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# Narrative design in board games: mapping praxis

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# Narrative Design in Board Games:

# Mapping Praxis

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Humanities, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Digital Arts.

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## Abstract

While board games have existed for thousands of years, narrative board games are a relatively new medium. While the medium shares some similarities with traditional narrative forms, there are significant differences that require interrogation. This research aims to map the current state of narrative board games and how they are designed and played. Narrative board games released in the last decade have demonstrated some of the exciting possibilities of narrative experience that the medium can create. The invention of new mechanisms and the creative deployment of characters as agents are two of many of the ways narrative board games allow the player's action to reveal narrative. By mapping how this has been done through the lens of traditional narratology and game design theory, the work in this research will move towards a board game narratology.

## Declaration

I declare that this dissertation/thesis is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in Digital Arts in the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

6th day of July 2020

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# Prologue

**Please take note. Due to the nature of the work, this dissertation contains numerous spoilers for many narrative board games. Read at your own risk.

***

Mission: Prevent the creation of a temporal fault.
Location: Asylum. 1921.
Receptacles (T.I.M.E Agents): Edith Jolibois (cannibal), Felix Bonnenfant (paranoid), Vasil La Fouine (cocaine addict) and Marie Bertholet (erotomaniac).

There are rumours of a secret society, patients from the asylum have gone missing, and nobody knows why Bob is so grumpy.

The Agents arrive at the asylum. Nurse Josephine tells them “to stay in the day room or go to the promenade.” If they need her, she will be in the infirmary. The Agents learn from a newspaper that it has been over a week since five lunatics, inmates at the Beauregard asylum, have been declared missing. According to police, the investigations are ongoing, and the theory of an escape is probable.

The Agents continue their investigation. Doctor Hyacinthe is insane, nobody trusts Josephine, the cooks have a stash of cocaine, and a toilet plunger has gone missing.

Looking for clues, they make their way into the greenhouse. Suddenly you hear a roar and a winged creature with the body of a lion and the tail of a scorpion attacks!
Mademoiselle Doume barely survives, but with one life point left, she manages to hobble away from the creature into the tombs.

Just as the Agents enter the dark cave, they run out of time and vanish. They wake up a few moments later in their caissons, back at Base. Bob is furious! Again!

***

I played *T.I.M.E Stories* (2015) for the first time in 2017, as a case study in my Writing & Interactivity course. The game lasted 20 minutes because the class ended and my group had other places to be. I wanted to keep playing but was alone, so I packed away the game and asked my lecturer if I could borrow the game. He kindly lent it to me but warned me that it would take a good few hours to get through it.

He was right. I played it with my family, and we failed the first mission horribly. We had some lunch and tried again. We got some more information in the second run but did not come close to finishing. Our third run was thwarted by my mother, who decided that performing a seance was a viable strategy for stopping a murderer from getting away and creating a temporal fault.

With each run, we got to know the characters better. The world got bigger and more detailed. Our team collected newspaper clippings, old photographs and a plunger. We learnt the story of the Beauregard Asylum in 1921, and all the evil things Doctor Hyacinthe did. In our first game we killed the Doctor, he got away in the second, and in our third run, we didn't even find the Doctor. But always, no matter what we did or tried, or how far we got, when we returned to Base, Bob was unhappy.

*T.I.M.E Stories*[1] was one of the first narrative board games I had ever played. The internal logic of the system and the way it balanced a semi on-rails[2] narrative with necessary replayability was fascinating. I wanted to play it again to figure out how it worked, and then another few more times after that. Playing this game was one of the most intriguing narrative experiences I had ever experienced. But while it was fascinating, it wasn't completely satisfying. That has remained my experience (to varying degrees) for every playthrough of every game listed in this research[3]. It seems to me that the constraints of the medium have not yet been manipulated or understood enough to deliver the satisfying narrative experience that these games promise but fail to deliver fully. I believe that research and analysis could be a way to start to solve this design problem.

[1] *T.I.M.E Stories* is actually a "shared central framework" which hosts a range of adventures which take place in the "White Cycle". The first white box is called "T.I.M.E Stories" and contains the first adventure, "*Asylum 1921*". While I will write about the system as a whole, my examples will come from the *Asylum 1921* scenario to avoid confusion.
[2] "On-rails" is a term used to describe digital games that limit player choice, or have pre-defined stories with limited possibilities for the player to get 'side-tracked'.
[3] And many more that, for the sake of time and scope, are not listed here.

# Chapter 1: Introduction

> "When games are analysed as stories, both their differences from stories and their intrinsic qualities become all but impossible to understand."
>
> (Aarseth 1997, 362)

Board games are not stories. I am not going to claim that they are, or outline reasons why they should be considered stories because they're not and they shouldn't be. What they are is an increasingly interesting way to experience and share stories. Board games are a medium for narrative. In this paper, I am going to map the state of the narrative board games that currently exist in order to move towards a board game narratology.

I suggest that board games are *sometimes*[4] a means by which a narrative is communicated and experienced, and are the artistic form used by the writer and designer of that narrative. In this paper, I am going to argue that the intrinsic qualities of board games create new/interesting/exciting means by which narratives can be communicated as a form of artistic creation. I will do this by mapping the praxis of narrative design in board games. Due to the scope of this research, my focus will be on narrative board games published in the last decade.

There is no universal definition for 'narrative board game'. Sometimes what I call a narrative board game, others call a campaign, storytelling or story-driven board game. Often those terms mean entirely different things, depending on who is using them. Let me clarify. I have defined narrative board games as ***a board game*** through which ***narrative is revealed*** as a result of ***player choice and action***.
This definition contains several important clarifications:

'*Board game*' - I am referring to "hobby games" or "designer games" played on tabletop surfaces. Games typically have a board, a set of cards, and some components. They are not mass-market games. This type of board game is so new that there is not yet a single name that meaningfully describes it (Engelstein and Shalev 2019, xxi).

'*Narrative is revealed*' - if something is revealed, it has to be there already. It is not conjured or made-up; it exists already - it has a form. The narrative is embedded in the game itself. These embedded elements distinguish narrative board from other games that rely on the player's imagination and improvisation to generate a story.

'*Player choice and action*' - this is an integral aspect of all games. *Choice* and *Action* are part of what creates meaningful play (Salen and Zimmerman). Crucially in the case of narrative board games, this agency and interaction with the game and with the other players create more than meaningful play; they influence and reveal the narrative.

Much of the theoretical backing I used in this research comes from *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game: Narrative Trends from the Late 1960s to Today* (2018), written by game designer Marco Arnaudo. What I call 'narrative board games' Arnaudo calls 'games-that-tell-stories'. He

[4] Because not all board games are narrative games.

defines them as “games that already contain every element that will form a final narrative” (19). As suggested in his name for the medium, the game tells the story, not the players.

Games like *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974) are not narrative board games; they are Tabletop Role-Playing Games (TTRPGs). They provide a system where the game master guides the players in a collaborative storytelling experience. Without getting too bogged down in the theory of a different field, I will briefly say that TTRPGs are a collaborative storytelling activity that depends on both the players and Game Master to elicit a narrative-based experience, even when using pre-written scenarios. Games like *Gloom* (2005), *Black Stories* (2004) and *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* (1998) are not narrative board games because they depend on the imagination and storytelling ability of the players to elicit a sort of plot or story. For example, in *Baron Munchausen,* players win by telling the ‘best’ and indisputable story (as voted by the group). While one player is telling a story, the other players can spend tokens to dispute the facts of their story. I would classify games like this as *Storytelling Games* (Boardgamegeek).

The process of classification is a helpful exercise, but classifications can often be too broad or too narrow. The definition of Storytelling Games on Boardgamegeek (BGG[5]) demonstrates the potential confusion that can arise from broad classifications. Their definition says that:

> “In **storytelling** games, players are provided with conceptual, written, or pictorial stimuli which must be incorporated into a story of the players' creation…These stimuli may be a selection of words or ambiguous symbols.”
>
> “Other **storytelling** games include titles such as *Tales of the Arabian Nights* and *Above and Below*, game designs in which players don't create their own stories, but instead experience a story from the inside as one of the participants. Games along those lines might present players with a particular narrative situation, after which the player will make a choice that affects which end to the narrative is told — with the results of this narrative affecting the player's standing in the game.”

According to BGG’s definition, storytelling games are games that contain “a story of the player’s creation”, but can also be about “experiencing a story from the inside as one of the participants”. These two ideas are almost entirely contradictory. The first game places the responsibility of story generation on the players, while the second game gives the players the responsibility of revealing the story. Further, games like *Tales of the Arabian Nights* do not actually create or reveal a narrative, as suggested in BBG’s definition. Instead, the gameplay generates a series of encounters and scenarios which are often disconnected from one to the next. They are story-moments that do not influence an overall ‘narrative’ or plot.

In comparison, a narrative board game comes with “a full lexicon of possible contents *already recorded* in the game components” (emphasis added) (Arnaudo 19). So instead of imagination, it is the ruleset in conjunction with the components of the game, activated by player action, that gives the players “the crucial role of soliciting the narrative by manipulating

[5] Accessed 11 November 2019. Founded in 2000, BGG is the largest online database of board games.

the components, rearranging the blocks of the story, interpreting the content, and mentally filling in the gaps between the various thematic units" (21).

Narrative board games as Arnaudo and I have defined them didn't exist twenty years ago. It is only in the last decade that these games began to make up a genre. Helpfully, Arnaudo has traced the history of modern narrative games back to "the birth of [tabletop] role-playing games in the 1970s" (42). He traces the evolution of narrativity in hobby gaming from the TTRPG of *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) and incorporation of J.R.R Tolkien's material into (paratextual) tabletop games in the 1970s. He then demonstrates how massive tactical-combat games with narrative elements like *Gloomhaven* (2017) are spiritual successors to games like the early dungeon-crawlers with minimal story elements like *Dungeon!* and *Solo Dungeon Adventures* (both 1975).

The *Choose Your Own Adventure* series and *Fighting Fantasy* gamebooks (popularised in the 1980s) were other media forms that impacted board game design by pairing branching text with game mechanisms like rolling dice and updating stats[6]. We see their impact in the inclusion of scenarios for story-oriented play in tactical games like *Cry Havoc* (1981) in 1984, and the rise of paragraph- based games like *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (1985) were both important narrative-adjacent styles of games that had a significant effect, with more advanced and symbiotic versions of the paragraph systems in use today. The new edition of *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (2009) re-popularized the system. While its disconnected encounter system that creates detached story-moments instead of a clear narrative disqualifies it from appearing in this study, its importance and impact on the history of narrative games is vital. Finally, Arnaudo writes about Legacy[7] and scenario-driven games, noting that players could have more satisfying narrative experiences at the cost of replay value. By designing games with a limited number of play sessions available in the box, designers can design a tighter, more constrained narrative that isn't open-ended or repeatable.

I have focused on the last decade not just because of the limited scope of this research, but also because I believe that the most significant advances in narrative board games have happened in the last ten years. Unfortunately, this period only makes up a small section (the eleven pages of Chapter 12) of *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game,* which was published in 2018 (and so cannot claim that it came too early). The Crossroads System of *Dead of Winter* (2014) and now *Gen7* (2018), and the story-based *Stuffed Fables* (2018) and *Mice and Mystics* (2012) all from Plaid Hat Games, and *Detective* (2018) and *Robinson Crusoe* (2012) from Portal Games are glaring in their absence from the book. Instead, the vast majority of games covered are those from the *D&D* universe (like *D&D Adventure Game,* 2000 and *D&D: The Fantasy Adventure Board Game,* 2003 - both published by Wizards of the Coast) or were published by Fantasy Flight Games. FFG has been publishing paratextual games, using existing IP (like *Star Wars, Game of Thrones, and Lord of the Rings)*, since 2002. These publishers are prolific but are limited in terms of world, play styles, and audiences. They do not represent the entirety or even the bulk of narrative board games.

[6] "Stats" is a term used in digital and analogue games to describe a character's statistics – the value of their physical, mental and social traits.
[7] "A multisession game in which permanent and irreversible changes to the game state carry over from session to session" (Engelstein and Shalev 24).

While I find his list of modern narrative board games too narrow an exploration, Arnaudo's definition of the genre is valuable. However, the "lexicon of recorded content" is not all that makes a narrative board game. Arnaudo expands his definition through the use of an "Identikit" (20) which outlines a list of common features of narrative board games:

1. A content is present; the game represents something.
2. The content is depicted in the components consistently and in some level of detail.
3. The rules and mechanisms of the game mirror the underlying dynamics of the content they represent.
4. Content and mechanisms converge in the creation of a consistent imaginary world that acts as the setting of the game experience.
5. The events represented in the game are related to one another through a sense of causation.
6. The players control individual characters rather than groups or abstract entities.
7. The players' characters are unique and differ from one another in some significant way.
8. An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters.
9. The players' characters have goals and objectives.
10. The players' characters undergo some form of change during gameplay.
11. The changing state of the characters is a major source of interest.
12. The strategies employed by the player mirror the strategies the characters would use in the world of the game.
13. The design leaves a degree of uncertainty as to the contents and options that will be available in each game session. The game mimics the sense of progressive revelation that is typical of storytelling.

This list forms and influences the lexicon of recorded content in a narrative board game. I used this list when I was beginning my research to help determine what games would be suitable for this study. The list also provides a helpful theoretical backing for the process of establishing and analysing the relatively new genre of narrative board games.

My research has focused on getting the lay of the land, and recording how narrative board games have been designed in the last decade and what theories have emerged alongside them. In order to map the praxis or the embodied theory of narrative design in board games, I began my research by playing many narrative board games. Some of them I will mention here either quite broadly or in painstaking detail. Others have just formed part of my practical knowledge and understanding of the genre. I have used thirteen core examples/references/ case studies/games in this paper[8]. I have not conducted an in-depth, thorough analysis of each game. Instead, I have used them to map some of the several ways that designers have approached critical problems and elements of narrative board games. This map will demonstrate some of the tools available to designers to create narrative games, and also provide the beginnings of a board game narratology. I do not claim my work is exhaustive or all-encompassing. It was not my intention to ascribe value judgements on these games (or

[8] A glossary of these games can be found at the end of this paper. There you will find descriptions of the gameplay and images of the games to help you more easily understand games you might be unfamiliar with.

their elements) or to declare what has and hasn't been successful. Rather, I wish to give an overview of some of what currently exists in narrative board game design, intending to document and interrogate rather than judge and evaluate. I will be exploring the major elements that are used to make and play a narrative board game.

Many of the elements that are used to make and play a narrative board game are contained within Arnaudo's Identikit. I return to unpack the Identikit, which helpfully characterises and details the elements described above:

- **A content is present; the game represents something.**

  "At least some of the elements of the game must exhibit a representational quality, and indicate something other than their ludic function in the game" (21). The representational meaning of the game's content aligns with the gameplay. Players can expect to sit down and see a representation of a fictive world.

- **The content is depicted in the components consistently and in some level of detail.**

  Many non-narrative games are heavily themed, and their components often represent these themes in specific and convincing ways. In narrative board games, however, not only are the components detailed in a way that is consistent with the world of the game, they form part of the representational content by creating the illusion of a tightly woven narrative fabric.

- **The rules and mechanisms of the game mirror the underlying dynamics of the content they represent.**

  The interactions (between people, places and things) and actions of the represented processes must be available for the player through the game's rules and mechanisms. In order to achieve this, the game pieces (under the influence and control of the player) must behave (to an extent) as they would "in the fictional reality they represent" (23).

- **Content and mechanisms converge in the creation of a consistent imaginary world that acts as the setting of the game experience.**

  Not only must the game's contents and rules only be aligned with each other, but they must also belong to a coherent fictional space. This space (typically represented by a board and surrounding components on a table), is relational and representational. The narrative unfolds through the interactions with the space as the game is played, converging to create a consistent imaginary world. The relationship between these elements should be symbiotic.

- **The events represented in the game are related to one another through a sense of causation.**

  "Without causality, narrative is lost. The way that events are connected by causality may change greatly, but causality must be present for actions to have foreseeable consequences and for the events to cohere into a narrative form" (Wolf qtd in Arnaudo 27). Causality is one of the biggest challenges that narrative games face. The state of the fictional world must be affected in a way that makes sense by the embedded narrative elements and the emergent

results from the player's actions. I will discuss embedded and emergent elements in the next chapter.

- **The players control individual characters rather than groups or abstract entities.**

  Each player receives a personalised entity to control/manage which becomes that player's access point to the fictional world of the game. This 'avatar' is the player's primary source of agency and is the conduit between the player's actions and the effects on the storyworld. The avatar or character does not just fulfil a ludic function but is also a "narrative agent" (28). Marie-Laure Ryan writes that the avatar in digital games positions the player as "a character situated in both the time and space of the virtual world. His actions determine the fate of the avatar, and by extension, the fate of the virtual world" (qtd in Arnaudo 28).

- **The players' characters are unique and differ from one another in some significant way.**

  Most narratives, including those found in games, are "largely about humans (or anthropomorphic things) that the viewer/reader identifies with" (Juul 2011: 161*).* These characters are typically different from each other, not only because that is an inherent characteristic of people, but also because those differences often become "a driving element of many plots" (Arnaudo 28). These differences, which typically become increasingly customised as play progresses, "reproduce the narrative alchemy of interpersonal exchange that is at the core of most fiction" (28). This process of customisation is particularly prevalent in campaign and Legacy games.

- **An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters.**

  "Since narrative appeals through the emotions and moral sense, it requires the audience to share interests and antagonisms with the characters" (Chatman qtd in Arnaudo 28). However, because of the inherent interactive, co-creating nature of games, the possibility for sharing and identifying is (potentially) greater and (certainly) different than with the characters in non-ergodic literature. More often than not, the player and character have shared goals. The physical and tangible presence of character markers (miniatures, tokens, pawns) in the same physical space as the players of narrative board games also increases this identification. The most obvious way this identification and bond develops is through players choosing the character they wish to play as, and selecting identifying markers like the character's name, weapons and allies.

- **The players' characters have goals and objectives.**

  In narratives, the story "springs from character, and is expressed through the actions that the protagonists undertake in furtherance of their goals" (Laws qtd in Arnaudo 31). These goals and objectives are typically closely aligned (or even the same) as the victory-condition of the game. These simultaneously narrative and in-game goals "ensure that the sequence of actions taken by the players will result in a meaningful and consistent chain of fictional events in the storyworld" (Arnaudo 31). Aligned goals between the game and the characters help maintain narrative congruence.

- **The players' characters undergo some form of change during gameplay.**

  Characters change and develop in narratives. These changes occur because of interactions with the world, other characters and events. The same happens in narrative board games. Equipment may be gained or lost, characteristics and stats improve or worsen and abilities enhanced or reduced. By taking actions and experiencing the results of embedded and emergent elements, the player's characters change in response to the fictional world.

- **The changing state of the characters is a major source of interest.**

  "The prototypical suspense situation occurs when a character is in danger, and the reader hopes for a favourable outcome" (Ryan qtd in Arnaudo 32). Of course, if the character is the player's avatar in a game, then that hope is strengthened by the player's desire to win. Unlike most other mediums (even cutscenes in video games), board games don't have independent momentum. They rely on the player's actions to progress or advance the narrative. In narrative games with fictional events, there will be critical points that can only be reached by the active manipulation and interaction of the pieces by the players. "And if the game is one in which players control individual characters, that point can only be reached if the players are sufficiently invested in the destiny of said characters" (33).

- **The strategies employed by the player mirror the strategies the characters would use in the world of the game.**

  In order to ensure that the actions taken by the players mirror the fictive world, designers must "exclude antirepresentational actions from the players' options altogether, and … [make] thematically appropriate strategies necessary to achieve victory" (34). The compatibility between actions and world allows for ludonarrative congruence. As I will discuss later, true ludonarrative congruence is near-impossible to achieve.

- **The design leaves a degree of uncertainty as to the contents and options that will be available in each game session. The game mimics the sense of progressive revelation that is typical of storytelling.**

  Narratives do not present all narrative elements that they contain all at once. Instead, these elements are disclosed gradually in the act of narrating (34). This progression naturally creates uncertainty, as no upcoming revelation is absolute. This progression either occurs through pre-planned (embedded) events or the use of randomising systems. It is crucial that narrative games "strike a balance between randomness and structure" (34) in order to avoid chaotic gameplay or confusing and disjointed narrative.

While it's never explicitly stated, much of the Identikit is trying to ward off "ludonarrative dissonance" (Hocking 2007), which occurs when there is a gap between the ludic structure and the narrative structure of a game. Ludonarrative dissonance has been described as what happens when "the discourse conveyed through a game's story and environment contradicts the discourse underlying its gameplay" (Makedonski 2012). To combat this experience, Arnaudo's emphasis throughout the Identikit on the relationship between content,

mechanisms and world can create ludonarrative congruence – the symbiotic and harmonious connection between the ludic and narrative structure of the game

While Arnaudo has done some thorough work describing the games he has included in his book, and how the elements in those games broadly tick off the items on his Identikit, there is minimal critical discussion of what those elements are really doing and what effect they have on the system, the player and the experience. How for example does "an element of identification promote the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters" (20), what impact does this have on the play experience, and how do we see this functioning in published games? In this research, I will expand on his work to better understand the relationship between narrative and play experience in board games, while mapping some of the ways some board games published in the last decade have managed to tell stories through play.

## Mapping Praxis

Examination of the Identikit makes clear that in narrative board games the mechanisms of the game are based on the story world they represent, and that the elements of the story world (characters, location, events) are revealed and developed through gameplay. In a narrative board game, the narrative exists in the box already - it is up to the players to reveal it by interacting with the game's components. The player is integral.

The action in board games, like all games, is driven by the players performing the mechanisms. However, they can (and do) to varying extents contain elements of narrative or a complete narrative. Board games are not stories, but they can be used to communicate stories. I suggest that, in comparison to other board game genres, narrative board games are being designed to communicate stories and convey narratives in increasingly interesting and effective ways.

Boardgamegeek has 84 listed categories (from 'Abstract strategy' to 'Zombies') and eight sub-domains (including 'Children's games' and 'Wargames') that they have divided games into. However, there is no 'narrative' category. I spoke with Emile de Maat, a Database Manager and site admin at Boardgamegeek. He told me that the list grew from the earliest submissions to the site's database (which began in 2000). He admits that "the lists aren't considered to be well thought out", and that it is rare for any of the lists on the website to be added to or revised. When I asked him if he knew any reason why 'Narrative' isn't one of the categories, he responded that it is "most likely that it's never been up for consideration". Given that BGG is the biggest online database of games and users, the fact that there is no such thing as a 'narrative board game' according to their classification system is both a rationale for this study, but is also an obstacle for this research. Finding the games appropriate for this study and researching them was made more challenging, but the opportunity to start filling in this gap is exciting.

With no 'category' to search through, the beginning of my map of narrative board game praxis was establishing what a narrative board game is so that I might adequately explore it. Having done that (above), I have mapped narrative board game praxis into two parts. Part One, A

Cartographer's Toolkit, is divided into Narratology and Players. Part Two, The Map, is divided into Story and Discourse. I detail what those sections are and why I've included them below.

## Part One - A Cartographer's Toolkit:

Having defined the area I am mapping, it is necessary to note what lenses and tools of analysis I am using to create this map. These lenses fall into two main sections: Narratology and The Player.

### Narratology

Because the narratives found in narrative board games are not presented traditionally (i.e. 'literature proper': novels, short stories, even film), they cannot be studied using traditional narratological frameworks. As such, part of this research examines what narratological framework (if any) is suitable for the analysis of a narrative board game. For the sake of this research, I have defined *Narrative* as the Story (Situation and Character - what the narrative discourse reports) and the Discourse (Form - the narrative act and its product) working in combination with each other (Miller 75) (Fludernik 2). I explain this in much more detail in the next chapter.

Developing a narratology for board games is a complex exercise because it cannot be separated from the gameplay. However, Costikyan notes in *Games, Storytelling and Breaking the String* (2010) that "it's possible to constrain the narrative of a game if you free up constraints on player action in other regards, thus giving players the feeling that they still have a degree of freedom of action in the gamespace" (12). The gameplay must allow for freedom of choice, an idea that in many ways is antithetical to the way we commonly understand narrative. Because of scope, it would not be possible for me to develop a complete narratological framework through which one could analyse narratives in board games. In this section, I consider what aspects of existing narratology could be used in a board game narratology.

### The Player

The player is intrinsic to the experience of a narrative board game because it is their actions and choices that reveal the narrative. Their role in the system and the narrative form requires further interrogation because those choices and actions, and their integration in the narrative system, has implications that make the player more than just the player. They are the storyteller, somewhat the narrator, and the narratee.

The analysis of tools used by designers in narrative board games is strengthened by the examination of the player's role in the system. This is because every single element that is implemented into the system will be interacted with by the player.

## Part Two - The Map

Having established what lenses I am using to create a map of narrative board game praxis, I move on to discuss what primary markers will give shape to the map. These markers fall into two main sections: Story and Discourse.

### Story

The split between Story and Discourse in traditional narratology has structured the division of elements that I discuss in this paper. As mentioned above, Story in a narrative is the Situation and Characters that are reported by the narrative discourse. In this chapter, I will explore how story events are constructed using goals, uncertainty and conflict to create a game's Situation, and how Characters in a game are designed to allow the player to take action within the fictive world of the game.

By following the structure of traditional narratology, I have mapped a list of characteristics, techniques and phenomena that have been implemented in existing narrative games to construct a Story, that could one day form the basis of a narratological framework.

### Discourse

Discourse, or the presentation of the narrative, will extend beyond the typical first/third-person narrator type discussion that typically occurs when analysing a narrative's discourse. The player's actions and engagements with the elements of the system are what reveals the narrative in a narrative board game, thus shaping the narrative product. As such, a discussion of the medium's discourse must include the elements with which the player interacts.

These elements will be mapped according to the main structural features of narrative board games; rulebooks, game bits, space and mechanisms. In addition, a discussion of digital integration will demonstrate how new tools are being invented to help mitigate some of the challenges that designers of narrative board games face. In *Games, Storytelling and Breaking the String,* Costikyan explains why narrative game designers face so many challenges:

> To get a good story out of a game, you have to constrain gameplay in a way that ensures that a story is told through play. There are direct conflicts between the demands of story and the demands of gameplay, because constraints that benefit the story aspect of the game may sometimes make the game aspect less interesting; yet any game is a system of constraints…gameplay often emerges precisely because of those limitations (6).

If board games are already systems of constraint, then there is no real reason why those systems can't include the constraints of simultaneously producing a good[9] story and interesting gameplay. Costikyan goes on to say that "solving the problem is not easy, but it is conceptually possible" (7). It is this problem that has incited this research. I do not want to analyse board games as stories, but rather consider what intrinsic qualities of board games allow for the creation of new and exciting narrative experiences. I am mapping the praxis of how board games have created narrative experiences, and to what effect as a way to move towards a board game narratology.

We are in unchartered territory. By mapping narrative board game praxis along a Story/Discourse divide, there is potential to miss some of the ideas that fall in the overlap of those two facets. However, because this is the 'first draft' of this map, and more detail can be added later, there is enough theory and analysis to chart a course towards a more complete board game narratology. A map should do three things: tell us where we have been, where we are, and where we are going. This research will show where narrative board games have been, where they are now, and where they are going.

[9] The use of "good" to describe a story is problematic, as the perception of a story is inherently subjective. However, part of the scope of the study is to examine the narratology of narrative in board games, to determine what about the narrative structure positively and negatively affects the perception of the game experience for the player. This positive perception is what I am calling a "good" story.

Part One

# A Cartographer’s Kit

# Chapter 2: Narratology

One of the most critical steps in creating a toolkit is establishing which tools don't belong in it. Before I begin a discussion of narratology in board games, I want to clarify that I am using narratology to mean the study of narrative structure. I am not using the term as a proponent of the 'Narratology' side of the Narratology/Ludology debate[10]. While I am in some ways writing about the intersection between games and narrative, I have no interest in participating in the Narratology/Ludology debate. While that debate has resulted in some interesting research, I believe that games are not stories but that games can be used to tell stories. To discuss the debate anymore would simply side-track from the research I am trying to do, or anyone else for that matter.

I strongly concur with associate professor and director at the Institute of Digital Games, Gordon Calleja's sentiment that "Arguing that narratives are not particularly important to the gaming experience is an untenable, normative assumption that predetermines how players experience game environments. On the other hand, attributing every aspect of the gaming experience to narrative is equally unproductive" (2009, 113). That being said, the relationship between narrative and games has been thoroughly examined in the field of digital games. As of yet, a proper interrogation of the existence of narrative within board games has not yet occurred.

## Defining Narrative

> Literature and film are narrative through and through: there is nothing outside the narrative that is being retold. Game environments, on the other hand, are forms of designed experience which, although they may include story elements, are subservient to the overall experience of the player.
> (Calleja 2011, 116)

Narrative board games are a form of ergodic media. Electronic literature and video game theorist Espen J. Aarseth explains that "in ergodic literature, nontrivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (1). The players of a narrative board game must actively participate in the construction of the text, exerting non-trivial effort. They do this by taking actions, moving pieces, resolving encounters, reading in-game text, and making choices. Unlike the player of a game, the reader of a more traditional narrative form (book, play, or

[10] This 'debate' took place in the early 2000s, dividing computer game studies into two camps: the ludologists and narratologists. In short, the ludologists argued to varying degrees that games cannot tell stories, and should not be studied using narrative theory (particularly theory that borrows from other mediums). Narratologists believe that games can and do tell stories, and that it is worthwhile to study the narrative element present in (some) games. However, many well-known figures (Aarseth 2004, Eskelinen 2001, Frasca 2003, Juul 2001 and Murray 2005) within the debate have since refuted the debate and argued for a more centrist both/and methodology.

film[11]) is not integral to the narrative itself or its unfolding. So, to study narrative board games through traditional narratological frameworks, or as nonergodic literature, could potentially have interesting results but would not be a thorough analysis of the form.

In her *Introduction to Narratology* (2009), Monika Fludernik, professor of English Literature and Culture, offers a detailed description of Narrative:

> A representation of a possible world in a linguistic and/or visual medium, at whose centre there are one or several protagonists of an anthropomorphic nature who are existentially anchored in a temporal and spatial sense and who (mostly) perform goal-directed actions (actions and plot structure). It is the experience of these protagonists that narratives focus on, allowing readers to immerse themselves in a different world and in the life of the protagonists. In verbal narratives of a traditional cast, the narrator functions as the mediator in the verbal medium of the representation. Not all narratives have a foregrounded narrator figure, however. The narrator or narrative discourse shape the narrated world creatively and individualistically at the level of the text, and this happens particularly through the (re)arrangement of the temporal order in which events are presented and through the choice of perspective (point of view, focalization). Texts that are read as narratives (or 'experienced' in the case of drama and film) thereby instantiate their narrativity (6).

Fludernik's definition explains some of the nuance and complexity inherent to narrative. However, I find her definition to discuss more of what narrative can be than what narrative is. According to her explanation, narrative board games can be narratives: they are "a representation of a possible world in a linguistic and visual medium" and there are "one or several protagonists... anchored in a temporal and spatial sense". These protagonists (because of the actions of the players) "perform goal-directed actions". The temporal arrangement of events and choice of perspective are two of the critical ways the narrative discourse is shaped by the players (following the allowances the designer pre-implemented) during the play of a narrative board game. Not only is a narrative board game, a form of ergodic literature, it also is a form of narrative.

Having established that a narrative board game can be considered narrative, it is essential to establish exactly what I mean by 'narrative'. My understanding of 'narrative' is derived from multiple readings grounded in the narratological study of 'literature proper', all of which generally concur with each other.

J. Hillis Miller, the deconstructionist literary scholar, refers to Aristotle's *Poetics* when he writes that "plot is the most important feature of a narrative" (1990, 66). Miller goes on to say that other commonly known features of narrative like character, setting and diction are "all subsidiary to the chief element of plot" (66). He argues with himself, saying "That seems about all there is to say about it. The wide variety of different sorts of stories seems governed in one way or another by these simple laws of unity and economy" (66), and then immediately disagrees with himself because "things are not quite so simple" (66). Unpacking this

[11] In their most common usage and understanding. There have been many advances and experiments in all of those fields that demand increasing participation from their audiences.

complication, Miller says that all narratives have three basic elements: Situation, Character, and Form (77).

> *Situation* includes an initial state or situation, a sequence which leads to a change in that state, and insight or revelation brought about by that change.
>
> *Character* is not used to describe a fictional persona, but rather the "process by which the character is created out of signs" (75), using systems of representation. "Without personification", Miller writes, "there can be no storytelling" (75). The minimum personages required for a narrative is three: protagonist, antagonist and a witness who learns. The witness may be the protagonist or antagonist, another character in the narrative, or the reader of the text.
>
> *Form* is the way in which the representation is constituted through patterns and repetition. This can include the use of a trope or system of tropes, or a "narrative rhythm modulating that trope" (75).

