

Of Dice and Meeples



Issue 4

August 2026

Colophon

Introduction

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Zines should use reasonable page dimensions (if it's not roughly A4 or 8.5"×11" there should be a reason). Maximum zine length is 16 pages/10,000 words. Discussion of contemporary politics is discouraged but permitted with a maximum length for political content set at 2 pages/1,200 words. AI-generated material is not allowed. All artwork must be attributed to its creator, unless it is in the public domain.

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Contributors may submit their PDF zines via email to of-dice-and-meeples@tekeli.li

Submission deadlines and Ignorable Themes for the next several issues are as follows:

Issue #5 — 6 September: Print and Play

Issue #6 — 6 October: Games you wish you had the time and/or table space for

Issue #7 — 6 November: Essen Spiel and other conventions

Suggestions for further Ignorable Themes are welcome!

This project is explicitly inspired by [Ever & Anon](#), the digital APA successor to *Alarums & Excursions*.

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This issue's Ignorable Theme is: Alpha Players

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

A: A collection of zines. It can also refer to the community of people writing the zines.

Q: What's a zine?

A: A fanzine. A small, amateur magazine usually distributed for free or at cost.

Q: So this is a collection of free fanzines written by amateurs?

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

Q: But I see the same names appearing again and again throughout.

A: Those are comments. We comment on each other's zines. When you see "RogerBW: blah-blah-blah...", if there are no quotes around the blah-blah-blah, that's probably a comment to Roger.

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

A: Yes. It's like a cocktail party, but all written out. Come join us, if you like. Amateur Press Associations date back to the late 1800s and started to become popular among fantasy and science fiction enthusiasts during the 1930s.¹

Q: But now there are blogs and various online forums, so why do APAs still exist?

A: Because one type of forum isn't necessarily any better or worse than the others. One advantage of the APA model is longevity. Because they have multiple contributors and don't rely on making money, APAs are more durable than individual blogs or traditional magazines. Also, because websites come and go, whatever is posted online will probably eventually vanish into the electronic ether. But whatever is put into a publication that can be downloaded and archived is more likely to survive due to the sheer fact that multiple copies will exist. And the back issues become an indelible record of what people used to think. They provide insight into a world that used to be.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association



Send us a zine. Or some cover art. Or comments. Or a blurb.

Or tell us why we're wrong.

Send your thoughts to of-dice-and-meeples@tekeli.li, and provided they aren't laced with powergamer profanity (or maybe even if they are), we'll likely publish them for the enlightenment & edification of the entire APA. Please include your name, collection size, and why *Flash Point: Fire Rescue* is the best game of all time, and be sure to feed your workers.

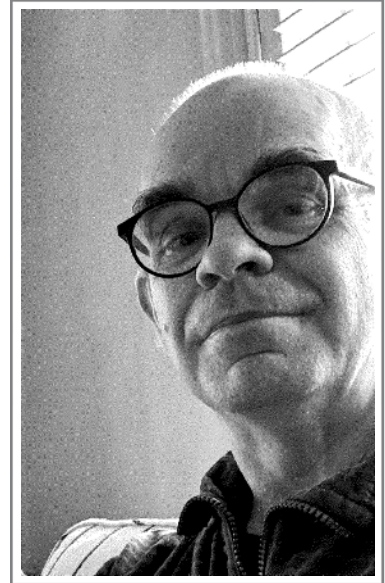
Abbreviations & Acronyms You May Need to Know:

- APA: Amateur Press Association
- Async: a slow online game where you're called back to take your turn
- BBG: Big Bad Guy/Gal (a major villain)
- BGA: Board Game Arena, a site for playing games online
- BTW: By the way
- XdY: X Y-sided dice added together; omit the X if it's 1.
- Frex: For example
- FWIW: For what it's worth
- IgTheme: Ignorable theme
- IIRC: If I recall correctly
- IM(H)O: In my (humble) opinion
- Monopoly: we don't talk about this "game"
- Nextish/Thish/Lastish: Next, This, Last issue
- (N)PC: (Non-)Player Character
- ODaM: *Of Dice and Meeples*
- PBEM: Play-by-Email
- PBF: Play-by-Forum
- RAE(BNC): Read and enjoyed (but no comment)
- Re: Regarding
- RHCT(M): Regarding his/her comment to (me)
- RYCT(M): Regarding your comment to (me)
- RYQT(M): Regarding your question to (me)
- TTS: TableTop Simulator, a physics engine for playing virtual boardgames
- WRT: With respect to / With regard to
- YMMV: Your mileage may vary
- Zine: A writer's contribution

Quicksand Memoir

Also, a bit about how to ignore Alpha Players

Christopher Taylor-Davies
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A.B.C.

This month, as a theme, we have the option of ignoring Alpha Players, and since this is my preferred option for dealing with that Mild Peril™, that is what I shall do. I am fortunate that I haven't really suffered from this blight, but have heard many sad tales from people who have. Maybe I am an Alpha Player and nobody has ever said so? I so, I apologise... Instead there will be a somewhat incoherent grab bag of bits and pieces, including a haphazard look at sandbox games that didn't make it into issue one of this zine.

There was an amusing online discussion online recently about things that terrified you as a kid, but which turned out to not really feature as hazards for you as an adult. One of these for me, and for others, was Quicksand. I promise this article won't drag you under like Quicksand, but will feature a sandy theme.



Fronting Up

What is a sandbox game? Really I have no idea so I will pick a few of my favourite/current games and see if they qualify.

In computer gaming land, sandbox tends to mean open-ended, where there aren't any defined objectives, just a set of tools and systems that the user can play around with. Board games though, like to have some victory condition or clear signal that the game is over. So I might instead say that one way to categorise sandbox games is as being more interested in emerging narrative than a pure pursuit of victory points. Narrative is one of the strongest elements attracting me to board games. While I have some pure abstract or lightly themed games floating about, I am always more likely to choose a game that generates some kind of narrative.



Narrative and pursuit of victory points are not mutually exclusive of course. One of the finest generators of narrative on my shelf is that vintage classic, **Up Front**. A card driven war game, with lots of fiddly rules, common for games of that era, it generated great stories, as your squad struggled through streams, got lost in gullies, or engaged in unlikely close combat to emerge victorious. But there was definitely a victory objective. Is Up Front a sandbox game? Potentially, as it does have a roll-your-own scenario option. Perhaps I just mention it because I like talking about Up Front on account of not getting to play it very often nowadays. Nostalgia and all that. It does demonstrate how fungible the category is. Or could be if you let it.

Delivering biscuits



Recently I received **Earthborne Rangers**, ordered after an enthusiastic SU&SD review, and delivered nearly 2 years later. This has elements of sandboxxery, in that you can go anywhere and do anything, within the boundaries of the game system. You are strongly encouraged to complete some story goals though, in order to advance the campaign. Nevertheless I would consider this an example of a sandbox game, and it too generates excellent narrative and is somewhat open-ended.

