drama:

Quote:

Any situation or series of events having vivid, emotional, conflicting, or striking interest or results

Ameritrash is a term that has been around since 2006 or so (if my BGG diggings are accurate). It commonly comes up as a topic of conversation/debate - and people's opinions range wildly on the term. Some people think it's a useless and meaningless term. Others think it has too negative of a connotation. Others recognize that it was once used to describe Mass Market American games but that the term was coopted as a term of endearment subsequently. Others think it means the game must be from an American designer. *The fact of the matter is that this term has pervaded the discourse*

surrounding boardgames and looks like it is here to stay.

So - what is the Ameritrash design school and what does it have to do with Drama? The approach advanced by Jezztek is that Ameritrash is a design school that seeks to play up the drama of a game experience. Drama can manifest many ways, from the game providing a rich narrative experience that tells a story (a dramatization of a story, think "theatre"), to creating tensions and other dramatics between the players themselves. Ameritrash games seek to immerse players in an evocative narrative (typically) that creates an uncertain story around conflict and tension.

Key tenets of the Ameritrash School:

- Theme & Narrative
- Conflict & Interaction
- Uncertainty, Luck, and Chaos
- Epicness & Victory
- Chrome & Immersion

Ameritrash & Drama: Theme/Narrative

Jeremy Kalgren @Jezztek wrote:

How does **Theme** relate to the core priority of Drama?

These helps draw people emotionally into a game. The game ceases to be a simple multiplayer puzzle and instead becomes a world, and a world you are directly invested in. It's about feeling like you are commanding a legion and not pushing around cubes, manning a post apocalyptic battle car and not just moving a tile around a tabletop, it's pretty much inseparable to drama.

It's unfortunate that AT games are so often associated with fictional themes (fantasy, space, zombies, etc.) because it tends to box in people's expectations about what theme can be in a game. Really, the theme can be *about* anything - but the important part is that it be successful in immersing a player in it, making them feel like they are an agent within an unfolding narrative instead of some ambiguous entity on the outside.

Games are successful in this regard when decisions over the course of the game are consistent if one were to imagine themselves INSIDE the game world having to make those same decisions. If one can imagine themselves readily in the gameworld and the decisions flow congruently with the theme, that's a great feeling. Nothing breaks the immersion of such a game when the "best move" for advancing your position is doing sometime totally contrary and nonsensical with respect to theme. Consider the starvation strategy in Stone Age - its a contrived "gamey" thing, not a thematic expression.

In many ways, Ameritrash games also graze the closest to the RPG genre in terms of putting players in a narrative and giving them a clear role to play.

Ameritrash & Drama: Conflict & Interaction

Jeremy Kalgren @Jezztek wrote:

How does **Conflict** relate to the core priority of Drama?

This one is any easy one, there are few things in life more dramatic than conflict. Love perhaps, but good luck creating a board game that evokes that particular emotion. [But] when you have your back to the wall, battling tooth and nail outnumbered by your enemies and still crushing them under your boot heel, that's dramatic. As such, to any designer trying emphasize the core priority of drama conflict is about as common as a quality can get.

Interaction can of course take many forms, but for Ameritrash games hostile conflict and battling are par for the course. This notion of conflict can really sweep across scales. You get grand strategic conflict playing out in something like all the way down to the take-that, tit-for-tat type conflict in a game like . A key aspect in both of these is that the conflict, as in many AT games, is targeted. You, the player, get to chose who you beat on and chose when you dish it out.

Ameritrash & Drama: Uncertainty, Luck, and Chaos

Jeremy Kalgren @Jezztek wrote:

How do Dice (**uncertainty**) relate to the core priority of Drama?

Dice adds uncertainty, uncertainty is a fantastic tool for heightening drama. When I see a table full of players jumping to their feet in anticipation, or bursting out in cries of joy (or into yelps of obscenities) 9 times out of 10 dice are somehow involved.

I've come to realize that uncertainty, specifically uncertainty of outcome, plays a critical role in building a dramatic narrative. Consider a game like Eclipse (which I think is almost entirely AT). Rolling dice to determine whether your combat attack (conflict) was successful or not is critical to not only building dramatic tension but making the narrative come alive in a way that transcends and trumps player actions. It's the idea of fate (if you believe in such a thing) manifest in the game. By hanging things on uncertain die rolls it drives the narrative and board-state into unique or unforeseen situations and builds a story within a story of sorts. It's richer.

Compare a die-roll based attack to a zero-luck one. In the zero-luck situation, we can imagine a story coalescing around our forces as they close in to combat range, and then the combat is resolved in a perfectly known and predictable manner. Story over. In the die rolling situation, we can have the same narrative about our forces clashing, but a second narrative is possible describing the outcome. Perhaps you brought in superior forces, yet some brilliant twist of fate resulting in my one lone interceptor surviving against all odds to blow up your mothership. OMFG!!!! We'll be talking about that one for a while, right? It created a unique story that will likely never exist in the same way again.

Ameritrash & Drama: Epicness and Victory

Jeremy Kalgreen @Jezztek wrote:

Again this is about emotional investment. When playing a disposable 45 minute mini-game you just haven't invested yourself in the same manner as someone heading into the 4th hour of their drawn out head to head conflict, it's just basic human psychology. If I've poured 3 hours of brain crunching into my plans and strategies I'm just far more invested in the outcome than if I was just dropping in for a quick filler. The more invested I am in the outcome, the more dramatic the game becomes.