According to Miller, all narratives must have some version of a "beginning, sequence, reversal," (Situation); a personification process that brings the protagonist, antagonist and witness "to life" (Character); and the patterning or repetition of elements that focus on a figure or trope (Form) (75). However, Miller also states that "even narratives that do not fit this paradigm draw their meaning from the way they play ironically against our deeply ingrained expectations that all narratives are going to be like that" (75). While this explanation offers interesting insight and nuance, it does not entirely establish (at least not for me) what a narrative *is.*

I return to Fludernik (2009), who notes how the structuralist literary theorist Gérard Genette distinguished the three meanings of *récit* (French for 'narrative'): *narration* (the narrative act of the narrator), *discours* (narrative as text or utterance), and *historie* (the story the narrator tells) (qtd in Fludernik 2). Fludernik then makes her own assertion that *Narrative Discourse* is thus the "narrative act and its product", while *Story* is "what the narrative discourse reports, represents or signifies" (2). Jonathan Culler, a professor of English and Comparative Literature, offers a similar explanation when he distinguishes the sequence of actions and events as the *Story,* and the presentation or narration of those events to the reader as the *Discourse* (1981, 117). He notes that the Story is "conceived as independent of their manifestation of discourse" (117).

Gerald Prince, a literary theoretician and linguist, in *A Dictionary of Narratology,* defines Narrative as "The recounting [...] of one or more real or fictitious EVENTS communicated by one, two, or several (more or less overt) NARRATORS to one, two or several (more or less overt) NARRATEES" (2003, 58). His definition, which leads to more definitions, brings together the concepts of Situation and Character.

> An Event is "a change of state manifested in discourse by a process statement … An event can be an Action or an Act (change brought about by an agent) or a Happening (change not brought about by an agent)" (34).
>
> A Narrator is "the one who narrates, as inscribed in the text. There is at least one narrator per text, located at the same Diegetic level as the Narratee he or she is addressing. In a given narrative, there may, of course, be several different narrators, each addressing, in turn, a different narratee or the same one" (63).
>
> A Narratee is "the one who is narrated to, as inscribed in the text...Like the narrator, the narratee may be represented as a character, playing a more or less important role in the events recounted...The narratee - a purely textual construct must be distinguished from the real Reader or Receiver" (56).

Prince's definitions highlight the importance of the roles of Narrator and Narratee in a narrative, and how the text is constructed, received and interpreted. These roles will be explored further in this research when considering the multiplicitous nature of the Player[12].

Cultural theorist, video artist and Professor Emeritus, Mieke Bal wrote *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* (1985). In it, she describes three integrated layers of narrative: Narrative Text, Story and Fabula.

> *Narrative text* "is a text in which an agent or subject conveys to an addressee ("tells" the reader, viewer or listener) a story in a medium, such as language, imagery, sound, buildings or a combination thereof" (5).
>
> *Story* "is the content of that text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection and "colouring" of a fabula" (5).
>
> *Fabula* "is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (5). *Event* "is the transition from one state to another state", and *actors* "are agents that perform actions" (5).

While it is possible to analyse each of these layers independently, "that does not mean that these layers *exist* independently of one another" (6). We can, through a process of reasoning, distinguish each layer from each other. The narrative text is not identical to the story, which is not identical to the fabula. However, they all work in conjunction with each other (6).

Bal's use of the term "Story" is potentially confusing, as she means something quite different from Culler and Fludernik's use of the term. I suggest that her terms *narrative text* and *story* are what Culler and Fludernik loosely mean by their term *discourse,* and Bal's use of *fabula* loosely correlates with Culler and Fludernik's understanding of *story.* Throughout this paper, I will rely on all three of these theorists but will use Culler and Fludernik's terms (*discourse* and *story)* to maintain clarity.

[12] Chapter 3.

For the sake of this research and its limited scope, and to guide my understanding, I have combined Bal, Culler and Miller's theories to develop my definition of *Narrative:* the Story (Situation and Character - what the narrative discourse reports, the content) and the Discourse (Form - the narrative act and its product) working in combination with each other. As the relationship between narrative form and gameplay is mapped, this definition of narrative will be a tool used regularly.

## Narrative in Board Games

Establishing a narratological framework for board games is not just difficult because of their differences to digital games as I will explore in the next section. The analogue, live, and often group-based nature of a board game creates a range of medium-specific challenges for their analysis. Some of these challenges include:

- The problem of people. While this will be covered in more detail later (Chapter 3), generally people's expectations, priorities and behaviours make analysing their participation complicated.
- People want to win. We don't compete with books, or the other people sitting in the cinema. In a narrative board game, the player's desire to win consistently goes up against the player's desire to be part of an exciting story.
- The story in a narrative board game will often be different (even if in minor ways) from one play to the next. This difference happens because of the decisions made and the randomness of the elements (cards drawn, dice rolled). These multiple storylines are part of one narrative. Because of the multiple storylines, it can be challenging to analyse the complete narrative.
- Games accommodate different player counts, and the narrative can be severely affected depending on how many people are playing. The rules, possible actions, and the storyline can differ significantly when a game is played solo versus when it's played with five people.
- Analysing the narrative is made more difficult by the fact that playing the game, a crucial aspect of the narrative's discourse, is a live event. Novels and films are recorded and can be returned to multiple times for moments of reflection, comparison and analysis. Because the decisions made in games have immediate, long-term or even unknown ramifications, the liveness of the event makes it difficult to go back and trace causes and effects.
- Some games have built-in ways for the players to make a record of the narrative of the game they are playing. The Cartographers Notebook in *The 7th Continent*[13] becomes an artefact of the narrative that must be analysed alongside the narrative of the game itself.
- Metanarratives emerge as the game is played. The narrative of the game might be about investigators catching a murderer, but a metanarrative emerges about how Kirsten thinks that Michaela looking for clues at the beach is a waste of time. While not part of the game's narrative, this metanarrative will affect the decisions taken, how the players participate, and the way the game's narrative unfolds and is experienced. Each group will also create their own metanarrative.
- The board, tiles, cards, tokens and miniatures of a game all need to be set up before the game begins, and manipulated, used, removed and adjusted during the game. This administrative activity can interrupt the play, pull players out of the magic circle, and disrupt the narrative tension.
- Players often get rules wrong, or at the very least forget them. Moments when players need to pause to open the rulebook will also disrupt the tension that has accumulated up to that point. When players play incorrectly, they can change the experience of the

[13] See page 97.

game, and sometimes experience a storyline at the wrong time, not at all, or when they were never meant to.

This is not an exhaustive list, as new challenges will emerge depending on the type of game, players and environment. However, it does show how the inherently variable nature of the medium makes analysis all the more difficult.

As mentioned earlier, Narratives are made up of Story (Situation and Character) and Discourse (form) working alongside each other. In the next two chapters I explore how some of the different elements of the Story and Discourse of a variety of narrative board games work, and what potential effect those elements have on the 'narrative-nature' of those games. For those chapters, I mostly rely on digital and analogue game design theory as the lenses through which I considered those elements.

I am now going to analyse a narrative board game using the traditional narratological theory I detailed at the beginning of this chapter. Because the purpose of my research is not to conduct a narratological study but is rather a consideration of existing and potential narratological lenses for board games, this section will only focus on *T.I.M.E Stories: Asylum 1921*. I am not analysing its specific narrative nor commenting on its effect. Instead, I am using it as an example to consider how traditional narratology aligns with and aids the analysis of narrative board games, and where this theory falls flat or isn't quite right for the medium. My broad list of the challenges of narrative board games will be exemplified in this discussion.

## Story - Situation

The first component of Story*, Situation,* includes an initial state or situation, a sequence which leads to a change in that state, and insight or revelation brought about by that change (Miller 75). Scholes et al. use the term "plot" to describe "action alone, with the minimum possible reference to character" (208). Bal's definition of *Events,* "the transition from one state to another state" (5) encompasses this process. Her use of the word "transition" supports Miller's proposition of a change in state, a process underway or alteration to the current state, and Scholes et al.'s emphasis on action.

Bal proposes three criteria for establishing a narrative event: change, choice and confrontation. These criteria do not all have to be present at the same time.

*Change:* typically occurs when a verb is introduced to a condition. However, it is only in a series of events where change is explicit does this change become meaningful (156).

*Choice:* Bal references Roland Barthes, who "distinguished between functional and non-functional events" (156). When a choice opens up possibilities, and the choice determines some (or all) of the subsequent course of events, that choice creates a functional event.

*Confrontation:* This does not necessarily need to be antagonistic. Rather, confrontation is the process of two actors and one action coming together to create an event.

In *T.I.M.E Stories: Asylum 1921*, “situation” (Miller) is not always presented clearly in the narrative. Firstly, *Asylum 1921* stands on its own but is also the first part of the larger narrative of the *T.I.M.E Stories* White Cycle. This means that the situation is part of a larger situation, yet to be discovered. Secondly, because of the interactive nature of games where the players elicit the narrative through their choices and subsequent action, there is no one “true” situation - rather each playthrough of the game will create an individual situation. For example, the first time a group plays *Asylum 1921,* the initial state is that they are new agents working at the T.I.M.E Agency. All they know about the world is that they are at the Beauregard Psychiatric Asylum in 1921, and their objective is to prevent the creation of a temporal fault.

The following sequence of events will depend on which rooms the players choose to go to, what they find in those rooms, and whom they speak to. Some of these events will centre on Change, some on Choice, and some on Confrontation. If the players don’t speak to the young lady painting in Room A - Dayroom (panel D) and take note of the clues hidden on her canvas, they will never be able to solve the riddle (and get the required item to solve the mystery and fulfil the objective) at Location 16. However, there will be some parts of the sequence that will remain the same. This is because they are embedded in the narrative and happen regardless of whether the players find out. For example, five patients from the Asylum will always have gone missing, and Nurse Josephine will always be Doctor Hyacinth’s accomplice.

The insight that occurs as a result of the change in the initial state will often come from the conclusion or outcome of the events. We know something new about the character, or the place. We know what happened to the people who were there, or we learn how little we actually knew. The end of a game of *Asylum 1921* will always bring about different insight depending on the route the players took to get there. If the players complete the game in only one run (or attempt), they will have bonuses for their next game of *T.I.M.E Stories* (*The Marcy Case*). But they will have less information than players who completed the game in two or three runs. The end of each run brings with it the insight and revelation brought on by the change of initial state, but that by no means necessarily marks the end of the narrative or the final revelation. Given the investigative-nature of *T.I.M.E Stories,* embedded into the structure and narrative is the constant gaining and then employment of revelation and insight. Each run, the players have more information they did the last time and will use that insight to influence their actions and the state of the gameworld.

While the repetitive nature of the Situation in the narrative of *T.I.M.E Stories* does not preclude it from being analysed using Miller’s conception of Narrative, the repeated caveat that it “depends on what the players have done” limits the framework’s applicability. In the same way, there are multiple narrative events (Bal) that occur. While these narrative events will always be the same (the text on the card is the same in every box), the order in which they happen, and their potential effect is dependent on what choices the player makes throughout the game. They may even be affected by the choices made in previous plays (runs) of the game. The narrative has many strands and storylines, which result in a variety of stories that exist concurrently, making the story of the game incredibly challenging to analyse.

## Story – Character

The second component of Story, *Charact*er, is not used by Miller in the usual sense of fictional persona, but rather the "process by which the character is created out of signs" (75), using systems of representation. *Characters,* defined by Bal, are the "anthropomorphic figures provided with specifying features the narrator tells us about" (104). We see the resemblance between Miller and Bal's work when Bal writes that "a character is a complex semantic unit" (104). They are ascribed unique characteristics and function differently for the reader (105). "Although the term "character" is most often used about existents in the world of the situations and events recounted, it is also used sometimes to refer to the Narrator and Narratee" (Prince 20). In a narrative board game, sometimes the players are just the narratee, and sometimes they assume the role of an "existent" in the world of the game.

Analysing a character is a difficult, complex task. As Leitch wrote in *What Stories Are*, "Defining characters as collections of traits [external appearance, mental attitudes or relation to a role] raises several problems" (1986, 157). Characters can't be reduced to "a series of predicates" (157) because they are not "mere combinations of traits" but rather "a way of talking" (157). In the case of *T.I.M.E Stories,* this becomes even harder because "it is only the storyteller's way of talking about them or displaying them that makes them more than the sum of their traits" (158). This is a challenging problem for my analysis for two reasons. The first challenge is that there is little text in the game and even less text that specifically pertains to the characters (PCs and NPCs[14]). Their traits are not explicitly visible: it is mainly through the emergent interactions as the game is played that the characters and their traits are revealed. These interactions, because they depend on the choices of the players, may not happen in the same order or even at all. It is not uncommon for readers to have very different opinions of characters in novels. However, in the case of games like *T.I.M.E Stories*, these very different opinions don't just depend on personal biases and preferences. They also depend on the order of revelations (if at all) brought about by the decisions made by the players.

The second challenge when analysing "the storyteller's way of talking about them" is that the presence and role of the storyteller, and who the storyteller is, is not entirely precise or clear-cut in a narrative board game. As I will argue in the next chapter, the storyteller in a narrative board game is the player. Thus, if a character is known through the way the storyteller (player) talks about them, then the character will be known differently in every play of the game. However, we may find some comfort in Leitch's assertion that "tellable characters … imply some later development without committing themselves *a priori* to any given line of development, and their development has a retrospective … logic" (165). We may go back and examine our choices, wherein the act of playing we (often inadvertently) revealed, provoked, or created a trait that perhaps we may never have seen. The character may be known differently in each play, but at least the player will know that character.

[14] Player Characters and Non-Player Characters. The term NPC was first used to describe characters portrayed by the gamemaster in tabletop role-playing games. However, its usage has developed to include any character not controlled by a player but is rather controlled by an element of the game's (digital or analogue) system.

Miller writes that “the minimum personages required for a narrative is three: protagonist, antagonist and a witness who learns” (75). The witness may be the protagonist or antagonist, another character in the narrative, or the reader of the text. These roles are all filled (sometimes a few times) in *T.I.M.E Stories: Asylum 1921.* There is no single protagonist, but rather a group. This seems quite straightforward, but it gets complicated quickly. Are the group of players (whom I will call meta-agents), who assume the role of T.I.M.E Agents, the protagonists? Or is it the group of patients in the Asylum, who become the receptacles for the Agents? Both? Neither? My first moment of uncertainty, if the players in the role of Agents could even be considered *Characters,* is resolved by Bal’s assertion that *Characters* are the “anthropomorphic figures provided with specifying features the narrator tells us about” (104). We are not told too much about these anthropomorphic figures, but there are signs of some traits. The first page of the rulebook says that the players are “insightful and motivated” and want to preserve “the infinite travel perspectives offered by the Tachyon Insertion Technique” (2). The mission briefing cards (BASE A-G) tells us that we are excited and impatient, 42 seconds late, and are still in training. Those traits are ascribed to the meta-agents, not to the characters like Edith Jolibois and Felix Bonnenfant that are the players’ receptacles. Furthermore, as will be interrogated in the next chapter, the player assumes some of the responsibility of the narrator. As such, it is possible that “the narrator tells us about” the players themselves.

That being said, far more specific detail is assigned to each of the receptacles, building on the signs already established for the meta-agents. Edith Jolibois has several numerical figures representing her ‘stats’ - agility, glibness, and combat ability. These figures signify her well-rounded (2 out of 3 for each score) abilities. There is also flavour text on her character card that tells the players that “since her early days, Edith has believed that she draws her vitality from the flesh of others”, and her quoted phrase is “Yum, grrr, yum, slurp, grrr!”. The textual information and the visual representation of Edith, offer the player a brief but detailed glimpse of the character that will develop as the game is played.

Of course, different players will use the characters to different extents and to serve different agendas. A player might have a character whose strength is combat, but the player might prefer glibness-based interactions or puzzles. Each character is ‘guided’ by their stats as a means of developing traits. The character to varying degrees will influence the player’s desires and decisions they make, and as such each character will serve a different role in the narrative, depending on the type of player that controls them.

## Discourse - Form

An element of Discourse, *Form,* is the way in which the representation is constituted through “the patterning or repetition of elements surrounding a nuclear figure or complex word” (Miller 75). This can include the use of a trope or system of tropes, or a “narrative rhythm modulating that trope” (75).

Bal uses the word *Story* to describe how the elements of the *Fabula*[15] (5-8) are arranged. "A *story* is the content of the [narrative] text and produces a particular manifestation, inflection and "colouring" of a *fabula"* (Bal 5). "The fabula is 'treated', and the reader is being manipulated by this treatment" (65-66). I am going to use the word "form" in this discussion. That is not to say that Miller's use of "form" and Bal's use of "story" are synonymous, but rather I see them working alongside each other. What I am exploring in this section is how the 'storyline' of *T.I.M.E Stories* has been arranged to manipulate players.

The broad storyline in *Asylum 1921* is that five patients at Beauregard Asylum have been missing for over a week. Doctor Hyacinth and Professor Desmarteau are working together, with the help of Nurse Josephine. They are planning a cultist ritual to open a temporal fault. Beyond that, what happens with the patients and staff, is dependent on the choices the players make and the success of their actions. There is no one 'true' storyline.

It is difficult to examine the form of the narrative in *Asylum 1921* because inherent to the narrative is player choice and consequence. The form itself is reliant on repeated encounters in order to experience the entirety of its Story content. It would take many runs of *Asylum 1921* to experience each different possible form of the fabula. There are 70 different location cards and 30 items. The items and locations work together to create (or prevent) a specific experience of the fabula, of which there are many. In order to muddle my way through how the story of *Asylum 1921* is constructed, I rely on Bal's exploration of some of the aspects of *Story:* temporality, sequential ordering, and rhythm.

"Time is thick and complex, not at all linear and single-stranded" (Bal 66). Of course, in *T.I.M.E Stories,* time is a central theme. Going back in time to attempt and inevitably repeat a failed mission is central to the gameplay. Beyond that, time functions in interesting ways. The time each location card 'takes' is not the same. Each agent does not spend the narrative equivalent of 5 or 10 seconds at part of the location and then leaves. For example, the first location is the Dayroom of the asylum. Card F in the dayroom is simply a piano by the wall. If an agent goes to that card and turns it over, they will see a newspaper sitting on the piano and be told to take Item 22. That item is the front page of the newspaper. Walking to the piano and picking up the newspaper is a quick moment in the story, but reading the newspaper is going to take a while longer. Given the critical information contained in the newspaper, reading it and then discussing your findings with the other agents is going to take far longer.
In contrast, Card D shows a young woman painting at an easel in the middle of the room. She does not speak to the agent, but the agent may take a while to write down the symbols, words and numbers the woman has painted on the canvas. It is as if the agent is standing next to the woman, carefully taking notes of what they see before moving on, which will take a few minutes. This happens throughout the game. While each card is the same size and represents a moment in the narrative, they take up different lengths of time - both in-game and in the narrative. Some moments are shorter and longer than others. The game paces out the events, using time to emphasise important story moments or to subvert expectations.

The story regularly makes use of *retroversion* and *anticipation* (Bal 71). The players meet the assistant nurse in the Infirmary, Card B. There she tells the players "I can't talk to you here. If

[15] "A *fabula* is a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors." (Bal 5).

you want to learn more, meet me later in the dormitory. I'll wait for you there.", who are also instructed to take the grey square token. This sets up the anticipation that if the players go to the Dormitory, the nurse might tell them something useful about what is going on. If players go to the Dormitory, they will see that Card F has the image of the same grey square token they received from the assistant nurse, allowing them to turn over that card. Anticipation builds. One of the agents visits that card, turns it over, and learns from the nurse that the Doctor and Nurse Josephine are planning something terrible together. The players then receive Item 5 from the assistant nurse: a letter from Doctor Hyacinthe to the Professor. This initiates a moment of retroversion, where the players have information about what plans the two made in the past. What makes this all even more complicated is that there is nothing that compels the players to move immediately from the infirmary to the dormitory. The assistant nurse will always say the same thing to the players, no matter the time of day or what else has happened at the asylum that day. In this way, while there is a causal relationship between events (speaking to the nurse, receiving the token, and spending the token to speak to the nurse again), these events are somewhat 'outside' of time. They will happen in the same way if they happen minutes or hours apart in the game. When the players go to the dormitory will be influenced by what location the players feel is most important to go to first. If the dormitory is the best location to help the players win, or even if it feels like that might be the case, they will likely go to the dormitory. In moments like this, the desire to win the game and make the 'right' choice does not disturb the desire for narrative congruence.

The events in *Asylum 1921* happen over approximately one day, mid-morning to evening (this is a guess based on the light in the artwork on the cards). Let us assume the story happens over 10 hours. Seventy location cards contain all the *possible* events in the story. Of those cards, it is possible to encounter (if not reveal) approximately 50 of those cards. That is because if you go to some locations, it is impossible to go to others. If the time were equally divided by the cards, every five location cards would mean an hour or so in the fictional world. However, the stack of cards can be divided into two main themes: secret investigations in the asylum itself with little combat, and more dangerous investigations in nearby tunnels and gardens with lots of combat. The first, secret investigations, happen in five locations using 20 cards. The earlier calculations would suggest this first phase took place over four hours or so, while the second phase (30 cards) takes approximately six hours. However, that is unlikely as the light in the second phase of cards suggests that the second phase of the plot took place over two or three hours. All this is a convoluted way of saying that the bulk of the in-game/in-world time does not correlate to the time as portrayed. The players will spend more time in the tunnels than anywhere else in the world, even though the events that take place in the tunnels are 'shorter' than some of the other events in the game. The rhythm of *Asylum 1921* establishes a *summary* (Bal 90) for the events mainly focused on fact-finding, while a *slow-down* (Bal 90) is used for events with harder and longer combat and confusing sequences.

So much of the form of *Asylum 1921* is dependent on the manipulation and treatment of time. The temporal relationship between the player and the game, the player and the story, and the characters and the story is the basis for so much of the way the *fabula* is manipulated, and the effect that manipulation has on the players is dependent on the designer's employment of the many possibilities of time.

Because I have used the concept of *form* derived from traditional narratology, the other elements that make up the discourse of narrative board games have not been considered in enough detail here. The number of cards and the artwork on them helped understand how time slows down in *T.I.M.E Stories,* but traditional narratology does not have a lens through which to consider the impact on the narrative of laying out the cards for each location, and packing them away once the players move to a new one, or what it means that player will not see the back side of each location card. Other discursive elements like the components, rulesets and mechanisms are vital to understanding the way the narrative is constructed and interpreted. These missing elements help demonstrate how traditional narratology is useful and provides valid insight, but is not 'enough' for a thorough analysis. If traditional narratology were the only lens used, the map of narrative board game praxis would be incomplete. I turn then to existing narratological frameworks created for playful digital environments as additional lenses to add more detail to my map of narrative board game praxis.

# Narratological Frameworks for Playful Digital Environments

> Literary evolution is in some ways more complex than biological evolution. It is a kind of cross between a biological and a dialectical process, in which different species sometimes combine to produce new hybrids, which can in turn combine with other old or new forms; and in which one type will beget its antitype, which in turn may combine with other forms or synthesize with its antitypical originator.
>
> (Scholes and Kellogg 1968, 11)

My understanding of *Narrative,* the Story and Discourse working in combination, was developed based on theories of traditional media. However, a narrative board game is not traditional media; it is a hybrid, new form. An application of traditional narratological theory to board games would not fairly reflect the nuances of either the theory or the medium. Calleja supports my suggestion that a traditional narratological approach to studying narrative board games would be insufficient when he writes that “game environments demand a redefinition of classical notions of narrative” (2011, 116). He also writes that “it is not that ergodic media do not contain important story elements, but that the form these story elements take is not adequately described by classical narratology” (2009, 1). Celia Pearce, game designer and associate professor, seems to concur that a game’s narrative cannot be studied in the same way as traditional narrative when she writes that “unlike literature and film, which centre on story, in games, everything revolves around play and the player experience” (2009, 144).

If traditional narratology is incomplete or insufficient, it is possible that a narrative theory grounded in playful, interactive, or participatory media could be helpful. In order to move closer towards a ‘Board Game Narratology’, I have gathered and considered a range of theories based on interactive media to test and evaluate their applicability to a narrative study of board games. There has been much work in the last few decades that explored the narrative possibilities of new media. It will become quite clear as I explore these theories that, while there are some overlaps and similarities, most of this media is digital and as such has affordances and conventions that the analogue medium of board games does not share. For this reason, many of these theories are potentially helpful starting points and tools to map what currently exists, but are not complete or thorough frameworks on which to base an entire narratological analysis of a narrative board game.

## Half-Real

> Video games are two different things at the same time: video games are real in that they consist of real rules with which players actually interact, and in that winning or losing a game is a real event. However, when winning a game by slaying a dragon, the dragon is not a real dragon but a fictional one. To play a video game is therefore to interact with real rules while imagining a fictional world.
>
> (Juul 1)

The game designer, educator and theorist Jesper Juul is (quite blatantly) writing about video games in his book *Half-Real: Video Games Between Real Rules and Fictional Worlds* (2011).

However, despite the different medium, I believe there is some applicability of his argument to narrative board games. He indirectly and inadvertently supports my assertion when he writes that “In having fictional worlds, video games deviate from traditional nonelectronic games that are mostly abstract” (2). *Half-Real* was published in 2011, just as narrative board games were rising in popularity. While they are nonelectronic (bar some digital integration), they are certainly not abstract and bear some similarities to the representational aspects of many video games.

Juul writes that “the interaction between game rules and game fiction is one of the most important features of video games...Their interaction is present in many aspects of the game: in the design of the games themselves, in the way we perceive and use games, and in the way we discuss games” (2). This interaction is a central focus of this paper as I have examined how the relationship or interaction between the game rules (discourse) and game fiction (story) have influenced the way narrative board games have been designed, used and discussed. “Even though fiction and rules are formally separable, the player’s experience of the game is shaped by both” (178). The player’s experience of the game will depend on how those two elements work in conjunction with each other. This is as true for narrative board games as it is for video games.

The duality of the competitive and audience-focused nature of games is captured in Juul’s assertion that “Rules and fiction compete for the player’s attention” (121). These two elements complement each other and make up narrative games. All games have rules, but not all games have a fiction. Rules are a prerequisite, but fiction is an optional extra. The necessity of rules makes all fiction inextricably linked to them. “It is not possible to deal with fiction in games without discussing rules” (121). This idea is valid for digital and analogue games. While much of Juul’s theory (grounded in overtly-digital tools like graphics and sound) is not directly applicable, I have grounded much of my analysis in his approach to fiction; that it cannot be removed from the rules. Much of my analysis in this paper will demonstrate how the fictional aspects of the games I am discussing depend on or even come from the rules.

Juul references Roger Caillois’s assertion that “Games are not ruled and make-believe. Rather they are ruled or make-believe.” (13). Juul and I both disagree with Caillois, noting that that division is “contradicted by most modern board and video games” (13). It is interesting that here, only for a moment, Juul refers to modern board games. His next sentence, “Most video games are ruled and make-believe” (13) doesn’t acknowledge his inclusion of board games, nor does the rest of the chapter. It is clear that while there is scope for board games to be included in this discussion, Juul has not done so. His focus is on video games. Including board games would suggest a like-with-like relationship between the two media that doesn’t exist. A theoretical examination that heavily relies on digital game theory to supplement board game theory would be reductive and misleading. They are not the same. However, many of his terms and ideas can be used as lenses through which to consider narrative board games.

## Scripted Narrative and Alterbiography

Because Calleja’s framework (2009) is more limited in its scope than Juul’s, its specificity is useful. Writing about digital games, he distinguishes between the *alterbiography* (the story

generated by the player as they take action in the game) and the *scripted narrative (*the pre-scripted story events written into the game) (4). The player interpreting the events occurring in the game, and interacting with the environment, characters and rules, results in "a performance which gives game environments their narrative affordances" (2). While there are some aspects of the framework that applies to narrative board games, it must be noted that he very clearly states that he is writing about "games that take place in spatially navigable virtual environments[16] population by entities and (or) objects with whom the player can interact" (2). This includes games like *Grand Theft Auto V* (2013)*, and Half-Life 2* (2004)*.*

Calleja's work does not reject traditional narratology but borrows from it. The concept of *focalization*, originated by Genette to distinguish between "perspective" and "point of view" (in Fludernik 153), is used to explore alterbiography focalization in game environments (4). Calleja suggests that there are three possible points of focalization in a narrative game: the miniature (a player controlling several entities at once), the entity (a single entity that the player controls), and the self (an entity that reflects or 'is' the player themself).

Calleja defines the alterbiography as "the active construction of an ongoing story that develops through interaction with the game world's topography, inhabitants, objects, game rules and coded physics" (5). Because he is writing about digital games, we know that he is writing about "coded physics" in the context of programmed software. The so-called coded physics in board games is not programmed software, but rather an established internal logic based on the system of rules. Because it is up to the players to physically manage the system, this logic is far more visible and apparent in a board game. We know that a character can only move three spaces on their turn because that's what the rules say. The player then takes the tangible piece and moves it three spaces. If the player triggers an event by moving those three spaces, they will physically manage that process too. These rules are more implicit and less evident in many digital games because the computer manages these rules for the players.

The scripted narrative is written into the game bearing the game's rules in mind, but the alterbiography are the moments of synthesis between the game's rules and fiction (Juul). The rules of the game will determine the actions that the players take, and the results of those actions will generate the story that exists within the game's fiction. Much of the analysis in this paper will use these concepts as tools to map the creation of games' scripted narratives, and how games establish the alterbiography.

While there are some common features between digital narrative games and board games, there are also some significant differences which demand (probably similar) but different frameworks. Calleja himself warns that "if we are to be rigorous in our study of games, we need to be very clear about what forms of games we are referring to" (1). While he is differentiating between games like *Bejeweled* (a tile-matching puzzle computer game) and *GTA IV* (an action-adventure video game), I will extend their point to warn about the dangers of comparing digital narrative games and narrative board games. When I use *alterbiography* and *scripted narrative* in this paper, I use them for their most basic meanings devoid of any direct connection to digital games.

[16] Which Calleja defines as "computer generated domains which create a perception of traversable space and afford the exertion of player agency. They are populated by objects and often human or AI controlled entities the player can interact with" (2).

## Embedded and Emergent Elements

Salen and Zimmerman's 2003 *Rules of Play* is considered a seminal text in the field of game design and analysis. In it, they build on the work of Marc Leblanc (1999) and Doug Church (1999) when they begin their exploration of narrative in games by distinguishing between *embedded* narrative and *emergent* narrative. The embedded narrative is "pre-generated narrative content that exists before a player's interaction with the game", while emergent narrative "arises from the set of rules governing interaction with the game system" (2003, 383). Embedded narrative elements are the in-game elements that have been pre-written by the designers. This can take the form of dialogue, characters, objects and even the major story arc. Emergent narrative elements are those that occur as a result of playing the game and interacting with the rules and the embedded narrative elements. A narrative game must be designed in such a way that interaction with the embedded elements creates emergent narrative. This is an argument that bears similarity to Calleja's description of *alterbiography* and *scripted narrative.*

It is important to note that despite their similarities, an alterbiography/scripted narrative and emergent/embedded narrative comparison would be reductive and over-simplified. In Salen and Zimmerman's discussion of emergent and embedded narrative, they become overly focused on the experiential narrative quality that games are able to afford. They use examples like *Poker, NBA Live* and *Ms Pacman* (385) to discuss embedded and emergent narrative. The lack of distinguishing or separating 'narrative games' from 'games with narrative elements' means that their framework is broadly applicable, but not specifically meaningful when "we can apply the concept to any interaction with the game system" (Calleja 2009, 3). Embedded and emergent gameplay is a concept that is widely applicable to game systems and experience, while alterbiography and scripted narrative is purely connected to narrative generation. I will be using all of these terms in this paper, but use them specifically within the context of narrative games.

