

# Games and Politics

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*In games with more than two players, politics invariably occur in one form or another. This paper describes an unfortunate side-effect of such games which I call the kingmaker effect. It was first published in 1997 in The Duelist magazine [1].*

### 1 Introduction

**I**N my experience critiquing games, the concept that has caused the most dispute is politics. I refer to a game as political if it has more than two players, or sides, and during a significant portion of the game the other players could agree to make you lose. Two-sided games, like Magic, Chess, Bridge, and Basketball, are never political.

Right now my study of political games is riddled with judgement calls, making it far from precise. For example, Yahtzee is a game for more than two players that isn't particularly political: I could win even if everyone else decides I shouldn't. Risk is highly political, however, since one person cannot expect to beat the rest of the players allied together unless they account for less than half the power in the game.

There are some good things about political games. Any player usually has a chance to catch up, no matter how far behind he or she might be. A political game is as deep as the players wish to make it: simple and straightforward, or convoluted and laden with conspiracy.

That said, I lean towards games where politics take a back seat. I haven't always felt that way, but over the years I have found that when I played games with a strong political component, the game itself didn't matter much.

### 2 Playing Nicely With Others

There is a wide array of opinions, often passionate, about the role of politics in games, with equally intelligent folk at all extremes. Most people who have played a lot have had some good experiences with political games. It is always hard to draw conclusions from past game experience, though, because good players can make any game fun. Similarly, it is hard to determine whether a political game is itself at fault or if the players aren't playing well. When someone is always whining about being behind, is that a problem with the player or the game?

Players often increase their enjoyment of political games by establishing unwritten rules of conduct. I know circles where whining is pun-

ished by group attacks. Other groups forbid negotiations, or only allow players to exert limited influence. Players are commonly expected to maximise their personal position even when they have no chance of winning. Often it is difficult to figure out exactly what the rules are, and playing around on the boundary of what is acceptable is risking group displeasure. When the game depends on unwritten rules, I usually credit the players with creating a lot of the fun, rather than the game.

There is a lot of potential for abuse in games where players can trade resources freely, since two players who cannot win individually could flip a coin and give the winner all their pooled resources to create a single viable position. To prevent such abuse, groups sometimes outlaw coin flips or random decisions, but players can still circumvent such efforts by alternating the 'winner' between games or by developing understandings. For example, if John is out of the running in this game and gives me good trades or gifts, he will get reciprocal consideration in the future.

### 3 Bad Games and Good Politics

Many features crop up frequently in political games that I consider bad game elements. A major part of the strategy in a political game is to draw attention to other people's positions and attempt to play them off against one another. One of the easiest ways to do this is to take a weak position. This may not immediately appear to be bad, but the implications are profound: if you *choose* a weak position, then it is not actually weak. And if weak positions really have the same power, then how you play the game doesn't make much difference. What really matters is how you play the players, whether the game is Risk or Family Business.

One of the most unpleasant features of a political game is what I refer to as *kingmaking*. Kingmaking happens when a player who has no chance of winning can choose who does win. This holds some charm for beginners, because being a kingmaker allows revenge against irritating players, and justifies diplomacy – the winner is chosen