AT'ers often seek out games with an "Epic" feel, which can manifest as games with long playtimes with high stakes. Victory is often based on achieving a decisive and glorious moment, as opposed accumulating an incremental trickle of victory points. And as decisive as victory can be, so can be defeat - and we can see far more AT games with player elimination (or effective elimination) compared to many other schools. In the context of long, epic games - being eliminated if you have no chance of defeat is often preferable to having to play out the rest of the game sitting on the sidelines.



An avalanche of stuff!

Ameritrash & Drama: Bits, Chrome, and Immersion

Jeremy Kalgreen @Jezztek wrote:

Chrome is all about being evocative of the theme, and heightening the sense of immersion in the game. It also subtly plants the idea that there are a wealth of possibilities and anything could happen during the game. Robartin put it best:

"Rules that might occur in 2 out of every 400 games. Still, when they happen they are damn cool because they're straight out of the freakin book! Who doesn't remember the game where Jonathan Harker actually killed the Count?"

I think this last point is an excellent one. Whereas other schools might look at that often unused and extraneous rule as more overhead and eliminate it in the name of streamlining; for Ameritrash games it adds that bit of spice that creates distinct, unique, and memorable moments.

And a parting quote from Jezztek:

Jeremy Kalgreen @Jezztek wrote:

In the end Ameritrash games are about the people playing the game, and most importantly playing the game against each other.

...

With head to head open ended conflict based games this is much less of an issue. In reality it's often times less about playing the rules of the game, but instead playing the minds of the other players. Trying to avoid drawing their ire, trying to look as weak as possible while making your position as strong as possible, often times the meta-game is the game, and that is inherently more dramatic then playing against the board. Ganging up, Kingmaking and Imbalance all just tend to come part and parcel in these type of games, and thank god for that.

German (Family) Games: Engagement



Is everyone having fun yet?

I want to raise a point here that German Family Games are not Eurogames and Eurogames are not German Games. They are *related* schools of design, and certainly Eurogames grew out of German Games as they mixed with other influences/desires, but it is important that the two schools remain distinct and are recognized as such.

But first, it is important to discuss a bit about what German Family Games are and why **Engagement** is the Core Priority for their design. [Samo's](#) comment to a prior blog post does an excellent job identifying some the critical underpinnings for German Games (and compares them to eurogames), so I'll use his work as a starting point.

Key tenets of German Family Game School:

- Accessibility / Approachability
- Closeness, Balancing, Pacing
- "Pacific" Themes
- Non-Violent Interactions

German Games & Engagement: Accessibility/Approachability

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

simplification

It's reducing everything to its essentials - which depends on your goals. The reason for it is probably the family market (simple to learn, plays in a short time). The consequence of it is why the theme is never more thoroughly developed.

German Family games are largely designed to appeal to a broad audience, hence they need to be readily accessible and eliminate as many "barriers to entry" in their gameplay. The biggest barrier from a family game perspective is rule complexity. If its too complex your 10-year old nephew and your 80-year old grandmother aren't going to be interested in learning and playing the game. So great family games need to strike a compelling middle ground. Emphasis is placed on **streamlining** and focusing the gameplay around a core concept that is easy to teach and understand yet offers sufficient depth to keep the gameplay fresh and dynamic for years to go.

German Games & Engagement: Closeness, Balance, Pacing

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

keep them in the game

[This has] to do with the family market and shorter playing times. As was mentioned there's no player elimination, but mostly it's about keeping players constantly in the running (usually by a fair amount of luck). VP are also common precisely they run against the idea of zero-sum games which are much more definite and competitive.

Another aspect of Accessibility comes through having designs that keep players engaged throughout the game. Games are most engaging when everyone is in contention for the win, or has a chance at winning. If you know you are going to lose ahead of time, or there is a clear-cut winner, finishing out the rest of the game is considerably less satisfying.

Of course there is a delicate balance point between "keeping them in the running" and "making players accountable for good/bad play", but an appropriate amount of luck or player-driven balance, or hidden scoring can go a long way towards keeping everyone at least "feeling" like they have a shot at winning.

In contrast, many other schools of design, intended to appeal to more hardcore gamers, are less concerned with giving everyone a chance to catch up, because the desire is for player's strategic choices to have high bearing on their performance and the final outcome of the game.

German Games & Engagement: "Pacific" Themes

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

theme as user interface

Theme is not used as a goal (immersion, simulation) but as something to help people playing the game, either by creating a proper atmosphere and making the game inviting to new players (these were nongamer friendly games) or by making the connection between theme and mechanics intuitive, thus easing learning and playing the game.

The theme of many family-games is of importance primarily as it is used to enhance the legibility and understanding of the game and also to make sure it doesn't turn people off. A term Lewis Pulsipher uses describe the theme of many German Family games is **Pacific**. This means that the themes tend to diminish or downplay conflict. Inside the game, this is often manifest as themes about "building up" as opposed to "tearing down."

On the outside, it also means themes are less likely to cause conflicts with the preferences of the intended audience. These are themes that are *comfortable*. Everyone can get behind (or at least tolerate) trains or medieval European farming. Zombies on the other hand, or other heavy conflict-based themes, are going to alienate a lot more people, which runs counter to the notion of engagement.

German Games & Engagement: Non-Violent Interactions

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

Non-conflict competition

This has something to do with post ww2 Germany, but also with [the] family market. There have been many strategies around this problem, one is **trading** (win-win negotiations), then **auctions** and then we're probably moving to the euro territory.