## Hamlet on the Holodeck

Janet Murray's seminal work *Hamlet on the Holodeck* (1997) was instrumental for the groundwork it laid in examining how cyberdrama functions. Murray defines "cyberdrama" as "the forms of (possibly interactive) storytelling shaped and influenced by cyberspace and the Internet". Some of these forms occur in playable media, digital games, and interactive fiction. I would argue that a narrative board game is in some ways a form of analogue interactive fiction and playable media, and as such, Murray's theories have some applicability to this study. In Part 2 of *Hamlet on the Holodeck*, Murray establishes three "aesthetics of the medium" (121):

- Immersion ("the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place")
- Agency ("the power to take meaningful action and see the results")
- Transformation (shape-shifting and mutability within the medium)

These principles appear in varying degrees in cyberdrama and, I suggest, narrative board games. Murray's aesthetics of the medium are a sort of narratological framework, one that could be used to measure the effect of the narrative form. These aesthetics could also be used as a set of principles that guide the creation of the form. It seems appropriate, or at least

worthwhile, to examine Murray's framework and see where it encompasses or misses crucial aspects of narrative board games.

**Immersion**

Murray defines *Immersion* as "the experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place" (124). She goes on to compare the term to the physical experience of being submerged in water, where the reader is surrounded by a completely different reality that takes all their attention, causing alertness and delight as they find themselves in a new place, and learn to move in it (124). While Murray is writing about the affordances inherent to computers, I think it is fair to say that Murray's assertion that "the age-old desire to live out a fantasy aroused by a fictional world has been intensified by a participatory, immersive medium that promises to satisfy it more completely than ever before" (98) could be applied to the "participatory, immersive medium" of narrative board games. In just the last decade, the medium of board games and the narrative genre has made advances that are moving players ever closer to the "experience of being transported to an elaborately simulated place" by creating exciting new ways to participate and be immersed.

Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous phrase, "the willing suspension of disbelief" was initially used to describe the "appropriate attitude towards poetry" (Fogle 37). This oft-quoted phrase is typically used to describe the process an audience goes through while watching or reading a representational or dramatic work. Murray asserts that while the phrase is often used to describe "the pleasurable surrender of the mind to an imaginative world" (136), this description is too passive even for traditional media, let alone cyberdrama. "When we enter a fictional world, we do not merely "suspend" a critical faculty, we also exercise a creative faculty" (136). Because we, the reader, want to be captivated and immersed in the fictional world, we will "actively *create belief,...*and we use our intelligence to reinforce rather than to question the reality of the experience" (136). The concept of 'actively creating belief' is one that I have used repeatedly to map not only the player's role in the narrative experience but also a variety of elements that have been embedded in games.

According to Arnaudo, the player has "the crucial role of soliciting the narrative by manipulating the components, rearranging the blocks of the story, interpreting the content, and mentally filling in the gaps between the various thematic units" (21). I want to clarify that a player mentally filling in the gaps does not automatically mean the player is playing a 'storytelling' game, instead of a narrative game. I suggest that mentally filling in the gaps forms part of "the active creation of belief" (109). The "full lexicon of possible contents already recorded in the game components" (Arnaudo 19) provokes the player's imagination and invites them to mentally fill in the gaps. This idea will be discussed further in the next chapter.

However, achieving immersion and inviting players to actively create belief within these participatory mediums is easier written about than done. When a story demands that people play it in order for it to unfold, it becomes much harder for the story to be clear and impactful. Maintaining the balance between not-quite-'reader and not-quite-writer is difficult. Murray writes that: "Because the liminal trance is so inherently fragile, all narrative forms have developed conventions to sustain it. One of the most important ways they have done this has been to prohibit participation" (126).

One of the ways that participation is structured, helping maintain that fragile liminal trance, is by establishing the participation as a visit. Because visits are denoted by “limits on time and space” (133), there are inherent restrictions that apply. I don’t think it’s unreasonable to assert that players of a narrative board game are ‘visiting’ the game. Time will pass in the real world, and time (whether it be real, sped up or slowed down) will progress in the world of the game. Players will occupy a physical space where they can play the game, and their characters will move through the space of the game by moving their pawns or choosing an option.

While Murray’s theory is both interesting and applicable, I think that it misses some of the nuances of how the ‘visit’ is crafted. When playing a board game, the visit begins before the players start playing the game. Trying to find a time when the whole group can get together to play, reading the rules, watching how-to-play or playthrough videos, teaching the rules, and setting up the game when you finally do manage to get the group together are all some of the activities that make up the ‘pre-visit’. During the ‘post-visit’, the group packs the game away, chats about what they thought of the game and what their favourite (or least) moments were. The visit is interrupted when players pause to go to the bathroom or check a confusing rule online. When the players are ‘visiting’ the game, the visit spills over, making the visiting/not visiting line not quite as clear and precise as one might like. The events before and after the game spill over into the visit to the game. This spilling over creates a meta-narrative of the play experience that will have a tangible impact on the experience of the game narrative, and the degree to which immersion is experienced.

Part of the way the visit is constructed, and the border is maintained, is by giving participants a ‘mask’. The mask notes the participative role of the player, “creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves” (140). Murray uses the convention of Avatars (an icon or figure representing a person or player in a virtual environment) to describe how this mask functions in digital environments. The separation that occurs between player and avatar in a virtual environment is distinctly different from what happens when players control a character in a narrative board game. Because a board game is a live event, in both time and space, players sit across from each other in the real world. Players look across the table and see their friend, not a character in the game. The “alternate identity” (140) that the players enact is represented on the board, in the physical and tactile token, pawn or miniature that the players use to move their characters across the game space. A player of a narrative board game must actively create belief on three different levels at once: they are participants in a fictional world, their fellow players whom they can see are also participants in the same fictional world, and the material objects (board, tokens, miniatures, cards) in front of them are representations of the elements of the fictional world. The mask of the tangible pieces helps the players create and maintain this belief. Because of Murray’s focus on digital environments, the inherent ‘liveness’ of narrative board games, and the implications thereof are not interrogated in this section.

One of the ways players can be encouraged to actively create belief is through the use of objects that are both functional in the fictional world and are used to achieve a specific in-game goal. These objects “become real through use” (138). When a player uses the objects and sees them “work as they are supposed to” (138), the players experience the feeling of being part of the fictional world. Many of the objects in narrative board games that can be ‘used’ by players are character pawns, weapons and resources. Objects like the hot air balloon in *The 7th Continent* and the letter from Sonia in *Legacy of Dragonholt* are some of the ways

that designers have embedded objects that “work as they are supposed to” (138), heightening the potential for players to actively create belief while playing, and experience a greater level of immersion. The players know that Sonia did not actually write them a letter. However, by printing the letter on a separate sheet of paper and stylising it according to the fictional world (brown parchment, wax seal), the players actively create the belief that their characters received this letter from Sonia, and then take appropriate action in the game. “Our successful engagements with these enticing objects makes for a little feedback loop that urges us on to more engagement which leads to more belief” (138).

By carefully structuring participation and employing tools like ‘the mask’ and ‘objects that become real through use’, designers can encourage and assist players to actively create belief and experience increasing levels of immersion in narrative board games.

**Agency**

Murray defines *Agency* as “the satisfying power to take meaningful action and see the results of our decisions and choices” (159). Murray writes about the limits of the effect of participation in a variety of media like participatory theatre and folk dancing. However, in computers, she argues, “we encounter a world that is dynamically altered by our participation” (161). Keyboards, joysticks and consoles allow players to navigate virtual spaces and take meaningful action within them. Murray’s thoughts on agency are not only applicable to computers but also more broadly to games. She writes that the aesthetic pleasure of agency “is more commonly available in the structured activities we call games” (162).

Activity alone does not create agency. Instead, agency is experienced when “the players’ actions have effect, the actions are chosen and the effects are related to the players intentions” (161). This agency is commonly experienced in modern board games. Players have a range of actions they can take, and players take the action they think will most help them win. There is a direct correlation between the players’ success and the actions they have taken. This agency is also experienced in narrative board games. However, the actions taken by the players go further than just helping determine the winner of the game; they determine the course of the narrative.

When people sit down to play a narrative board game, they are competing. This competition may be between players, or the player and the system, or a combination. Some players will take this competition very seriously, while others will be glad to be with their friends. This competition, and the agency inherent to games, requires players to make decisions and take action. Ideally, the action that is taken (fuelled by competitive desires) will mirror the appropriate action the character would take in the conflict they are facing.

The consumption of stories in most traditional formats requires little more action than to turn the page or push play. Murray acknowledges this potential contradiction (174):

> Games seem on the face of it to be very different from stories and to offer opposite satisfactions. Stories do not require us to do anything except to pay attention as they are told. Games always involve some kind of activity and are often focused on the mastery of skills, whether the skill involves chess strategy or joystick twitching. Games generally use language only instrumentally (“check mate”, “ball four”) rather than to convey subtleties of description or to communicate complex

> emotions. They offer a schematized and purposefully reductive vision of the world. Most of all, games are goal directed and structured around turn taking and keeping score. All of this would seem to have nothing to do with stories.

However, games and stories are not opposed. Murray proposes various narrative forms like journey stories, mazes, symbolic dramas, and contest stories that can all be integrated into gameplay to create "games as stories" (187). The structure of these narrative forms and the structure of games both share traits of goals, conflict and uncertainty. There is space for players to take action and experience meaningful results of that action within a fictional world.

It is important to note that taking action and interacting in the fictional world does not make the player the author. This is because "interactors can only act within the possibilities that have been established by the writing and programming...all of the interactor's possible performances will have been called into being by the originating author" (187). While Murray is writing about digital worlds, her use of the word "programming" can easily be transferred to the design of an analogue game.

Murray calls this design process procedural authorship, which includes (187):

- "Writing the rules by which the text appears as well as writing the texts themselves"
- "Writing the rules for the interactor's involvement, the conditions under which things will happen in response to the participant's actions"
- "Establishing the properties of the objects and potential objects in the virtual world and the formulas for how they will relate to one another"

By crafting the rules of the world, participation within the world, and the objects in the world, the designer "creates not just a set of scenes but a world of narrative possibilities" (187). In the case of a narrative board game, this may include writing the rules by which an encounter card is revealed, designing the possible range of actions a player can take on their turn, and establishing that boxes can be used as barricades or as storage. Interacting in the world of narrative possibilities and taking action within them does not make the player the author, it gives them agency.

**Transformation**

*Transformation,* the pleasure of shape-shifting, is an inherent quality of interactive media. Many actions taken will prompt some sort of transformation within the play state. This idea is closely related to the narrative concept of Situation, an initial state, and the sequence of events that leads to change in that state (Miller 77). However, instead of examining theory of how transformation occurs, or its effect, the sections of this chapter (including Kaleidoscopic Narrative, Enactment as Transformational Experience, The Multipositional View) are a series of possible ways to structure cyberdrama. In her notes in the updated 2016 version, she writes that the chapter offers "a wealth of underexploited design possibilities".

This chapter, while interesting in its own right, is limited in its usefulness for my research. Murray gives a range of interesting examples and ideas for how one might structure cyberdrama, but with little examination of the effect of that structure. For this reason, I will not examine the chapter in this paper.

*Hamlet on the Holodeck* is an important and useful work. While some of Murray's ideas (like 'the mask', 'active creation of belief' and 'games as stories') have some applicability to narrative board games, there will always be caveats and exceptions because of the intrinsic differences in form between cyberdrama and narrative board games.

## Narrative Games to Playable Stories

In her essay *From Narrative Games to Playable Stories,* literary scholar and critic Marie-Laure Ryan creates a framework that integrates digital activity with something that fulfils "the basic condition of narrativity: a sequence of events involving thinking individuals, linked by causal relations, motivated by a conflict, and aiming at its resolution" (43). She is interested in forms of interactive narrative that "offer a compromise between the unrealistic demands made on AI by the Holodeck and the very programmable but narratively challenged and interactively limited algorithm of hypertext fiction" (45). I believe that narrative board games sit somewhere on this spectrum between hypertext fiction and AI.

Ryan notes a significant challenge present in interactivity - the "interactive paradox: the integration of the unpredictable, bottom-up input of the user into a sequence of events that fulfils the conditions of narrativity - conditions that presuppose a top-down design" (45). As Louchart and Aylett wrote a few years earlier, this interactive paradox happens because "on the one hand an author seeks control over the direction of a narrative in order to give it a satisfying structure. On the other hand a participating user demands the autonomy to act and react without explicit authorial constraints" (25). This push-pull relationship between author and user creates an interesting tension but must be carefully managed in the design process.

Ryan uses her knowledge of narrative games and playable stories in combination with her understanding of the Holodeck's individual features in order to establish three key features as a point of departure from which to develop a 'poetics' of interactive narrativity: Natural Interface, Integration of User Action within the Story, and Dynamic Creation of the Story.

Natural Interface:

> Narrative structures use both physical actions and verbal transactions to progress the narrative and make sense of the narrative world. It is imperative then that the interactive narrative "must be able to stage both physical actions that change the fictional world and verbal acts that affect the minds of its inhabitants and motivate them to take action" (48). Players must not only be able to affect some change in the space, but must also compel action from NPCs and fellow players.

Integration of User Action Within the Story:

> As in the Holodeck, "all actions of the visitor move the plot forward" (50). If players' actions do not have a meaningful or at least visible impact on the narrative, their action within the context of the fictive world becomes meaningless.

Dynamic Creation of the Story:

> Top-down interactive narrative systems, like narrative board games, rely on pre-scripted elements that allow for “the players' progression on a journey along a path that is already traced and that leads to a fixed destination, or to several destinations when the system offers branching points” (52). However, bottom-up elements that give players options and demand their participation in order for a story to emerge must be integrated.

While I appreciate Ryan’s attempt at a ‘Poetics’, I find this section unsatisfying. Much of what she has written are generalisations based on examples, and as such, there is very little conceptualising and theorising. While narrative board games do feature natural interfaces, integration of user action, and dynamic creation of the story, it would be overly simplistic to say that these three tenets are the only ones required for a thorough analysis of a narrative game.

While this list of theories is not exhaustive, it does cover a wide range of some of the ways narrative in digital games has been analysed. Not only are they incomplete or insufficient for a thorough analysis of narrative board games, I find them insufficient for digital games. This is because they are not narratological frameworks and do not claim to be. Instead, they are possible lenses through which some aspects of narrativity in games can be considered. Because of the newness of the media, and the very many different ways that the media is presented, creating a narratological framework would be an incredibly difficult task.

The theories presented above all have some similarities to each other. Scripted Narrative and Embedded elements, Alterbiography and Emergent elements, and Agency and Integration of User Action are just some of the concepts that share similarities. There is no theory wildly different from all the others. Similarly, an exploration of the theory of narrative board games would not yield wildly different results from those about narrative digital games. However, the differences that do exist are important and not to be ignored.

# Identikit

In the Introduction, I outlined and expanded Arnaudo's Identikit. Unlike all the theories for digital games just discussed, the Identikit is invaluable for this research because of the rarity of what it is: a narrative framework specifically for board games. This framework cannot be used for evaluation or analysis, but rather it helps establish what a narrative board game is. It is important to note that Arnaudo says of his Identikit that "a game can be said to tell a story when all or most of the following apply" (20). The table below demonstrates how not all of the criteria entirely apply to each game, but this does not preclude them from being considered narrative board games.

As useful as the framework is, there are some criteria that Arnaudo has established that are not entirely clear or encompassing. While Arnaudo has said himself that only "most" of the criteria must be applicable, I think parts of the Identikit, in particular, the way Arnaudo characterises Characters[17], excludes a large portion of narrative board games. To demonstrate my point, I have compared each game in this research to Arnaudo's criteria (see table 1 below). Given the somewhat subjective and inconclusive nature of determining the extent to which the criteria are fulfilled, I have used the vague unit of measurement of Hardly to Somewhat to Considerable.

Table 1

Case studies measured against Arnaudo's Identikit

| | 7th Continent | Arkham LCG | Arkham 3rd | Detective | Detective: CoA | Holding On | Dragonholt | Mansions | Mice & Mystics | Pandemic | Stuffed Fables | TWOM | TIME Stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Content is representational | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 2. Content consistent | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 3. Rules mirror content | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 4. Content and rules align to world | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 5. Events related by causation | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 6. Players control characters | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. Players' characters unique | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 8. Character identification | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 9. Characters have goals | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 10. Characters undergo change | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 11. Character change is of interest | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 12. Strategies mirror game world | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 13. Uncertainty in each game | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 - Hardly | 1 |
| 2 - Somewhat | 2 |
| 3 - Considerable | 3 |

[17] Excuse the pun.

Looking at the table, one can see that some of the games I have selected conclusively meet all the criteria, and others where the results are less decisive. Later on in this paper, my discussion of the games and their elements will explain why I believe "the content is depicted in the components consistently", "the content and mechanisms converge in the creation of a consistent imaginary world", and other criteria from the Identikit (20) are "Considerably" fulfilled. However, there are two principal categories where complications arise: Characters (6-11) and Strategies (12).

Contained in the Identikit are several requirements for the characters in the game:

- The players control individual characters rather than groups or abstract entities
- The players' characters are unique and differ from one another in some significant way
- An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters
- The players' characters have goals and objectives
- The players' characters undergo some form of change during gameplay
- The changing state of the characters is a major source of interest

While this list provides a thorough accounting of the characters that the players control, it crucially misses the characters in the game that the players don't control. Through my research, I have determined that most narrative board games fall into two main categories:

1. The players assume the role of the characters in the story of the game (*Legacy of Dragonholt, Arkham Horror Third Edition, Mice and Mystics)*
2. The players assume the role of minor characters/agents uncovering a story through the game (*Detective, Detective: City of Angels, Holding On).* In this style, the metanarrative[18] is more obvious, as the players enact a story of uncovering the story.

In the second type of game, the players' characters have somewhat limited (generally distinguished by a special ability or maybe some artwork) individual or unique characteristics that give them the quality of a fully-realised character. They are more player pawns, the means by which the player can take action in the game. However, as limited as these characters are, the Non-Player Characters (NPCs) in the world are detailed and nuanced. They undergo a lot of change and development and are impacted by the events and world around them. The players encounter characters they identify with, experience the effects of those characters' goals and objectives, and see them undergo change. The framework's criteria would exclude these games, despite the rich characterisation of the NPC's. The focalisation or point of view is different in the two main categories (lens of the protagonist, and the lens of a witness), but I believe that shouldn't preclude either from being considered narrative board games.

Some games fall in the middle, either using some aspects of both or shifting between the two depending on the scenario that is being played (*Mansions of Madness 2nd Edition, Arkham Horror: The Card Game)*. Arnaudo's Identikit only captures the features in the first type of game.

[18] In the case of a narrative board game, the metanarrative is the story of the play experience as the game's narrative is unfolding. I do not use this term within it's postmodern understanding.

I think a more comprehensive Identikit should include similar criteria for the NPCs that are present in the game and can be interacted with to varying degrees. I propose an addition to Arnaudo's Identikit (see table 2 below):

- The players control individual agents through which they take action, interact with NPCs, and reveal the embedded story.
- The NPCs are unique and differ from one another in some significant way
- An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between the players and the NPCs
- The NPCs have goals and objectives
- The NPCs undergo some form of change during gameplay
- The changing state of the NPCs is a major source of interest for the players

Table 2[19]

Case studies measured against Arnaudo' Identikit with my additions

| | 7th Continent | Arkham LCG | Arkham 3rd | Detective | Detective: CoA | Holding On | Dragonholt | Mansions | Mice & Mystics | Pandemic | Stuffed Fables | TWOM | TIME Stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Content is representational | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 2. Content consistent | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 3. Rules mirror content | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 4. Content and rules align to world | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 5. Events related by causation | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 6. Players control characters | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. Players' characters unique | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 8. Character identification | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 9. Characters have goals | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 10. Characters undergo change | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 11. Character change is of interest | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 12. Players control agents | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 13. NPCs are unique | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 14. NPC identification | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 15. NPCs have goals | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 16. NPCs undergo change | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 17. NPC change is of interest | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 18. Strategies mirror game world | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 19. Uncertainty in each game | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 - Hardly | |
| 2 - Somewhat | |
| 3 - Considerable | |

[19] Enlarged version on page 48.

The above addition means that all games have some features that are “Hardly” or “Somewhat” applicable. However, the more inclusive Identikit means a more comprehensive conception of what a narrative board game. This is crucial because the use of NPCs in a fictional game world, and their character development and progression, is often a core device used to convey Story in narrative board games.

As one can see looking at the table, the criteria that the “strategies of the player mirror the strategies that would be undertaken in the world of the game” (20) is not “considerably” applicable for any of the games. I suggest that this characteristic should be amended to: strategies of the player mirror the strategies that would be undertaken in the world of the game *as much as possible.* Arnaudo’s explanation of this characteristic is heavily focused on ludonarrative-congruent[20] actions. He cites James Wallis who noted that in the game *Cluedo,* “not only can you win by proving that you committed the crime, you can accuse yourself and be wrong, and will lose the game as a result. As a game mechanic this works, but in story and genre terms it is a tale told by an idiot” (Wallis qtd in Arnaudo 34). *Cluedo* is not a narrative board game, and it doesn’t pretend to be. Nevertheless, Wallis’ point still stands. The alignment between mechanisms and story is paramount to ludonarrative congruence and a story world that makes sense.

Narrative board games have a delicate balance to achieve: a game with meaningful play that ‘holds’ a satisfying story. Often this means placing restrictions on the players in order to match the pace of the revealing story with the pace of the gameplay. Unfortunately, these restrictions often don’t make complete sense. For example, in *Detective,* when a player spends a Skill token, they may not use it again for the rest of the day. This means that players have to strategise when in the day to use their skill tokens. In reality, investigators are not restricted to only using their skills once per day and then having to wait until the next morning before those skills refresh and can be used again. There is nothing to suggest that the world of *Detective* is some alternate universe where skills and abilities are a finite resource. This mechanism just doesn’t make sense. However, if the players were able to use their skill tokens every turn without restriction, the cases would be too easy to solve. Players then have the opportunity to actively create belief: in an oblique way, the restriction on the skill tokens mirrors the restrictions on skills in reality - just because an investigator can research doesn’t mean they will always find what they’re looking for.

I could generate similar examples from all the games included in this research. Rather than pedantically pointing out the problems in these games, I rather suggest leniency for the strategies employed by the players in existing narrative board games, while proposing a continued effort on the part of designers and writers to continue to work on lessening the gap between mechanism and story.

Arnaudo’s Identikit, while in need of expansion and clarification in some ways, generally offers a clear idea of the characteristics that separate narrative board games from other games. The games that I have identified using the Identikit all fulfil the criteria in varied and interesting ways. The Identikit is a valuable tool that I have used regularly to map narrative board game praxis.

[20] Ludonarrative congruence – the symbiotic and harmonious connection between the ludic and narrative structure of the game (see page 15-16).

Table 2

Case studies measured against Arnaudo's Identikit with my additions

| | |
|---|---|
| 1 - Hardly | |
| 2 - Somewhat | |
| 3 - Considerable | |

| | 7th Continent | Arkham LCG | Arkham 3rd | Detective | Detective: CoA | Holding On | Dragonholt | Mansions | Mice & Mystics | Pandemic | Stuffed Fables | TWOM | TIME Stories |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1. Content is representational | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 2. Content consistent | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 3. Rules mirror content | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 4. Content and rules align to world | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 5. Events related by causation | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 6. Players control characters | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 7. Players' characters unique | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 8. Character identification | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 9. Characters have goals | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 10. Characters undergo change | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 11. Character change is of interest | 3 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 12. Players control agents | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |
| 13. NPCs are unique | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 14. NPC identification | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 15. NPCs have goals | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 16. NPCs undergo change | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 17. NPC change is of interest | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 3 | 2 | 3 |
| 18. Strategies mirror game world | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| 19. Uncertainty in each game | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 3 | 3 |

# Chapter 3: The Player

Conducting a narratological study of narrative board games is a complex task because the active participation of the player distinguishes the medium (and thus its analysis) from traditional narrative media. The player serves many roles when playing. They perform administrative tasks, actively create belief, make decisions and respond to the results. They set up the game and pack it away afterwards. They learn and teach rules and give advice to their fellow players. All this action means the players wears many hats. But what is their role in the narrative structure? This section will explore the roles the player assumes and how the existence of active, sentient agents within the narrative structure complicates the analysis of the form in order to help map the player's effect on the medium.

> When a work is produced, the creative act is only an incomplete, abstract impulse; if the author existed all on his own, he could write as much as he liked but his work would never see the light of day as an object, and he would have to lay down his pen or despair. The process of writing, however, includes as a dialectic correlative the process of reading, and these two interdependent acts require two differently active people. The combined efforts of author and reader bring into being the concrete and imaginary object which is the work of the mind. Art exists only for and through other people.
>
> (Sartre 1967, 49)

## Player as Storyteller?

A narrative work is distinguished by two characteristics: "the presence of a story and the presence of a storyteller" (Leitch 3). Leitch is referencing the work of Robert Scholes and Robert Kellogg in *The Nature of Narrative* (1968). They begin their work by musing on the nature of narrative, narrative criticism, and narrative study. They do not believe the novel is "the final product of ameliorative evolution, as the perfected form" (Scholes and Kellogg 3). A novel-centred view of narrative literature is unsuitable for two reasons: "it cuts us off from the narrative literature of the past and the culture of the past, and it cuts us off from the literature of the future" (9). If "for writing to be narrative, no more and no less than a teller and a tale are required" (4), then narrative board games as I've defined them certainly deserve to be studied as a form of narrative.

However, the delineation between story and storyteller (Leitch), tale and teller (Scholes and Kellogg), is not totally clear in a narrative board game. When I began this research, I thought it could be possible that multiple entities played the role of the storyteller at the same time. I considered that the storyteller could be the designer, who embedded narrative elements in the game, or those embedded elements themselves were the storyteller. Alternatively, perhaps the storyteller could be the player whose actions elicit narrative. Perhaps the storyteller is all three working in conjunction with each other. Unfortunately, neither Leitch nor Scholes and Kellogg go on to elaborate what exactly they mean by "storyteller" or "teller". Without intervention from those writers, I will assume that they mean storyteller in the traditional sense:

a person who writes or tells stories *to others*. This implication of an audience is interesting, given the crucially intrinsic role of the audience (player/s) in a narrative board game.

"In the relationship between the teller and the tale, and that other relationship between the teller and the audience, lies the essence of narrative art" (Scholes and Kellogg 240). There is a clear distinction then between tale, teller, and audience. Unlike in the traditional narrative media that Scholes is writing about, because of the participatory nature of narrative board games, the audience is active. Perhaps the way to understand what Scholes means by "teller" and how that role is embodied in narrative games is by considering whether the audience lies closer to the tale or the teller, the story or the storyteller. If the teller is embodied, that implies the existence of an active agent - and indeed the most active agent in a narrative board game is the player, the audience. If the storyteller is the one telling the story, presenting the narrative, then it is likely that the role of the storyteller in a narrative game is embodied or performed by the player/s. Consider Aarseth's assertion that in ergodic literature is "invited to complete the text" (20). The player is working alongside the author (or designer) who has constructed the story and is now fulfilling "the crucial role of soliciting the narrative by manipulating the components, rearranging the blocks of the story, interpreting the content, and mentally filling in the gaps between the various thematic units" (Arnaudo 21). The player has not written or invented the story, but they are telling it - or at least helping to.

I turn then to H. Porter Abbott's *Cambridge Introduction to Narrative* (2008) whose 'bare-minimum' definition of a narrative, "the representation of an event or series of events" (12) reflects and bears similarity to the 'bare-minimum' definitions from Leitch and Scholes. There is a correlation between story, tale, and an event or series of events. If the storyteller is doing the representing of the series of events, and the players' actions and decisions are what elicit the events, perhaps the players are the storytellers doing this representing.

Abbott goes on to interrogate the use of the word "representation" in his definition (13):

> Those who favour Aristotelian distinctions, sometimes use the word *presentation* for stories that are acted and representation (re-presentation) for stories that are told or written. The difference highlights the idea that in theatre we experience the story as immediately present while we do not when it conveyed through a narrator. My own view is that both forms of narrative are mediated stories and therefore involved in re-presentation, conveying a story that at least *seems* to pre-exist the vehicle of conveyance.
>
> A good counter-argument to my position asks: Where is this story before it is realized in words or on stage? The answer, so the argument goes, is: Nowhere. If that is the case, then all renderings or stories, on the stage or on the page, are *presentations* not representations... For my definition, I will stick to the term "representation". I do this in part because the word is so commonly used in the way I am using it and in part because it describes at least the feeling that we often have that the story somehow pre-exists the narrative, even though this may be an illusion.

Narrative board games have elements that are "told or written". Event cards, encounters, sections from paragraph-style games have been pre-written by the designer or writer of the game, and are read by the players - usually out loud, but sometimes to themselves. In this

way, narrative board games are quite clearly *representational.* At the same time, there are elements of narrative board games that are "acted". Players may read out dialogue, as if from a script. They will move character pawns/tokens/miniatures across the space. Just like blocking[21] in theatre, the position of these characters will depend on what action they (the player as the character) want to take, and whom they want to take it with. Reactions from the system and the player will play out live, even if those reactions were embedded into the system beforehand. I concur with Abbott's use of the term representation, agreeing that the story in a narrative board game is *nowhere* before it is written down *and* played out, noting that narrative board games contain elements from both 'presentations' and 'representations'. The acts from both the representational and presentational aspects of narrative board games are performed by the players, reiterating the notion that the storyteller is the player.

If indeed the players are the storyteller, then the designer of the game is not the storyteller, they are the author. The author's work is the content of the story, what is told. The author or designer has some control over the story. They consistently exert authority because while there may be many outcomes as a result of the player's interaction, all possible outcomes have been predetermined by the author.

## Player as Narrator?

Scholes and Kellogg suggest that broadly speaking, a narrative has "three points of view - those of the character, the narrator, and the audience" (240). However, they go on, writing that "as narrative becomes more sophisticated, a fourth point of view is added by the development of a clear distinction between the narrator and the author" (240). We know that the Character is filled by the player and designer simultaneously. The designer creates an idea of a character with specific traits, and the player fills out that character through play in the fictive world. We know that the audience is the player, and the designer is the author. So who or what is the narrator?

The narrator, an "instrument, construction or a device wielded by the author" (Abbott 63), is one of the essential ways the author exerts their authority. If it is the case that "when you narrate you construct" (64), is the embedded narrative text (which the designer has crafted), the mechanisms the players use, or the players themselves the narrator?

Narratives will always have a Narrator, but this narrator may be *overt* or *covert.* An overt narrator is "one that can be clearly seen to be telling the story - though not necessarily a first-person narrator - and to be articulating her/his own views and making her/his presence felt stylistically as well as on the metanarrative level" (Fludernik 21). A covert narrator "is linguistically inconspicuous; s/he does not present her/himself (one could almost say: itself) as the articulator of the story or does so almost imperceptibly" (22).

[21] Blocking is the process by which a director will determine the position of actors, set pieces, props, lighting, entrances and exits for a performance. Blocking is often determined by what actions have just happened, what is about to happen, and the relationships between characters and items (Lyon 77).

While a narrator will not always fulfil all of them, they have four main functions (Fludernik 27):

1. Narrate or present the fictional world
2. Comment on and expound narrative events (to develop sympathy and understanding of the characters and world).
3. Make philosophical assertions by articulating universally 'valid' propositions. These propositions point to the rules of the world, creating "a system of norms" that help explain the occurring events.
4. Communicate the discursive nature of the narrative by employing specific techniques (like making metanarrative comments).

These functions can be performed separately or in different combinations according to the demands of the story and discourse of the narrative.

When going through the functions of the narrator, it is clear that in a narrative board game, the role of the narrator is filled by both the embedded elements (crafted and implemented by the designer) and the player. There will be moments in the game's text that comment on the story events or make philosophical assertions about the fictive world. The embedded elements will present the fictive world and situate the players' characters within that world. However, the players will often share the role of present the world by making decisions as the story unfolds. Both the elements and the players use a variety of techniques to communicate and explore the discursive nature of the game's narrative.

## Player as Narratee?

If there is a narrator, there must be an audience on the receiving end of the narration. This may be the reader, or it may be what Fludernik (and others, see Prince) call the Narratee, "the intrafictional addressee of the narrator's discourse" (Fludernik 23). This role is typically performed by a fictional character who exists in the same world as the narrator, or is the reader charged to become active" (23). They are "a persona traceable in the narrative text through the use of address pronouns, imperatives and other markers of addresseehood" (157).

The narratee, "fictional characters who exist in the same world as the narrator", can either be PCs or NPC. However, if the narratee is also "the reader charged to be active", then that quite clearly suggests that the narratee is the player active in the fictive world of the game. While the NPCs in some cases are being narrated to, it is clear that in the case of narrative board games, the central narratee is the player.

This chapter could potentially be expanded into an entire thesis, rigorously considering the many affects the player has on a narrative system. Unfortunately, this is outside of my current scope. However, the work done here serves as a valuable tool that grounds an understanding of how the player, central to the revelation of narrative, functions. As we move on to map how Story and Discourse have been implemented in the primary case studies of this research, it is imperative to remember that the player's role as storyteller, (somewhat) narrator and narratee will have a direct impact on the way the narrative is constructed and received. The active participation of the player, who makes choices and takes actions, is what reveals the narrative.