Narrative isn't the only thing that might define a sandbox experience. **Terraforming Mars** has been a mainstay in this house, our go-to 2 player engine builder. Sure you can rush the game to its end by doing all that necessary terraforming work, but you can also just crank the handle on your floater engine, or science network, or deranged Jovian mining enterprise and just keep on building more projects. Which is to say that even within the scope of quite a rigid set of victory conditions there is scope for treating it as something of a sandbox, albeit with all players having to adopt this mindset. Engine builders in particular do encourage this because you are often given a rich set of toys to play with and getting them to work together effectively is a satisfying puzzle on its own.

Pushing your luck

TTRPGs could also be considered in the sandbox realm, especially as players almost never do what the DM expects, apart from always choosing to go after the loot rather than the story objective. There is a strong element of trying things out to see what happens, or assembling something interesting out of disparate components or mechanisms. Maybe we are getting closer to what might constitute a definition of a sandbox game. Are you given a toolbox and left largely to your own devices to figure out what you can do with it to achieve your objectives. I do remember a game of **Descent** where we, the adventurers, constantly chose to explore every chest, every dead end, in pursuit of loot. The GM kept telling us it was incredibly dangerous and yet we kept rolling an extraordinary sequence of lucky rolls on whatever the hazard system was and gleefully avoided all his traps. If we had been cats we would have used up 9 times 9 lives. Apologies for the terrible pictures, 2013 phone cameras were not very good.



Childhood Trauma

In the video game arena sandbox games are most commonly associated with construction style games. The Sim City, Rollercoaster / Railroad Tycoon type of games tend to let you do whatever you want within a fairly generous set of parameters. Which reminds me of a tale of one such game. Not a board game, but definitely a sandbox game. The original **Tropico** had you cast as the ruler of a banana republic. Set on a small island you controlled matters indirectly by creating buildings and crops for your residents to work. I was playing this with my son (maybe 4 or 5, I don't remember) watching and making suggestions. Put some corn there, and some houses there, he would say. This was all going well, until there was an election, and as I hadn't been paying attention to some key metrics I lost my post. The scene shifted to you being rowed away from the island in a small rowboat. My son looked at me confused and asked what had happened. I said that we had lost the election and were no longer in charge. He looked at me, eyes wide, close to tears, and said "But who will look after them now?"



This photo has nothing at all to do with Tropico, but I have no screenshots or evidence from that era any more. However these are Chess pieces and Chess is mentioned in this article. Eventually.

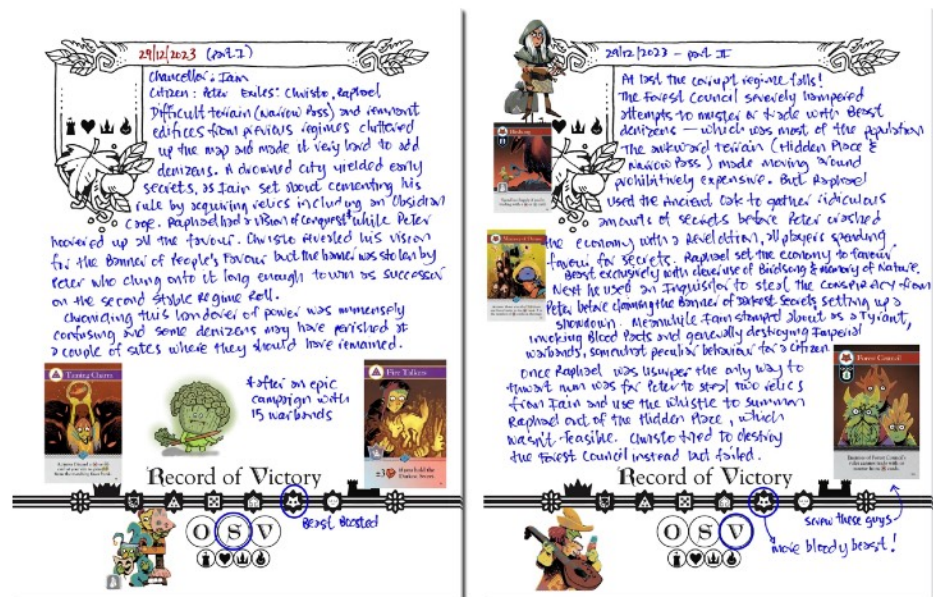
Tactics FTW

While I am veering wildly off course, perhaps I can mention probably my favourite type of video game, the turn based tactical JRPG. The Final Fantasy Tactics series, both the original, and the excellent GBA and DS versions, as well as Tactics Ogre are fine examples of these. I find them very board game like in flavour, in that you are given a parcel of units, equipment and capabilities, and have to work out the optimal way to make use of those to achieve your objectives. While it is a kind of efficiency puzzle, like the best engine-builders, it is free-form enough to allow for many ways to win. Usually. These are also legendary for uneven play progression with some wicked difficulty spikes. I bring them up in the context of sandbox games because I think they demonstrate that “sandbox” can simply mean the ability to find a variety of solutions and enjoyment within a carefully chosen set of constraints. That definition could be extended to almost any game I realise, but for me that flexibility and player creativity has to be part of the central idea of the game.



Oath is a 4 letter word

Maybe the most well known recent board game in the sandbox realm is **Oath**. We have had several sessions of this with more or less the same set of players, but spread far enough apart in time that we spend most of the time trying to remember the rules. In **Oath** the world retains some locations and denizens between sessions, and your factions also have some persistent state. The choices of the players directly influence the environment of the current and subsequent games. For good and ill, which gives each campaign a unique flavour. However, I think it would be better played regularly in quick succession to build up the familiarity with the mechanisms and rules, and also to even out the feeling of being let down by a particular session that just got bogged down, or went off the rails somehow. You would finish knowing that you will get it out again a week later and try again, instead of seeing it lurking on the shelf for 9 months, waiting for the next outing.



One consideration about **Oath** is that there is huge amount of stuff you may never ever see, even over multiple campaigns. This irritates the completionist in me, but impresses me as an element of game design. Being confident enough to include aspects that players may never see outweighs that sense of missing out I mentioned earlier. It makes the game feel larger than life, essentially unknowable. Oddly comforting, unlike

Stretching a point

closed system games like **Chess** or **Dungeon Twister** where you feel you could work out (if you had a brain the size of a planet) all the possible combinations and therefore your optimal move. In a sandbox game experimentation is encouraged rather than exhaustive analysis.