This concept ties into the above discussion on theme, but it also translates into the actual gameplay mechanics. German Family games do have a fair amount of interaction, often of a very open and chaotic sort (auctions, bidding, etc.). Yet this interaction is almost always framed in a positive and constructive manner (e.g. mutually beneficial trading), not in a hostile manner.

Targeted interactions, where players can specifically affect/harm an opponent of their choosing is rare. Even when it occurs, it is often the result of a player being *required* to make such a move, as opposed to choosing to make such a move. For instance in Settlers of Catan, if you roll a 7 you HAVE to decide where to place the robber, and the logical response to place it where it improves your score the most relative to the lead player. By having the game force you to do this, it excuses players from having "hurt" another player, and maintains a more friendly and positive atmosphere (usually).

Eurogames: Challenge



One of the shortcomings to [**Jezztek**](#) original post is that while his breakdown and assessment of Ameritrash games was spot on, the identified core priority for eurogames was not. Originally, the core priority for Eurogames was identified as *Elegance*, yet elegance is more of a global trait in my mind, one which any design might aspire towards.

I can understand the drive for using elegance as a term, as certainly the drive for more streamlined and elegant mechanics was part of the German family games movement/school as Eurogames grew out of it. Yet looking at the top eurogames from the past few years, these games hardly strike me as elegant in the way that Go is elegant, or Lost Cities is elegant, or even Settlers is Elegant. Eurogames are generally far more intricate and complex than German Family Games - and while the integration of mechanics might be elegant, it is not elegant in sense of creating greater depth through relative simplicity.

So before going further, let's expand on that last point about what Elegance is (and isn't) in my mind:

Quote:

Thoughts on Elegance and Fiddliness

I often see a conflation between the idea of elegance and fiddliness, as if the two were on opposite ends of a spectrum. Really, they are talking about two different things. *Elegance* is about the gameplay complexity and depth, *fiddliness* is about the ergonomics or physicality of playing the game, moving pieces about, record keeping, etc. In more detail:

Gameplay: Elegant vs. Clunky

The elegance versus clunkiness continuum represents the relationship between gameplay depth (strategy, tactics, etc.) and rules complexity. Games that achieve greater levels of depth through simpler rules and less overhead are more *elegant* than games with similar (or less depth) but correspondingly more rules and overhead.

This continuum has nothing to do with the physicality of the game, how the pieces are manipulated, how the execution of board states are handled, etc. That has to do with how streamlined or fiddly the game is physically.

Ergonomics: Streamlined vs. Fiddly

The ergonomics of a game are really about the manipulation of pieces, and the physical processing of actions, etc. A very streamlined game is something like LOST CITIES, where the gameplay flows smoothly between players, there is little downtime, no complicated steps to perform in taking and resolving actions, etc.

Civilization is ultimately quite an elegant game, but it is a very fiddly game too. The underlying mechanics are surprisingly simple given the games scope and depth - yet the gameplay experience is broken up into many phases each round, and the execution of actions requires moving lots of tokens around, adding up the value of trade cards ad nauseam, etc. It's a very fiddly game and not particularly streamlined.

So back to Eurogames, which have the core priority of **Challenge**. The term "Challenge" is not meant purely in terms of competition or conflict, although that certainly can be a *part* of the challenge eurogames provide. Rather, the idea of challenge is broader in application. Eurogames are ostensibly gamer's games - there are primarily for people *IN* the hobby, and they came about as German Family games had a front-end collision with the more American-style "hobby gaming" that was far more tolerant (and even embracing of) games with greater rules and mechanical complexity.

As a consequence, the euro-gamers games endeavor to challenge players in a multitude of ways. Players are challenged in terms of learning more complex rules systems and new mechanics, having to manipulate complex and interlinked mechanical systems, making tough short- and long-term decisions, and competing with other players in a controlled and (at least initially) "fair" and balanced manner. A tall order. Let's break it down.

Key tenets of Eurogame Design School:

- Intricacy and Mechanics
- Competitiveness
- Control & Constraint



A beautiful clockwork...

Eurogames & Challenge: Intricacy and Mechanics

Let's start off with Samo again 😊

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

Mechanisms

The idea that theme doesn't have to be immersive was interpreted as something else [by euro designers] - that theme is not necessary at all. But what does then hold the game together? [The] focus became on mechanics and some were fetishized simply for being novel.

This trend with time became the opposite to simplification. Recently it seems to be about many interconnected mechanics (clockwork design).

BGG is most certainly the epicenter of the Eurogame player-base on the internet, and one thing that is always evident is the interest and importance eurogamers place on the mechanics of games. There is a constant desire and interest in seeking out new and "innovative" mechanics, or finding games that implement a mechanical idea in a more clever or more novel way, or the thrill/joy of learning new game systems and "discovering the game."

You hear over and over again from eurogamers about the joys of "learning the system" for a new game. As the embodiment of "gamers games", eurogames fill the desire to learn how to manipulate new-fangled complex system. New systems pose new challenges for gamers to work through; and their intricacy is ever intoxicating. Such games emphasize their intricacy (e.g. how mechanical sub-systems come together in a clockwork-like manner) and innovations.