Part Two

# The Map

# Chapter 4: Story

In order to map the terrain and get a lay of the land, it is vital to establish identifying landmarks. In narrative board game praxis, *Story* is one of those landmarks. In narratology, *Story* is "the event or sequence of events", and the "entities involved in the events" (Abbott 17). In this chapter, I am going to analyse the *Story* elements of a range of narrative board games published in the last ten years by exploring the two main elements that make up a narrative's story: Situation and Character. In order to map how some designers have integrated Story into their games, I will not analyse the content of each game's Story, but rather detail what strategies and tools have been used to embed that content into the game.

Much of my analysis in this chapter will be grounded in Salen and Zimmerman's *Rules of Play.* Their chapter, Games as Narrative Play, offers helpful theory on the intersection of games and narrative. Unfortunately, as mentioned earlier, much of this theory is diluted by the discussion of narrative and story-based experience in games like *Tony Hawk Pro Skater 3* (2001) or Poker. Nevertheless, the sections on Situation, Character, Fictive Worlds and Story Events offer useful and valuable insights and theoretical grounding.

While there are several proposed methodologies for the criticism and analysis of digital games (Bogost, Aarseth, Konzack), the same cannot be said for board games. As such, I have mostly relied on Aarseth's *Playing Research* (2003), which suggests a methodology for the aesthetic study of games (he is mostly writing about digital games, but his methodology has far-reaching applicability). He proposes a 'play-ful' approach, where only in the act of playing the game can the game's gameplay (the player's actions, strategies and motives), structure (rules), and world (fictional content, topology/level design, textures) (2) be analysed. The majority of the insights and analysis in the next two chapters were discovered by playing my case studies. I have included broad observations to try, in some small way, contribute to what little theory of board game analysis there currently is.

The sections in this chapter are: Situation and Events (Story Events within Fictive Worlds, Narrative Goals, Conflict and Uncertainty) and Characters. I have selected these sections to ground my analysis in existing theory. Specifically, I rely on Salen and Zimmerman, who combined traditional narratology with game design principles, and used the sections listed above in their chapter 'Games as Narrative Play'. Other sections in their chapter, like Digital Game Spaces, Narrative Space, and Core Mechanics, are either entirely unsuitable for this paper or will be used in the next chapter (Discourse).

# Situation and Events

## Story Events within Fictive Worlds

Salen and Zimmerman reference Rune Klevjar when they identify two elements of game narratives: "*fictive worlds*, which represent narrative context, and *story events*, the actual game incidents that take place within the fictive world" (402). These elements have a close relationship, "informing and enriching the other" (402). Both of these elements can emerge from or be embedded in narrative board games through a range of tools, including random results, manipulated results, decisions taken, and embedded text. The fictive world should not be "a generic backdrop for scripted plot events" (402), but should instead be carefully fleshed out to strengthen the impact of the story events. The fictive world should be one "whose setting describes the limits of its own action". At the same time, story events should help build up and inform the fictive world. There should be congruence between these two parts of a whole. In a map of narrative board game praxis, the practice of framing story events within the fictive world is one that is consistent. I detail below how some games integrate story events into the fictive world.

***Stuffed Fables* (Plaid Hat Games, 2018):**

In *Stuffed Fables,* players take on the role of a group of stuffed toys who protect a young girl, their owner, from Crepitus The Nightmare King. They do this by resolving encounters, defeating bad guys and surviving difficult obstacles. Most actions in the game are resolved through player choice, dice drawing and rolling.

Instead of a board, the gameplay in *Stuffed Fables* happens entirely on the Storybook. The book is 103 pages long, with the left-hand page acting as the "game board" and the right-hand page containing the story points (depending on what happens to the players on the left-hand side of the book). The last eight pages of the book are different, containing the various endings to the seven different stories contained in the book. These stories are:

1. The Big Girl Bed
2. Wetting Go
3. A Kinder World
4. Unhinged
5. Nothing But The Tooth
6. Shots and The Dark
7. The Fear of Loneliness

There is a *lot* of narrative text in *Stuffed Fables.* The entirety of the first page of the Storybook is narrative text, establishing the world and some of the playable characters. Because it is the first story in the game, this act of establishing the fictive world and characters is crucially important in order to maintain narrative coherence and understanding for the remainder of the

stories. The players learn about how the little girl is sleeping in her big girl bed for the first night. The arrival of the big girl bed means that now is when the Stuffies' service truly begins. They must protect the little girl from Crepitus, The Nightmare King, and his minions.

While the majority of the narrative text is on the first page of each story, there is more in other areas of the Storybook too. Each page of the Storybook, which signifies the Stuffies' progression through the adventure or a new story beat, has a 'chapter' heading. "The Crawling Dread", "The Place That Lies Beyond", and "The Thrill Ride" or all potential chapters in *The Big Girl Bed.* A glance at the left, 'board' side of the book with its visual descriptor of the chapter, in combination with the chapter heading, gives players a good idea of the tone and plot of the chapter. Descriptive titles and images help build the fictive world.

At the beginning of each new page, players receive new setup instructions and read some more narrative text. This text follows on from the story point that sent the players to this page. For example: If the Dark Heart uncouples the train at Storypoint 11-1, the players are sent to 13-1, where the players find themselves in Bramblebum, "a dark, tangled forest". However, if the Dark Heart is defeated, the train takes the players 15-1, where the players are in "The town of Squalor, a chaotic maze of ramshackle buildings and random alleyways". Most of the story points have accompanying narrative text, while some only have 'mechanical' instructions for encounters that the players must complete. The congruence between the narrative and the action is maintained, as the story tells the players exactly what is happening in the narrative at each major point. In this way, the story events are integrated into the fictive world.

On the first page of each story is a separate piece of text. This text, called "Stitch's Fable" is a fable connected to some of the issues that will come up in the story. Similarly, at the end of each story, there is a list of "Talking Points", questions for parents to ask themselves and their children to encourage conversation about the issues that arose during the game. The Talking Points are not story events and don't help build the fictive world. However, the overall narrative is used as a prompt or springboard for parents to use, creating a metanarrative of the play experience with their children. These additions are not part of the fictive world but do enhance the overall gameplay experience, and have the potential to help the players "actively create belief" (Murray 136).

***This War of Mine* (Awaken Realms, 2017):**

*This War of Mine* is a cooperative survival game. It is the analogue adaptation of the 2011 video game of the same name (11 Bit Studios). In the game, players control a group of civilians trapped in a war-torn city. The game is divided into two phases: day and night. During the day, the group will eat, rest and improve their shelter by building items like stoves and water purifiers. At night, some of the group goes out to scavenge for food, medicine and parts while the rest stay behind to guard the shelter. Players will accumulate mental, physical and emotional damage as they try survive as long as possible.

*This War of Mine* is a paragraph-based game. These games include "full booklets of numbered paragraphs describing hundreds of situations that could take place in the game world" (Arnaudo 114). The advantage of paragraph-based games is that they have the potential to

“convey more detail than what an encounter card or event table could, while also offering the opportunity for structuring strings of events in narratively effective sequences” (114). In *This War of Mine,* these paragraphs are contained in The Book of Scripts.

Most sequences are only two or three paragraphs long. There is usually an introductory paragraph which explains the scene, and then a choice for the players to make. Each choice takes the players to a different number in The Book of Scripts to read the next paragraph. Some choices can only be made if the players have the right equipment, while other ‘choices’ won’t be choices at all - the paragraph will either tell the players exactly which number to go to or will have the players roll a ten-sided dice to determine which number they go to next. The dice rolls will typically correlate the probability of the dice roll to the probability of the event. So a more likely event, like an elderly couple not having supplies, will happen if the players roll a 1-8. If the players roll a 9 or 10, the elderly couple will have a good amount of food. However, sometimes these expectations are subverted - there are no rules for how the players can choose the most ‘successful’ option. Some players will make their choice based on morality and guilt, while others will choose the option they think will be most successful.

The text in The Book of Scripts was translated from Polish to English, which unfortunately means that the phrasing is sometimes awkward. However, the text generally adds to the brutal and oppressive atmosphere and explains quite clearly what is happening.

> **1056.** The street is covered in debris from the plane. The fuselage is full of holes - everything around is on fire, but some of the cargo fell away from the wreckage. We see heavy crates that contain food and medicine - that’s our goal. We’ll have at most a few minutes before the military and half of the city gets here. Some people from the other side of the street came over and are already dragging away one of the crates. We grab what we can, but then suddenly we hear a gun being reloaded. We turn around, and three men are standing there - one of them is pointing his weapon at us.
> *“Freeze. This stuff is ours. Get out of here!”*
>
> - **We give up the rest of the crates without a fight -** with our arms in the air, we watch as they take a few of the crates and disappear around the corner. They fire in the air as they leave. At the very same moment, soldiers appear from the other direction - it’s time to run. Let’s head back home - BACK TO GAME.
> - **Desperate - we try to fight** - see 1246.

The passage above is a fair example of what most entries are like in the Book of Scripts. There is some description of the scene and the risks and rewards of the encounter which begins to create tension. This tension is heightened when “suddenly we hear a gun being reloaded”. The text here includes essential details about the fictive world, and the story event itself. These details become particularly crucial when players must make decisions that will influence the narrative. It is strange then that in the rules, players are instructed to “never read the whole script aloud - doing this will surely bore other players and ruin the thrill of the game”. Instead,

the player whose turn it is with The Book of Scripts must read it to themselves and then summarise what happened to the rest of the group. This is odd for two reasons: firstly, the whole group controls all of the characters in the game (it is not a character per player system). As such, the whole group is technically present for the encounter, whether or not all of the characters are there. So there is no reason for only one player to read and then relay what happened because everyone is there. This also means that one player reads what happens and enjoys the reveal by themselves before sharing it with the group. The second reason is that when players are asked to summarise as they go, the language will often be stilted and sparse. The rich detail of the world and the moment of tension when the gun is reloaded is reported back to the group instead of carefully described. Those moments that have been carefully crafted by the writers and designers, and are essential to the narrative, rely on a player's ability to summarise and communicate instead of the work of the writers. This means that the weight and some of the detail of significant story events, and their connection to the fictive world, will potentially be lost.

Both *Stuffed Fables* and *This War of Mine* use random results, manipulated results, choices and embedded text to generate, enhance and heighten story events, which in turn fill the fictive worlds of the game with rich detail. The story events and fictive world inform each other, working in symbiosis to help the player make sense of both so that their actions will be meaningful as they elicit narrative through play. These actions are also made meaningful as they accomplish narrative goals.

## Narrative Goals

In-game goals serve two important purposes: they help a player judge their progress through a game, and they help players understand "the significance of their actions within the narrative context" (Salen and Zimmerman 385). As the players achieve goals, they move from one episode of the larger story to the next. Salen and Zimmerman called this "level design", making it clear that when writing this section, they mainly had digital games in mind. While it's relatively uncommon for board games to be thought of as having levels in the traditional sense, meeting objectives, achieving missions, and completing scenarios could certainly be the analogue equivalent of progressing through levels. Level design could very well be an essential component of a future board game narratology.

Levels offer the player access to "specific areas of the narrative world, each level populated by unique events, objects and characters that create a particular narrative tone and texture" (Salen and Zimmerman 386). The game's narrative context (fictive world) is made up of the game's goal or series of goals (triggered by story events). As players meet goals, they reveal more of the narrative available to them. Because of these goals, players' interactions with the system become meaningful as their actions are framed within the narrative context. As players move from one level/objective/scenario to the next by completing goals, they gain "narrative coherence" (386).

Level and scenario structures "allow players to feel the details of a story while the game designer maintains control of the larger narrative experience" (387). Narrative checkpoints are

essential for players, helping them calibrating, regroup and remember important moments in the story thus far.

By playing the game and meeting objectives, the system of the game "actively enforces dramaturgical progression, in terms of overall narrative goals or goals of character development" (Lindley 211). This means that the events represented in the game will be "related to one another through a sense of causation" (Arnaudo 27). This feature of the Identikit demonstrates the need for causality in the story events of narrative board games. "Without causality, narrative is lost" (Wolf 37). By connecting one level of the game to the next, and embedding the need for goals to be met in order to progress, causality is established.

Player action and narrative goals should be closely aligned, so that progression through the game mirrors progression through the story. I detail below how some games have aligned game and narrative goals.

***Arkham Horror Third Edition* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2018):**

*Arkham Horror Third Edition* is a cooperative horror game. Players are investigators in Arkham Massachusetts. Each round of the game is made up of four phases: Action, Monster, Encounter and Mythos. Players will take actions and resolve encounters in the first and third phase, while the monsters will attack and random events will be drawn in the second and fourth phase. By rolling dice, using their variable player powers, and resolving encounters, players will try to rid the world of the terrifying Ancient Ones.

Each scenario in *Arkham Horror Third Edition* begins with a Scenario Sheet that contains all the necessary information to setup and play that scenario. Included on this sheet is "The Story So Far…", the starting location, the result of Reckonings, and items to be set up. For *Approach of Azathoth* (the recommended first scenario), the story begins: "At the center of infinity slumbers Azathoth, lulled to sleep by the ceaseless piping of accursed flutes. Yet some mortals would seek to draw the infinite power and calamity of the Blind Idiot God to them, and thereby doom all of humanity…"

Based on the scenario introduction, the players are likely going to be tasked with stopping the "mortals" who are trying to draw on the power of Azathoth. The game uses a Codex system: a set of scenario-specific cards that are removed from play, and trigger a result (usually another card in the Codex deck) or are flipped over once a condition is met. These cards contain scenario-specific goals and rules which remain in effect until the card is removed from play. The first Codex card in *Approach of Azathoth* says:

> People walk with their heads down, shoulders hunched. With each new oddity, it becomes harder to pretend that nothing is wrong. But the vanishings, the strange lights, the sightings of inhuman creatures, they are not something that can be ignored...at least, not for long.

The card goes on to give instructions about accumulating "doom". Doom tokens generally signify bad things happening in the town of Arkham: rituals, monster sightings, unusual deaths. When locations have accumulated enough doom, the next appropriate card in the Codex is revealed. This generally means things have gotten worse, and the Investigators have more problems they need to deal with. Similarly, once the Investigators have found enough "clues",

the next appropriate card in the Codex is revealed. This generally means the Investigators are making progress in the scenario, completing goals and meeting objectives.

In the case of *Arkham Horror Third Edition*, meeting goals is not always a positive, forward-moving event. Allowing too much doom to accumulate is not progressing in terms of winning the scenario. However, it is overall progress in terms of the game and its narrative as a checkpoint and the game state changes. In some ways, the players will often move 'down' a level, but this will still allow players to see new parts of the fictive world and maintain narrative coherence.

***Stuffed Fables* (Plaid Hat Games, 2018):**

As discussed earlier, the gameplay in *Stuffed Fables* is centred around the Storybook. On the left page is a map of the encounter space for that section of the scenario, and on the right are the section points (i.e. 3-1, 5-3). The section points are labelled according to page number-section.

Story 1 in *Stuffed Fables* is *The Big Girl Bed* which begins at 3-1. The players read about how the little girl is spending her first night in a big girl bed, and it is now up to her Stuffies (the players) to protect her from Crepitus, The Nightmare King. Once the players have finished reading the introduction, players are instructed to go to section 5-1. The players turn the page and read some more narrative text which corresponds to the setup instructions. Then the game begins!

Each section gives details about what is happening in that part of the story, and what the Stuffies are trying to do: "*You try to pull the red wagon free*". If the players pass the test: "Y*ou manage to pull the red wagon out. The stuffies hop in the wagon and try to catch the train by riding down the hill to where the train rounds the bend*." However, if the players fail the test, "*Trying to dislodge the wagon causes an avalanche of toy parts to fall on you. Digging yourself free costs time*." Passing or failing this test takes the players to different sections of the Storybook, and as such, takes them to different parts of the overall narrative.

Progressing through *Stuffed Fables'* narrative by meeting (or failing objectives) doesn't only happen by moving from one section to the next. By turning the page (triggered by moving to a new section), there is not only a new set of story beats to encounter, but also a new map as the Stuffies have moved into a new location. The reveal of the new page and the new place gives the sense of the next 'level' in two important ways: the artwork of the new location signifies a different part of the fictive world that has not yet been encountered, and with each new location comes a set of special rules that affect the story events of that location. For example, on page 9, The Thrill Ride, the Stuffies each choose a place on the red wagon (left/right, front/rear) and the dice from successful tests as the players move down the hill of toys can be converted to purple dice. These purple dice make steering harder but will make the final test (a leap from a ramp across the mountain of toys onto the train) easier. If the players make it onto the train on page 11, Stop That Train!, the special rules are focused on catching The Dark Heart, and purple dice are no longer significant.

By moving to new sections and turning the pages, the players of *Stuffed Fables* progress through the narrative in a clear, visceral way. Each page is a central beat (or level) to the narrative, and turning the page marks a clear progression in the story and gameplay.

***Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game* (Portal Games, 2019):**

*Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game (Detective)* is a cooperative crime-solving, mystery game. Players take on the role of a team of investigators working at the Antares National Investigation Agency. By following clues, interviewing witnesses and suspects, doing research and using forensics, the investigators will attempt to solve a string of old cases.

There are five cases in *Detective.* These cases are all connected[22]and must be played in order, one after the other. The basic narrative progression is quite simple. Players complete one case and then move on to the next. So when the players successfully complete the first case - "A Man with a Golden Watch", they will move onto the second case - "The Soldier with a Heart of Gold". There is a precise moment of progression from one state to the next. As each case is completed, the information builds on itself. The fictive world gets bigger and more detailed in a clear, direct manner as the players progress from one case to the next.

However, in order to progress to the next case, the players don't have to figure out every aspect of the case. When time runs out (each case has a maximum number of 'days' it can take to solve the case), players log on to the Antares database to submit evidence and answer questions. Players need to get a score of at least 80% in order to progress to the next case. If they pass, they receive a report detailing the evidence and insights from that case. Unfortunately, that report is the same no matter your score or what questions you didn't know. So while players are successfully achieving a narrative goal, and progressing in the narrative, they suddenly have evidence that they didn't know from clues they hadn't seen yet or solved. This information is vital for the players to be successful in the next case. By placing priority on the players achieving the in-game goals, *Detective* disrupts the narrative congruence.

Moving from one case to the next is the main way that narrative goals are achieved. However, *Detective* also uses Plot Cards - a special type of cards that represent leads in future cases. Players may find these cards as they play through cases and will add them to the appropriate future case deck as instructed. These plot cards will typically include evidence or information that at the time didn't seem relevant or useful but become so later on. Finding a Plot Card is a small moment of victory for the players, as they typically mean the players are on the right track in their investigation, and on their way to completing the overarching narrative goal of solving the case.

As players progress through the game, they achieve narrative goals by completing story events. By linking narrative and game goals, and embedding scripted narrative for players to encounter when they achieve goals, the players experience the 'alterbiography' (Calleja 2009, 4) of the game as the story emerges through the gameplay. Inherent to achieving goals are obstacles. Some of these obstacles come in the form of conflict.

## Conflict

Conflict arises as players work towards achieving a goal. This conflict provides "both opportunity for narrative events, and a narrative context that frames the obstacles the player must overcome" (Salen and Zimmerman 387). Because conflict inherently suggests

[22] This is different to *Detective: City of Angels* that comes with nine standalone cases. They increase in difficulty, but otherwise can be played in any order.

opposition, there must be something in the game that obstructs the player from achieving their goal. Part of the way the player understands their role in the game and the fictive world is through the conflict they encounter, which generates alterbiography. “The trick to using game conflict as a narrative game design tool is to tie it closely to the formal game structure itself” (387). If this is done well, the game might create “transformative narrative play: a game conflict enriched by a narrative level of meaning that emerges from the social, strategic, and representational structures of the game” (388).

When the conflict in the game provides a narrative context for the action, players will help tell the game’s story by infusing their action with narrative meaning (388). When the player’s actions, motivated by conflict, are opposed by some force that is trying to stop the player from achieving their in-game goal, congruence between story events and the fictive world is achieved.

Board games are designed to be a competitive experience, no matter if the board game is competitive or cooperative. As conflict arises, obstacles stand in the players’ way of achieving goals. These obstacles will sometimes be individual and sometimes shared obstacles. While it isn’t a hard-and-fast rule, individual obstacles will be most prevalent in competitive games, while shared obstacles are most prevalent in cooperative games (although players in cooperative games will often have individual obstacles in addition to their shared ones). A competitive game is “a game with two or more players and a single winner” (Engelstein and Shalev 2). These games make up the majority of the hobby board game market and are the games that most people are familiar with. In cooperative games, “players coordinate their actions to achieve a common win condition or conditions. Players all win or lose the game together” (4). Players are competing against the game system, not each other. Sub-sections of cooperative games include team-based, solo, semi-cooperative, single loser and traitor-based games (4).

Conflict in a narrative board game is going to affect the game structure (competitive or cooperative) and the overall narrative experience. This is because the game’s victory conditions will be closely tied to the conclusion of the narrative. Who wins, how they win, and how the others lose are not just conclusions to a game - they are conclusions to the story.

***Legacy of Dragonholt* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2017)**:

*Legacy of Dragonholt* is a solo or cooperative game. The game is an RPG-style fantasy game that doesn’t require a gamemaster. Players create their own characters and go on pre-written adventures in the village of Dragonholt. They will meet other characters, complete missions and solve mysteries as they make choices. The outcome of their decisions will depend on the items they’ve aquired and the background and skills of the characters they created.

If you play *Legacy of Dragonholt* solo, you have complete control of what decisions you make and are the only one who ever resolves encounters in your game. However, if you are playing the game with two or more players (up to six), decision-making becomes a shared process. Each player receives an Activation Token, which is used to track which players have made a decision. Once a player makes a decision, they turn their token over and proceed to the next paragraph in the Quest Book. They cannot make another decision until everyone has exhausted their tokens (at which point everyone refreshes). When a player makes a decision, they are the Active Player until someone else makes a decision. This system does two things:

it prevents ‘alpha players’ or ‘quarterbacking’ in which one player “takes control of the group discussion and decision-making” (Engelstein and Shalev 5), and it distributes the encounters by having a rotating system of active players. Everyone in the group has things happening to them, and everyone has an equal opportunity to participate. While individual encounters are rotating around the players, the outcomes will still influence the group’s overall goal and narrative outcome. They will learn things about their main enemy, gain resources and make alliances that will help them in the game’s core conflict. All moments of conflict in the game will happen within the context of the inherent obstacle that arises from the necessary sharing of decision-making.

Conflict in *Legacy of Dragonholt* appears in several different ways. As above, there are meta moments of conflict, where players have different opinions about which decision should be taken. The second type of conflict is the small brawls and fights (physical and verbal) with other characters in the village and on the road, which are quickly resolved and have a minor impact on the overall narrative. These ‘minor’ moments of combat are approximately five to ten paragraphs long. Each player makes a decision, resolves the outcome, and passes the Quest Book to the next player. Actions taken during combat are resolved quite differently from combat in most other systems. When players take an action, they may be restricted by whether or not they have the right item, skill, or story point already marked. Beyond those restrictions, players may take any of the available actions. Unlike most other games, the system determines whether or not the action was successful. For example, if a player decides to “4300 - Catch the spear and disarm the bandit”, then that is what they will attempt to do. When they choose that option, they are directed to entry 1513:

> *You steel yourself and wait until the last moment before the spearpoint would impact your chest. In an instant, you fall back a step and grab the spear’s neck.*

To successfully grab the spear without getting stabbed, the player must have the Brawling or Willpower skill and proceed to entry 8563. Otherwise, they must go to entry 4384. The player has no way of knowing when they begin the encounter what skills will be required, and which option is most likely to be successful. Combat isn’t resolved through dice-rolling or revealing cards, but only through the decisions taken. These include past-decisions like which skills the player took, and what previous story points they choose that gave them items. The narrative, within the context of conflict, is revealed through the player’s choices and actions.

Finally, there are central enemies to be defeated and mysteries to be solved. The first Quest Book, *To New Roads,* is the introduction to resolving the peculiar and untimely death of Sonia after your party receives a letter from Celyse outlining her suspicion. However, because players will not always know exactly where to go and what to do, they will encounter side quests and learn more about the village of Dragonholt and the people in it. Players will have to use deductive reasoning, solve riddles, make educated guesses to solve the mystery. Like with the combat described above, it will not always be clear what choice will be successful. Players are invited to explore, and their ‘failure’ and ‘successes’ will reveal more of the fictive world. Each story beat and each decision made happens within the context of the central narrative conflict the players are trying to resolve (successfully).

***Detective: City of Angels* (Van Ryder Games, 2019):**

*Detective: City of Angels* is a crime-solving game set in 1940's Los Angeles. The game has nine standalone cases with different characters and crimes in each one. Players gather evidence, search locations, interview witnesses, intimidate suspects and pay bribes to be the first detective to solve the case.

*Detective: CoA* is the only case study in this paper that is a competitive game (although it does offer a cooperative mode). A competitive game is "a game with two or more players and a single winner" (Engelstein and Shalev 2). *Detective: CoA* seats two to five players. Most of the players play as detectives, working to solve the case first in order to win. However, one of those players assumes the role of the Chisel. The Chisel has a separate victory condition from the other players: the Chisel wins if none of the detectives solves the mystery in the allotted time.

The main objective for the detectives in *Detective: CoA* is figuring out the murderer, murder weapon and motive for each case. One of the most interesting "obstacles the player must overcome" (Salen and Zimmerman 387) to achieve this objective is the Chisel. The Chisel uses the Adaptive Response Card system (or ARC system) to "stall and misdirect the detectives by bluffing, manipulating, and outright lying to them" (2). While the Chisel wins if the detectives can't solve the case, "their most important job is guiding the story" (2). The Chisel's role is most important when the detectives are interrogating suspects. The Chisel will have a range of responses to give to the detective, which will either be a Lie/Misdirection or the Most Useful Response. The Chisel must follow the progress and decisions taken of the detectives to determine what response is most likely to confuse the detective or convince them to spend extra resources. Detectives can challenge the Chisel, but if they're wrong, the Chisel will gain leverage over them. This opposition or obstacle in the players' way is particularly interesting because it demands the input and decision-making of another player. All the possible ways the Chisel can work against the detectives is contained in the box, but it is up to them to determine how and when to use those tools. By creating obstacles and diversions, the Chisel guides the players through a story with conflict, uncertainty and goals. The story of the crime, which is predetermined, is revealed through this conflict with the Chisel. While the specific details will not change, the impression of the circumstances and characters involved will depend on what information the Chisel reveals and when. Central to this conflict, and competition between the detectives, is the uncertainty about how much truth exists in the scripted narrative of the game.

As players try to achieve narrative goals, they come up against obstacles. These obstacles, grounded within the context of the fictive world, allow for 'alterbiography' (Calleja 2009, 4) to emerge as players engage in meaningful, world-driven play.

## Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a core element of gameplay because it is a key feature that makes gameplay meaningful. If there is no uncertainty (the outcome is predetermined) “then any choices a player makes are meaningless, because they do not impact the way that game plays out” (Salen and Zimmerman 174). Beyond its ability to create meaningful play, uncertainty in a game is a core motivation for playing the game. If the outcomes were known before you started to play, what point would there be in playing?

The social psychologists, Timothy D. Wilson, David B. Centerbar, Deborah A. Kermer and Daniel T. Gilbert’s noted in their paper, *The Pleasures of Uncertainty: Prolonging Positive Moods in Ways People Do Not Anticipate* (2005), that “research has indicated that predictable events evoke less intense emotions than unpredictable events, which means that the reduction of uncertainty can entail the reduction of pleasure” (5). There is pleasure in uncertainty, taking risks, and pushing luck to see what comes next. In the relatively ‘safe’ environment of a narrative board game, this pleasure should be exploited and enhanced by the affordances of the system and the decisions it leaves to the players. Importantly though, “people opt for uncertainty when they know that it will eventually be reduced” (19). The system must create moments of uncertainty and allow the players to indulge in those moments. However, that uncertainty must be resolved. Players must learn the results of their decisions eventually.

Not only is uncertainty a necessity for meaningful play, but it is also a common feature of narrative structure as uncertainty creates dramatic tension. We turn the page and watch the next episode because we want to see what happens. As with conflict, uncertainty in the game should connect the game’s narrative to the game’s system. When the uncertainty is intrinsic to the narrative and the system, “as players make a choice and its uncertain outcomes slowly unfold, new choices present themselves, each emerging option cloaked in its own narrative uncertainty” (Salen and Zimmerman 389). The last component of Arnaudo’s Identikit is that “The design leaves a degree of uncertainty as to the contents and options that will be available in each game session. The game mimics the sense of progressive revelation that is typical of storytelling” (34). The scripted narrative is not presented all at once, but rather are disclosed and emerge gradually through play. This slow reveal creates uncertainty, as no revelation of the story or the gameplay is absolute.

In discussing the pleasures of interactive narrative, Marie-Laure Ryan (2009) uses Meir Sternberg’s work (1992) to talk about the ability of interactivity to produce temporal immersion which capitalises on the aesthetic of uncertainty. She writes that “curiosity, surprise, and suspense” are narrative effects of interactivity in playable media (55). Participation and discovery through exploration (whether of a narrative space or a system) is motivated by curiosity and rewarded with surprise (55). However, suspense is harder to create because “it requires long-range planning by the system and top-down management of the player’s expectations” (55). Suspense happens in games when players can see at least two different potential outcomes and want to know which outcome will materialise. “But when players can determine the path through their choice of action, the uncertainty is lost” (55). Narrative game systems must work towards creating the sensations of curiosity, surprise and suspense in order to create dramatic tension.

***Mice and Mystics* (Plaid Hat Games, 2012):**

In *Mice and Mystics,* players are members of the royal court who have been turned into mice. Using their different strengths in combat, and managing the luck of the dice, players must defeat their foes and make their way through the dangerous castle to warn the king about the evil Vanestra.

Most of the games covered in this research use a paragraph-esque system. This system, made popular by games like *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (1987, 2009) present multiple options to the player in a narrative format. Sometimes options are only available if the player has a particular skill or object. It is often these options that elicit the narrative through the player's actions. There is uncertainty about the outcome of the chosen option, creating suspense and surprise. Choices are sometimes made out of curiosity, by players eager to see what a certain option has in store. *Mice and Mystics* doesn't present players with the same opportunities to make uncertain choices. Included in the game is the storybook, "Sorrow and Remembrance". The book contains a prologue, eleven chapters, and epilogue. The chapters all are playable, with Objectives, Victory and Defeat conditions. The prologue and epilogue are not playable; instead, they serve just to begin and end the story. All of the chapters are played in order, with the same introduction and conclusion to the narrative of that chapter. There is no deviance from the main storyline. One could essentially read the whole story without playing the game.

Instead of in the overall plot, the uncertainty lies within each chapter. More specifically, the uncertainty lies within whether or not the players are going to successfully complete the chapter (determined by the victory and defeat conditions). This uncertainty is fuelled in several different ways. Firstly, the actual combat, the main action of the game, is rife with uncertainty. Each player's turn begins by rolling the action dice. The dice have different icons on their faces: swords and bows used to attack in combat, shields used to defend in combat, numbers that determine movement, and stars that determine results of special events and actions. So while players may make plans for how they want to deal with the many minions attacking them, their plans are dependent on the roll of the dice. However, unlike some other games[23], players will always receive a result that they can do something with - even if that is just to move. The one die (out of five) has cheese on a few of the faces, which when rolled adds another wedge of cheese to the cheese wheel. The cheese wheel is an in-game timer - when the entire wheel has cheese, a Surge of new minions enter the battle. Surges make it increasingly difficult for the players to meet their victory conditions. A Surge at the wrong time can totally thwart the players' plans, so one unlucky roll could mean total disaster.

There are optional side plots in some of the chapters, each with uncertain or unspecified results. However, all of these plots are about finding items and interacting with NPCs. Typically, succeeding in a side plot will give the players some sort of bonus (like an object or "story achievement") that will help the players win in a later chapter. These plots might change the likelihood of the group winning or losing, or may change how that specific encounter plays out. However, it will not change the overall narrative at all. In this way, *Mice and Mystics* does not fully meet the requirement of "Uncertainty as to the contents and options" (Arnaudo 34), because most of the revelations of the story are absolute. Uncertainty must lead to new narrative options in a narrative board game. In the case of *Mice and Mystics*, uncertainty is

[23] *Mansions of Madness Second Edition* and *This War of Mine* both have dice with blank faces.

mostly used to determine success or failure in combat which might demand a replay of the scenario. There is no narrative pressure exerting itself on the gameplay; the story will be the same no matter the results or how long it takes to get there.