What about **Fields of Arle** in the context of sandbox games? In one sense this is hugely constrained, you have only 4 actions in each of the 9 “rounds” of the game and these actions are limited to just the spaces on the board where you can send your workers to. Doesn’t seem like it qualifies. Yet within that problem space you actually have so many different ways to try to gain points that it does feel like a sandbox to me. Here are all my toys, how shall I deploy them this time? Apart from having to have a very minimal amount of food and peat to keep you alive it’s wide open and up to me to try different approaches. It helps that I really like this game anyway, so I am going to award it a tentative “CTD SandBox Award”.





I can't believe I left out **Hanabi** from the list of co-operative games from last time. Perhaps it is because it has such a small box, at least for the original tiny card game. I know there have been various deluxe versions with tiles or larger cards, but mine is just a small card box. I first played it a convention when it had just been released and so it was very popular, and always easy to find a game. I ended up playing a number of times with different people. Part of the fun of these games is the meta-game that develops when you play with the same group, which also can then derail you when you play with a different group. With **Hanabi** it is always fun either way. However, I remember being introduced to **Coup** and completely upsetting the experienced players because my initial move didn't match their meta-game expectations and threw off their calculations. I was roundly berated. In this case, to bring us back to the theme, they were all being **Alpha** players, expecting a newcomer to follow their bidding convention and understand their unstated assumptions. Needless to say it was an unpleasant experience and thus not one I chose to repeat.

This sandbox article has wobbled all over the place, gone nowhere in particular, and thus generally fits to the sandbox theme admirably.

Until next time, then...



IN CASE OF UNCERTAINTY, EXIT: THE GAME

My partner and I were once invited to an escape room. This particular room was supposed to be solved within an hour, and our two-couples team had a mix of skill levels. Our relevant experience was having watched a fair few episodes of *The Crystal Maze* as children, and theirs was having travelled around Europe actively seeking out escape rooms. Veterans, if you will. We would naturally be following their lead - until things went a bit pear shaped.

I managed to sequence break it, causing the Supervisor (Observer? Overlord? Keyholder?) to open the door and ask how we were able to do whatever the heck we just did.

If memory serves it is the first escape room that the experts had ever failed to finish, and I've refused all offers of escape rooms since.

But at some point we were given *EXIT: The Game - The Mysterious Museum*, an escape room-adjacent puzzle in a box, by an entirely different couple who thought we might like it.

Oh, how wrong they were...

Spoilers ahead. Technically.

The game begins with you bumping into someone muttering something or other about stuff and things outside a museum - it has been a while, cut me some slack.

You enter the museum to find it deserted, but as you turn around to leave the doors slam shut on you. You're trapped. It is time to escape.

In your hand is Riddle Card A which you turn over to reveal a ticket to the museum, and on the first page of the booklet is your view of this first room of the museum. Scattered around



CC-BY-3.0 KOSMOS via BGG user W. Eric Martin

the display pieces are a bunch of digits - much like a crime scene, come to think of it - and three strange green alignment markers that are *clearly* designed to show you where to hold the entry ticket and will inevitably point to some of these digits and not others.

Now, the *EXIT* series of games are designed to be played just the once, for in the process of playing them they are rendered ruined, by which I mean you'll need a pair of scissors.

I have mixed feelings on the destruction of playing cards and the like in games, but on this occasion, knowing how much I don't like escape rooms, I was adamant that this ticket

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stub was not getting ripped up. We were going to proxy it, or simply imagine one corner having been removed - I'm sure we were smart enough for that.

Three digits are needed, arranged from high to low, and then you input them on a spinny dial thing to reveal an Answer Card number which you check to see if you got it right or not. Easy peasy. 830. What do you mean it's wrong?

There are Hint Cards that you can use to make your life easier and easier, before a final hint card that just reveals the answer, which was 300. There was just enough ambiguity and wiggle room in the alignment markers and the arrows on the ticket to lead you to the wrong outcome.

At that point I probably swore, and definitely swore to never play an *EXIT* game ever again (totally not an overreaction). We turned the page to the next puzzle, had a quick look, and abandoned it before we had to bend the next card, meaning we'd be able to sell it on as 'opened but unplayed'...

That must have been a few years ago now (though time is funny these days, I can't tell), so I went searching for a playthrough video of *The Mysterious Museum*, and there's one on BoardGameGeek by a couple of puzzle and brain training authors, no less, *who make the exact same mistake as us idiots*, even after having taken a pair of scissors to that ticket without hesitation.

To *EXIT*'s credit, I cannot say what the clues for this first puzzle were on account of not remembering them, and I may even be generous and say that the first puzzle is designed to give you a bit of a fail so that you learn how to deal with it, but I really don't think that's the case.

I think I've spent more time writing about *The Mysterious Museum* than it took to play (or to watch others play), and I want that time back.

Ironically, the story is about a time machine.

Spoilers end.



ALPHAPOLIS?

I wrote about *EXIT* largely because it's a game where I can imagine someone taking the reigns and doing it all themselves without anyone else at the table having much of a say, becoming that Alpha player we seek to avoid.

Another game I can imagine could lead to that problem is the *opolis* series: *Sprawlopolis*, *Agropolis*, *Naturopolis*, and even *Casinopolis*, which I don't have because at that point I thought they were just being silly - three city-themed *opolis*' I could take, but *four*?!

Each game sees you try to arrange 15 cards (or more, with expansions) into a grid of your own sprawling design in such a way as to score as many points as you can towards 3 (or more, with expansions) random scoring conditions.

Sprawlopolis, for example, might see you score 2 points for each blue Commercial block that sits between two orange Residential blocks, as long as all those blocks are on the same road, *and* you might score 3 points for each road that begins at one green Park block and ends at a different Park, *and* you might score 1 point per road whose ends are somewhere *within* your city grid, but lose 1 point for each road that ends at the edge of the city.

Sometimes, as is the case here, the scoring conditions might work together and make your life a little easier. Having only 15(ish) cards before the end of the game doesn't leave you

with a lot of wiggle room if you've got to do wildly different things with them.

Each scoring condition comes with a unique number which you add together with the other scoring conditions in that particular game to get a total target score. Beat that score to win.

Cards all feature four blocks, one of each colour, along with one or more sections of road, and can be rotated 180 degrees and placed adjacent to, or on top of, other cards, in whole or in part. You'll probably be wanting to cover an awkward area of the city with a more useful one whenever you can, to eliminate a road or put a specific block next to something it wants to be near, for example.

It will often feel like playing a card to score something will introduce a problem that will have to be swiftly dealt with, so it's best to weigh up your placement options before finally playing a card and moving on.

I just played a game with those scoring conditions and scored 14 points when all was said and done. The target was 25. Even using rules for an easy game I would have failed, and I thought I was doing alright. I could try again, or I could shuffle everything up and redraw 3 new scoring conditions for a new set of challenges.

So where does the Alpha player come in? Well, up to 4 players can tackle this puzzle, with each player getting dealt one city card that they cannot reveal to the other players. The active player gets two more cards, and when they've chosen one to put into the city grid, they pass the other two to the next player and draw another card.

