Back to Basics

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THERE seems to be a trend in recent years for new games to be bigger and brighter than their predecessors. This is especially obvious in the board game industry, where new titles released each year try out out-do each other in terms of production and appeal, but it also seems to be happening in the video game industry.[1]

Big production is *in*. Games are coming in bigger boxes, with more components, more detailed boards, and longer rule books to cope. And they certainly look good! A big, glossy, colourful box is eye-catching on the shelf. But what about the games themselves? Progress in this respect is not as encouraging, as the design of the underlying games appears to be taking second priority to marketing concerns.

Market Pressure

Industry contacts – both designers and publishers – are worried about this trend, but there is little incentive to arrest it. Consider the main publicity outlets for board games these days: large trade shows such as Essen SPIELE where thousands of games must compete for the attention of the crowds filing past, and online funding campaigns such as Kickstarter where presentation and unique selling points are paramount.

Kickstarter stretch goals – bonus features to be added if certain funding milestones are met – further exacerbate the problem. Designers are obliged to list speculative features that look and sound good but which are not guaranteed to eventuate; these are by definition optional and not essential to the core game and may not even have been tested extensively. And in the event that the stretch goals are actually reached, then even if the game does end up being playable – which is not guaranteed! – those bonus features must be added whether they truly add value or not.

Form Over Function

A friend recently pointed out that there appears to be some confusion now between good game design and simply piling up mechanisms. 'Wow, 40 pages of rules,' he joked, 'it must be good!'

I experienced this phenomenon first hand when another friend introduced me to one of last year's most popular board games, and I literally fell asleep at the table at least twice in the 15 minutes it took him to explain the rules (sorry Ken!).

And the experience of playing that game was not much better; this popular design from a popular designer piled complexity upon complexity, until every action felt micromanaged under the sheer weight of rules that I could barely remember. These rules were probably carefully playtested, fine-tuned and balanced, but the simple enjoyment of play seemed to have been lost along the way. I am not rushing to play that one again.

Getting Back on Track

This trend towards 'bigger is better' may be attributed to a cult of the new, and the emergence of a new generation of gamers for whom the classics of the past are quaint antiquities that lack the 'wow' factor and instant gratification of the latest blockbusters, and do not look as impressive on the shelf. So what can be done about this trend?

Designers have the power to refocus their attention on good design, and to resist market-driven temptations such as planned obsolescence in games. Players have the power of their wallet. If a game is underwhelming, do not buy its expansions, or the Star Wars-themed version, or next year's bloated offering; they will probably not be any better.

My own preference is for abstract strategy games, which allow deep play with simple, elegant rule sets [1], although much of any game's complexity can be hidden in the rules [2] and equipment [3] if it is well designed. But this Editorial is not necessarily a call for a return to simplicity, but rather a return to the principles of good design; even complex games can be attractive, elegant and engaging if they are carefully thought through and implemented.

Designers should concentrate on making games that players will enjoy for years rather than games that fly off the store shelves but are quickly forgotten. This is a call to restore games as works of art rather than consumer content.

This Issue

This issue's contributions highlight this theme of going back to the basics (of design). While this is an undercurrent of all previous issues, it is especially prevalent here.

The opening article 'Stained Glass', from Nikoli's Yoshinao Anpuku and translator Ken Shoda, describes a simple Japanese logic puzzle

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[1]http://www.gamesradar.com/video-games-have-become-too-complex-and-need-regress/

inspired by the design of stained glass windows, with carefully pared-down rules.

The article 'Disthex: A New Twist on Hex', co-authored with Japanese game designer Ryoji Ishii, describes the design of an elegant new Hex variant called Disthex. This game shows a good understanding of Hex, as a simple rule change complements the existing rules while fundamentally changing the character of the game.

William Kretschmer then dives into the complex world of group theory with 'Groups in Circle Puzzles', to describe a family of mechanical puzzles with an unashamedly mathematical basis. This piece demonstrates how fundamental mathematical principles can translate directly to interesting games and puzzles. Carl Hoff follows this with his back-story of the development of another maths-based mechanical puzzle in 'From Untouchable 11 to Hazmat Cargo'.

My piece 'Ludoku: A Game Design Experiment' describes the somewhat deliberate design process behind a new Sudoku variant called Ludoku, in an effort to create a simplified version of the original game that is still strategically deep. You can judge the result for yourself, as Ludoku is this issue's 'feature puzzle', with challenges printed throughout the issue were space permits.

'Edit Games' by Daniel Ashlock and Andrew McEachern then describes how the well-known concept of 'edit games' can be extended to describe families of existing games and puzzles, as well as used to create new ones.

João Pedro Neto and colleague Jorge Nuno Silva return to one of the most basic games of all in 'Measuring Drama in Snakes & Ladders'. They show how simple metrics can be used evaluate variants, to help find interesting new twists on even the simplest of games.

Sofiia Yermolaieva and Joseph Brown examine one of the most basic pieces of game-playing equipment in 'Dice Design Deserves Discourse'. They show that players' preferences are not always the most practical when it comes to design.

My article 'Tension in Puzzles' aims to define the somewhat nebulous notion of 'tension' in terms of games, and extend this concept to puzzle design. The issue concludes with a reprint of Richard Garfield's classic piece on 'Games and Politics', which includes the first known description of the 'kingmaker effect' in print.

References

[1] Browne, C., 'Elegance in Game Design', *IEEE Transactions of Computational Intelligence and AI in Games*, vol. 4, no. 3, 2012, pp. 229–240.

[2] Browne, C., 'Make the Design Do the Work', *Game & Puzzle Design*, vol. 2, no. 2, 2016, pp. 27–40.

[3] Browne, C., 'Embed the Rules', *Game & Puzzle Design*, vol. 1, no. 1, 2015, pp. 60–70.

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Ludoku Challenges #1 and #2

Fill the grid with numbers 1..9 such that no number is repeated in any row or column, and the diagonal neighbours of a number do not repeat that number *or each other*. Ludoku is described on pages 35–46.

Ludoku #1 (Easy)

					6			
	2	1					5	
1			9	2			3	
			5	4	6	8		
		8	7		2	5		
		5	4	9	8			
	4			7	1			8
	6					3	4	
		2						

Ludoku #2 (Medium)

			3	6				
		8			5			
					6		4	
	9	7	1		4			8
6				7				1
4			8		2	1	3	
	7		5					
			9			4		
				8	9			