***The 7th Continent* (Serious Poulp, 2017):**

*The 7th Continent* is a choose-your-own-adventure style exploration game. Set in the early 20th century, players are explorers who have returned to the newly-discovered seventh continent. It appears as if the last time you were there, some terrible curse befell you. Now you must try lift the curse – and survive while doing just that. Players will have to collect clues, hunt for food, craft items and explore the land to find the source of the curse.

In almost complete contrast with *Mice and Mystics, The 7th Continent* is a game almost wholly fueled and motivated by uncertainty. When players begin a new Curse (the start of a new campaign), the only thing they really know is who they are (each player is a different character with unique abilities) and which single terrain tile they are all on. This almost-complete uncertainty is vital for the nature of the game, given that the gameplay is centred on exploration. Why explore if you know everything?

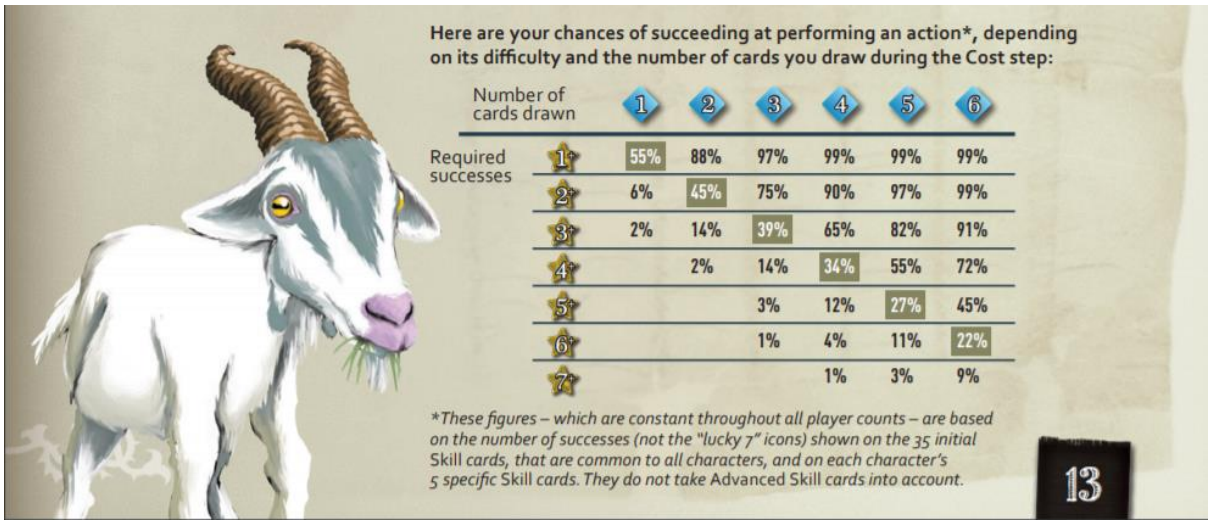
When players explore a new part of the island (add a new card to the tableau), they will be told which number to draw from the adventure deck. However, there is often more than one version of the same card number. If a player must draw card 303, and there are two different versions, they may not look at each card and decide which card to place. Instead, they must draw blind. If there are multiple terrain cards with the same number, the terrain will look the same, but the available actions or resources on the cards will be different. The cards aren't only terrain cards; they might be temporary or permanent events, items, states or bonuses. It is unlikely that the players will ever know what was behind the cards they did not draw (unless they cheat and look at the other cards). This uncertainty, fuelled by curiosity, is often simultaneously infuriating and satisfying. There is a pleasure in the restriction that can compel players to continue playing and exploring. Drawing a card from a range of unknown choices adds narrative pressure and uncertainty to the action, and mimics the inherent progression of storytelling.

In order to do the actions available on the different terrain cards, players will draw cards from the Action Deck. This deck is made up of three different types of cards: general Skill cards, character-specific Skill cards, and Curse cards. When a player takes an action, there is a corresponding cost and difficulty. The cost determines the minimum number of cards that must be drawn from the Action Deck, while the difficulty determines how many successes are required to complete that action. The stars on Skill cards determine successes. If enough stars appear on the drawn cards, the action is successful. However, when the player is drawing cards, they have no way of anticipating how many stars will be on the cards they draw. So players have the option of drawing extra Action cards in order to increase their chances of being successful. However, there is an important caveat: players must decide if they are going to draw more Action cards than required *before* they reveal the results of the cards already drawn. So extra cards may end up not being necessary or may end up not being enough to help the player anyway. The Action cards represent the stamina and energy of the group, and so the deck depletes with every action taken. The characters must risk extra exertion in order

to be successful when attempting important events but may fail. This risk and uncertainty tie in with the world of the game, mirroring the inherent risk and luck required to explore new land and survive.

When an Action is taken, and Action cards are drawn, whatever Skill cards are not put into the active player's hand goes into the discard pile. The game doesn't end once the Action deck is depleted. Rather, the Discard pile is shuffled and becomes the deck that the players draw from when they take an action. However, in this deck are the Curse cards that were in the Action deck. Once players are drawing from the Discard deck (using their 'reserve energy'), the players immediately lose the game if they draw a Curse card. While it has no immediate consequences, depleting the Action deck creates suspense and anxiety because the players know that their time in the world, and time to complete their objective, is running out. When it does, and the Discard pile is shuffled, the game could end at any moment. Any action taken, any card drawn, is now imbued with risk and heightened uncertainty.

The designers have created a tool for the players to help them mitigate risk when drawing cards, and decide how many cards they should draw. Players have the option to consult or ignore the Probability Table (page 13 in the rulebook, figure 2 below) as they wish, deciding the extent to wish they want their play experience to be mathematically thought out, or if they just want to go with their gut. Either way, the revelation of the narrative will be impacted by this choice.



Here are your chances of succeeding at performing an action*, depending on its difficulty and the number of cards you draw during the Cost step:

| Required successes \ Number of cards drawn | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1+ | 55% | 88% | 97% | 99% | 99% | 99% |
| 2+ | 6% | 45% | 75% | 90% | 97% | 99% |
| 3+ | 2% | 14% | 39% | 65% | 82% | 91% |
| 4+ | | 2% | 14% | 34% | 55% | 72% |
| 5+ | | | 3% | 12% | 27% | 45% |
| 6+ | | | 1% | 4% | 11% | 22% |
| 7+ | | | | 1% | 3% | 9% |

*These figures – which are constant throughout all player counts – are based on the number of successes (not the "lucky 7" icons) shown on the 35 initial Skill cards, that are common to all characters, and on each character's 5 specific Skill cards. They do not take Advanced Skill cards into account.

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Fig. 1. Probability chart of successes in *The 7th Continent*.

It is clear that not only does uncertainty play a large role in the construction of story events, but it is also a fundamental aspect of narrative board games. Both the gameplay and the story must have revelatory elements that spark curiosity, build suspense and deliver surprise. Narrative board games must have these moments of uncertainty and resolution embedded into the system, and allow them to emerge from the meaningful decision making from the players.

By mapping how Situation functions within narrative board games, it is clear that by integrating narrative goals, conflict and uncertainty into the story events, designers enrich the fictive world of their narrative board games. The games discussed in this section have all done that in different ways, to varying degrees of success. The thrilling uncertainty of drawing cards in *The 7th Continent,* the ways the Chisel tries to manipulate and obstruct the players in *Detective: COA,* and the necessity of passing story points to defeat Crepitus in *Stuffed Fables* are some tools that have been used to create story events that are meaningful, contextually-bound, world-building and help tell the story.

# Characters

In *Rules of Play,* Salen and Zimmerman reference J. Hillis Miller when they write that "a narrative is not merely a series of events, but a *personification* of events. Miller doesn't mean character in the usual sense of a fictional persona, but rather the process by which "character is created out of signs" (qtd in Salen and Zimmerman 380). Narratives, and their components, take place within and "occur via *systems of representation*" (380). To crudely distil semiotic theory: A sign represents something other than itself and is interpreted. Meaning emerges in the process of interpretation which is shaped by context (Salen and Zimmerman 42). This section will map some of the ways that characters have been signified and denoted in narrative board games based on practical tools and theoretical concepts.

Characters in games usually fall into one of two categories: player character (PC) or non-player character (NPC). The term NPC was first used to describe characters portrayed by the gamemaster in tabletop role-playing games. However, its usage has developed to include any character not controlled by a player but is rather controlled by an element of the game's (digital or analogue) system.

Salen and Zimmerman explain the fallacy of an immersive character, "that a player has an 'immersive' relationship with the character, that to play the character is to *become* the character" (453), which is not true. A player will never "identify completely with the character" or "lose him or herself totally within the game character" (453). While it is certainly possible for there to be a sense of identification or moments of deep immersion, the character will always be a tool or object through which the player can manipulate and interact with the fictional world. While there will never be completed identification, many games employ techniques that allow for ownership of and attachment to characters.

For characters in a narrative board game, the Identikit has a list of requirements:

- The players control individual characters rather than groups or abstract entities
- The players' characters are unique and differ from one another in some significant way
- An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters
- The players' characters have goals and objectives
- The players' characters undergo some form of change during gameplay
- The changing state of the characters is a major source of interest

In the earlier Identikit section (page 44), I explained why the following additions are necessary:

- The players control individual agents through which they take action, interact with NPCs, and reveal the embedded story.
- The NPCs are unique and differ from one another in some significant way
- An element of identification promotes the formation of an emotional bond between the players and the NPCs
- The NPCs have goals and objectives
- The NPCs undergo some form of change during gameplay
- The changing state of the NPCs is a major source of interest for the players

In this section, I will explore why all of the requirements listed above are necessary and valid for the characters in narrative board games.

What occurs during gameplay is not complete identification, but rather is a triple consciousness: “as a *character* in a simulated world, as a *player* in a game, and as a *person* in a larger social setting” (Salen and Zimmerman 454). The character design in narrative board games allow for these three experiences to be aligned and cohesively work together to create a playful narrative experience. This is because the design actively creates opportunities for the players to imbue the characters with their own meaning by taking actions in the fictive world that align with player’s expectations as a character, player and person. What follows is a map of how characters have been designed and integrated into some narrative board games.

***Legacy of Dragonholt* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2017):**

When you start playing a new game of *Legacy of Dragonholt* (2017), “the first step is to create your hero - an avatar that represents you in the story” (3). The player (“you”) is synonymous with their character (“avatar”). Players must actively create belief that the decisions they take from now until the end of the game are the decisions of their avatar in the fictive world.

The character creation process is a far lengthier and more involved process than the usual “select a character from those available” option often given at the start of narrative board games. This is because *Legacy of Dragonholt* has a lot in common with TTRPG systems. However, it is far more streamlined and simple. Part 1 of the Player’s Handbook for *Dungeons and Dragons 5E* (Crawford) which details character creation is 155 pages long. The character creation book in *Legacy of Dragonholt* is 20 pages.

Creating a character happens in four stages: Choose a Race, Choose a Class, Describe Yourself, and Choose Your Skills. This is a fairly standard character-creating procedure, and the character options are quite similar to most fantasy TTRPGs. Available races are humans, orcs, dwarves, elves, gnomes and catfolk. Available classes are apothecary, bard, brawler, knight, sage, thief and wildlander. The description for each character includes a physical description, personality and ideals, background and name of the character. Finally, players select skills for their character from the broad categories of combat (like archery or brawling), physical (like athletics or stealth), mental (like awareness or willpower), social (like deception or empathy) and utility skills (like craftsmanship or thievery). By choosing traits from a range of possibilities, and then tailoring the character with extra detail, the player actively participates in the process of ensuring that their “characters are unique” (Arnaudo 28). Furthermore, the tailoring process of the character will in some way reflect the player’s priorities and will help create “an element of identification that promotes the formation of an emotional bond between players and characters” (Arnaudo 28).

My character, Meldamiriel, is a Wildlander, 93-year-old female Dawnsmoor Elf. Some of her skills include arcana, archery and persuasion. Her eyes are as green as the forest she lives in, and her hair as red as the fire in her belly. Her travelling companions are Rum Tum, the Brawler Half-cat who grew up in alehouses and is the size of an orc, and Professor Buckley,

the Apothecary who is a 70-year-old Gnome with a long white beard and a penchant for daydreaming. These characters are all masks, actualised in our imagination, that we 'put on' when playing. By ascribing particular traits that belong to the fictive world we're playing in, this mask "creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that we are role-playing rather than acting as ourselves" (Murray 140).

My research is not about TTRPGs, and as discussed earlier, I would not classify TTRPGs as narrative board games. However, the use of character in *Legacy of Dragonholt* has undeniable similarities to character in TTRPGs. What differentiates them is that the characters in *Legacy of Dragonholt* are played within part of a system that doesn't use a gamemaster (GM). Each party is adventuring in the village of Dragonholt. A map acts as a board as players move from one location to the next, read the appropriate entries in the quest book, make decisions, determine results based on skills and items, and resolve the encounters.

It is rare for players to have as much control and creative license when choosing characters in a narrative board game as they do in *Legacy of Dragonholt*. However, that creativity is guided by the Character Creation Book. Players have the option to decide which region their Elf came from, but the options are prescribed and situated in the context of the fictive world (Terrinoth). Players can select whichever Class and Race they want, but each comes with a list of skills. When players select their skills, they must choose at least four of those skills, connecting the character with the mechanical demands of the game. Describing your character's background, which will determine the character's "goals and objectives" (Arnaudo 29), and then role-playing accordingly will impact the decisions you make and your party's success or failure.

Characters are represented in the world through verbal and written descriptions instead of visual descriptions. The artwork in the game shows generic images of what the people and places in Terrinoth look like, but the specifics are left to words. There is no actual image of my green-eyed, red-headed Elf (although I could ask a friend to draw one for me). However, the way I describe her conjures an image in my mind and the minds of the rest of my party. In the character sheets and the quest book, this is true for all the characters. By staging the characters in their imagination, and building the fictive world around them, players 'actively create belief' (Murray) and 'mentally fill in the gaps' of the world (Arnaudo).

> "A human woman in her middle years, with heavy-lidded brown eyes, light golden skin, and a long salt-and-pepper braid, sweeps through the room. Her plum-and-gold gown rustles, and she snaps orders at Ursula's harried daughter as the moves."
>
> (Dragonholt Village quest book, entry 4206. Countess Inn - Day Six)

The descriptions of the NPCs allow the players to imagine their characters interacting with full and developed characters in the world. They act as a counter-point to the characters the players have created. The character-creation process allows for players to customise, claim ownership and develop attachments to their characters. These characters, constructed by the players with a series of signs, will interact with NPCs already created by the game's designer. Each play-through of *Legacy of Dragonholt* will yield a different story and narrative structure depending on which signs the player chose to represent their character.

***Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game* (Portal Games, 2019):**

In *Detective,* each player selects "an investigator with a unique ability and skill set". There are five investigators to choose from, and because the game seats up to five players, any investigators that were not selected are turned over and become consultants available to the players.

The cards for each investigator all have the same information: a (stock) photo of the investigator, their name, former occupation (before joining Antares - the game's fictional agency) and some flavour text about the investigator. Each investigator also has a special ability and skill[24]. For example, Jack Coleman is a former cop. "Jack has been in this business his whole life. An experienced cop, who has seen it all." Jack's special ability gives the team two authority tokens instead of one when they take the Write a Report action. His Skill[25] is Research. Another investigator, Julia Jacobson, is a former investigative journalist who now works for Antares. "Julia had a series of very successful investigations for her newspaper. She works well under pressure and with limited resources". Julia's special ability allows her to spend an authority token to change a skill token from the pool into a wild. She has no Skill.

The investigators in *Detective* are barely characters. The *signs* by which they're created are broad and undetailed. The specific characteristics that differentiate them from the other investigators have little to do with a fictional persona and are just an ability they have that the other investigators don't. While variable player powers and special abilities can be used well to signify character, the special abilities in *Detective* are only vaguely connected to the investigator's backgrounds. The two authority tokens that Jack Coleman gives the other investigators when they take the Write a Report action has little to do with his background as a former cop. I can make the connection between the bureaucratic action of writing a report with his experience as a former cop, but that's where the connection and detail ends.

Julia has no Skill. Given that the available Skills are Research, Technology, Perception, Questioning and Wild (can be used as any skill token), and Julia was an investigative journalist, it seems like she would almost definitely have research, perception and questioning skills. These Skills are one of the signs that contribute to the players' understanding of these characters. It is strange then that investigator only has one (or in Julia's case no) Skill. Furthermore, this Skill is only going to be useful once in the game. Once the player uses that skill token to dig deeper (an action in the game that gives the players more information), the token is spent and will not refresh until the next time the game is played. But in reality, skills are not finite resources, spent and lost. Investigators, like all other professions, will learn more skills as they progress in their career. They will become better researchers and may learn new technologies. There is no sense of that growth in *Detective.* The characters don't develop. Because of this, characters are chosen purely for their (believed) ability to help the players solve the case.

[24] See 'Variable Player Powers' in Mechanisms section.

[25] In *Detective,* an investigator's Skill gives them one token of that skill type. Different cards will require specific Skill Tokens in order to "Dig Deeper" or "Follow a Lead". These Skill tokens can only be used once in the game.

In contrast, the NPCs are much more detailed. Sergeant Slater, an old cop with a penchant for mistresses and jogging, has died mysteriously. Horatio Dawson, a war-hero, might have been murdered for his golden watch. These and many more details are revealed in several ways. Evidence, case files, interviews with suspects and witnesses, and online searches all make the central NPCs rich with detail. Their goals and motivations, unique characteristics and the way they change over time emerge as the game is played. Because not all of the cards are seen, not all of the detail for each character will be known.

It is for the reasons listed above that I took issue with the way Arnaudo set the criteria for characters in his Identikit[26]. There is almost no characterisation of the PCs in *Detective.* However, the NPCs are rich with detail and develop significantly as the game's narrative progresses over the five cases. The PCs are the way the players discover these characters, what they did, and what happened to them. The narrative revelation, based on the past and present actions of the NPCs, comes through the relatively-neutral characters that the players adopt. The players control individual agents, the detectives, through which they take action, interact with NPCs, and reveal the embedded story.

***T.I.M.E Stories* (Space Cowboys, 2015):**

*T.I.M.E Stories* is a game of time-travel, exploration and mystery-solving. The first game in the cycle, *Asylum 1921,* is set in an American asylum in 1921. The players are T.I.M.E Agents, travelling to different moments and places in time to prevent different disasters from happening. In *Asylum,* the Agents use the bodies of patients in the asylum to stop the evil doctor from creating a temporal fault. They do this be exploring locations, collecting clues, solving puzzles – all before they run out of time.

I said at the beginning of this section that characters in games are usually PCs or NPCs. *T.I.M.E Stories* does something unique and interesting; characters are either the Player as Character, the Player's Character or a Non-Player Character.

Each player portrays themselves as a character in the fictive world of the game and also assumes the identity of someone in the specific scenario being played. So I, Kirsten du Preez, am a T.I.M.E Agent whose mind is projected into the body of Edith Jolibois when trying to solve the Asylum case. From the game's rulebook, "Your mind is projected into a receptacle which is already adapted to the era or world which you're about to visit" (2), "A receptacle is a character you possess who comes from the world in which your team has been sent on a mission. You take possession of its body and are thus in charge of its abilities (and sometimes of its flaws). For any new run, you can choose a different receptacle" (7).

This in-game double-characterization is incredibly effective because it reflects what is happening outside the game. A player cannot truly become another character, no matter how skilled a role-player they are. But in the player's imagination, they can pretend to be someone else. It is almost as if their mind is being projected into a receptacle that exists in the world the player is about to visit, encouraging the player to 'actively create belief' (Murray). The double-

[26] Page 44.

characterization also acknowledges the fact that role-playing can only go so far. It is impossible for a player to totally ignore their own agenda/goal/priority for the play session. Kirsten the T.I.M.E Agent (and player) will have very different motivations to Edith Jolibois.

The double-characterization of the PC's in *T.I.M.E Stories* is one of the best examples I found of ludonarrative congruence in a narrative board game. The ways in which players can fluidly connect and disassociate with the receptacle they are using is well-managed by the system. Kirsten finds it disgusting when Edith eats her enemies to regain life points, but doesn't disrupt the narrative congruence when Kirsten expresses how disgusted she is. The double-characterization also makes the metanarrative more apparent, as players are hyper-aware of their direct involvement in the narrative structure.

When players fail a mission (as they often do), they might feel it's best to change receptacles. Perhaps the group needs more combat ability, or more life points (health). Because the player is embodying a receptacle, it makes sense if the party is suddenly made up of different characters the next time they attempt a mission: different receptacles, but the same team.

Like many other narrative board games, the receptacles (or PCs) have stats and special abilities. In *Asylum 1921*, the receptacles have stats for their Deftness/Agility (Physical), Glibness (Social), and Combat Strength (Fighting). These stats are not only used to resolve whether or not the PCs succeed in encounters, but are also modified to make sense in the context of each scenario and the specific demands on the T.I.M.E Agents. For example, in *Lumen Fidei* (another case in the *T.I.M.E Stories* White Cycle), the Social stat is called Diplomacy. Given that the case is set in 15th Century Spain at a meeting of Christian militants, it is appropriate that the Social stat is specifically about "the ability to behave correctly, and make a good public impression".

A central NPC in *T.I.M.E Stories* is Bob. Bob, a high-ranking official at the T.I.M.E Agency, is the first NPC that the players are introduced to. He reiterates the importance of doing as few runs as possible before shouting to the players to get into their caissons quickly because he has "other fish to fry". Bob is also the person who greets the players when a run has ended (either in failure or success). When the players have failed, Bob is furious and mean. When the players have succeeded, Bob is wry and withholding.

In the first few games, Bob appears to be no more than an NPC guiding the players through the system. After his snarky comments, he tells the players what to do next. However, as the players move through scenarios, Bob's role becomes increasingly entangled in the overall mystery of the White Cycle. His absence from the "Madame" scenario is a crucial part of the overarching story. Bob anchors the narrative and is a point through which the players can evaluate their success in the game and progress through the narrative. Bob's growth and development as an increasingly important role happens 'offstage'. The subtle changes he makes in his behaviour will eventually connect him to the narrative in surprising, delightful and unexpected ways. The existence of Bob, and the intrinsic role he plays in the overall narrative, demonstrates the necessity for the inclusion of NPCs in the Identikit. His unique characteristics and development over time are a "major source of interest" (Arnaudo 32) for the players.

There are many NPCs in *Asylum 1921*, nevermind the entirely of *T.I.M.E Stories*. These characters range from cocaine-addicted cooks to plunger-seeking lunatics. Some of these characters are meant to distract and slow us down, while others are there to help us. Some characters are only on one card and won't be seen again, while others will keep popping up no matter where the players go. Some characters are only mentioned in newspapers, shown in photographs, or whispered about in hallways. No matter the character, they serve an important role in either distracting from or guiding the players towards resolving the mystery (or future mysteries). As players progress through the White Cycle, they learn that experience with the system doesn't necessarily equip them to distinguish better who should be ignored and who should be paid close attention to.

Each player has two markers; white cylindrical blocks with a coloured sticker on top. The one pawn is used to show that T.I.M.E Agent's position in the current scene and the other reminds all players which Agent is which colour. These markers are neutral, which is appropriate given that they signify players that could have any number of physical markers in the real world. However, all other characters in the game (receptacles and NPCs) are signified on cards with detailed artwork consistent throughout the game.

The design of the characters *T.I.M.E Stories is* really interesting. All of the PCs and NPCs are clearly designed to meet an objective or serve a purpose for the overall design of the game, even if that purpose isn't immediately apparent. The characters, created out of signs, don't ever feel entirely concrete or understood. This is because meaning and understanding come through the process of interpretation which is shaped by context - and the context of *T.I.M.E Stories* is never totally clear.

Allowing players to build their characters from scratch within the constraints of the fictive world in *Legacy of Dragonholt,* keeping the PCs neutral to emphasise the development of the NPCs in *Detective,* and the double-characterization in *T.I.M.E Stories* are all effective tools for integrating Character into the Story of a narrative board game. The characters must be designed in such a way that their goals and objectives align with the narrative goals embedded in the story events. The signs that are used to build a character must make sense in the fictive world, allow for the player to experience some sort of identification with the character, and must create opportunities for the player to actively create belief about their role in the alterbiography. Characters are a mask, ascribing the players an "alternate identity" (140). By mapping how Character design has been integrated into existing narrative board games, it is clear that detailed, context-bound character design allows a player of a narrative board game to actively create belief on three different levels at once: they are participants in a fictive world, their fellow players whom they can see are also participants in the same fictive world, and the material objects (board, tokens, miniatures, cards) in front of them are representations of the elements of the fictive world.

# Chapter 5: Discourse

> The creation of a game narrative is really the creation of a narrative **system**.
> (Salen and Zimmerman 404)

> It is the dynamic structures of games, their emergent complexity, their participatory mechanisms, their experiential rhythms and patterns, which are the key to understand how games construct narrative experiences. To understand game narratives, it is essential to analyze game structures and see how they ramify into different forms of narrative play.
> (Salen and Zimmerman 165)

*Discourse* is the way the *Story* is "constituted through patterns and repetition" (Miller 75), "the narrative act and its product" (Fludernik 2), "the presentation or narration of those events" (Culler 117) and the "particular manifestation, inflection and 'colouring' of a fabula[27]" (Bal 5). In a narrative board game, the discourse comes from the 'gameness' of the games, because it is the elements of the game's system that enable the story to be revealed as the game is played.

Part of this discourse is what Salen and Zimmerman refer to as "Narrative Descriptors" (399). All elements that are included in the game, the rulebook, artwork, board, and components "play a different storytelling role in explicating the game universe, creating a narrative context for events and actions" (399). It is through the narrative descriptors that players will be able to make sense of the world, characters and encounters. Integrated and discernable representations of narrative elements "help players understand the activity of the game within a larger narrative context" (401), which in turn creates meaningful play. Narrative board game comes with "a full lexicon of possible contents already recorded in the game components" (Arnaudo 19), and are "games that already contain every element that will form a final narrative" (14). However, these narrative descriptors and components do not stand on their own. They function within the system of the game.

Other storytelling mediums also contain "every element that will form a final narrative" (Arnaudo 19). A novel can be read, or a film can be watched a hundred times over, and the narrative will never change (even if the reader's subjective interpretation does). The same cannot be said for a narrative board game. Inherently, games are systems that require input from the players. As such, the narrative can *only* emerge through these manipulations of the game's components. Despite players having access to the same components, the exact structure of that specific narrative is unlikely to be repeated because players will make different decisions and random elements will generate different outcomes. The complex systems that make up a game, underpinned by the game's mechanisms, means that "player choice leads to unpredictable narrative experience" (Salen and Zimmerman 383).

The sections in this chapter are: Rulebooks, Game Bits/Components, Digital Integration, Space and Mechanisms. I have used these sections to map the main Discursive tools

[27] A fabula is "a series of chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (Bal 5).

available to integrate Story into gameplay. Contained in each section is a discussion of the tool and an exploration of how designers have employed the possibilities of that category in the design of a variety of narrative board games.

## Rulebooks

> The best story-driven board games come to life through smooth and organic systems of rules that do not require deviations from the system to express a pleasurable narrative. When this occurs, the mechanisms of the game start feeling like second nature and easily fade into a distant background in the player's mind, making it possible to establish a deep connection with the theme and characters in the game.
>
> (Arnaudo 41)

Before I begin, I want to clarify that while the rules of the game are obviously important (and closely linked to a game's mechanisms), I am focused here on how the rules are framed and communicated within the fictive world of the game, not on what the actual rules are. A narrative board game's rules are often communicated through rulebooks, but there is increasing use of online how-to-play videos and app-based tutorials that accompany traditional rulebooks. The process of framing the rules within the fictive world happens in several different ways, like by naming a mechanism according to a feature of the fictive world, or by incorporating flavour text alongside the explanation of key concepts.

Rulebooks typically have several common features. They often begin with a blurb detailing the fictive world, establishing who the players' characters are, and what type of game experience they can expect. This is followed by a components list (everything in the box), a description of how to set up the game, and then the description of how the gameplay functions. Frequently asked questions or icon glossaries typically are at the end of a set of rules. In narrative games, these conventions should ideally be used to set the tone and provide context for the fictive world the players are about to enter.

The rulebook is often one of the first meaningful interactions with a board game. It is more than just the blurb of a book or trailer for a film. Reading the rules is a conscious, active act. Players read them to learn the game by themselves, or out loud with others[28]. They touch the components, moving pieces around to get a handle on how the system works. They will navigate the text, going back to remind themselves of the victory condition or skip ahead to see if there is a FAQ section. Sometimes they will repeat a section they're not quite sure they understand. Other times they'll skim the rules and trust that when they start playing, it'll all make sense.

In Juul's *Half-Real*, he writes about fictional worlds as derived from the concept of possible worlds in analytical philosophy (122). Fictional worlds are described in one way, but that description must be remembered as distinct from the world "as it is actually imagined" (122). The players know (because the *T.I.M.E Stories* rulebook tells us) that players are T.I.M.E Agents whose minds are transferred into receptacles, and that for this first mission, their receptacles are in an Asylum in 1921. While the details of the surrounding world are not meticulously detailed for the players, they can presume that there are people, other places and other events happening in the world. "The work not only cues the reader to imagine the

[28] If possible, try to avoid reading out a whole rulebook when learning a new game with other people. It's much harder for everyone to learn by listening to rules.

states of affairs described by the [rulebook], but also to make inferences about the larger world of [*Asylum 1921*] based on the text (122). This is necessary because by their very nature, "all fictional worlds are incomplete" (122). It is impossible to include every single detail of a world, and so it is the players' job to 'mentally fill in the gaps' (Arnaudo), by making inferences, and filling in the detail. Because of this, "different readers and game players will imagine a fictional world differently" (Juul 122). This is a shared phenomenon among all narrative forms. However, rulebooks can help mitigate a variety of imaginings by established the genre, conventions and rules of the fictional world, so that the players might reasonably fill in the blanks. A number of the case studies do this in different and interesting ways.

***Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game* (Portal Games, 2019)**

The introduction for the *Detective* rulebook provides a brief introduction to the fictive world of the game, under the guise of a partial transcript of a speech to new Antares recruits. The players learn that they now work for Antares, the "most high-tech investigation agency in the world!" Beyond that, players know very little before diving into the 16-page rulebook.

There is no additional flavour text in the rest of the rulebook telling the players about the investigators, the world of the game (set in Richmond, Virginia) or Antares. No flavour text expands or justifies the rules of the game. For example, if the investigators work overtime (advancing the time track), they take one Stress token for each hour they work beyond 4 pm. However, no flavour text tells the players about the effects Stress has on the investigators, their ability to work, or manage their mental health. Only, "if you collect Stress tokens greater than your limit, your investigation ends immediately". Given the highly thematic nature of the game, it feels like a potentially missed opportunity for the rules to be outlined so clinically. At the same time, some players may prefer to fill in those details themselves, and rather just get started with the game.

What is particularly interesting about *Detective's* rulebook is the meta-information that's provided. It is not just the rules for the game, but also a collection of "#playtestingtips" and "designer notes". These are comments and suggestions based on what the designers learnt about the play experience from watching playtests. They suggest players take on the roles of the Notetaker, Narrator and Fact Checker, which will guide how the players participate in the game (beyond their individual investigators' abilities). They also suggest players take a real break after each in-game day to help keep their team focused. These tips could have been written as advice from the Head of Antares or the team's captain, but rather the designers chose to write directly from designer to player instead of authority figure to investigator. There are two key moments where the rules break the fourth wall: the playtesting tips and designer notes, and when the rules say the game "breaks the fourth wall by allowing the players to use the Internet". These examples of meta-commentary and advice are potentially a lost opportunity to further establish the world and relationships of the game's narrative. However, the players know that they're playing a game. By choosing to bring awareness to the game's structure and how it is a designed experience, the designers help create the border and establish the 'visit' of the game (Murray).

***Holding On: The Troubled Life of Billy Kerr* (Hub Games, 2018):**

In *Holding On,* players work as nursing staff providing palliative care to Billy Kerr, their patient. He had a heart attack on a flight from Sydney to London. The players know his name, age and medical condition. The players must provide medical care and emotional support by gaining Billy's trust and piecing his stories together. Players do this by allocating resources and searching memory cards for clues.