The setup diagram clearly states that players 'DO NOT REVEAL' their hand, but there is an entire section of the slim rules under the subheading 'Table Talk' that says "Discussing cards is not only legal, but encouraged!"

Yes, ok, it *does* restate that players can't show their hand to anyone, but you're passing cards between yourselves and there are only 15

(or more, with expansions) in the deck to work with - and the top card of that deck, the one that a player will draw once their turn is over, is *always* public information.

So in a 4 player game you will only be uncertain about 3 or 4 cards, after which someone is going to say words to the effect of "I'm playing this one for that objective, and then you can play that one there" and before long you might as well be playing an open-handed solo game.

And so I do. I've only played the *opolis* titles multiplayer on a few occasions, and while I've neither been nor seen an Alpha player in those games, they felt very much like we were pooling our hands together rather than keeping them apart.

I've got most of the stuff for most of the *opolis*'. The expansions only add a few cards each, if that, and you really can pick whichever theme you like the look of the most, they play the same way, though I find *Agropolis* to be a little more complicated than the others.

To prove their interchangeability there exists various versions of *Combopolis* to combine two games together, and *Ultimopolis* to smash all three into one large game, which I've yet to try.

There's a user on BoardGameGeek by the name of Lars Toft (*LToft*) who has played all 816 combinations of the *Sprawlopolis* base game scoring conditions, shuffling the cards so often that the printing has worn down to barely anything. If you ever question whether a deck of 18 cards can provide enough entertainment to justify a purchase, his 108 hours of playtime should give you an idea...

For a game that takes mere minutes unless you start to slide into analysis paralysis, having an Alpha player make an appearance is at least short lived. If they ask whether you should play it again, it's on you to say "No", but consider following that with "I'll play it by myself some time", because it's not often that you can fit an entire city builder in your pocket.

GARBAGE WATERS RISE!

Whilst browsing the Internet, waiting for time to pass, I remembered I'd recently joined the discussion forums of *tekeli.li*, so had a look through the new posts and found a thread asking whether people recycle their games.

"Aha!" I thought. "An area I have some actual first hand experience in, albeit limited and perhaps outdated." So I chimed in.

I used to work in the glamorous world of recycling, sorting and processing rubbish from the mostly clean to the definitely not. It was official policy to not take anything for yourself, but we were reusing what we found, which is far better than recycling it.

I took plenty of things over the years. The rucksack I held my work stuff in was dumped, brand new. Some of the pens on this very desk were tossed close to a decade ago. The dice tray I use for *Rallyman* was salvaged from a skip. There was no recycling stream for a wood and felt dice tray: I saved it from landfill.

Naturally I saved board games too, though usually of the kind not worth saving. Nobody needs to play *Dragons Den*, a trivia game masquerading as a bidding game based on the BBC series, for example, but you should all hunt down *Challenge Anneka*. Don't let BGG's 2/10 rating fool you; it had a neat phone book mechanic that I sadly can't show you without flying hundreds of miles to fish it out of my parent's garage, though 'neat' is doing a lot of heavy lifting there. Restoration Games need to turn it into the co-op it should have been. Released in 1990, it was practically the law for it to be a competitive roll and move instead...

Anyway, there was one occasion where, whilst working on the tins, I saw a familiar box at the front of the heap, that of *Forbidden Island*. The components were nowhere to be seen, perhaps kept, perhaps not. Was the previous owner frustrated with an Alpha player problem? Maybe they just didn't like the tin.



Having owned that tin myself I agreed with their decision to chuck it: All games in tins need to think twice about being in tins, no exceptions.

What I knew for sure was that this tin needed processing. It was lobbed into the machine, squashed along with all the other tins into a brick the size of a shoebox or so (for some reason called a biscuit, and I never worked out why), stacked up on a pallet as best as they could be along with however many other mishappen bricks we made, before being strapped up and shipped off to whoever we were selling them to. After that, who knows?

Ideally not into a new *Forbidden Desert* tin...



“A bad thing may be going to happen.”

— *Roger BW*

I think *Jamaica* is one of those games where you’ve just gotta roll with it. We had one game that saw a player go undefeated in fight after fight, no matter how much gunpowder we shot her way. Half of us abandoned the race to try and prove it was actually possible to win a battle against her. On that day, it just wasn’t. No idea who actually won the game - by that point we didn’t really care.

Despite my desire to play video game IPs in a new medium, I’ve basically played none of those that have made the leap. Most are titles that I’m not interested in, or just look so bloated as to be off-putting.

Somehow *SUPERHOT: The Card Game* is able to screw with my brain just as much as the video game using nothing but a deck of cards. One day I might understand how to play it.



RETHEME OF THE RINGS

I’m not sure I’d ever be able to sit down and play as many games of *Pandemic* as CTD, even if spread over many a session. The original *Pandemic* was one of the first games we bought and one of the first games we sold. It just didn’t do anything for us, I suppose.

As they’ve gone on to release more and more, I have sometimes wondered whether we would have a different reaction with a different theme, but while I might give *Fall of Rome*, *Lord of the Rings* or *Star Wars* versions a go, I know my gaming partner in crime wouldn’t. She’d want something more along the lines of fending off tourists from touching artworks in galleries. Might have to make our own version instead...

We found *The Lord of the Rings* in a charity shop for a couple of quid. It’s missing one component. One precious component. We’ve not played it, but have played *The Hobbit* at the library. I can only hope it’s not the same, and that *The Lord of the Rings* is better.

I’M A FIRE STARTER

Are board games where players don’t work together a form of conflict or sport? I think I get Roger’s point, in that I too probably shy away from games where we’re explicitly bashing each other the head, but if that’s the theme and this is the safe environment to enact that sort of thing, so be it - even when I’m usually the primary target on account of teaching something in the first place.

I do enjoy a good map, and while I don’t mind playing *Codenames* now and again, I don’t want to rely on it, so *Landmarks* makes it onto the list of things to look up. We’ve already sold and rebought *Codenames* though, so it’ll have to win my partner over.

I think the host of the local library group has mentioned *Fortune and Glory* once or twice, but I can’t be sure because he has been known to confuse game names, which makes trying to picture what he’s actually talking about a game in itself. He’s mentioned *Dead of Winter* too - at least I think he has...