The other side of the coin is that the pursuit of ever more novel mechanics diminishes the importance of theme in many eurogames. Hence we end up with the sentiment that the theme is tacked on. This exists because many (not all) eurogame mechanics don't have any conceivable analog in the real or fictional worlds their theme evokes. Certainly there are eurogames that successfully connect theme and mechanics, and those do stand out. Yet many more eurogames use theme as a understanding and communication aid, and not something their mechanics are striving to model or actualize.

Eurogames & Challenge: Competitiveness

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

Low Luck

Probably born from the clash of american gaming culture (heavy with dice and other luck factors) with different german game designs. What changed is that competition factor became seriously pronounced and that hobby gamers wanted serious competition, but still without "hurt feelings" vibe of german american games. First champions of this were auction games, but they have then via **worker placement** turned into indirect competition games.

Balance

This one comes from both designer control (as in - it's the designers, not the players that must make the game "fair") and the idea of serious competing.

Eurogames are intended to be taken seriously by their players (playing them is not an insignificant investment after all). The old Knizian adage "*When playing a game, the goal is to win, but it is the goal that is important, not the winning.*" has grown into a rallying cry for a competitive motive for play that seems to resonate strongly with Eurogamers. This isn't meant to imply overly (or negatively) competitive behavior, but simple that playing your best within the strategic, low-luck, balanced context of the game is expected to some degree.

As a consequence, transparent gameplay, fairness and balance are more important issues than the drama and chaos provided by randomizing elements (e.g. success based die rolls), targeting attacking, and so on. Eurogamers generally want their successes and failures to be the result of their own good or bad decisions.

This drive for competitiveness without the chaos results in many games where players are challenged to "work the system" better than their opponents (see above for Intricacy & Mechanics) over the course of the game, rather than engage other players more directly. This pushes eurogames, often times, into the realm of player vs. game as opposed to player vs. player (although that's an over-simplification). When the opportunities for interacting with players directly (through board play or via negotiation, etc.) are restricted, the complexity of the game needs to increase to provide an equivalently deep strategic experience.

Eurogames & Challenge: Control & Constraint

Samo Oleami @sgosaric wrote:

Designer Control

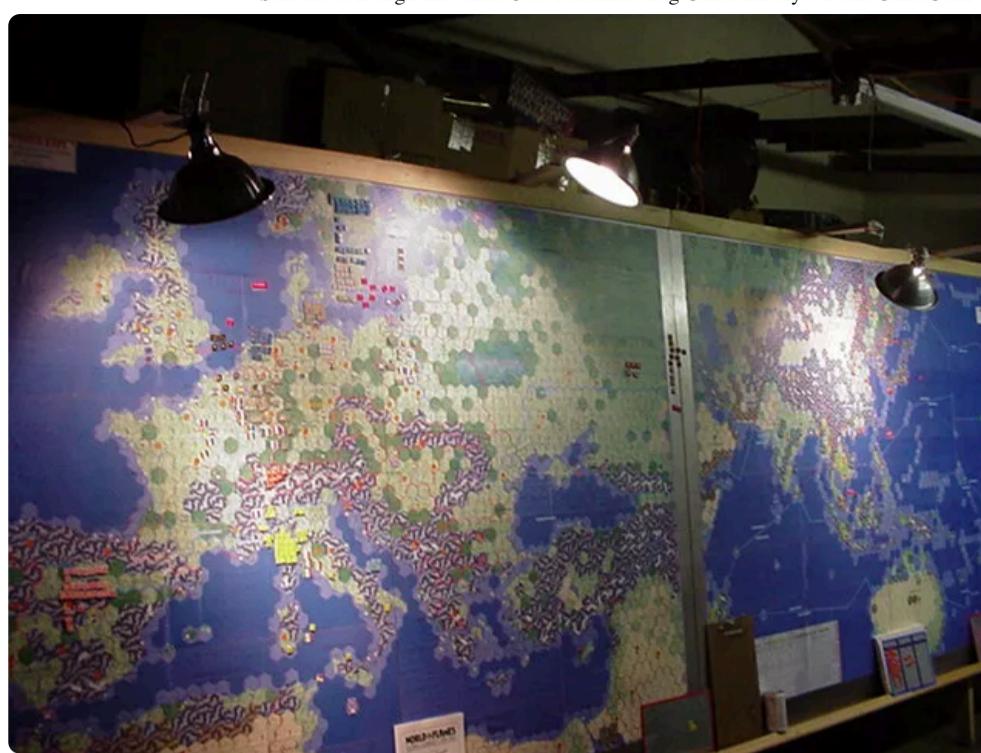
With lower luck, there seem to be one unpredictable part of gaming left, which were players. Designer control [games] were born - their bonus side [being] that they are not so group dependent as heavier interaction games (even auction games). As you're competing against the design and not each other, it also lowers the possible anxiety arising from the conflict.

Following from the above, we arrive in a situation where eurogames function within a tightly controlled decision space and where procedural aspects of the gameplay are often of critical importance. For example, turn order handling is often of vital concern to eurogame designs, where first turn or last turn advantages/disadvantages need to be accounted for to provide "fair play" and competitive play. Chaos (random factors or other players' actions), which has a reduced role in the gameplay would otherwise make subtle turn order matters irrelevant over the course of the game, but no so in a tight controlled environment.

The other outcome of this designer controlled environment is increasing the predictability of the game from one session to the next, which in turn enables players to hone their strategies and skills more. By restricting and limiting how players interact with each other, personalities, play-styles, or metagame issues can be minimized. This enables eurogames to function equally well whether playing with a group of close friends or total strangers at a gaming meetup or convention. I wonder to what extent the success of the eurogame design school has to do with such games breaking into more, potentially uncertain, social settings.