The structure of the rulebook for *Holding On* is much the same as the other rulebooks covered here: a short narrative introduction, components and setup, and an overview of the gameplay. The overview covers parts of the game like The Care Team and Billy's Condition. These core aspects of the gameplay are only framed within the mechanics, with minimal mention of the overall narrative.

For example, Billy's Condition: "In *Holding On*, Billy's condition will change throughout the game. All Patient Cards and some Event cards feature these symbols. How they impact Billy will be based upon which of these icons, and how many, appear on the card" (5). There are three possible conditions: Condition Deteriorates (-1), Condition Stable (No Change) and Condition Improves (+1). Those three conditions make sense in the context of the game, and it is reasonable that Billy's condition (a numerical figure) will be impacted by the Patient and Event cards given the inherent systemic nature of games. However, because *Holding On* is a narrative game, I find these descriptions (-1, No Change, +1) underwhelming because they are purely mechanical. There is no description of what kind of events might make Billy's condition deteriorate or improve, or how the change in his condition impacts him or the nurses. The rulebook only says that the players must move the pawn up or down one space, and continue. That being said, the icons and art on the Patient and Event cards are detailed enough to give the players an idea of what's happening to Billy. They actively create belief and mentally fill in the gaps when they move the pawn down three turns in a row.

***Arkham Horror Third Edition* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2019):**

The rulebook for *Arkham Horror* is unusual because there are several of them. There is the Learn to Play which includes the setup and overview of the rules of the game, the Rules Reference which provides detailed and clarificatory rules in a glossary format, and the Deluxe Rulebook (which is an added purchase). The Deluxe Rulebook is a hardcover book that contains the Learn to Play, the Rules Reference and 42 pages of artwork, backstory and history of the people and places of Arkham.

Similar to the *Detective* rulebook, *Arkham Horror's* rules begin with an introduction. However, this text is much more specific and sets the tone for the gameplay.

> The year is 1926, and it is the height of the Roaring Twenties. Flappers dance till dawn in smoke-filled speakeasies, drinking alcohol supplied by rum runners and the mob. It's a celebration to end all celebrations in the aftermath of the War to End All Wars.
>
> Yet a dark shadow grows in the city of Arkham. Alien entities known as Ancient Ones lurk in the emptiness beyond space and time, writhing at the thresholds between

> worlds. Occult rituals must be stopped and alien creatures destroyed before the Ancient Ones make our world their ruined dominion.
>
> Only a handful of investigators stand against the Arkham Horror. Will they prevail?

While the link between narrative and gameplay isn't made explicit here, the players know that the game is about fighting occultists and alien creatures in order to prevent some sort of catastrophe.

The wide margins of the rulebook have been used well, giving context for rules, visual aids, strategy tips or additional narrative information to help build the fictive world. On page 23, players learn about "Magic in the Mythos". This sidebar says that because the magic in Arkham Horror is such an unknown, frightening force when magic is used, it can either obey you or turn against you. As such, when players cast spells, they suffer Horror. This extra information gives the players some more detail about how the fantasy elements of the narrative operate while linking those to the mechanics of the game.

The last 42 pages of the deluxe rulebook are a treat for any fan of H.P. Lovecraft[29]'s work (on which *Arkham Horror* is based) or any of the Arkham Mythos games. The artwork is beautiful and grounds players' imagination of the world in small, meaningful references: the interior of Schoffner's General Store, a death certificate issued at St. Mary's Hospital. Reading the history of Ma's Boarding House, we learn that Ma and Velma (owner of Velma's Diner) have an old rivalry, which comes to fruition every Founders Day Weekend with Velma's cherry pie taking on Ma's apple pie. Just make sure that if you want to have any of Ma's pie ever again, don't ask her about the boarded-up passageway in the basement. The players' knowledge of the world expands, and their ability to fill in the gaps improves.

This extra detail is not only rewarding, but it also forms part of the grander narrative of *Arkham Horror Third Edition* and builds its fictional world. Players who haven't purchased or read the extra content will undoubtedly be able to follow the narrative while playing any of the four scenarios that come in the box. However, those who have will understand and appreciate the scenes described on the Encounter or Headline cards far more.

***T.I.M.E Stories* (Space Cowboys, 2015):**

The first page of the rulebook for *T.I.M.E Stories* opens with "Temporal Agent: A High-Risk Career, Extraordinary Lives". The first page is a sort of advert for temporal agents, with the lines "The T.I.M.E Agency Needs You!", "Thankfully, We're Keeping Watch" and "Failure is Not an Option" highlighted. The fictive world is being established, and the players are learning their place in it. The players learn that T.I.M.E stands for Tachyon Insertion in Major Events, and the Agency is responsible for preventing catastrophic changes to timelines by sending Agents into the past, future or alternate realities.

[29] While I consume of a fair portion of games inspired by his work, I do so with caution. Anyone consuming his work should be wary of his well-publicized anti-Semetic and racist views, many of which are present in his writing.

The Agents' bodies remain behind in their caissons, while their minds are projected onto receptacles who live in the time and place the agents are visiting. This narrative element justifies why each Agent has an entirely different character from one scenario to the next. There is a consistent integration in the rulebook between the fictive world and the mechanics:

In *T.I.M.E Stories* players can repeat the scenario 3-4 times (scenario-depending) before they 'fail' the mission.

> If you do not manage to fulfil the mission given to you by the T.I.M.E Agency in the expected time, you will be returned to our time. You will then be able to resume the mission by starting from scratch.

Although it is near-impossible to complete a scenario on the first attempt, there is an urgency to succeed because each failed attempt means fewer rewards and bonuses to take as you move to the next scenario. *"Don't abuse this ability because the cost of each insertion to the Agency and to the taxpayers isn't negligible!"* The gameplay requires multiple plays of each scenario, but too many plays would become dull. The rules highlight the importance of the players completing each scenario in as short as time possible in a way that builds on the fictive world already being established.

Once the narrative justification for the mechanics of the game has been introduced, "*The training manual awaits you…"*

In *T.I.M.E Stories'* rulebook, it establishes itself as a narrative board game; the game is neither a roleplaying game or board game, but rather both. The designers wanted the story to be told and experienced, on the board and around the table. However, they also made a board game, with "its actions and movements subject to a set of rules that allow reflection and optimisation". Of all the rulebooks for all the games I have covered in this paper, *T.I.M.E Stories'* rulebook is the clearest in drawing the links between the fictive world and the game mechanics.

It is not the job of the designer, developer or rules editor to make the fictional world complete by way of the rulebook (or accompanying aids). Instead, they should use the rulebook to provoke the imagination of the players so that they might *appropriately* fill in the blanks of the fictional world through prompts contained in the game, players' understanding of the real world, and their understanding of the genre's conventions. Another way to expand the detail of a fictional world and encourage players to 'mentally fill in the gaps' (Arnaudo) is through the implementation of context-bound components.

## Game Bits/Components

In his dissertation *Role Playing Materials* (2016), Rafael Bienia writes that "material actors collaborate with narrative and ludic actors to make role playing work" (134). While he is writing about TTRPGs, I would suggest that the same is true for narrative board games. In a TTRPG, the material actors are items like the "light, table, battle map, character sheet, pencil and GM screen" (135). In a narrative board, the material actors are items like miniatures, tokens, dice and cards.

In this section, I will explore how the design and implementation of a range of game bits have been used to heighten narrative tension, increase character identification and enhance the sense of world and environment. A game's components are more than ways to track progress through the game system; they are a tactile bridge between the player's world and the fictive world.

***Holding On: The Troubled Life of Billy Kerr* (Hub Games, 2018):**

In *Holding On,* players manage a pool of nurses and assistant providing palliative care to a man named Billy Kerr. When the nurses and assistants have to cover extra shifts in order to look after Billy properly, they accumulate 'Stress'. In the game, 'Stress' is represented by a red circular token with a hole in the middle. When a nurse or assistant "gains stress", a Stress token is placed on the corresponding pawn.

When a nurse or assistant reaches their maximum stress, they become 'Overstressed'. At the end of that day (in the game) they must go 'On Leave' for one day. When they return, they will be stress-free.

While this process is, of course, an over-simplification of the demands and processes of caring for terminally ill patients, *Holding On* makes clear the narrative imperative (and also real-world imperative I believe) for medical staff to be looked after in order for them to properly look after their patients.

There is no text in the game that describes the effect this stress has on the nurses, or what precisely happened to cause it. By placing the Stress tokens on the pawn's "shoulders", which become increasingly stress-laden as the game progresses, the players can see a physical representation of the toll that the care they're providing takes. This visual cue triggers the active creation of belief, as the player feels sympathy and concern for the nurse, and uses them more cautiously.

***Pandemic Legacy* (Z-Man Games, 2015):**

*Pandemic Legacy* is a Legacy game about treating and curing diseases around the world. The game takes place over the course of a year, with each month (in-game, not in reality) offering a new scenario for the players to beat. Players will travel around the world to treat hotspots

while researching cures. Each month has different objectives the players need to achieve. Players will use the City Cards to move, treat and research, so managing their resources (City cards) is imperative for success.

As a Legacy game, it is more than just a campaign game: it is “a multisession game in which permanent and irreversible changes to the game state carry over from session to session” (Engelstein and Shalev 25). Changes to the game’s components signify many of these changes in the game state. These changes usually happen by placing stickers, or by opening dossiers and packages, which sometimes adds new components to the game. No matter the change, they only happen when instructed by the game.

There are four different diseases in *Pandemic Legacy.* They are signified by four colours: yellow, red, blue and black. However, there is a space on the board (Disease Tracking Area) for each disease to be named by the group. As the game progresses, outbreaks and advances will occur depending on how well the team has managed the different diseases. Some diseases will become increasingly easier to treat and cure, while one will become impossible to treat or cure (this disease is called C0dA). This information is contained on the board with stickers placed in the Disease Tracking Area.

The diseases (the ‘antagonist’) and the characters (the ‘protagonist’) are all named by the players. Unlike most other narrative games, players do not keep the same character from game to game. Each character has special abilities, and over the course of the game will develop relationships with other characters that give them even more abilities. In the first game, players will have five potential characters to choose from. As they progress through the game, that number will more than double. Each new character is named by the group when that character is ‘unlocked’. Before a group plays their first game, they have the opportunity to name four diseases and five characters. This is entirely optional, but groups can be as silly or as serious as they would like. These names are written on the cards and the board, marking the components. This process of naming and marking helps develop a sense of ownership over the fictive world and its elements. This deepens the players’ investment and heightens the experience. While the Identikit is referencing characters, the process of naming creates “an element of identification that promotes the formation of an emotional bond” (Arnaudo 28). This act of co-creation allows for identification between the player and the world, which all the players share.

The players also make changes to the board. When a city Outbreaks for the first time, it becomes unstable (Panic Level 1). It then becomes a rioting city, then collapsing and finally a fallen city. Each of these states makes it increasingly harder to move in or out of those cities. Stickers are placed next to the city to indicate what Panic Level the city is in. As the game progresses from month to month, cities across the world become increasingly panicked. However, as time progresses, your team continues to build infrastructure that will help you eradicate the diseases. Research stations, military bases and roadblocks are built, and stickers are placed. If a city reaches Panic Level 2 (rioting), research stations in that city are destroyed, and no new ones can be built from then on. The board will change over the course of the entire Legacy experience. Cities will fall, and research and military stations will be built. The map is marked with the destruction and chaos from the previous months’ games. Cities

become imbued with the memory of what happened there in previous games, and tensions rise when disease cubes are added to cities that have already had outbreaks.

New components are also introduced as the game progresses. Temporary roadblocks and quarantines become vital to your team trying to contain outbreaks, and tokens placed on the board signify these actions. Temporary military bases and research stations can also be built, and pieces signify these structures. Each disease is represented on the board by small cubes of the corresponding colour. However, there is a moment where C0dA (the disease that is impossible to treat or cure) mutates and becomes much worse. When this happens, players are instructed to open one of the packages which contains a packet of small figures. This moment is filled with tension and uncertainty as the suspense builds. The figures in the package are pale lime green and modelled to look similar to zombies. Whenever the disease cubes are placed on the board, there is increased anxiety for the players. A board full of accumulated cubes can be quite terrifying. Given that the C0dA figures are almost double the height of the regular disease cubes, and their pose is quite threatening, they have a marked effect on the tension of the gameplay whenever they are placed on the board.

As players progress from one month to the next, their map shows increasing signs of chaos and destruction, while the diseases become increasingly terrifying and difficult to treat. The components that are stuck down, opened or destroyed all heighten and exemplify this growing chaos. The content of *Pandemic: Legacy* "is depicted in the components consistently and in some level of detail" (Arnaudo 21). They form part of the representational content of the fictive world by creating the illusion of a tightly woven fabric. New developments in the world mean new components are introduced. Packages are opened when significant events happen. There is a clear relationship between the narrative progression and employment of components.

***Mansions of Madness Second Edition* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2016):**

*Mansions of Madness* is a cooperative game of horror and mystery, set in the Lovecraft universe. The game is driven by an app that provides the results of attacks on and by the monsters, puzzles, dialogue choices with witnesses, and the results of search and explore actions. The game comes with a series of standalone scenarios (and more can be purchased with expansions and in the app). Each scenario is set in a different location, has different NPCs and is about a different kind of case. Players take on the role of investigators, trying to protect Arkham from human and other-worldly horrors.

*Mansions of Madness* is a component-heavy game. In the base game, there are 8 character miniatures, 32 action tokens, 22 person tokens, 20 environment tokens, 18 fire/darkness tokens, 26 clue tokens, 24 monster tokens and 24 monster miniatures. Each character has with a character card, with the character's stats, art and backstory. Each character also has a matching miniature, approximately 25mm high, modelled to match the art on the character card. These miniatures are used on the map tiles, signalling where on the map that character is. The other miniatures, the monsters, are placed on stands. Inside each stand is the corresponding token which indicates the monster's Awareness, Horror, Brawn and Special Abilities. The stands have holes which allow the information on the token to be visible, but the miniature remains the physical representation of the monster in the space. These miniatures

contribute to the tension in the game, clearly indicating how close the figures are to each other. When a monster moves, their intimidating figure (in pose and size) gets closer to the character and alerts the player that danger is approaching.

The map tiles are wonderfully detailed and were designed to be used in multiple scenarios. Sometimes doors become walls, and walls become secret passages from one scenario to the next. The 20 environment tokens include walls, doors, secret passages and barricades. These tokens match the art in the map tiles and are double-sided to give greater visual variety and choice when setting up the board. They also provide the players with new actions to take - doors can be passed through, secret passages can (sometimes) be entered, and barricades can be placed in front of doors to delay a monster. These actions, and whether or not they're taken, will affect the outcome of the game (and narrative).

The 32 action tokens are made up of Search/Interact and Explore/Sight tokens. Whenever that action is available, a corresponding token is placed on the board in the space where that action can be taken. At the beginning of a game, there are typically many of these tokens on the board. As the game progresses, these actions will be taken, and the tokens are removed from the board. The decreasing actions available give the sense that the players have fewer options as things get increasingly tense.

All of the components in *Mansions of Madness* are objects that "become real through use" (Murray 138). When the player uses the components, and they "work as they are supposed to" (Murray 138), immersion and engagement heighten. The players learn that the barricade token will slow monsters down, and the Explore token will explore the space and enlarge the map. Of course, these tokens are somewhat abstracted. However, because engagements with the objects are successful and act as anticipated, the players experience a feedback loop of increasing engagement which in turn creates more belief.

The components form part of the "lexicon of recorded content" (Arnaudo 19) present in a narrative board game. In narrative board game praxis, components are tools used to set the tone, heighten the experience, exemplify the possibilities within the story, and act as a record of what has happened. Integrating digital components is another tool at the designer's disposal to heighten the narrative experience.

# Digital Integration

In the last decade, board games have increasingly been integrated with some sort of digital component. This may be because digital components have affordances that the analogue medium does not. Digital integration in narrative board games can be used as a tool to heighten experiences, limit ludonarrative dissonance, and improve the pacing of the story. These integrations come in a range of forms: timers, assistants, GMs, companion apps and hybrids.

In this section, I will explain how the integration of digital elements into narrative board games can serve the important task of expanding the fictive world and heightening the impact of story events to varying degrees of success.

***Mansions of Madness Second Edition* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2016):**

While there were several significant changes to the design of the Second Edition compared to the First, the most significant change was the introduction of the Mansions of Madness companion app. The game is app-driven, making it impossible to play the game as it should be without the app.

When you open the app, you see the same mansion on the cover of the game's box and hear a spooky soundtrack (rolling thunder, cawing crows and quiet violin music). When you select 'New Game', you are taken to the list of scenarios. Some of these scenarios are built-in, some are unlocked when you purchase physical expansions, and some are DLCs (downloadable content) for approximately $4-5. Each scenario shows the difficulty level, approximate duration, an appropriate image and a description of the scenario. Because DLCs are added regularly, the integration of the app means there are more playable scenarios than there would have been, increasing the story events and expanding the fictive world.

Once you have selected the scenario, you select which Investigators (characters the players have chosen) will be used in the scenario. Once you do, the app tells you which Starting Items the Investigators receive. These items will depend on how many investigators are in the scenario and who they are, and which scenario it is.

While the scenario loads, the screen shows a quote from H.P Lovecraft.

*It is absolutely necessary for the peace and safety of mankind that some of earth's dark, dead corners and unplumbed depths be let alone.*

This loading screen marks the beginning of the 'visit' (Murray) and sets the tone of the story. When you 'Begin Scenario', a man with a deep voice quietly, dramatically narrates the beginning of the story while corresponding text and artwork show on the screen. Sound effects of howling wind and screeching doors play in the background.

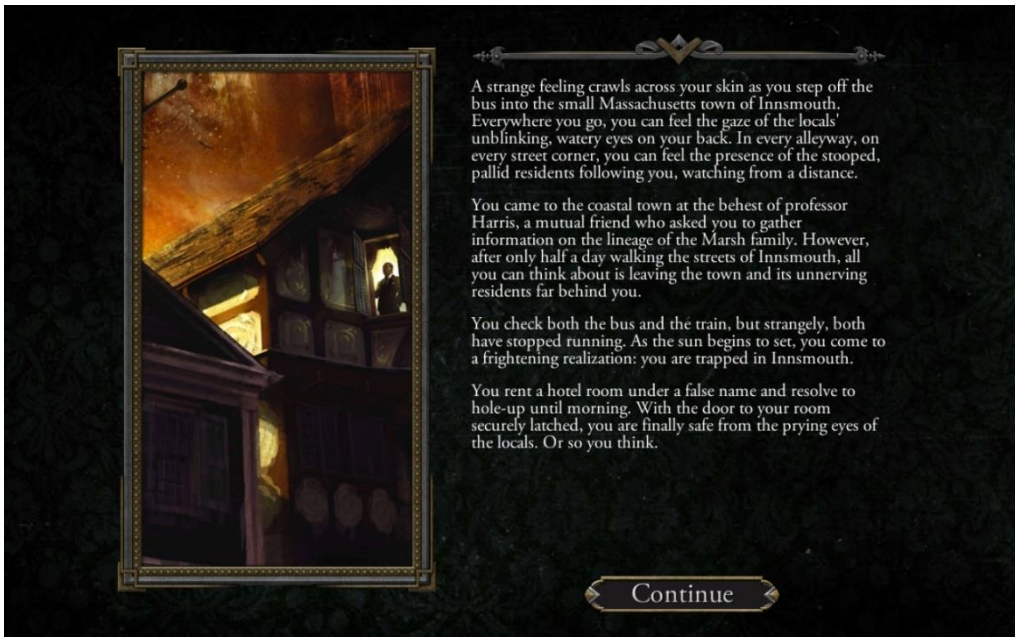


Fig. 2. Opening screen for the “Escape from Innsmouth” scenario in *Mansions of Madness Second Edition.*

Fig. 3. New spaces in the world are set up as play progresses.

The text and sound effects at the beginning of each session not only helps set the mood of the story but gives important contextual information. Once you begin the scenario, the app guides you through setting up the ‘board’ (location tiles positioned next to each other). This text is often instruction intermingled with world-building.

The gameplay is divided into two phases: the Investigator Phase (where the players have their turns) and the Mythos Phase (where the monsters attack). The app manages both of these phases. In the Investigator Phase, players can interact (on the app) with the Search/Interact, Explore/Observe, and Person tokens to gather information, tools and weapons and navigate the space. In the Mythos Phase, players must deal with effects from supernatural events and attacks from monsters. In the first edition of the game (1 vs the rest), one player had the role of managing the monsters. They would calculate the damage done to the players and the monsters based on dice rolls, weapons and modifying abilities. Now that is all calculated automatically in the app. This not only improves the pacing of the story, it also allows all players to be Investigators in the story instead of one playing left to do the 'admin' of the game. As such, all players around the table are characters in the story.

As players move through the space, meet NPCs, fight monsters, solve puzzles and resolve encounters, they progress through the narrative. The app manages all of this. Its capacity to remember and calculate means the players can focus on the narrative and mystery of the scenario instead of being bogged down in maintenance and admin. The app also acts as a "mask". Part of the way the visit to *Mansions of Madness* is constructed is through the mask of the app, which has a participative role of its own (even though it requires input from the players), and so "creates the boundary of the immersive reality and signals that we are…playing" (Murray 140).

***The 7th Continent* (Serious Poulp, 2017):**

In late 2017, Serious Poulp ran a second printing of *The 7th Continent* through Kickstarter. One of the last stretch goals (which was unlocked at $6 200 000[30]) was five adventure cards that could be explored with an "Augmented Reality"[31] app. Once the project was complete, *The 7th Continent* app was released. The app has two features: Music and The All Seeing Eye.

When you select "Music" and choose which area of the map you're in (indicated on the map by roman numerals), the app plays a soundtrack made of music and diegetic sound effects appropriate for the location. While the soundtrack is not part of the story, it affects how the story is presented and received. For some players, an appropriate soundtrack heightens the mood/immersion of the play experience. The soundtrack aids players in "the active creation of belief", as they hear sounds that come from the fictive world they're playing in.

When you select "The All Seeing Eye" (and input a password proving you've found the relevant adventure card that uses the AR), and hover over some of the terrain cards, AR bubbles, leaves and swirling colours display. These are used as clues in the game.

The AR received mixed reviews from hundreds of backers when the stretch goal was announced, and from many players since the game was released. The game is set in the

[30] The game raised just over $7 000 000, making it the third highest funded tabletop game on Kickstarter of all time (as of 2 October 2019).
[31] "An enhanced version of reality created by the use of technology to overlay digital information on an image of something being viewed through a device (such as a smartphone camera" (Merriam Webster)

early 20th century and is about a group of explorers. The analogue medium of the game suits the theme and story well. In an (admittedly pedantic) way, the AR feels disjointed from the time and place the narrative is situated in. On the other hand, there are magical elements in the game's narrative and AR is an efficient and (sometimes) successful tool for magical or enchanted effect. However, invisible ink, stickers, coloured lenses, optical illusions and detailed artwork are some analogue ways to evoke the sensation of the supernatural.

By integrating digital elements into narrative board games, designers can streamline play, heighten tension, evoke emotion, and push the boundaries of the analogue medium. It is important though that these integrations serve the fictive world that the rest of the game is working hard to establish and maintain. Digital components can be used as a tool to arrange and present the story. However, their inclusion in narrative board games is reasonably limited, their presence on the map is relatively small, and much more experimentation and analysis of their impact are required. Far more prevalent to the mapping of narrative board game praxis as it exists currently is the issue of space.

## Space

In Henry Jenkins' essay *Game Design as Narrative Architecture* (2010), he examines "games less as stories than as spaces ripe with narrative possibility" (119). Jenkins is writing about digital games, but I believe his work has applicability to board games as well. The game's space is the stage on which the players' choices and actions reveal the narrative. A game's space is crucial when designing narrative-based gameplay because of the four ways in which it can create the conditions for an immersive narrative experience:

1. Evocative spaces: Game spaces can be designed to evoke a pre-existing story or genre in the mind of the player. These spaces give the player a concrete shape to the memories or imaginings of the (already known) story world, "creating an immersive environment the player can wander through and interact with" (124). Board games often use maps rich with detailed artwork to evoke the sense of space. Different locations represent available actions or encounter points which reveal narrative when interacted with.

2. Enacting stories: Game spaces can function as a staging ground where narrative events are enacted. This often occurs through the act of exploration. Moving from one location to the next brings about narrative events that the player must resolve (125). Many board games use movement from one location to the next to trigger events or make new possibilities available to players.

3. Embedded narratives: Game spaces may be embedded with narrative elements, creating a "narratively-impregnated mise en scène" (126). The arrangement of the space, the objects that fill it, and the characters that move through it are all embedded elements of the narrative. In board games, the spaces have permanent and temporary detail that "impregnates" the world with narrative detail. Some details will be added during setup, while others are added (either through player choice or system result) as play progresses.

4. Emergent narratives: The process of players altering or creating game spaces allows for emergent narrative to occur. Furthermore, the rules of the space will determine what possible choices the player can make, which in turn allows for emergent narrative (128). While not many board games allow for players to create game spaces, the rules of the existing spaces determine the ludic and narrative possibilities that players can provoke or elicit through their actions and decisions.

The space and the items[32] inhabiting it are the foundation of the narrative experience. Jenkins and Squire wrote earlier that "games create 'possibility spaces', spaces that provide compelling problems within an overarching narrative, afford creative opportunities for dealing with these problems and then respond to player choices with meaningful consequences." (6). The case studies included here all make use of different types of 'possibility spaces'.

[32] I explored this further in the "Game Bits" section.

***Mansions of Madness Second Edition* (Fantasy Flight Games, 2016):**

In *Mansions of Madness Second Edition,* the narrative space exists on the table and in the companion app. The physical space is duplicated digitally, and the narrative possibilities are contained in both. As players use the Observe action, Explore and Move actions, they traverse the space while often expanding it as they do. As the Investigators move, tiles for bathrooms, hallways, gardens and docks are laid out. The app instructs the players which tiles to place and where.

The artwork is stunning, with meticulous detail on each tile. The finish of the wooden floors, the half-full glass of water next to the bed, the spade in the corner and the sink full of dirty dishes all evoke mood, tension, and a sense of the people who usually occupy that space within the fictive world. These are 'evocative spaces' (Jenkins) that gives the players a concrete shape to ground their 'actively created belief' (Murray). When the game begins, players are typically instructed to place between one and three tiles. As the game progresses and the Investigators explore the space, the players can place up to twenty tiles (scenario depending) to expand the map. As new tiles are placed, new action tokens are placed because Investigators can do new things, talk to new people and find new clues as they enter new spaces. The board becomes a space where players can 'enact stories' (Jenkins). They do this by physically moving the miniature (a 25mm grey[33], plastic figurine) for their character from one tile to the next, taking actions and interacting with objects.

Everything on the board is replicated on the app. Players traverse the digital space by dragging the screen and clicking on the digitally-rendered action tokens. The player clicks the token on the app when they take an action because the app gives the available choices or information relevant to that token. Given that the entirety of the game board, except for the specific positions of each Investigator, exists and functions on the app, it might seem superfluous that the physical board exists at all. However, the physical act of picking up your Investigator's miniature, and placing it in your next location, moving the Monsters' miniatures closer in each Mythos Phase, and adding Fire Tokens to the board as the blaze spreads, are all tactile and effective ways in which the physical use of space in *Mansions of Madness Second Edition* heightens tension and creates memorable, narrative-imbued moments as the objects 'become real through use' (Murray).

As rich and detailed as the tiles are, and as satisfying as it is to see the layout of the house, train or boatyard laid out in front of you, the administration required seriously impacts the pacing of the story, which in turn can potentially disrupt the immersion experienced by the players up to that point. There are almost 30 double-sided tiles in the core box and many more if you purchase the expansions (of which there are currently six). Each time a new tile is revealed, play stops while the players look through all the tiles to find the right one. I think that the game should give a list of tiles needed for the scenario, or at least a list of 'potential' tiles (so as not to spoil all the locations) during set-up. While this problem is particularly prevalent for *Mansions of Madness Second Edition*, the labour required to perform administrative tasks (brought on by the functioning system) in narrative board games is a crucial design challenge

[33] Unless painted of course.

to keep in mind. Every time the players must pause to perform administrative tasks, the flow, tension and pace of the narrative are interrupted.

***Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game* (Portal Games, 2019):**

*Detective's* board is a really small, 20cm x 20cm square. The space on the board is used quite efficiently, with "The Lab", "Richmond PD", "Fieldwork", "Headquarters" and "Courthouse" locations, the "Day Track", and the "Time Track". The artwork for the locations is fairly generic, very possibly using stock photographs. The background of the board shows a nondescript map of a city. The game is set in Richmond, Virginia. While this is important context for the central case the players are trying to solve in the game, there are very few visual signifiers of Richmond to situate players there other than the name of the police station, "Richmond PD".

The 'generic police force' in 'generic US city' in some ways unexciting; or at the very least, a relatively bland "evocative space" on which to "enact stories" (Jenkins). But because the players have a computer open to use the Antares system, and are allowed to use the internet, some players might take some time to search "Richmond" online to better understand and picture the setting of the game. The nondescript palette allows players to imagine detail of the setting that will influence the way they structure their play and perceive the narrative. Because the setting of the game board is so generic, the details of the places that are important in the cases stand out.

In *Detective,* players get cards and follow the clues on them by "following leads" and "digging deeper". However, these actions can only be taken at certain locations. If players need to "go through the archives" they will usually do this at Richmond PD or the Courthouse, while examining evidence will typically happen at the Lab. Because travelling costs time, players will often stay at one location for as long as possible before moving on to the next. Moving from one location to the next is about whichever card the players want to read next, in as little time as possible. Traversing the space has little to do with fulfilling narrative desires. If we consider Jenkins' framework, the narrative associations that the space evokes are vague, the stage on which events are enacted is relatively generic, and the space contains very little embedded information. The clue cards, full of embedded information, are the source of emergent narrative. However, because following leads and digging deeper can only happen at certain locations, the embedded information becomes intrinsically linked to the space.

The way space is used outside of the game's components is quite intriguing. Notes in the rulebook recommend that players should "write down important names. Connect them with lines to show their relation to one another as well as to evidence, dates, places and events. In addition, we recommend creating a mind map to organise your thoughts". Players are encouraged to use physical space to lay out clues, ideas and relationships (see figures 4 and 5 below). A well-laid-out cork-board will help players see links and remember important information. The excitement of figuring out a clue and the satisfaction of a mindmap with clearly laid out relationships (created by the players) in some ways makes up for the scarcity of the in-game narrative space. Players feel excited as they mimic the conventional cork-board in crime shows, and physically replicating that convention helps heighten the sensation of immersion.

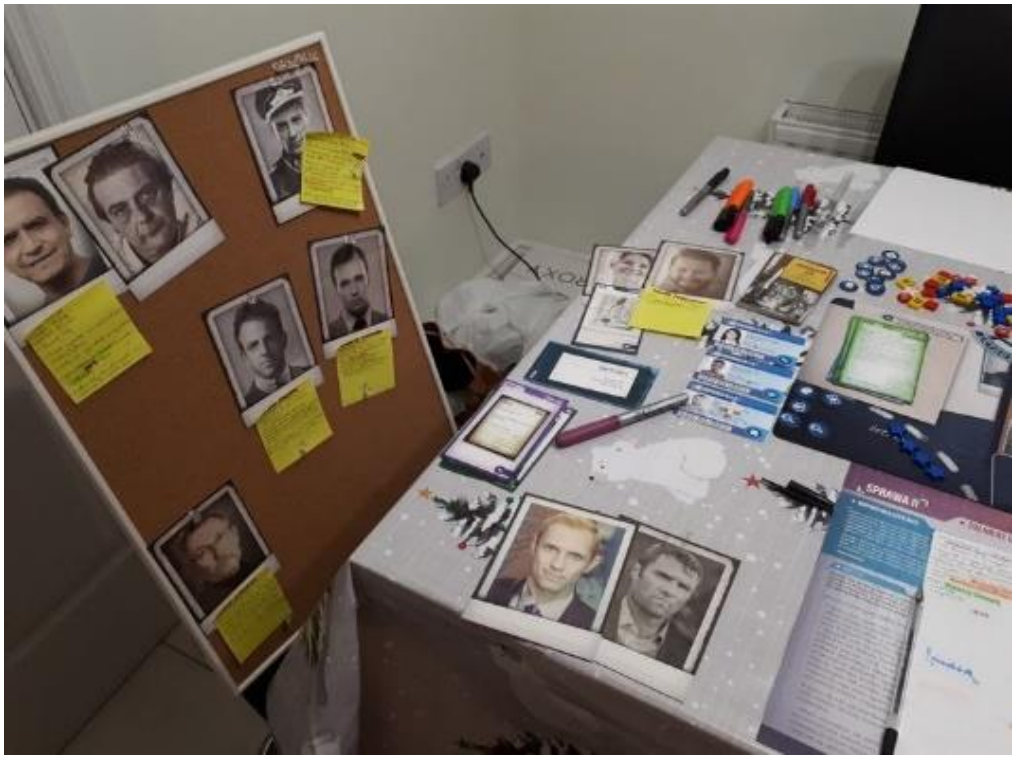

Fig. 4. “Game of the Year!”. BGG user, Vikingowa uploaded this image on Apr 16 2019. This player has printed images of the suspects to use on their corkboard.