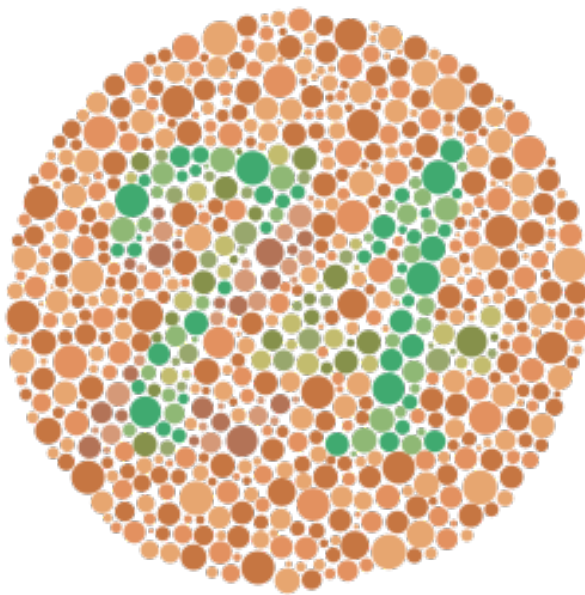
The Blue Dinosaur

by Marcus Boyce

I was about three years old, and it was my birthday. My birthday cake had two little blue birds on the top, or as I put at the time ‘a nice pink bird.’ That was the first clue that I don’t see colours like most of the world’s population does.

It has caused me *trouble* in life ever since.

The first issue was dealing with these ... Ishihara tests.



If there is a number in that (or letter) then I cannot see it. Anyway, turns out I have both red-green colour-blindness and to a lesser extent blue-yellow colour-blindness too. Sucks to be me, I guess? I did draw a wonderful dinosaur at school that was a nice shade of grey...erm, it was turquoise blue!

From three years old to now, many decades later, I have had a disadvantage that either eliminated my ability to do something or be something (no career in the Police for me, but I didn’t want that) or made doing something come with a large cognitive overhead.

I’ve played both video games and board games since I was young, my first computer was a ZX81 so yeah, I was there Gandalf. But mostly my colour-blindness didn’t really cause an issue. You

can play *Hungry Hungry Hippos* with bad colour-blindness without issue and *Jet Set Willy* also didn’t really need working colour vision to play. Modern video games moved on and often do require colour to play. These have generally managed well with accessibility options for colour-blindness but having played ‘modern style’ board games for the couple of decades, I can say they have not, and I’d go as far as saying they have gotten worse than games like *Agricola* that came out in, checks notes and crumbles to dust, 2007.

I am not going to excuse older games from having colour-blind accessibility issues, as a lot of them do. *Race for the Galaxy*, also from 2007, just like ‘Gric, is unplayable due to, erm, uhm, I think the red and brown. Don’t quote me on that as I can’t tell you what the problematic colours are. Sadly, even the revised more “colour-blind friendly” versions remain unplayable for me. *Village*, from 2011 was only playable if I modified the cubes. When I say “I” what I mean is my wife, as how could I modify cubes when I can’t tell what colour they are? For a while this became a common practice. *Grand Austria Hotel*, the original version, also had the modified cubes, featuring a daub from a black permanent marker so I could tell brown from red. *Transatlantic* had stickers applied to the red ships so I could tell them from the green ones. Repeat ad nauseam, until I got tired of supporting publishers who release games that are unplayable to people like me. It also doesn’t do much for the resale value either. Now I check videos of the game or go to BGG to look at screenshots and if it isn’t designed with colour-blind accessibility in mind, I don’t spend my money. Even doing that sometimes games arrive that looked perfectly playable but are not. We shall look at why that is shortly.

Colour-blindness affects something like 300-350 million people and is more common in men than women. Common enough of a condition that

video games have options for the common specific types of colour-blindness. Yet here I am unable to play *Sagrada* because to me it has like two colours of dice. Or maybe three? How many colours does the game have?

I can hear the voices in the distance now saying things like “It’s 8% of the world population of males why bother with the effort of making games colour-blind accessible?” or “Just buy another game” or “I don’t care, I want my game to be pretty” and those voices are getting closer.

Sure, not every game can be made colour-blind accessible, I am not going to sit here and argue they all *should be*. What I am going to advocate is that most games can be made accessible with minimal or zero impact on aesthetics and minimal impact on cost. If that is the case, why wouldn’t designers and publishers do so? After all that could equate to more sales. I will happily chuck my board gaming budget at such publishers and designers and vocally praise and recommend them.

OK, old man, enough shouting at the clouds, what are the magic fixes you speak of?

It’s mostly double coding. Yeah. That.

Double what now? To represent an in-game object in two distinct ways. If a game has wood as a resource, it isn’t a brown cube on the board and a brown cube in your hand. It is a distinct wood shape on the board and a distinct wood shaped piece to go with it. This means a game with similar coloured items (say a green and red resource) will represent them in a way that can be determined by either colour or shape or both! Double coded.

2014’s *Scoville* had a lot of coloured peppers potentially making the game a nightmare for colour-blind folks. They double coded the peppers by making them different sizes making the game playable for colour-blind folks. Well mostly. The colours green and orange were the same size but sadly of a close enough shade that I had to modify them with the usual daub of permanent marker. I wasn’t angry with Tasty Minstrel Games over this, as it probably wouldn’t affect most colour-blind players and they did go

to the effort of making the game accessible way back in 2014.

Not all double coding is equal. *Sea Salt and Paper* uses a system called ColorADD. This adds a symbol to the colours. Now this *works* in so much as I can look up what the symbol means but on *Sea Salt and Paper* the ColorADD symbol is small and trust me, at no point in the 30 plays of the game I have under my belt, have I ever made sure I was collecting a certain colour for mermaid scoring. The cognitive load is too much.

Let’s look at why a game can look playable to me if I read the rulebook online or watch a video playthrough. Colour calibration and variance. Printing correctly colour calibrated colours is hard, printing cubes that match the colours printed on the board is extremely difficult (painting on wood versus printing on cardboard) Printed colours tend to look different to those seen on a screen, so I can read a rulebook or watch a video and tell the colours apart but when the game arrives the reality is different. Such is life. It is why double coding is the main way of solving the problem. However, that may not be an option for all games, and in that case the choice of colours becomes a much more considered case. It is possible to have colour-blind accessible colours and to have the game look visually pleasing.

I suppose I could invest in a professional colour calibrated display so the likelihood of the colours onscreen matching the actual games’ colours is higher but that seems a silly investment for someone who is quite badly colour-blind!

I am old enough to be aware of reality, publishing games is not an industry with huge profit margins, and outside the big, crowdfunded games a game isn’t going to make millions. Anything that eats into those profit margins is going to be a tough sell, but we are also now in a world where games live or die on how they look and that often means resources shaped like resources not cubes, so they are already mostly there, they just need to consider the colours used, and how they are used and play test with real colour-blind folks. Trust me, putting your colours through one of those websites that simulates colour-blindness

doesn't cut the mustard, and we are right back on the earlier topic of how colours on screens don't match printed ones unless you have gone to the effort and expense of a professionally calibrated end to end system.

Sadly, even if a game has a high level of colour-blind friendly methods, it is likely to still add a cognitive load to colour-blind players. But that is always going to be the case, and my brain must work harder, and that is a perfect excuse as to why I can't win more than my wife in most games. That is the excuse I have, and I am sticking to it.