This control and constraint notion also manifests, often times, as a the whole "multiple paths to victory concept" - where big strategic pathways are intentionally baked into the design. Good play often times down to identifying these pathways and navigating along them better or more optimally than your opponent, who is often times racing down a completely separate pathway. This is a generalization but nevertheless quite evident in many euro games, and is a contrast to more open decision space games (sandbox games or "framework" games) that tend to evoke more emergent and surprising strategies with an ever shifting meta-game.

Wargames: Realism



Welcome to the war room

Ameritrash games prioritize drama, the inter-player narratives that are formed and take on a life of their own, implemented with a focus on immersion. Eurogames emphasize challenge as manifest through an emphasis on mechanics, intricacy, and competitiveness. Wargames, in turn, emphasize **Realism** of their subject matter - and endeavor to model, simulate, or mimic a real (or fictional) subject matter. Most often this is about historical wars or conflicts (i.e. ConSims or Conflict Simulations) - but it need not be.

For Wargames, mechanics are utilized however necessary to provide an accurate or realistic analog to the theme. Likewise, drama is often less a concern, with dramatic situations at liberty to occur or not occur in a realistic manner befitting the subject matter; but it's not forced.

This is a useful quote to consider:

Jeremy Kalgren @Jezztek wrote:

All three genres [edit: *Euro*, *Ameritrash*, *Wargame*] have games about war, but each of them realizes these scenarios through the lens of their core priority. Let's say you are designing a game about war, you have most of the mechanics fleshed out but are trying to decide about whether to include any mechanics related to supply lines.

As an **Ameritrasher** you would be asking yourself whether by adding Supply Lines to your existing mechanics you would be bogging the game down making it less emotional and dramatic, which would not be a sacrifice you are willing to make, but if they could include it in a simplified stylized manner that would heighten drama (i.e. Fortress America) they would be happy to do so.

A **euro designer** would be asking themselves if there is way any way to include the mechanic seamlessly and elegantly into the core game, or if it would feel tacked on and add needless complexity.

A **wargame designer**, on the other hand, would be willing to sacrifice both a certain amount of elegance and a certain amount of "edge of your seat" drama if it meant fulfilling their core priority of realism.

Wargames & Realism: Level of Detail & Fidelity

I should be honest in that my experience with Wargames is quite lacking. Yet following from the quote above, and based on observation and commentary, it appears to me that the question of level of detail and the **fidelity** of translating that detail into the realm of plausibility is important for wargames and is often used as a basis for distinguishing one game from another.

A term I like to kick around as I think about design is the notion of **Congruency**, by which I mean how plausible and realistic the mechanics are in terms of the theme being covered. Wargames, given a desire to prioritize realism and believability of the game's theme are looking for congruency, where mechanics "make sense" and aren't arbitrary.

Curiously, I do wonder how this notion of detail and fidelity translates into a non-ConSim or historical wargame game's. Is it fair to consider **Magic Realm** (for example) a "wargame" in the broader context of simulation and realism? If I were to imagine a game trying to simulate, at a high level of detail, the adventures of a fantasy wizard traversing a fantasy world, Magic Realm provides a high level of fidelity, detail, and internal congruence.

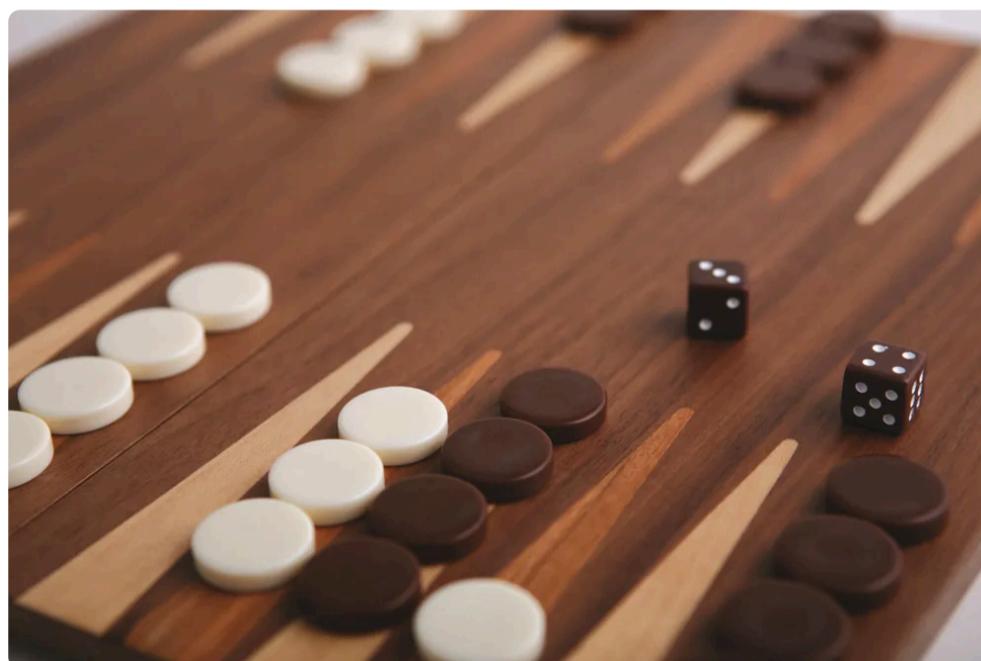


Wargames & Realism: Knowledge Building

Another point or motive I hear Wargamer's raise when discussing such games is their capacity for learning about the real-world events or realities being modeled. Playing a ConSim for a particular battle or historical military campaign provides the players with some degree of insight or knowledge about the actual event. Even if things play out differently than in reality, the issues and decision factors the players grapple with are often highly analogous to those of the real world historical events.