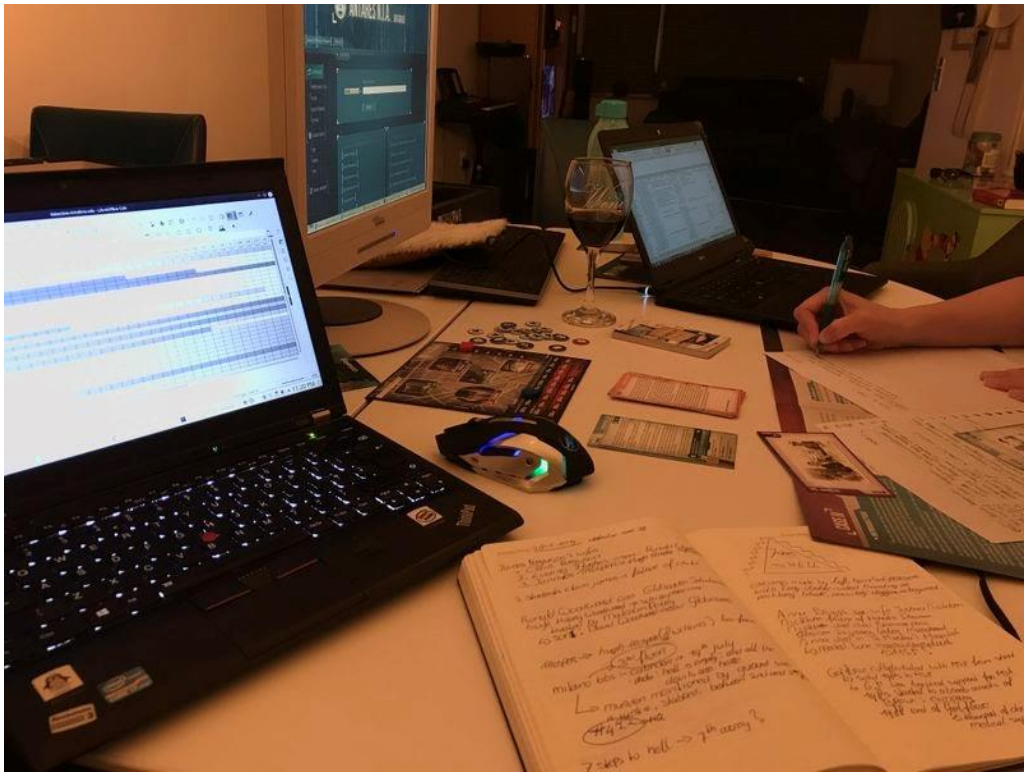

Fig. 5. “Digging deep into Detective”. BGG user mayk78 uploaded this image on May 30 2019. This player has used digital and analogue space to take notes and record their investigation.

The space in *Detective* has been designed to reward players who invest their effort and creativity into the play experience, and actively create belief (Murray). While that may be frustrating for some players, or feel like the fictive world is not as full as one would like, it is a strategy that highlights the complexity of the cases above all else.

***The 7th Continent* (Serious Poulp, 2017):**

The core premise of *The 7th Continent* is based on exploration. Players are "renowned explorers", returning to the newly discovered seventh continent to try and lift a curse that befell them on their last expedition. By resolving Exploration cards and placing numbered Terrain cards into play, players slowly expand their map of the seventh continent - the board. There are often multiple Terrain cards with the same card number; the terrain is the same, but the icons are different. The exploration cards are random, while the terrain cards are predetermined. This relationship creates an engaging, emergent dynamic which allows for each visit to the seventh continent to happen differently. Each visit depends on the Explorer's decisions and random draws, even though the continent is the same piece of land for each player who comes to explore. By influencing the Explorer's priorities, the order in which terrain cards are revealed influence the narrative, even though the content is predetermined.

When the entire map of the seventh continent is laid out (using the terrain cards), the continent covers a few square metres (or an average living room floor). This is not a viable way to play. As such, the designers recommend that as the Explorers move and reveal new terrain cards, and the map becomes unmanageably large, the Explorers should pack away the terrain cards that are no longer close by. However, the explored space is not lost for good. Included in both Kickstarter campaigns for *The 7th Continent* was a Cartographers Notebook. The Notebook was designed as a tool for players to map out their expeditions. While it was an additional purpose (common for Kickstarter campaigns), Serious Poulp also released a free PDF version. The Notebook is quite simple, a 4x5 grid with space to make notes, draw the landscape and record card numbers. It's a space where players can record what's happened by detailing where they've been and what they've found (see figure 6 below). This replicated space is a record of each particular group's narrative, structured in the way the players want to remember their experience of the narrative. The Notebook is a tool that the designers have given the players to record the narrative they revealed through their choices and actions. Its only impact on the game and story would be to remind players of things they had previously discovered (which may impact future decisions). Instead of affecting the revelation of the story, the pleasure of the Notebook lies in the power it gives the player to record and retain an artefact of the game's narrative once it is complete.

There is some, but very little, flavour text in *The 7th Continent.* There is even less narrative text. The narrative is almost entirely revealed by the players as they explore the space. The order in which players uncover terrain cards and the randomisation of the exploration and terrain cards means that each playthrough will be unique to that group of Explorers. It is what the players find and do in the space that reveals the story.

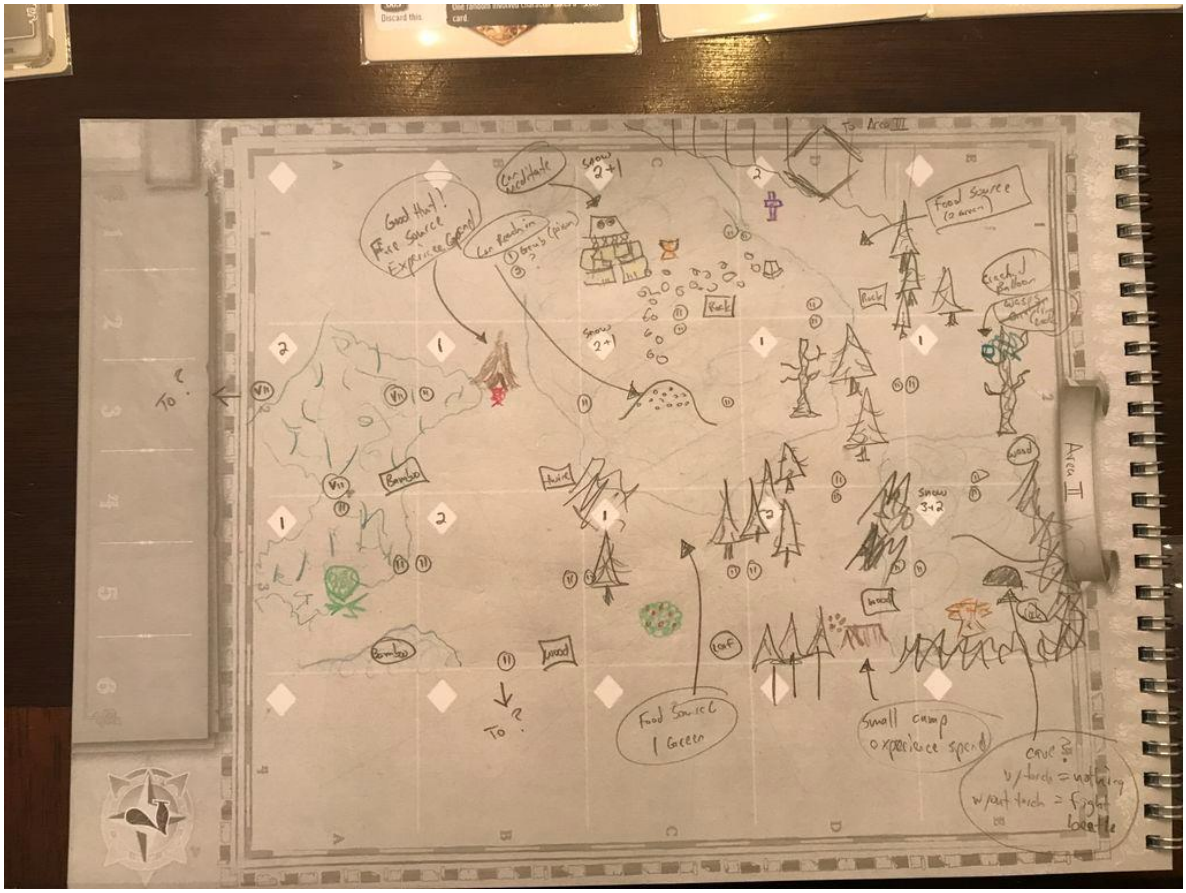


Fig. 6. “Cartographers notebook usage”. BGG user hankheyming uploaded this image on June 16 2019. This player has used a combination of icons, numbers and drawings to record a map of part of the island.

As important as space is to a narrative, so is the ability to move through that space. A range of movement mechanisms (action selection, action point allowance, special abilities and stats) allow players to make choices about how they traverse the space, and which parts of the space or fictive world are most important for them to meet their gameplay objectives and satisfy their narrative desires. “Spatial stories are held together by broadly defined goals and conflicts and pushed forward by the character’s movement across the map” (Jenkins 124). It is only when the space is abundant with narrative potential that players are enabled to collaborate with the space and engage in “story-constructing activity” (124). This “story-constructing activity”, what occurs when the players’ actions and choices reveal the narrative, is crucial to the map of narrative board game praxis. Narrative board games must use space as a tool to connect the story events, fictive world, and available actions for the player. These actions typically come from the game’s mechanisms.

# Mechanisms[34]

Exploring the challenges of storytelling and narrative-based board games, Joshua Buergel (2019), a game writer and reviewer, wrote:

> Because the focus in these sorts of games is on the narrative, many of them opt for very simple game mechanisms. There aren't any mechanisms in them that are going to be interesting on their own, divorced from the story, and your fun won't be rescued by a compelling competitive environment. All of the eggs are in the story basket, and none are in the game basket.

I don't entirely disagree with Buergel's statement, but I think that "there aren't any mechanisms in them that are going to be interesting on their own" is somewhat unfair. In this section, I will map some of the mechanisms that are common to narrative games as a way to help elicit narrative and are interesting separate from the narrative they are included in. Because a game's mechanisms determine what choices and actions the player take (which is what reveals the narrative), mechanisms are a foundational aspect to the map of narrative board game praxis.

The core mechanisms in a game are the moment-to-moment actions the players are taking. Mechanisms are the things that people do when they play games; the core actions that they take. Different mechanisms will create different player experiences, create common problems, and can be implemented in a wide range of game genres. However, there must be a clear correlation between the mechanisms and the narrative in order to avoid "ludonarrative dissonance" (Hocking 2007).

It is vital that in a narrative game, performing the core mechanism allows the player to "make meaningful choices and explore a space of possibility" (Salen and Zimmerman 389). In narrative games, it is crucial that the action that players take are not only meaningful in the classic ludological sense (the player's choice has an impact on the game system) but also in a narratological sense (the player's choice has an impact on the narrative system).
"The player does not *want* complete navigational and expressive freedom per se, but wants to be able to pursue action that is *meaningful"* (Swartjes 19). While he is writing about digital games and interactive narrative in *Whose Story is it Anyway* (2010), Swartjes remarks are valid for board games too. Swartjes notes that if the system is using a predetermined narrative structure (which narrative board games do), then the system must either:

(1) ensure that the narrative structure doesn't depend too much on what actions the user takes,
(2) enforce the narrative structure by means of subtle rules or restrictions, or
(3) properly communicate to the player "the formal and material constraints" of the system in order to align expectations and encourage appropriate actions (19).

[34] In *Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design,* Engelstein and Shalev note that "mechanisms" are frequently called "mechanisms" by players, and that they "use the term interchangeably" (xxi).

I will demonstrate in this section how some of the mechanisms that have been used in narrative board games fulfil Swartjes' requirements, and how they create opportunities for the players to reveal the narrative.

When I began this research in 2018, only four of the 54 listed Mechanisms on BGG had anything to do with narrative (acting, role-playing, simulation, and storytelling). That was true for most of this research period. However, in September 2019, Scott Aldie (founder of BGG) announced that they were updating their list of Mechanisms using Engelstein and Shalev's *Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design: An Encyclopedia of Mechanisms.* As of writing this, this process is still underway. In the announcement, Aldie did acknowledge that "the BGG list of mechanisms has not kept up well with the pace of innovation in design" (boardgamegeek.com – "Announcements", accessed November 14 2019). However, while the new and improving list is certainly an improvement, there is still a lot missing. As Engelstein and Shalev wrote in the book's introduction,

> Though we strove to be broad and inclusive, an exhaustive compilation of all game mechanisms was never our intention, and is arguably impossible. While we do brush lightly on topics like narrative, dexterity and pantomime for example, there remains a lot of unmapped terrain...These lines are certainly artificial, and we have not sought to put forward a definition of what games are in drawing the lines as we did (xxi).

While I appreciate the acknowledgement that the use of narrative has not really been explored, it reinforces my belief at the time of writing my Proposal in mid-2018 for this research that the lack of specific naming and creating of mechanisms and systems for narrative games suggests potential preferences for designers and players, as well as an area of board game design that has not received the attention it potentially should.

**Narrative Choice:**

The one particularly relevant mechanism that Engelstein and Shalev include in their encyclopaedia is Narrative Choice, a mechanism in which "multiple action options are presented to the players via a narrative format" (109). They trace the use of this mechanism from *Dungeons & Dragons* in the 1970s to *Tales of the Arabian Nights* (1985 and then a new edition in 2009), and *Dead of Winter: A Crossroads Game* (2014) to *Legacy of Dragonholt* (2017). As will be demonstrated shortly, while this mechanism is used frequently in narrative board games, it is far from the only mechanism that can be used to elicit narrative.

*Detective* uses Narrative Choice as its core mechanism. For each case, the players start with a range of specific "lead" cards with the information available at the beginning of the investigation. At the bottom of some cards will be new leads (numbers of other cards) to follow up on. The players will have a range of leads that they can choose to follow, but will never have enough time to follow all of the leads. Players need to make choices based on deductive reasoning and logic, although, in my experience, curiosity is often a strong driving force in the choices made by the group.

*Legacy of Dragonholt* offers Narrative Choice as a central mechanism, but that choice is generally only offered to one player at a time by using Activation Tokens. However, while the

player may have up to six possible choices they can take, some of these Narrative Choices will only be available to them depending on what skills that player has, what items the player has, what time of day it is (in the story world) and what story points are marked. This ensures that the presented choices are not only connected to the game's system but also connected to to the internal narrative world and character logic of the game.

Narrative Choice can be an effective mechanism to bring "structured narrative and flavour to the game without the players needing to create narrative from abstract game elements" (109). However, designers must be wary to not allow the presented choices to be disconnected from the game, to overwhelm the players, or to become uninteresting. By offering choices that all connect the action to the story, the designer ensures "that the narrative structure doesn't depend too much on what action the user takes" (Swartjes 19).

**Variable Player Powers:**

"Each player has special actions that only they can perform, or that modify standard actions" (Engelstein and Shalev 94). This mechanism means that each player has a unique power or ability that makes them distinct from the other players. In the case of narrative board games, these abilities are usually tied to the selected character that the player is playing. Engelstein and Shalev call this a "meta-mechanism" because of its potential to modify other actions and systems (94).

Across the games studied in this research, it is the most popular mechanism, appearing in some form in all but one (*Detective: CoA*) of the case studies. Because the notion of 'character' is so central to any narrative framework, it makes sense that not only are the characters in a narrative board game distinct from each other visually but also in their ability. It is interesting to note that in all the games Engelstein and Shalev use as examples, none of them are narrative games (95). This may be because variable player powers are typical to combat-heavy play, which exists in far more genres than just narrative board games.

In the cases of games like *Arkham Horror Third Edition, Mansions of Madness Second Edition, Mice and Mystics, Stuffed Fables, This War of Mine* and *T.I.M.E Stories,* each player assumes the role of a character. These characters are defined by unique characteristics in two categories: stats and special abilities. Stats typically include categories like Strength, Dexterity, Will, Charm and Observation and many more. These categories are common to all characters in the game, but their specific value (or combination of values) will be unique to each character. Entirely unique though is the character's special ability. These abilities are generally tied to the backstory of the character. In *Arkham Horror Third Edition*, there is a character called Dexter Drake, The Magician. Not only is his 'Lore' stat his highest, but his special ability is also "Magical Gift - Once per round while resolving a Lore test, you may reroll one or all of your dice." Michael McGlen, The Mobster, can't let go of what he saw the night his partner died, when "the thing in the river dragged Louis off the dock to tear him to pieces beneath the water". Appropriately, his special ability is "Out for Revenge - After you defeat a monster as part of an attack action, you recover one sanity or focus one skill of your choice". These additional rules help "enforce the narrative structure" (Swartjes 19).

“Variable Player Powers” is a meta-mechanism because it modifies other mechanisms. This allows for the base game and its rules to be as simple and straightforward, while each person then learns their specific ability. This is important for narrative board games, as the game should ideally be complex enough to maintain interest, but not overly-complex, thus distracting from the narrative. The use of variable player powers can help satisfy this balanced complexity, while also adding to the fictive world of the game and the characters that inhabit it.

**Hand Management:**

“Managing your hand means gaining the most value out of available cards under given circumstances. Cards often have multiple uses in the game, further obfuscating an “optimal” sequence” (boardgamegeek.com – “Hand Management”, accessed October 20 2019). In narrative board games, hand management works alongside unique characters or variable player powers, as different characters are often able to take different cards into their hand.

Each player has a hand limit of seven cards in *Arkham Horror: TCG.* Players will draw a new card to their hand each turn during the upkeep phase, or they can use one of their three actions in their turn to draw an extra card. These cards are drawn from each player’s deck. Players begin a new campaign with a preset deck, determined by the character they’ve chosen. However, as players progress through campaigns, they will build their deck by removing, adding and upgrading cards.

Each card in the deck is either an asset, an event or a weakness (which each character has). Weaknesses in hand will negatively affect the success of your turn, while assets and events are helpful - but only if you can pay the resource cost. Players must not only manage their hand (by building their deck) in between games, they must also manage their during the game itself. This often requires resource management in order to afford playing the cards. Because of this, there are occasions where managing a hand can be as much about strategically discarding cards as it is about playing them.

In the case of *Arkham Horror: TCG,* hand management goes a lot further than just providing actions and bonuses. It is an inherent part of each player’s character development. The deck is not literal but rather is referential to who the character is and what types of things they can do. When a scenario is completed, and players are upgrading their deck, the upgrades are not just about better abilities or cool bonuses. Characters gain Experience during scenarios, which players can spend to learn new skills, upgrade weapons and make new allies. This is all done by adding new cards to their deck. So the narrative starts to make the deck represent the character's resourcefulness, which players must carefully manage for narrative effect and in-game success.

There are four regions on the board in *Pandemic Legacy*, and each region is (potentially) plagued with a different coloured disease. Players have a hand limit of 7. Each player starts the game with a hand of five city cards. These cards are each named and colour-coded according to the region they’re in. These city cards don’t belong to specific characters, but some characters have special abilities for how they can use these cards.

Each character has the same set of core actions they can take using the cards: Direct Flight, Chartered Flight, Build a Structure, Share Knowledge and Discover a Cure. Direct and Chartered Flights require players to discard the City card they're moving to or from. Building structures (like Military or Research Bases) require discarding the City card the player is in to build the structure there. Sharing knowledge allows players in the same city to pass cards to each other. Discovering a Cure requires a player discards 5 of the same colour cards to discover a cure for the disease of the corresponding colour. Character abilities might change the restrictions on these actions, but do not change the actions themselves. For example, the Scientist only needs 4 of the same colour cards to discover a cure, and the Operations Expert can build structures without discarding the card of the city they're in. Because the players have different abilities but the same actions, they must manage the cards in their hand (and their abilities) to most effectively eradicate the diseases and win the game using the different actions available.

Hand Management allows players to tailor their play experience to a particular strategy or align their actions with some of the traits of their chosen character. How the players choose to optimise their hand will not only have a clear and direct impact on their success in the game but will also directly impact the narrative arc of the game as players 'fail' and 'succeed' in important story events.

**Probability Management**

Probability Management is "a mechanism which allows players to influence the probabilities of certain outcomes, but not directly determine them" (Engelstein and Shalev 233). Mitigating chance and randomness is an essential part of most board games, and will directly impact the progression of the game's narrative.

There are many different probability-based outcome-generators in narrative board games. *Mansions of Madness Second Edition, Stuffed Fables, This War of Mine* and *T.I.M.E Stories* all use dice to generate random results. Tokens (with a range of results and effects) are drawn out of the 'Mythos Cup' regularly in *Arkham Horror Third Edition* and *Arkham Horror: TCG.* Cards drawn (facedown) from the Action deck in *The 7th Continent* will have a varying number of successes on them, which players can manage but not predict.

The dice in *Mansions of Madness Second Edition* are identical, eight-sided dice. Each die has 3 success faces, 2 clue faces, and 3 blank faces. Players typically roll the dice when they are performing a skill test. Attacking a monster, charming the butler, or searching for evidence will all put the characters' skills to the test. The number of dice the player rolls will depend on the value of their character's stat for that test. For example, if a player is doing a Strength test, and their character's Strength is 3 (out of a maximum of 5), they will roll three dice. The number of successes rolled will be inputted into the app, and the app will relay back the results (i.e. the monster dies, is wounded, or isn't damaged at all). However, if the player rolls a clue (the face on the dice with the magnifying glass), the player may spend a clue token (if they have) to convert the clue to a success. Some characters have special abilities that let them reroll dice or convert clues. There are also items in the game that give players temporary special abilities or increase the value of their stats for different skills. Players can use all of these elements to manage the likelihood of certain events, and keep the story going as much in their

favour as possible. The story events in the fictive world will be significantly impacted by the players' ability to mitigate disaster. By communicating the constraints of the system, players can align their expectations and take appropriate action within the narrative structure (Swartjes 19).

There are seven different coloured dice in *Stuffed Fables.* On a player's turn, they will draw 5 dice from the bag. White dice are rolled to get Stuffing, and black dice are placed on the Threat track. The five remaining coloured dice are used for a number of actions. The red dice is used for melee attacks, green for ranged attacks, yellow for searches, and purple as a 'wild' for any colour. The blue dice have no unique actions. If a player wants to search a location, they must have a yellow or purple dice to do that. However, it may happen that players don't roll the colour they need, or can't use all the actions (maybe there is nobody to attack at the moment). The game mitigates this restriction by allowing all coloured dice to be used for general actions: move, reserve a die, encourage, perform a skill test or contribute to the group task. This means that players will always be able to do actions, even if not the actions they would like to. The "Reserve a die" action allows players to put one die aside for use in another turn to ensure they will be able to perform that action later. Also, like in *Mansions of Madness,* characters and items have special abilities that allow players to reroll, increase or change the value of the dice they have rolled. The fictive world of a childhood filled with scary dreams and stuffed toys is supported by the 'forgiving' nature of the dice that always allows the players to take an action and do something to impact the outcome of a story event. The narrative structure doesn't depend on the player rolling the exact right dice at the exact right time, but rather allows for flexibility and improvisation.

Probability Management is a common mechanism for players to mitigate or offset randomness in a game, allowing them to make meaningful choices. These meaningful choices are important not just in the context of the game, but also for the narrative. One unhelpful card or dice roll can have disastrous, world-and-game-ending effects. By implementing ways to delay or avoid these effects, the designers allow the players to impact and co-create the narrative experience.

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The mechanisms in this section, and how they are integrated into the game's narrative accomplish all three of Swartjes requirements for the system of a narrative structure (19):

(1) *ensure that the narrative structure doesn't depend too much on what actions the user takes*, instead we see how the mechanisms allow the player to take actions that align with and contribute to the narrative structure.
(2) *enforce the narrative structure by means of subtle rules or restrictions,* we see how abilities and actions reinforce the narrative world
*(3) properly communicate to the player "the formal and material constraints" of the system in order to align expectations and encourage appropriate actions,* as the actions available to the player are actions that make ludic and narrative sense, and are appropriate responses to the narrative developments in the game.

By ensuring a clear relationship between the actions that they afford, and the elements of the game's story, designers can use mechanisms as a tool to enable the player to reveal story while participating in a well-structured ludic activity that generates meaningful play. This should be what all narrative games do. Mechanisms are the structural foundation of the map of narrative board game praxis because they determine what a player can do, which determines how the player reveals the narrative. The list of mechanisms that have been mapped here represents some of the major mechanisms included in this paper's case studies. However, a much more comprehensive list that explores a wider variety of games is necessary for a board game narratology.

# Chapter 6: Conclusion

> There's a conflict between interactivity and storytelling. Most people imagine there's a spectrum between conventional written stories on one side and total interactivity on the other. But I believe that what you really have are two safe havens separated by a pit of hell that can absorb endless amounts of time, skill and resources.
>
> (Freitag qtd in Platt)

This paper began with a quote from Espen J. Aarseth that speaks about the importance of not analysing games as stories because they are not stories. Throughout this research, my response that "board games are not stories but are an increasingly interesting way to experience and share stories" has not only been maintained but deepened. Over the last two years, I have had the pleasure of experiencing some of the most intriguing, exciting and thrilling narratives of my life, and all while playing board games.

However, it has not all been fun and games. Walter Freitag's belief that between conventional written stories and interactivity is "a pit of hell that can absorb endless amounts of time, skill and resources" is one that I concur with. I have grappled with theory on narratology, game design and interactivity, trying to find a box that I could wrestle narrative board games into. What I have found is that there is no one-size-fits-all approach. For every rule I thought I had established, I found at least two exceptions. Many insights or opinions I had were countered by multiple theorists. There were many references I needed to justify something I had said, that simply don't yet exist. The newness of the medium and the incredibly little that has been written about it was a thrilling obstacle to tackle.

Narrative board games are doing something new and exciting and deserve academic attention. They are beginning to fulfil a need. As Miller said (72):

> We always need more stories because in some way they do not satisfy. Stories, however perfectly conceived and powerfully written, however moving, do not accomplish successfully their allotted function. Each story and each repetition or variation of it leaves some uncertainty or contains some loose end unraveling its effect, according to an implacable law that is not so much psychological or social as linguistic. This necessary incompletion means that no story fulfills perfectly once and for all, its functions of ordering and confirming. And so we need another story, and then another, and yet another, without ever coming to the end of our need for stories or without ever assuaging the hunger they are meant to satisfy.

No narrative board game, like no story, will "fulfil perfectly once and for all, its functions of ordering and confirming". However, some of them are not far off. I set out in this research to map what types of design decisions were being used to integrate narratives into board games, and what theory supported or contested those decisions. In the process of mapping the medium, there were several tools I found myself returning to, as they affected much of the way the map was conceptualised.

By establishing a clear understanding of what ‘narrative’ is, I was able to situate the medium of narrative board games within the historic and academic context of narratology. From this process, I was able to determine that narrative board games are narrative works because, in order for a work to be a narrative form, all that is required is “the presence of a story and the presence of a storyteller” (Leitch 3). While the roles of the story and storyteller in narrative board games are more complex than they initially seemed, they are ultimately performed by the players and embedded elements. The player’s role as part-storyteller and part-audience is a complex and somewhat muddled position. The player alters every playthrough of a game, changes the way it is experienced, and the story told. They are intrinsic to the medium, and designers should implement new ways to exploit this vital role. The role of the player was a tool that constantly sharpened every conception and understanding of how narrative functions in board games.

Other tools I frequently used was a range of theories, found in the narratological frameworks that already exist for digital games, that are somewhat applicable to board games. Active creation of belief, the mask and agency (Murray), embedded and emergent elements (Salen and Zimmerman) and alterbiography (Calleja) are some of the theories that were applied in this research to varying extents. However, because they were written for different mediums with different affordances, the applicability can only go so far. Some of these theories, if somewhat re-conceptualized, could form part of a narratological framework for narrative board games.

Klevjar’s (qtd in Salen and Zimmerman 402) separation between fictive worlds and story events was a helpful tool through which to consider how situations unfold in narrative board games. Story events that allow players to fulfil narrative goals, experience conflict and face uncertainty are moments of scripted narrative through which the alterbiography (Calleja) emerges. The varying uses of Characters as avatars, masks, and agents (Murray) allow the players to participate in these story events. The construction of space and employment of mechanisms will help determine how those story events play out.

Establishing these tools, and establishing the relationship between them made apparent that the narrative discourse of a narrative board game is based in the ‘gameness’ of the game. The elements that the players touch and use to take actions are what creates emergent gameplay that allows for the story to be revealed. The components and board, and how the players are allowed to use them provide the structure for how the player reveals the narrative. Discourse in traditional narratology explores whose point of view is the story coming from, and how time and space are used to highlight important moments in the story. These questions are important when analysing the discourse of a narrative board game, but must be considered alongside the elements that make up the structure and form of the game itself. This is one of the critical issues that must be addressed in a board game narratology.

Narrative board games, a form of narrative, are shaped by their Story and Discourse. By analysing some of the elements that make up some narrative board games’ Story and Discourse, it became clear that reasonably insightful analysis could be obtained using this structure. For example, considering how Situation and Character were presented in some of the case studies demonstrated important insights. The multiplicity if situations and double-characterization are important aspects of board games that must be considered. However, it

was also clear that the traditional narratological structure was not designed with narrative board games in mind; it couldn't entirely hold up the weight of this exciting new medium. Many of the sections overlapped or needed the support of other sections. 'Space' could exist on its own, or be incorporated into 'Mechanisms', 'Situation and Events' or 'Character'. Each section has remained separate in order to lay the foundations for a narratological framework for narrative board games. However, those connections between elements remain and are important.

Traditional narratological analysis of a narrative board game yields inadequate and incomplete results, as many of the insights come with a caveat; all assertions made can only be applied to a certain extent because so much depends on the player. In this map of Story, Discourse and grounded theory, there is one major missing landmark: The player. A narratological framework that places the player at the forefront, and considers the intrinsic qualities of the medium is needed. The player is the landmark from which we read all other parts of the map, the beacon that determines the course of the narrative work. This landmark is only partially constructed on the map I have created. An entirely separate study is required to position the player on the map more completely. There are many reasons why. Firstly, there is no accounting for a player's expectations, motivations and decisions when engaging with the narrative form in traditional narratology. This would require surveys, interviews, observation of players, and collection and interpretation of data which would all go far beyond the scope of this research. Furthermore, the existence of the player has more implications than just their thought-processes. The player fundamentally alters the structure of the experience of any game.

In narrative board games, it is only when the components, cards and rules are taken out of the box, set up and played with that the narrative emerges through gameplay. We have established that this participation with the elements that reveal the narrative can only happen if a person or group of people perform this sustained interaction. However, people cause problems; they are one of the main causes of the "pit of hell" between 'story' and 'interactivity'. They like different games, forget the rules, pull out their phones after their turn, and are too busy to schedule regular game nights. Any assertion that I have made in this research about a game or its narrative has to be understood in the context of the playing styles of each player at the table, the environment, the relationships between the players and other factors far outside the designer's control. These phenomena will profoundly impact the emergence and reception of the narrative in a game session.

The way games are played and the people who play them have a massive impact on how the narrative unfolds, and the players' experience thereof. For example, all but three of the games in this paper (*Arkham Horror Third Edition, Mansions of Madness Second Edition* and *Detective: City of Angels)* are campaign games. Campaign games are games with a series of chapters or sessions, typically played in order, with an overarching narrative. A campaign can have anywhere from five (*Detective)* to twelve (*Pandemic Legacy)* chapters. However, each chapter may take more than one session to complete. Because most board games are played over a few hours over a few sessions, they must develop grand and branching narratives that can be sustained over multiple play sessions, usually over a few months. Legacy games have begun to tackle that problem, by offering an episodic play experience that reaches a climax and conclusion. The changing of components in a legacy game heightens the play experience and creates memorable moments of the narrative and the play session. However, legacy

games to date seem to have been more interested in how the ludic choices, not narrative choices, made in the previous games will affect the upcoming games. I would suggest that this may be because players are more interested in winning than they are in getting a good story. However, this is conjecture.