Do you want to talk visual accessibility?
Typeface choice, white spacing, contrast and so on? Why the original version of *Isle of Trains* is much more visually accessible than the new "deluxe" version? Because I can wax lyrical about all the issues there too...

Ok, next time then...maybe.

We've all been there - we buy a new game, filled with excitement to break into it, to get it to the table and experience this new delight. A few days later, our new game arrives and we immediately rip the packaging open and remove our brand new, shiny toy. Brimming with excitement, we remove the shrink wrap, liberating the box from its plastic prison, and gently open it, greedily inhaling the scent of new cardboard like an addict snorting ecstasy. After burrowing into the rules, devouring every detail, preparing ourselves for the big moment, we gather our group of friends, players and somewhat willing victims together, promising a memorable time of fun and folly. And then, we play. Expecting to feel that glorious sensation of joy and wonder that comes from a good game, we dive into our most recent treasure with bravado, and within a short time we emerge... disappointed. What went wrong? Did we botch the teach? Did we simply misunderstand an important aspect of the game? Surely, it must be something of the sort. From everything we read, from the videos we perused, we just **know** that we like this game. And so, filled with the knowledge that our previous experience's failure came from some unknown factor outside of the game itself, we throw ourselves wholeheartedly into another attempt... and find ourselves sorely disappointed once again.



The most memorable experience of this that I have comes from [Once Upon a Time: The Storytelling Card Game](#). I first saw this game on [Tabletop with Wil Wheaton](#) many years ago. After this hilarious introduction to the game, I knew immediately that I had to buy it, and that I would absolutely love playing this hilarious game. After the first time playing it, I felt completely let down. My family's play of the game devolved from storytelling into my parents and siblings literally just laying down their cards and evolving our tale with "and the princess escaped from the tower. The ogre chased the princess. The ogre fought a knight." Honestly, the words to describe how sad this experience felt just utterly evade me. I, however, still expected to enjoy the game - I just decided that I would never play it with my family again. Over the next couple of years, I pulled out *Once Upon a Time* on multiple different occasions with multiple different groups, and every single time the game slowly deteriorated as the players lost their creativity with each passing turn. By the end, the game landed in the same place as it had on that first play - disappointment.

Yet another time where I found myself face-to-face with this emotional conundrum came about when I purchased [Elysium](#) as a game for my wife and myself to play together on quiet nights at home (pre-kids - there is no such thing as a quiet night any more). We opened it up, started setting the game up for the first play, and both found ourselves struggling to comprehend the rulebook - we ended up boxing the game back up, putting it back on the shelf to come back to later, and playing something else (most likely [Splendor](#)) instead. That game still rests on its shelf, unopened and unplayed in the six long years that have slipped quietly by since I took ownership of it. Every time I look at it, I feel a sense of disappointment and sadness, knowing that it never took the place that I wanted it to within my collection.



It is my supposition that every game (well, except [Candy Land](#) and [Monopoly](#)) has a setting and a group where it should be played and enjoyed. Even if something falls flat for me, it theoretically has a perfect group somewhere. The letdown comes when the game hits all the right chords, yet never quite creates the gaming melody that you want. Something feels just a little (or a lot) out of tune, and you cannot fix it no matter how many times you try. Disappointment can be a hard thing to cope with in gaming, as usually new games take a commitment of both time and finances to research, acquire and learn, and forfeiting that investment when a game fails to strike home can be painful.

The worst part of it all is the knowledge that it will happen again, and again, and again. We have chosen to partake in a pastime which consists of a constant, never-ending influx of new and exciting entries - which is a positive thing, as it leads to growth of the hobby and regular induction of new players. This also means, however, that more and more disappointing games will find their way to our tables, and we have to cope with that however we see fit. For players such as myself, the game finds itself shelved and awaiting the day when it has a shot at redemption. For some, it means a parting of the ways - disappointing games hit the sell pile and never receive another thought. I have

only ever followed this route once in my life - selling [Boss Monster: The Dungeon Building Card Game](#) and [Flames of War: The World War II Miniatures Game](#) to my LGS in exchange for games I actually love.



To this day, *Once Upon a Time* sits upon my shelf, awaiting the day when the appropriate group arrives on my doorstep. I still believe that I will love this game - good stories delight me - yet I cannot seem to find others who can make that a reality. The ad-libbed stories evolving from the prompts provided seems to be outside of the reach of those I game with. Honestly, it may be out of reach for myself as well, yet I cannot help anticipating the next time I get to play this game. I still resolutely believe this game to be a delight, but I cannot say that I truly believe I will ever get the experience from it that I have sought all these years.

And so that leaves a very simple question: What games have you all played that you walked away from with that sinking feeling of regret and disappointment?

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<https://boardgamegeek.com/blog/17181/not-another-board-game-blog>

Little Wooden People

Number 4: by Roger BW

- Blog: <https://blog.firedrake.org/>
- Gaming stuff: <https://tekeli.li/>
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Recent Games

I went to Summer Stabcon! Stabcon is now on its third set of organisers, having started as a Diplomacy gathering¹ in I think the 1980s, and happens twice a year in Stockport; it's primarily for playing board games and RPGs, though FanBoy3 (the Manchester games shop) bring along a few games to sell too. In other words it's my favourite sort of gaming gathering.

I have mixed feelings about [Trio](#)². Usually I'm terrible at memory games, but this is one I can play. And I do, and sometimes I win, but I want to try the "spicy" version (where you need to make sets in a particular relation to win, rather than just any three sets), and the people I play with don't. I should play it more then decide whether to keep it or sell it.

[Xenon Profiteer](#)³ is another obscurity: it got a bit of attention when it came out but I very rarely see it mentioned now. It's a deckbuilder, but your "junk" cards can be useful even as you get rid of them; it's loosely based on actual physics (the distillation of xenon from the atmosphere for commercial use); and it's competitive but not at all about violence.

[Skull Queen](#)⁴ was done a great disservice by its publisher Schmidt Spiele. It has *nothing to do* with *Skull King*, which they had republished the

year before. It is, however, an enjoyable trick-taking-adjacent game by Stefan Dorra (*For Sale, Medina*) which like *Flip 7* has those moments of disaster, followed by everyone laughing, that I enjoy in a game: your four pirate meeples move up and down the scoring track ("plank") as each hand progresses, and sometimes they fall off one end or the other, in which case they will score nothing for that hand.



¹Hence the name.