I also wonder how games *not* about war and conflict, yet that nevertheless appeal to this sense of real world learning fall broadly within the wargame design school. I think of like High Frontier or Bios: Megafauna in this regard, where the games are trying to take scientific knowledge and concepts and wrap them around a game and let players explore the theories and ideas. Similarly, I consider a game like within this realism/simulation school from the standpoint of tasking players with building a working economy with market changes and dynamics that are analogous to those in the real world (if nonetheless abstracted). There are principles and dynamics being modeled that have implications for knowledge building and learning that reach beyond the game itself.

Abstracts: Minimalism



There is often a lot of discussion about what is or isn't considered an "Abstract" game. While some games we all generally agree on (i.e. Go or Checkers), others are less clear. Some people have argued that Chess isn't an abstract because the playing pieces have a thematic element to their design and naming (e.g. Knight, Rook, King, Bishop, etc.). Tigris & Euphrates is another interesting case, where the theme comes across very weakly for some players leaving them feeling like the game is an abstract, although for others they have quite the opposite reaction and find it relatively thematic.

In the general sense, I tend to think of Abstract strategy games as games that (in some combination):

- Typically have no theme or representation art (i.e. abstract)

- Typically have no random elements (are deterministic)
- Typically have no hidden information (have open information)
- Typically 2-player
- Typically no simultaneous decisions/bluffing
- Typically simple components
- Typically simple rules with emergent gameplay

Under this approach of "typically" I'm perfectly fine lumping Chess, Backgammon, and Go all equally under the abstract strategy game umbrella, despite Backgammon's use of dice and Chess evoking a warfare theme. They have enough of the other elements in place to put them well within the realm of abstract games in my mind.

But what is it that drives the design approach for abstract games? I feel that, taking the above criteria holistically, abstract games are an embodiment of **minimalism** in their design and execution.

Abstracts & Minimalism: Less is More

Under the context of minimalism, theme is not particularly necessary or desired. Heavy use of hidden information, random elements, or other considerations generally requires more rules and/or components to execute. Having more stuff to support more players generally runs counter to this minimalism idea as well.

Given the age of many classic abstracts, I do wonder to what extent this minimalism was born of necessity of the times, versus being a design conscious choice, or (perhaps more likely?) the result of the games evolving towards a more "pure" state over 100's of years (in some cases). In Chess, or Go, or Backgammon, nearly everything that isn't absolutely core and central to the game has been boiled away.

Abstracts & Minimalism: Emergence through Elegance

The compatriot of minimalism is the vital importance abstract games place on **simple rules creating emergent depth**. Many of the classic abstract strategy games and can be learned in a few minutes, yet the gameplay resulting from such a simple ruleset (and a minimal amount of components) is typically very deep and emergent. Abstracts are, in some ways, the ultimate expression of a framework or sandbox game, where elegant mechanics give rise to great depths. **Go** is the epitome of this notion.

Footnote

I wonder where Traditional Card Games fit across this spectrum of design schools. Like many classic abstracts, Traditional Card Games have evolved over periods of time. Yet despite a game like Bridge, Cribbage, or Rummy being very different from each other and from more "board"-centric abstract games like chess or go, I feel like they have a similar lineage and design philosophy. They are minimal in their execution (in terms of components), are typically theme-less, and have simple rules with surprising depth. The big differentiator is of course hidden information and randomness - but there are other abstracts that demonstrate both of those attributes as well!

BONUS! Customizable Games: The Meta-Game

Having played a fair bit of (customizable card game) in my younger days, as well as a healthy serving of (customizable miniature game) I feel that customizable games are ones where the bulk of the player's thinking and strategizing is at a meta-level. I've spent probably more time thinking about and designing and testing Magic decks than I've spent actually in-game playing them. Likewise building army lists for Warhammer. The **STRATEGY** of these games is in the construction of the deck/army/whatever, and the tactics are in the execution of an individual play session.

Given that the strategizing exists largely outside of the gameplay itself, it isn't surprising that the meta-game is of paramount importance. Knowing what cards or deck-types are strongest at a particular point in time and how to build a deck to work with that or counter it is critical to effective play; ditto for assembling miniature armies. Hence, being a good player of customizable games hinges heavily on your ability to follow and engage in the ever-shifting meta-game.

Wrap-Up Postulations

Phew! Let's review where we went:

- **Ameritrash** School ~ **Drama**
- **German Family** School ~ **Engagement**
- **Eurogame** School ~ **Challenge**
- **Wargame** School ~ **Realism**
- **Abstract** School ~ **Minimalism**

The question you may be asking now is, what's the point of all this? I have a few responses.

(1) There has been a fair amount of discussion recently about **gamer preferences** and how that translates into motives for playing certain types of games. I feel there is a strong relationship between these core priorities and the motives players have for a particular type of game and the experience that game intends to provide. Players looking for a simple but deep game that love abstracts might be turned off by many Ameritrash games, what with their fantastical themes and high drama theatics.