While opening a box or placing a sticker (in the vein of Legacy games) might create memorable moments, the story at the time that sticker was placed is hard to recall weeks or months later. When players are playing multiple campaigns at once, this gets even harder. I have six different groups that I am currently[35] playing 14 campaign games with. Because of what I study and where I work (in the Digital Arts department at Wits University), I am lucky to have more people than most that I can play board games with. While I perhaps have too many groups, some people don't have any. It's common to see posts online (Facebook, Twitter, Discord and Whatsapp) from people who are looking for a group to join. This dramatically narrows the potential target market as it requires people who have a committed group (or are prepared to play solo), and have the availability to play the same game ten or fifteen times.

This brings me to another issue: scheduling. If a game is played over 12 sessions and is played once a week, it will take three months to finish the game. But that's presuming that nobody ever cancels. Perhaps a group can only meet every two weeks, and then the game takes six months to finish. Sustaining narrative tension and interest for that long, let alone remembering what has happened, is really challenging.

Not many people sit down with a book expecting to compete with it – no strategic decision must be made before you can turn the page. The same cannot be said for a board game. General expectations that players have of games may have influenced the design of them. Players expect a competitive experience, and many of them will want to win. The impact of players' strategies and what the 'best decision' is on the progression of the narrative is great. For many players, winning will always be the priority, with the desire for an engaging narrative experience coming second. It is possible, but extremely challenging, to satiate both desires.

Players' human-nature, expectations, desires and responsibilities will always alter the experience of any game, not just narrative board games. However, because the player is so intrinsic to the narrative being revealed, discovered and shared, this can and has been a central dilemma to the progress and development of the medium of narrative board games. This fundamental and impactful problem is far from solved. I am writing about this problem now at the end of my research for two reasons. Firstly, it has sat in the back of my mind since I began this process. I was always hyper-aware of my own subjective experiences playing these games, and what impact the time, place, frequency and group that I played with would have on my analysis. Secondly, taking the player into account feels like the logical next step. I have created a map of narrative board games, but the player is barely a landmark on that map. I have considered these games in detail. But what about the people playing them? I am eager to find out.

Gordon Calleja wrote that the system of a narrative game contains a "cyclical process afforded by the representational, mechanical, and medium-specific qualities of a game, and actuated in the mind of the player" (2011, 124). By mapping the representational, mechanical and medium-specific qualities of narrative board games, and considering the player's role within

[35] January 2020.

the game's cyclical process of signs, interpretation and action, it has become clear that a board game narratology is needed because narrative board games are an increasingly exciting medium to stage narrative.

# Game Glossary

***The 7th Continent*** (Serious Poulp – 2017) is a solo or cooperative 'choose your own path' game set in the early 20th century. A group of explorers returns to the newly discovered seventh continent to attempt to lift a curse that struck the last time they were there. The game boasts hundreds of playable hours as players explore the continent, revealing more and more land the further they travel. The game features grid movement, hand management, deck management and variable player powers as some of its core mechanisms.

Fig. 7. Two explorer miniatures on a location card.

Fig. 8. A skill card that provides an item once crafted.

Fig. 9. A skill card that heightens an ability.

***Arkham Horror: The Card Game*** (Fantasy Flight Games – 2016) is a solo or cooperative "living card game" set in the Lovecraft mythos. One or two investigators battle monsters and uncover mysteries in the New England town of Arkham. The game comes with a series of campaigns or cycles. Within each cycle, players select an investigator, build their deck and accrue skills and scars as they journey through the campaign. The game features deck building, hand management and action points as some of its core mechanisms.

Fig. 10. Location cards.

Fig. 11. Skill, Event and Item cards from a character's deck.

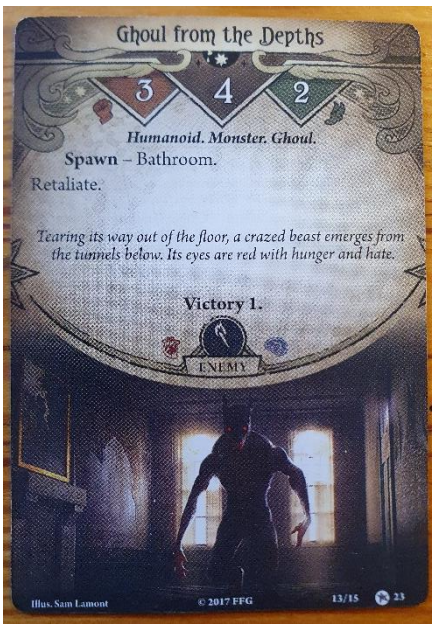



Fig. 12. A monster to be defeated.

***Arkham Horror Third Edition*** (Fantasy Flight Games – 2019) is a solo or cooperative game set in the Lovecraft mythos. A group of investigators defend Arkham against Ancient Ones who wish to conquer and have dominion over the world. The gameplay is divided into four phases: Action, Monster, Encounter and Mythos phase. In those phases, players must gather tools, find allies and defeat monsters big and small. The game uses a modular board and features variable player powers.

Fig. 13. Front and back of an Encounter card.

Fig. 14. A character card and stand.

Fig. 15. The modular board connected by different streets.

***Detective: A Modern Crime Board Game*** (Portal Games – 2018), or *Detective,* is a solo or cooperative deduction game. The game features five cases all linked to each other, forming one large mystery. Players select characters based on law enforcement jobs and travel around the city following clues. The game has a dedicated online database, Antares, with files on the suspects, witnesses and circumstances of the case. The game centres on puzzle-solving and deduction.

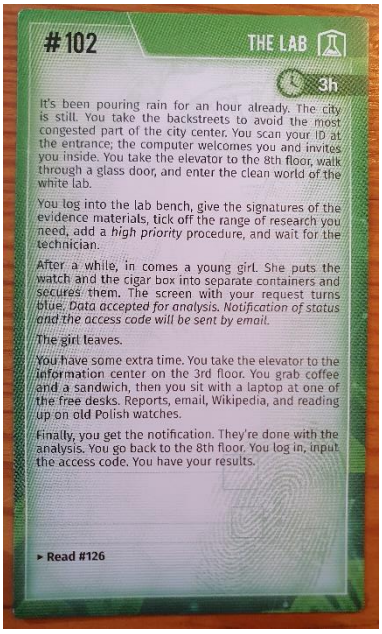



Fig. 16. One of the case cards

Fig. 17. Two of the available characters for players to choose.

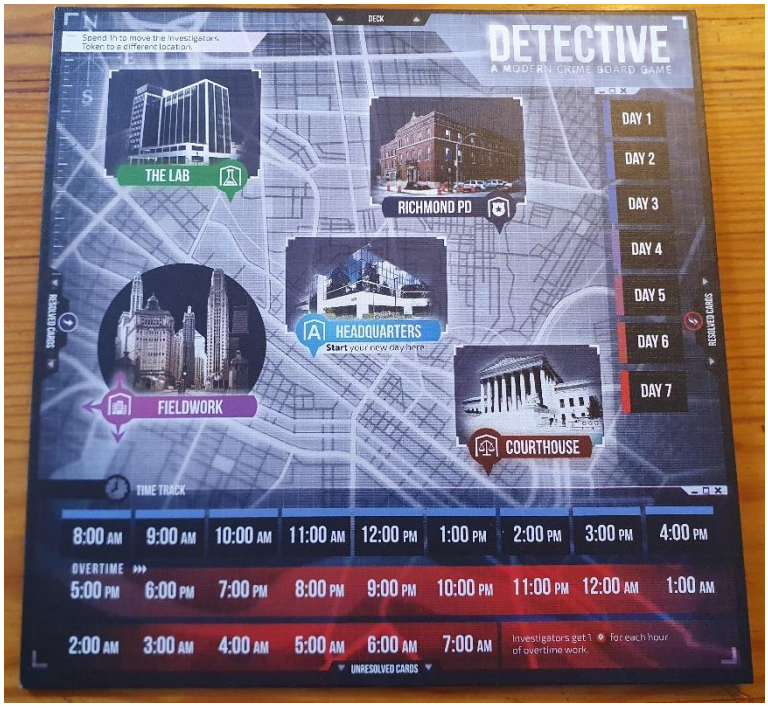



Fig. 18. The board. It shows the locations, time tracker and day tracker.

***Detective: City of Angels*** (Van Ryder Games – 2019) is a competitive deduction game, with solo and cooperative modes included. The game is set in 1940s Los Angeles and features a series of increasingly difficult cases to solve. The cases are not connected. The Adaptive Response Card system allows one player to select which responses suspects give during interrogations. The game uses action points and deduction as its core mechanisms.

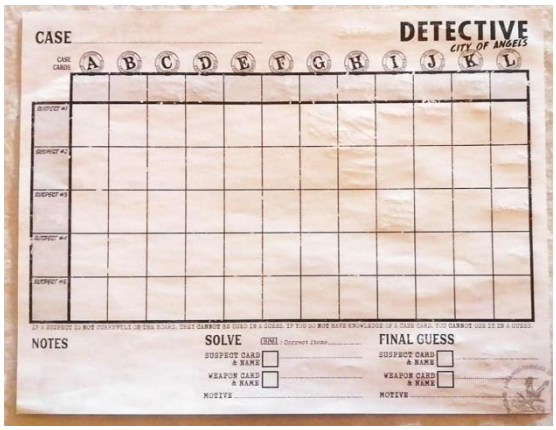



Fig. 19. Case sheet. Each player gets one to mark down their observations and notes.

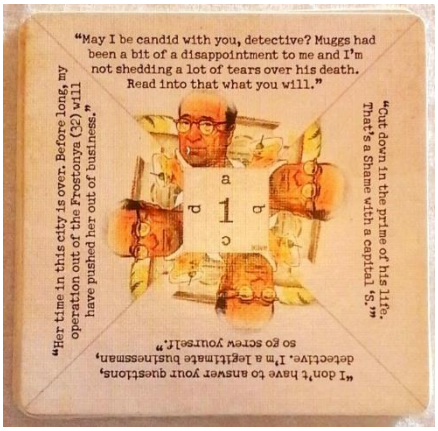



Fig. 20. A response card that the Chisel uses. They can choose one of four responses.

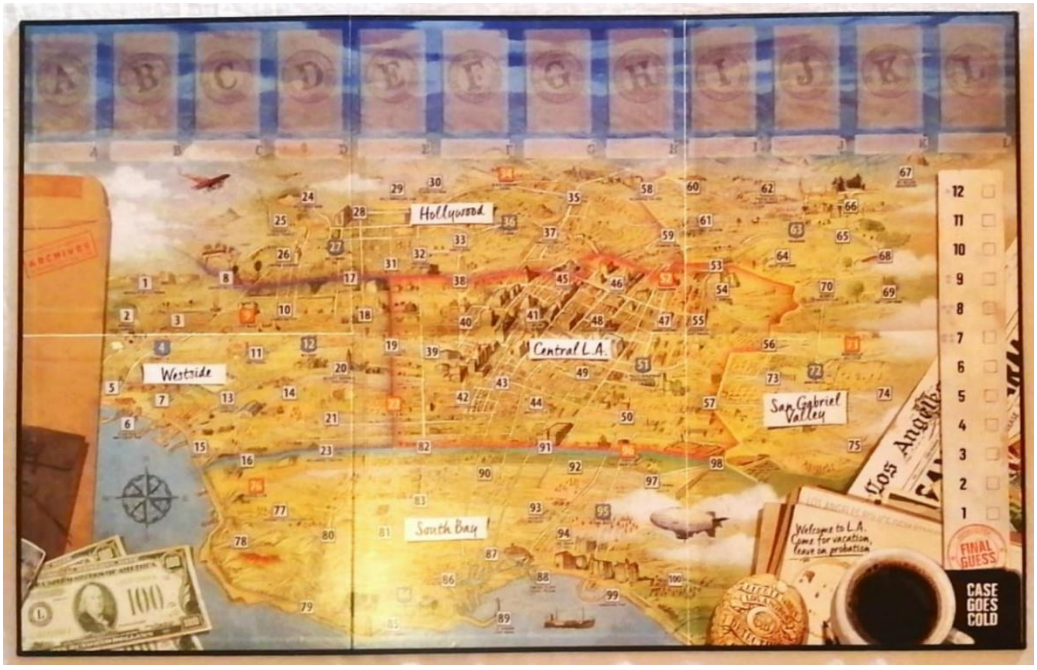



Fig. 21. The board. There are slots for evidence at the top. The board is divided into five districts which governs movement.

***Holding On: The Troubled Life of Billy Kerr*** (Hub Games - 2018) is a cooperative medical game. Players assume the role of nursing staff tasked with providing palliative care for the terminally ill. Your latest patient, Billy Kerr, has been rushed in following a heart attack. Players work together to manage Billy's pain, provide him with necessary medical treatment and gain his trust as you try to piece together the story of Billy's life. The game uses set collection and worker placement as its core mechanisms.

Fig. 22. Nurse pawns. The blue pawn has a stress token.

Fig. 23. Clear memory card.

Fig. 24. Patient cards. These tell the players what kind of care Billy needs.

***Legacy of Dragonholt*** (Fantasy Flight Games – 2017). It is important to note that the designer has said herself that in *Legacy of Dragonholt,* winning and losing is not black and white. Instead, the focus of the game should be on enjoying the far-reaching consequences of each decision made and enjoying the story. The game sets the action in the village of Dragonholt and allows the players to explore the places and people of the village. The game uses narrative choice as its core mechanic.

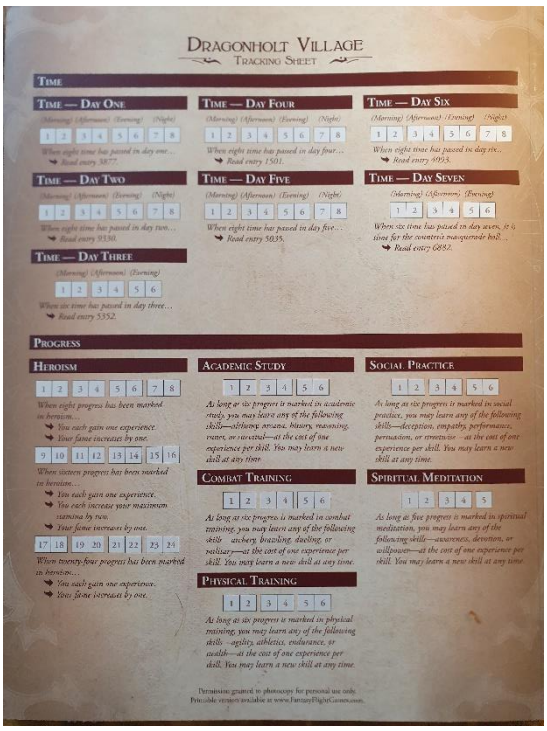



Fig. 25. Tracking sheet at the back of the Village book. This keeps track of time and important events.

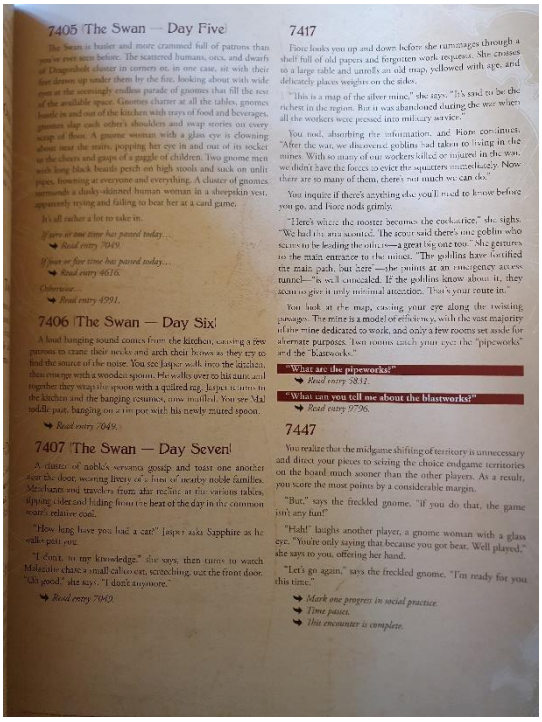



Fig. 26. Excerpt from the Village book. You will be directed to different entries in the book.

Fig. 27. Map of Village of Dragonholt and the Village book.

***Mansions of Madness Second Edition*** (Fantasy Flight Games – 2016) is a solo or cooperative app-driven game set in the world of Lovecraft's mythos. A selection of investigators is available to use by the players in the various mysteries available to play. Players will collect weapons, evidence and tools by interviewing suspects, solving puzzles and fighting monsters. The game uses variable player powers, a modular board and dice rolling as its core mechanisms.

Fig. 28. Some Monster miniatures that appear in different scenarios.

Fig. 29. Some of the available character cards. Each cards has stats, health and special abilities.

Fig. 30. One of the many location tiles. This tile shows the interior of a diner with its kitchen.

***Mice and Mystics*** (Plaid Hat Games – 2012) is a solo or cooperative game. The players take on the role of royal loyalists who have been turned into mice. By defeating spiders, rats and other enemies, players gain experience and upgrade their skills and weapons. Weapon and spell-based combat form the majority of the gameplay. The game uses dice-rolling, modular boards and variable player powers are the game's core mechanisms.

Fig. 31. A character card. It shows combat stats, special abilities and health.

Fig. 32. One of the location tiles with two of the Character miniatures.

Fig. 33. A page in the story book. The beginning of each chapter explains the objective, setup and special rules of the chapter.

***Pandemic Legacy*** (Z-Man Games – 2015) is a cooperative game that uses the Legacy system. The players are disease-fighting specialists, battling a series of epidemics popping up all over the world. The game can last between 12 and 24 sessions, depending on how well the players do. Choices and results from one game will affect future games. The game uses hand management and action points as its core mechanisms.

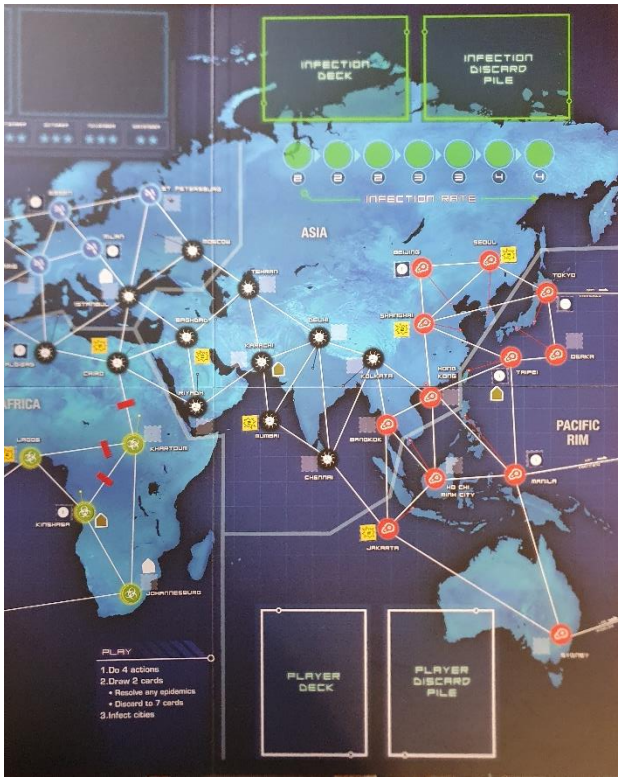



Fig. 34. Right side of the board. Stickers indicate outbreaks and unrest in cities.

Fig. 35. Two of many City cards, used to move, treat and research.

Fig. 36. A character card. He has been given a name, relationships and background info.

***Stuffed Fables*** (Plaid Hat Games – 2018) is a solo or cooperative game where players take on the role of stuffed animals protecting their little girl from Crepitus, the Nightmare King. Players will use their different coloured dice to take a range of actions that will allow them to fight Crepitus and his minions, travel through the world, help each other and heal. The game uses dice rolling as its core mechanisms.

Fig. 37. A character card. It contains info like her special abilities and how much stuffing she has.

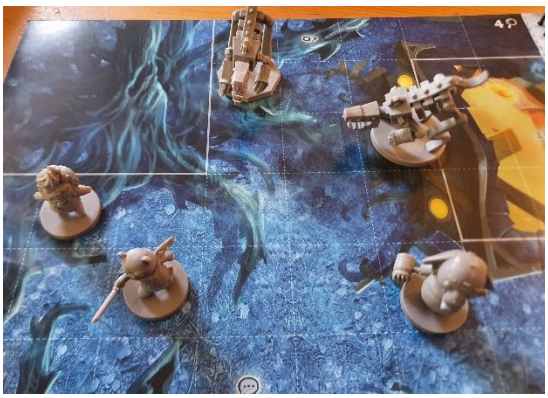
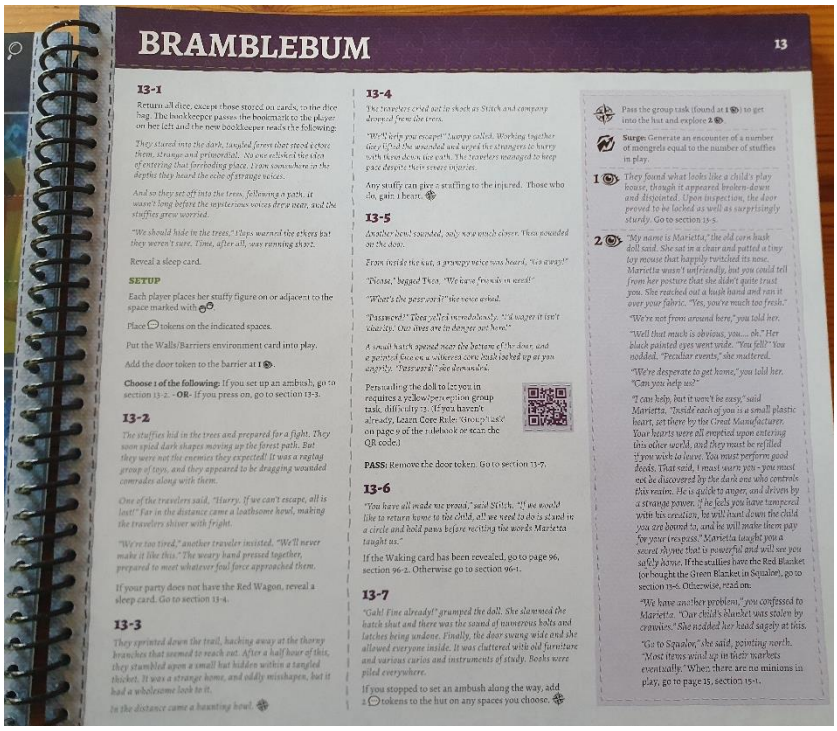


Fig. 38. A fight is underway on one of the maps in the Storybook. Pictured are two Enemy and three Character miniatures.



BRAMBLEBUM 13

13-1

Return all dice, except those stored on cards, to the dice bag. The bookkeeper passes the bookmark to the player on her left and the new bookkeeper reads the following:

*They stared into the dark, tangled forest that stood close them, strange and primordial. No one relished the idea of entering that foreboding place. From somewhere in the depths they heard the echo of strange voices.*

*And so they set off into the trees, following a path. It wasn't long before the mysterious voices drew near, and the stuffies grew worried.*

*"We should hide in the trees," Hops warned the others but they weren't sure. Time, after all, was running short.*

Reveal a sleep card.

**SETUP**

Each player places her stuffy figure on or adjacent to the space marked with

Place tokens on the indicated spaces.

Put the Walls/Barriers environment card into play.

Add the door token to the barrier at 1

**Choose 1 of the following:** If you set up an ambush, go to section 13-2. - **OR**- If you press on, go to section 13-3.

13-2

*The stuffies hid in the trees and prepared for a fight. They soon spied dark shapes moving up the forest path. But they were not the enemies they expected! It was a ragtag group of toys, and they appeared to be dragging wounded comrades along with them.*

*One of the travelers said, "Hurry. If we can't escape, all is lost!" Far in the distance came a loathsome howl, making the travelers shiver with fright.*

*"We're too tired," another traveler insisted. "We'll never make it like this." The weary band pressed together, prepared to meet whatever foul force approached them.*

If your party does not have the Red Wagon, reveal a sleep card. Go to section 13-4.

13-3

*They sprinted down the trail, hacking away at the thorny branches that seemed to reach out. After a half hour of this, they stumbled upon a small hut hidden within a tangled thicket. It was a strange home, and oddly misshapen, but it had a wholesome look to it.*

*In the distance came a haunting howl.*

13-4

*The travelers cried out in shock as Stitch and company drove off from the trees.*

*"We'll help you escape!" Happy called. Working together they lifted the wounded and urged the strangers to hurry with their dog-like gait. The travelers managed to keep pace despite their severe injuries.*

Any stuffy can give 2 stuffing to the injured. Those who do, gain 1 heart.

13-5

*Another howl sounded, only now much closer. Then wounded on the door.*

*From inside the hut, a grumpy voice was heard, "Go away!"*

*"Please," begged Theo. "We have friends in need!"*

*"What's the password?" the voice asked.*

*"Password?" Theo yelled incredulously. "I'd wager it isn't exactly. Our lives are in danger, not here!"*

*A small hatch opened near the bottom of the door, and a pointed face in a tattered cowl peeked up at you angrily. "Password," she demanded.*

Persuading the doll to let you in requires a yellow/green region group task, difficulty 12. (If you haven't already, Learn Core Rule: Group Tasks on page 9 of the rulebook or scan the QR code.)

**PASS:** Remove the door token. Go to section 13-7.

13-6

*"You have all made me proud," said Stitch. "If we would like to return home to the child, all we need to do is stand in a circle and hold paws before reciting the words Marietta taught us."*

If the Waking card has been revealed, go to page 96, section 96-2. Otherwise go to section 96-1.

13-7

*"Gah! Fine already!" grumped the doll. She slammed the hatch shut and there was the sound of numerous bolts and latches being undone. Finally, the door swung wide and she allowed everyone inside. It was cluttered with old furniture and various curios and instruments of study. Books were piled everywhere.*

If you stopped to set an ambush along the way, add 1 tokens to the hut on any spaces you choose.

Pass the group task (found at 1) to get into the hut and explore 2.

**Surge:** Generate an encounter of a number of mongrels equal to the number of stuffies in play.

1 *They found what looks like a child's play house, though it appeared broken-down and disjointed. Upon inspection, the door proved to be locked as well as surprisingly sturdy.* Go to section 13-5.

2 *"My name is Marietta," the old corn husk doll said. She sat in a chair and patted a tiny toy mouse that happily twitched its nose. Marietta wasn't unfriendly, but you could tell from her posture that she didn't quite trust you. She reached out a husk hand and ran it over your fabric. "Yes, you're much too fresh."*

*"We're not from around here," you told her.*

*"Well that much is obvious, you.... oh." Her black painted eyes went wide. "You fell!" You nodded. "Peculiar events," she muttered.*

*"We're desperate to get home," you told her. "Can you help us?"*

*"I can help, but it won't be easy," said Marietta. "Inside each of you is a small plastic heart, set there by the Great Manufacturer. Your hearts were all emptied upon entering this other world, and they must be refilled if you wish to leave. You must perform good deeds. That said, I must warn you - you must not be discovered by the dark one who controls this realm. He is quick to anger, and driven by a strange power. If he feels you have tampered with his creation, he will hunt down the child you are bound to, and he will make them pay for your trespass." Marietta taught you a secret chant that is powerful and will see you safely home. If the stuffies have the Red Blanket (or bought the Green Blanket in Squalor), go to section 13-6. Otherwise, read on.*

*"We have another problem," you confessed to Marietta. "Our child's blanket was stolen by crawlies." She nodded her head sagely at this.*

*"Go to Squalor," she said, pointing north. "Most items wind up in their markets eventually." When there are no minions in play, go to page 15, section 15-1.*

Fig. 39. A scenario page in the Storybook with the different section points.

***This War of Mine*** (Awaken Realms – 2017) is a solo or cooperative game, based on the video game of the same name. Players share responsibility for a group of civilians trapped in a besieged city. During the day they will improve their shelter and rest, and then go out scavenging in the dark of the night. The game uses dice-rolling, action points and push-your-luck as its primary mechanisms.

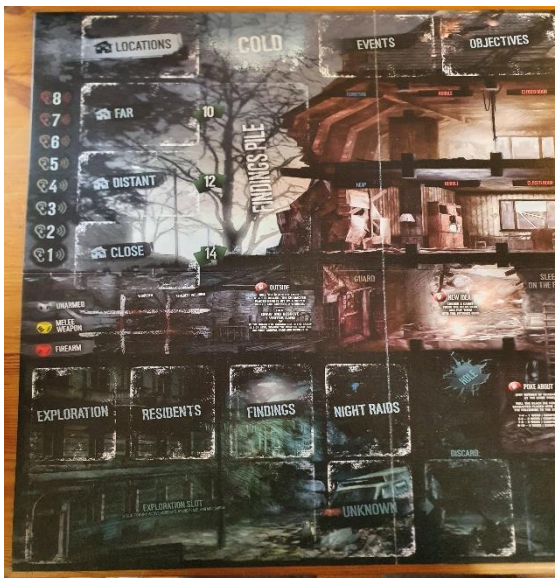
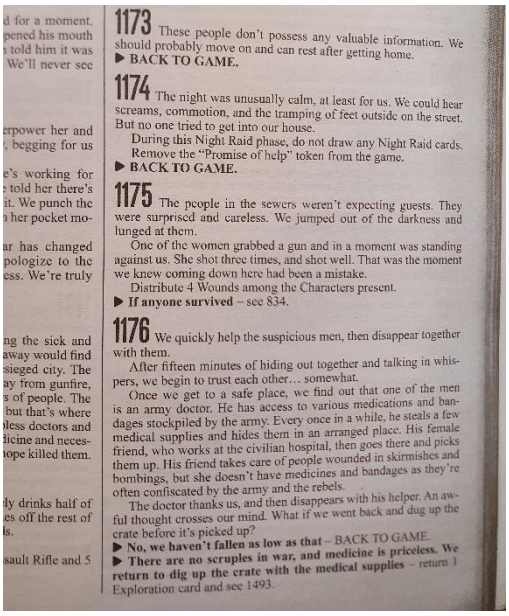



Fig. 40. Left side of the board. There are slots for card decks, including the decks (Far, Distant, Close) for the night phase.

Fig. 41. A character, event and action card.



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**1173** These people don't possess any valuable information. We should probably move on and can rest after getting home.
▶ **BACK TO GAME.**

**1174** The night was unusually calm, at least for us. We could hear screams, commotion, and the tramping of feet outside on the street. But no one tried to get into our house.

During this Night Raid phase, do not draw any Night Raid cards. Remove the "Promise of help" token from the game.
▶ **BACK TO GAME.**

**1175** The people in the sewers weren't expecting guests. They were surprised and careless. We jumped out of the darkness and lunged at them.

One of the women grabbed a gun and in a moment was standing against us. She shot three times, and shot well. That was the moment we knew coming down here had been a mistake.

Distribute 4 Wounds among the Characters present.
▶ **If anyone survived** – see 834.

**1176** We quickly help the suspicious men, then disappear together with them.

After fifteen minutes of hiding out together and talking in whispers, we begin to trust each other… somewhat.

Once we get to a safe place, we find out that one of the men is an army doctor. He has access to various medications and bandages stockpiled by the army. Every once in a while, he steals a few medical supplies and hides them in an arranged place. His female friend, who works at the civilian hospital, then goes there and picks them up. His friend takes care of people wounded in skirmishes and bombings, but she doesn't have medicines and bandages as they're often confiscated by the army and the rebels.

The doctor thanks us, and then disappears with his helper. An awful thought crosses our mind. What if we went back and dug up the crate before it's picked up?
▶ **No, we haven't fallen as low as that** – BACK TO GAME.
▶ **There are no scruples in war, and medicine is priceless. We return to dig up the crate with the medical supplies** – return 1 Exploration card and see 1493.

Fig. 42. An excerpt from The Book of Scripts. Players will be directed here at different moments.

***T.I.M.E Stories*** (Space Cowboys - 2015) is a cooperative game. As noted in the prologue, *T.I.M.E Stories* is actually a “shared central framework” which hosts a range of adventures which take place in the “White Cycle”. The first white box is called “T.I.M.E Stories” and contains the first adventure, “Asylum 1921”. While I will write about the system as a whole, my examples have come from the Asylum 1921 scenario to avoid confusion. The game uses variable player powers and dice rolling as its core mechanisms.

Fig. 43. Two of the character cards players can choose from.

Fig. 44. An item card used to solve one of the puzzles.

Fig. 45. The panorama of the dayroom.

Fig. 46. The same panorama, but with the cards flipped over.

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