

Understanding Player Elimination in Boardgames as a Form of Permadeath

Melissa J. Rogerson

Interaction Design Lab
School of Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia
melissa.rogerson@unimelb.edu.au

Martin Gibbs

Interaction Design Lab
School of Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia
martin.gibbs@unimelb.edu.au

Marcus Carter

Department of Media and Communications
University of Sydney
Sydney, Australia
marcus.carter@sydney.edu.au

Fraser Allison

Interaction Design Lab
School of Computing and Information Systems
The University of Melbourne
Melbourne, Australia
fraser.allison@unimelb.edu.au

Keywords

Player elimination, permadeath, boardgames

INTRODUCTION

Although the concept of permadeath has only relatively recently been embraced by videogames (Chang, Constantino, & Soderman, 2017; Keogh, 2013), boardgames have offered a form of permadeath for many years, in the form of player elimination. BoardGameGeek.com defines player elimination as “when a player can be eliminated from the game and the play continues without the eliminated player.” A player who loses all their money or resources, or is permanently defeated, loses agency within the game and is unable to participate, experiencing a form of permanent exclusion or death within the game context.

Extended Abstract Presented at DiGRA 2018

© 2018 Authors & Digital Games Research Association DiGRA. Personal and educational classroom use of this paper is allowed, commercial use requires specific permission from the author.

An absence of player elimination is a feature of modern European-style boardgames, which avoid direct confrontation and promote the idea that everyone is a potential winner right until the end, often using hidden scoring elements to prevent players from knowing who is leading. This contrasts with American-style boardgames where player elimination is a natural result of the high levels of direct player-to-player conflict. Aficionados of this genre claim that player elimination builds in-game tension and enacts thematic elements, and that it frees players from untenable – and potentially lengthy – losing situations.

The boardgame context of permanent exclusion is particularly interesting when it is considered in the light of both the importance of the sociality of play and the co-located nature of play. In a boardgame, not only does the setting continue despite the player's absence, but the player is effectively forced to witness it; they cannot simply log out or create a new identity, but must wait for the play to be completed. In these instances, it is often important that they not reveal critical information that they might hold about the game; for example, the identity of their own and other cards in a social deduction game like Werewolf. In some situations, they might even be required to continue to participate in some form, albeit without agency or the prospect of victory. An example of this is games of deduction, like *Cluedo* [*Clue*] (Pratt & Pratt, 1944), where the player must continue to provide requested information even after being eliminated (by making an incorrect accusation).

An additional form of short-term player elimination is found in games that are played over a series of rounds or intervals, where a player may be eliminated from a round rather than from the whole game. An example is the game *Diamant* (Faidutti & Moon, 2006), subsequently reissued as *Incan Gold*, a push-your-luck game which is played over a series of five rounds. Players can choose to leave a round early, guaranteeing a fixed amount of income from that round, or can play on and risk losing their prizes. Regardless of which they choose, all players start the next round together. Arguably, this is similar to Contract Bridge, where the Dummy player “may not participate in the play (except to play the cards of dummy's hand as directed by declarer) or make any comment on the bidding, play or score of the current deal.” (*Laws of Rubber Bridge, The International Code*, 2014, Law 43); the player's lack of agency is temporary.

In this paper, based on a thematic analysis of online discussions and forums, we discuss the different types of player elimination in boardgames and describe their consequences, examining the effects of these types of elimination on the player experience. We question what makes player elimination an acceptable experience within a boardgame, and test the assertion that meaningful play (Salen & Zimmermann, 2004) can make the difference between a ‘good’ and ‘bad’ experience (Carter & Allison, 2017).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was supported by funding from the Australian Research Council Discovery Project (DP140101871), the Australian Government Research Training Program, and the Microsoft Research Centre for Social Natural User Interfaces.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Carter, M., & Allison, F. (2017). Fear, loss and meaningful play: Permadeath in DayZ. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 9(2), 143-158. doi: 10.1386/jgvw.9.2.143_1

- Chang, A., Constantino, J., & Soderman, B. (2017). The multiple lives of permadeath: An introduction. *Journal of Gaming & Virtual Worlds*, 9(2), 103-121. doi: 10.1386/jgvw.9.2.103_1
- Faidutti, B., & Moon, A. R. (2006). *Diamant*. Munich, DE: Schmidt Spiele.
- Keogh, B. (2013). When game over means game over: using permanent death to craft living stories in Minecraft *IE '13 Proceedings of the 9th Australasian Conference on Interactive Entertainment: Matters of Life and Death*. Melbourne, Australia. New York, NY: ACM.
- Laws of Rubber Bridge, The International Code*. (2014). (North American ed.). Horn Lake, MS: American Contract Bridge League (ACBL).
- Pratt, A. E., & Pratt, E. (1944). *Cluedo*: Hasbro.
- Salen, K., & Zimmermann, E. (2004). *Rules of Play. Game Design Fundamentals*. Massachusetts: MIT Press.