This isn't to say that gamers only have one preference though! Preferences and tolerances can change depending on one's mood and the attitudes of the group as a whole that's looking to game together.

(2) From a **designer's standpoint**, being cognizant of these core priorities and how they impact the design decisions you make in light of your intended audience is critical. Fundamentally, as a designer you need to ask yourself "who" you are designing for, and start to work towards that audience or at least be aware of how different audience might interpret your game.

(3) These core priorities and design schools are loose, amorphous, and ever-changing. These aren't hard and fast rules but rather general feelings and directions that define the movements. I found the core priority concept to be a handy way of framing the "gestalt" sense of certain types of games and a way to articulate what it is that certain games are trying to achieve.



(4) The past few years has seen a tremendous amount of hybridization and **hybrid game forms**. Hybrids, I'm inclined to think, occur when two or more priorities are roughly equal in importance. I can't help but look at Mage Knight and see it has the off-spring of a simulation-ist Magic Realm-type game that had a collision course with Dominion and HeroQuest.

In conclusion, the core priorities idea provides a frame for better understanding the different schools of design. And going all the way back to Jezztek's initial premise, it does in a way that let's us come to terms with the big idea of the different schools and not get bogged down in the exact specifics of which attributes do or don't define a particular genre. So the question now is, does this approach resonate with you? Or send you running in the other direction?



Written by [Oliver Kiley](#)
[Mezmorki](#) [Big Game Theory!](#)

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@crazybyzantine Feb 7

Russ @russ wrote:**Martin G** @qwertymartin wrote:

"Ameripejorative" is *massively* more irritating than "Ameritrash", for what it's worth.

I still find it less irritating than using "RNG" for "random" or "randomness"...

I prefer to use "uncertainty" or "unexpected events/outcomes" 😊

As opposite of "deterministic".

Mark W [Designer](#)

@mawilson4 Feb 7

Having not read everything in the recent discussion, I can actually agree that the preponderance of hybrids and different ways to engage with games means that we're not talking about absolutes.

The dissonance with Oliver's article, though, to me is erased when we're reminded that these represent "core" priorities instead of "only" or "exclusive" priorities. And when you view them as jumping-off points for discussion about differences between genres, which are more varied than what's catalogued here. Indeed, in Drew's most recent post where he talks about genre expectations being used to attract and satisfy an audience, that's to me what these core priorities sort of point to. Obviously in limiting it to five schools/priorities, we can name hundreds of hybrids and exceptions. But where audiences split off (say, in wargames, to use an earlier example), I would say that exceptions aren't actually splitting from the genre's core priority but rather positioning themselves in relation to it. Or if it's a hybrid, it probably merges some of the core priorities from various genres or emphasizes some over others while technically including a mix of priorities.

I have a combat-oriented design right now, and as I pitch and playtest it, I'm describing it as an "abstract, tactical wargame." Why abstract? Because I need to send the signal that simulationist elements are not paramount in it, but that it retains many other hallmarks of the wargaming genre. It's attracting and satisfying an audience, to reuse Drew's phrase, but in relation to established genre tropes, not in defiance of them. It's a game that could be seen as disproving the "core priorities" framework from one perspective, but to me uses the somewhat commonly understood language of design priorities to find its audience. So when I say "it's a mix between a combinatorial abstract and a CDG tactical wargame" it's from the basis of something like Oliver's framework that playtesters can understand the expectations and intended experience.

Russ [Designer](#)

@russ Feb 7

(Having said that, I agree with Drew that it's nutty that some people think Carcassonne and Catan are not "euros" because in recent years many people narrow "euro" to mean "medium-to-high-complexity resource/economic low interaction euro". It would be like saying GIPF and Hex and Othello are not "abstract games" because someone insists that an "abstract game" must be specifically a chess variant.)

James Arias

@crazybyzantine Feb 7

Yeah like how would everyone categorize ?

It's definitely thematic from perspectives of intended "dramatic", mechanics tied closely to theme, art style, etc.

Definitely some random elements (roll for outcome, draw from bags) but with odds manipulation elements (spend tokens to mod die rolls, actions for "bag-thinning" like deck-thinning).

Has some "long-range planning" aspects frequently associated with Euros.

Overlaps into adjacent separate religious wars ...

- no minis just tokens & standees 😊
- coop, not competitive

To me it's a hybrid. And I upgraded mine with minis because plastic makes everything better 😊

Eric Brosius

@Eric Brosius Feb 7 (edited)

Russ @russ wrote:

(Having said that, I agree with Drew that it's nutty that some people think Carcassonne and Catan are not "euros" because in recent years many people narrow "euro" to mean "medium-to-high-complexity resource/economic low interaction euro". It would be like saying GIPF and Hex and Othello are not "abstract games" because someone insists that an "abstract game" must be specifically a chess variant.)

It's more like saying an "abstract game" must use dice. "Euro" once meant a game that was stripped down to its essential elements, without anything that isn't necessary to what the game is trying to do. Today it means the opposite.

I use the terms "so-called-Euro" and "complexity fest" to describe what some people call "medium-to-high-complexity resource/economic low interaction euros".

Oliver Kiley  Designer

@Mezmorki Feb 7

@Drew

Before continuing, I want to say that I appreciate your thoughts and your push back on this. Like any academic debate, rigorous criticism is an important part of the process and it's how we collectively build deeper knowledge and understanding.