²<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/352515>

³<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/176530>

⁴<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/423432>

I have of course talked about [Flash Point: Fire Rescue](#)⁵ before, but at Stabcon I tried an experiment: the usual board is 6×8 squares, but an attic or basement can add another 6×4 section (and one uses a d12 rather than a d8 to choose the column where random things happen). So I added a *second* supplementary board, for one attic and one basement, and used a d16 that I'd bought off eBay. We quickly realised that a mere four firefighters wouldn't be enough, so took it up to six; and the d16 seemed to roll 16 really rather a lot, so I ended up using a dice roller on my phone instead. But we had a good time, and I'll definitely play this mode again, especially with a large group.

[Line of Fire: Burnt Moon](#)⁶ is a card-game version of the *Undaunted* system, by the same designers. You're sending in robots to do the actual fighting, while the humans stay safe using their special abilities. The rulebook could definitely have been clearer, but this is a solid game in a small box, even if the art of rotor-borne drones flying on Io seems... optimistic.



[Earth](#)⁷ is probably a bit longer than it really should be, and I don't get to play it often, but I always enjoy it when I do. This time I raced for the animal cards (shared objectives), at the cost of basically everything else. Of that style of what I call "huge deck games" (*Terraforming Mars*,

Ark Nova), where the deck is so huge that you can't really predict what may come up, it's the one I enjoy most.



I've mentioned [Ticket Gagnant](#)⁸ in passing; it's by JC Bouvier of *Rallyman* fame, working with his daughter Célestine who's a professional jockey. It's that sort of meta-race game where you have cards giving some idea of how the racers will perform, and place bets on them, but so does everyone else; and it flows quickly and simply (and chaotically).



The first time I played [Nova Luna](#)⁹ we missed a key point in the rulebook; this game, played correctly, was rather more fun. I didn't do brilliantly and it's very spatial, but it always presents interesting choices.

⁵<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/100901>

⁶<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/427263>

⁷<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/350184>

⁸<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/379553>

⁹<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/284435>

¹⁰<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/62871>

[Zombie Dice](#)¹⁰ is a push your luck dice chucker. Subtle? Sophisticated? No. (Susceptible to a fairly naïve analysis, even, or certainly a Monte Carlo simulation.) But still good fun to play as an occasional filler.

And that was all at Stabcon.



[Histrion](#)¹¹ is only from 2016, but it feels to me as though it belongs in the classic Euro space. It's basically simultaneous choosing from multiple ways of getting cards, but if both of you land on the same option neither of you gets them. Plus lots of fiddly complication. As usual for this sort of game, the thematic connection is almost absent; has its moments but to me didn't really distinguish itself from its many peers.



[The Spill](#)¹² clearly owes a lot to the template set by co-ops like *Pandemic* and *Flash Point*. Even on its easiest level it's pretty tough, though on

this play we got within a turn of winning. The dice tower is very pretty, but I suspect next time we play we'll just use a d4 to get a more even distribution of dice.



[Magical Athlete](#)¹³ seems to have more actual "game" to it than *Hot Streak* which I talked about in #3. It is actually about the race, rather than the betting on the race, for a start. Played with the same two relatively sober people (as I am), it felt more like the chaotic fun that *Hot Streak* was trying for.



Not as much, though, as [DC Breakout: Arkham Asylum](#)¹⁴ (by several Engelsteins), in which you take two DC universe villains (yes, both Condiment King and Clock King are canonical, apparently) and try to synergise their powers as you, well, run a race. Honestly this is my favourite of the three.

¹¹<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/182120>

¹²<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/338479>

¹³<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/454103>

¹⁴<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/453934>

[Red or Yellow](#)¹⁵ is a party game with a really interesting mechanic, but. Basically there's a binary choice, and you (a) make a choice and hide it, and then (b) bet on whether you will be the only one to choose that option, it'll be unanimous, or you'll share your choice with at least one other player but not all of them. That's an interesting idea, but the game rules go on at great length about how wild and wacky it all is, and after that it couldn't but be a disappointment. Like many party games, probably more fun with more people and more booze.

[Tiny Epic Galaxies](#)¹⁶ always feels to me as though greatness is *just* over the horizon. I enjoy it when I play it, but I've played it four times in nine years and I've never felt the urge to buy a copy.

In the same month (just), I have also indulged one of my other hobbies, with a long weekend away at Shrewkfest, a camping ukulele festival.

Colour Symbology

(A version of this appeared previously on my blog.)

There are various good reasons to develop a symbology for colours, and there are several already. Why am I proposing another?

Well, the immediate reason was the release of [ColorSym](#)¹⁷, which looks like a decent approach, but is basically an AI-washed copy of Peter Vel's [ideas from 2021](#)¹⁸ giving him no credit. (I recommend reading that post, which explains much of the reasoning for wanting to do this; it's not needed for every game, but sometimes it's very handy.) Vel also mentions ColorAdd, as seen in e.g. *Sea Salt & Paper*, but doesn't mention that it's also under mysterious

and non-public licencing conditions. For clarity, I place what follows in the public domain, though I'd like to get credit (along with Peter) if you use it.

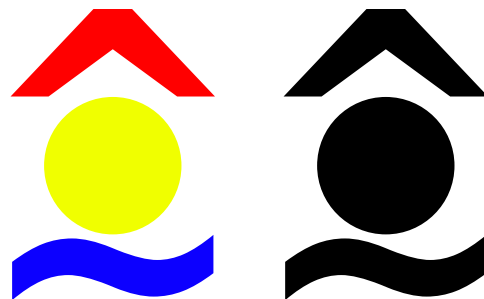
Vel's proposal is broadly this:



The chevron is red for fire, circle yellow for sun, line blue for water; these symbols for composite colours represent orange, green, purple and... brown? Let's not worry about that for now.

So I'll start with that (he has convinced me that the RYB colour model is right for this), but return the blue line to the original wavy one, because I want to use straight lines for something else. The presence or absence of these symbols can indicate red, yellow and blue pigment components as before; all three of them indicates black. (I think I have more games with black components than with brown, and if not, too bad. We'll support it later.)

Also I'll use an actual yellow shade for my examples rather than Vel's orange.



Now how can this be extended? I'll call this "Vel Plus".

Putting the symbol in an enclosure (e.g. a square) is semantically null, but allows us to indicate the absence of any dye component, i.e. white.

A darker shade is shown with a "+" symbol (crossing the space occupied by the circle,

¹⁵<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/465709>

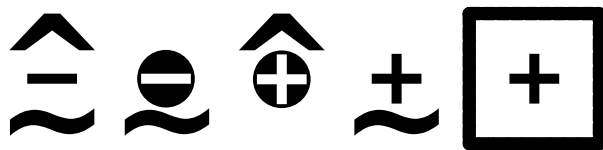
¹⁶<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/163967>

¹⁷<https://colorsym.com/>

¹⁸<https://petervelnl.blogspot.com/2021/11/vision-encoding-language.html>

shown inverted if the circle is present) and a lighter shade with “-”. (Perhaps the sense is not obvious, but “more ink” and “less ink” is the mental model, just as “no ink at all” is white.)