Second, it's worth pointing out that this article is now nearly 11-years old, and it may say as much about the context in which it was written and the state of thinking at the time than it works as a tool today for understanding types of games. It was admittedly incomplete at the time, and many of the earlier comments got at a number of suggestions ideas for refinement and expansion of the concept.

More importantly perhaps is that my own thinking has continued to grow well beyond this particular framework. Not sure how much of my other writing and work relative to game genres and classification you've seen. But... it ties directly into some of the things you said:

Quote:

Genre is about attracting and satisfying an audience.

....

This is done through genre conventions and tropes. You can list off a whole bunch of them...

...

The thing that people often got wrong when trying to define Euros this way is that they were looking for a "one thing" to define them all or a long litmus test. The thing about **genre conventions and tropes** is that it is very rare for any one of them to be present in 100% of examples of the genre, and it is also rare for an example of the genre to include every convention and trope (if a film has every Western trope and convention, it is a parody). **A critical mass of conventions and tropes needs to be present**- because that's what is required to create and meet the audience expectations that "this is like those other things that you like, but also different".

I agree with you on all of the above - and much of the other things that you've commented on recently.

The article below is a slightly more recent (2021) summation of my thinking on this topic at the time.

[Terms of Art: Building Language for Board Game Criticism, Design and Casual Discourse](#)

Most pertinent to this conversation is the reference to [Wittgenstein's Family Resemblance](#) theory as a basis for genre definition (thanks again Martin - the gift that keeps giving!). This is basically as you describe for genres, in that there is a set of typical attributes or features (conventions, tropes, etc.) that pertain to a genre. A game does NOT need to hit ALL of them, but rather a sufficient number of them to likely be in the genre in question. I think we're saying the same thing here.

When we talk about "fun" and why people play games, the article I linked above highlights a series of motives for playing games, which I expanded based on some prior research. The types are listed below (with some tweaks):

Quote:

1. Socialization / Pastime
2. Challenge / Problem Solving
3. Discovery / Exportation
4. Drama / Excitement
5. Immersion
6. Fantasy / Escapism
7. Sensation
8. Expression / Reflection
9. Competition
10. Simulation / Learning
11. Achievement / Metagaming
12. Engagement / Comfort
13. Control & Agency (I've contemplating adding this)

The above are the experiences or "aesthetic responses" that one might be desiring and/or that a designer is trying to instill in their game. These experiences are also driven by a few essential dimensions:

Quote:

- * Theme Integration
- * Player Interactions
- * Complexity
- * Depth
- * Randomness/Uncertainty

In my view, genre tropes and conventions basically boil down to how a particular style of game delivers the intended experiences (i.e. one or more choices from the 1-13 list above) by way of the technical systems employed (complexity, types of interaction, etc.).

With respect to the Schools of Design topic however, as others have pointed out, it is ultimately about the tradeoffs that are made. If I'm designing a game with a combat system for example - what am I trying to do with it? Am I adding more detail and nuance to better simulate the "reality" of the setting in some way, am I trying to maximize the decision depth and focus on the tactical decision making? Am I trying to keep the outcomes chaotic and random to make the gameplay feel more dramatic at the expense of player agency? This could push the game's feeling (and genre-alignments) in a bunch of directions. Push enough elements in a similar direction and it probably more closely aligns with a given genre. That's all the design school idea is getting at.

As for the specific style and genres of games - compared to even 10 years ago, there are vastly more examples of games both within and cutting across given genres. And even at the time there are certainly sub-genres that could've been spoken to. "Eurogame" remains a broad and vague term - and increasingly thinking about the specific sub-genres within it is probably more useful. E.g. OG Original German Style Games, Newros/Heavy Weight Eurogames, Lighter Weight / Lower interactive euros (take & make games, roll & writes, etc.). We can do the same for "Thematic Conflict" (ahem AmeriPerjorative) games - thinking about sub-genres like Troops/Dudes on a Map, Beer & Pretzels, Take-That, Civ/4X/Empire Builders. Sub-genres can share some key definition features/tropes, but may vary in other ways too (depth, complexity, interactivity, etc.).

Phew. I don't know if any of this is helpful. I think we're honestly more aligned in our thinking than our exchanges here would indicate.

Martin G 🇬🇧 ⚡

@qwertymartin Feb 7

11 years old?! Mind blown 😊

@casualcasual 🇬🇧

Feb 7

Oliver Kiley @Mezmorki wrote:

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The thing for me is that, sure, in the last ten years games appear to be more hybridised; however when you look at them in the way you describe here, they will still have a core purpose. As Drew said, mostly games will communicate their purpose in various ways - mainly at that aesthetic level; however, some will have a mismatch in communication. But that doesn't change their purpose though. Of course, if we label their core purpose with a genre, that's where the confusion can be created with everyday language - that's at the heart of the "Catan is not a Euro" thing. I get that. Personally i've got no problem in labelling a lot of hybrid games as Euros because to me under the hood they share the same core purposes - the hybridity is largely in the aesthetic. Is that helpful? Well it is to me but i get why it leads to confusion too.

Oliver Kiley 🇺🇸 🎨 Designer

@Mezmorki Feb 7

Martin G @qwertymartin wrote:

11 years old?! Mind blown 😊

No kidding. I had half as many children then!

Russ 🇺🇸 ⚡ Designer

@russ Feb 7

Oliver Kiley @Mezmorki wrote:

Martin G @qwertymartin wrote:

11 years old?! Mind blown 😊

No kidding. I had half as many children then!

Same here!

(...half of zero is zero...)

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