Grey can thus be indicated as a light black (all component symbols with a “-”), or a dark white (enclosing box with a “+”); the latter is simpler. Or if it matters (hello *Automobiles*) we could say that light black is a dark grey, and dark white is a light grey. (And brown is back, as a dark orange or yellow.)



In order: red and blue, lighter, is magenta; yellow and blue, lighter, is light green; red and yellow, darker, is brown; blue, darker, is dark blue; white, darker, is light grey.

I think that should be enough. The RYB colour model isn't well suited to subtle shade representations (there's apparently an edge case where having one component at full intensity, and two others at 50%, can indicate either of two shades), and a game with more than 22 different colours needs more help than I can give it.

The only thing ColorAdd supports that this doesn't is shiny colours. CA supports gold and silver; we can do better than that, by surrounding any glyph with short radial rays.

And all of this is readily sketchable, without lots of fiddly detail, which should make it possible to adapt it to specific graphical styles.

Alpha Players

Everyone agrees that alpha players, the ones who take over and tell everyone else what to do, are bad. And I agree. But I can see how I might drift into it too.

I have a large game collection and I tend to be a game teacher. I demonstrate games at conventions. This points me towards explaining rules, but also to explaining strategies: there's no point using your last spare actions (in *Flash Point*) to move, because you can hold them over and use them to move next time without losing anything. (Unless the place you're planning to move to may catch fire before you get there of course. Or unless you have too many spare actions to save them all.) CAFS (the slow firefighter who's very good at extinguishing fires) really needs to go in where the fire is densest, because unless they're using all their free Extinguish points they're less effective than other roles; they should basically never be hauling out victims.

So I can say that up front and that's fair enough. Or I can say it during the game, and that's when I feel I'm at risk of looking over someone's shoulder and saying “don't do that, do this”. Some of my enjoyment of this game comes from having done a fairly deep dive into it (I have, for example, written an integrated rulebook for it) and I want other people to get the same pleasure I do.

But that means I need to let them make mistakes. Or at least what I think are mistakes: I'm not perfect, they may have thought of something I didn't.

Then there are questions of strategy. I favour a zone defence: the firefighters split up and each stay in one area of the building, concentrating on the fires there, and pass victims out between them. Other players prefer a much more mobile approach. And they aren't wrong, even if it doesn't work as well for me.

Similarly in competitive games, in a demo I might say “have you noticed that you can do *that*,” which I won't say when playing with friends unless we're explicitly making it a teaching game.

So it comes down to empathy: do I think it would annoy me, if I were that player and someone else did it to me? Then I'll resist the urge to do it. And yes, I've had to work out from scratch how to do that kind of empathy, and I realise not everyone can.

We Also Heard From

Comments on OdaM number 3

Matt Elliott: I've not played any version of *Metal Gear Solid*, but your comments on the game remind me strongly of *V-Commandos*. (There are probably many other games with a combination of stealth and violence that I haven't played.) In that game, you can do a lot of planning, but sooner or later you're going to have to trust your little random friends the cards and the dice... and that, on balance, is a good thing. Otherwise each map setup would be a puzzle, and once you've solved it, that's it.

It is far too long since I played *Captain Sonar*. I have several friends who dislike "good stress" games (all right, I know only one person other than me who enjoys *Magic Maze*) and so I usually end up playing turn by turn. Really should get that out again. Mmm.

I think a lot of... what's the term? "Non hobby gamers" perhaps, or "normal gamers". People who are not *gamers like me* with an over-large collection, people who won't sit still for a half-hour teach. People like that, who grew up perhaps with four or five games in the house and everyone already knew how to play them, in fact people who mentally categorise learning a new game as a *rare thing*, will often play the same relatively simple game again and again well beyond the point at which I've got bored with it.

And the thing I have to keep telling myself, as I suspect you do, is *if they are enjoying it that is OK*. They may not be getting the same sort of

enjoyment out of it that I do, but even so. (I just hope they don't end up thinking that that is all that boardgaming has to offer, and wander off rather than trying something meatier.)

I play a bit of *FUSE* now and again, which I suspect could count as effectively the minimalist version of *Five Year Mission*. (And some time I'd like to record a play and time the various phases of the turn; I suspect that being physically efficient in terms of picking up the bag, pulling dice out of it, putting it down where the next player can reach it, may count for a lot.) No real theme of course.

Love the idea of *Kayaku*!

RYCTM I got the impression that while Holy Grail were happy to be selling *Rallyman GT* and looking forward to *Dirt* they weren't hugely profitable lines like some of their other games; and it's great that Synapses Games have reprinted them, but again, I think they're midlist games rather than hugely popular ones. I suppose that just as in book publishing the accountant-led companies always have to be looking for the Next Big Thing.

RYCT Alice: *Red 7* feels to me like a game one might see the old blokes playing in the pub. Probably with tiny glasses of some noxious spirit on the table.

RYCTM I ran a play-by-forum game of [Rush 'n' Crush](#)¹⁹ so if you want to see details of how it plays that's still there. (Or I can wibble on about it at length.) I've never played *Wipeout* but I suspect it has a similar feel, definitely strong on the Heavy Metal Umlauts; Rackham, the publisher of the 2009 edition, tied it in to their grungy industrial skirmish wargame, which it has basically nothing to do with.

I wouldn't say *Leaving Earth* is *best* solo but I enjoy it that way. And I don't think I know more than one person who'd sit still long

¹⁹<https://discussion.tekeli.li/t/rush-n-crush-pbf-race-1/>
4196

enough to play the fully expanded game multiplayer.

Yeah, I don't like the BGA *Dirt* anything like as much as the *GT* implementation, but I play it a little with friends with whom I wouldn't otherwise get to play at all. I did look into learning to write game implementations on BGA, but then they got bought by Asmodée, and I'm not going to do unpaid labour for *them*.

Christopher Taylor-Davies: What's worse, I think, than losing a semi-co-op because someone was squirrelling away resources for themselves, is losing it because someone was acting suspiciously and everyone decided that they must be squirrelling away etc. even though they weren't.

I've played that Knizia *Lord of the Rings*. I particularly like the way that some things make your heroes advance towards darkness, while other things make the darkness come and meet them.

I don't love *The Crew* (which probably makes me a Gaming Heretic). It's not that I think it's terrible or anything, but after playing quite a bit with the same people I found myself thinking that an awful lot depended on the setup: depending on just what needed to be achieved in what order, a particular set of goal cards could become very easy or very hard based entirely on which specific cards went into which goal slot. And so as a result the idea that you would beat mission N, and then go on to try mission N+1, lost some of its force: OK, we did indeed beat mission N on the fourth try, but did we really get better through those games or did we just get lucky with the goals this time?

I've won *Ghost Stories* once. Tried to win, rather more times than that.