

## Narrative Levels in Game Design

I have been making board games since I was about three years old, but only in the last year or two have I tried selling any of them. In good capitalist style, this has changed my consciousness of the design process. Since I started Mad Sheep Games, I've had a number of people ask me for advice on game design, and I realized that I'd never really thought about it much before. I've been thinking about it a bit since then, and—as is my wont—organizing my thoughts in terms of the social history of gaming. What follows is partly a reflection on design, and partly on history, and I suppose it poses more questions than it answers. The questions focus on two ideas that are, I think, essential to either critiquing games in their historical context, or designing new ones. I have termed these “sujet” and “fabula”, phrases which I am stealing and misusing from the Russian Formalists (who, in my defense, weren't using them). I wouldn't be pillaging Shklovsky's terminology without reason: mathematical game theory has developed a very precise language for talking about games, but this is not at all shared by gamers or designers. For instance, I have had long and numerous arguments with people who claim that chess is a “totally random” game, though clearly it has no non-deterministic elements. Bearing that in mind, I want to be very cautious in setting up these distinctions.

Games often present elaborate narratives that accompany their mechanics. In some cases, these narratives are specifically inspired by external media such as novels (e.g. *Sherlock Holmes – The Mystery of the Mummy*<sup>†</sup>), television series (e.g. *Firefly – The Game*), or the like. In a few cases, the game itself creates a narrative that inspires stories in other media, such as the novels based on *Dungeons and Dragons* or *Warhammer*; or the movie version of *Clue*. More typically, however, game designers create a unique—though often minimalist—storyline that ornaments the mechanics of game-play. Thus a pinball game might be decorated with generic pirate imagery, so by hitting “treasure maps” you open gates that allow you to reach “chests of gold”. None of this affects the basic mechanism of game play; we can imagine the exact same playfield redecorated with *Miami Vice* decor, or African safari imagery. These changes of ornamentation might affect the atmosphere of the game, but they are strictly irrelevant to the strategy and flow of game-play.

However, even if we strip away all the ornamental narration, game mechanics tell their own stories, and create their own sense of drama, which I am terming fabula. For instance, the mechanics of blackjack tell a story about trying to get as close as possible to an edge without going over it. There is a specific quality of emotional tension in blackjack based on that narrative. That tension is there if we are playing modern blackjack with a fresh and sterile casino deck, in a noisy, oxygen-pumped room in Vegas, surrounded by hustlers and whales and showgirls. But it is also there if we are playing *veintiuno* in a quiet bar in Seville in 1587, using a tarot deck full of complex, quasi-occult decorations. Barring a few changes in rules, the fabula is the same in both situations; what has changed is the additional content; the sujet.

Blackjack, like many classic card games, appears to have rather little sujet: just the now-abstract decorations on the cards, and a few pieces of terminology like “hit me” or “going bust”. I think we should be wary of minimizing these minor elements. Still, we can certainly note that the vast difference in the emotional experience of blackjack and (say) poker is almost entirely due to differences in the games' mechanics. The cards are identical, the context and terminology is quite similar. But the fabula of poker is about bluffing and psychological brinksmanship, whereas the fabula of blackjack is largely about mathematical risk assessment.

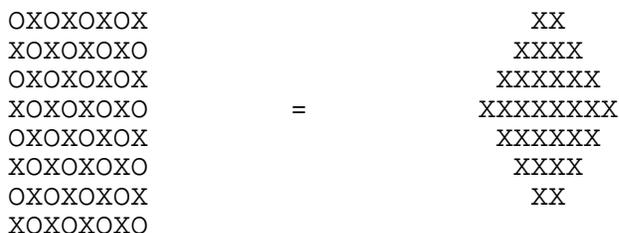
We can test this distinction by looking at abstract games; games that ostensibly have no sujet at all. This list includes many card games and sports, simple pattern-based games, and the like. Tic-tac-toe, go, bowling, *Othello*, *Blokus*, *Set*, and my own game *Tryptic* all seem to be devoid of sujet. Under closer scrutiny, however, we see that virtually all such games make certain “decorative” narrative choices. Tsukuda Original's choice of the name *Othello* references Shakespearean tragedy and racial conflict, while the design of the board and the black-and-white tiles reference the game of go. All these decisions add up to a portentous sense that *Othello* is a very serious, intellectual game: a point underscored by Tsukuda's tagline “A minute to learn...a lifetime to master!” Older versions of *Reversi*, which is mechanically the same game, date back at least the 1880s. They often feature chess-board or Chinese-checkers-style boards, sometimes with marbles instead of tiles, and they use various other color combinations, with red/green being a popular favorite. These differences are purely stylistic, and yet they were enough for *Othello* to become a roaring success, where *Reversi* never was. Goro

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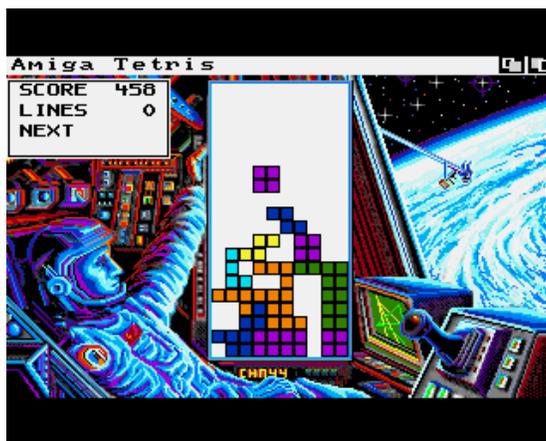
<sup>†</sup> I hope it will not seem contrived to adopt a convention of italicizing modern games associated with particular creators, as we do with other texts. Contrived or not, it seems like a necessity given the confusing nature of many game titles.

Hasegawa even alleged that he had invented the game from scratch. Clearly even a minimal sujet can have a large impact.

Again, draughts or checkers appears to have no sujet, but the board layout and the reference to “kings” both suggest chess (which has a very well-established sujet). This is especially true if we consider that checkers does not actually *use* half the squares on the board, and could be played equally well on a smaller diamond-shaped board (as shown below), or similar layouts. Indeed, most earlier versions of draughts, such as *al qirq*, were played on boards without any redundant spaces. The sujet of checkers has also changed several times to emphasize the terminology of chess, responding to fluctuations in the name and gender of the pieces. By the 1800s, the actual mechanics of chess had adopted the idea of pawn promotion from checkers, where it has probably existed since the 1200s. In short, chess and checkers seem to be coevolving, imitating each other at both mechanical and superficial levels.



Another example of a game with very little sujet is Pajitnov's *Tetris*. The fabula combines rotational geometry and pattern-matching with nerve-wracking suspense and progressively increasing difficulty. The original version was a strictly abstract game, except perhaps for a play on the word “tennis” that missed its audience. This situation did not last long. Outside the USSR, *Tetris* was branded as a Soviet game, perhaps even an emblem of Gorbachev's “new” Soviet Union. Game Boy added a Russian folk musical motif, the traditional piece *Korobeiniki*, which quickly became one of the most iconic “theme songs” of all time. Again, we see this sujet in the 1988 Amiga *Tetris* (image courtesy of Wikipedia) and Pig With the Face of a Boy's elaborate music video *A Complete History of the Soviet Union Arranged to the Music of Tetris*, also set to *Korobeiniki*. Yet as the screen capture from Amiga demonstrates, *Tetris* did not really integrate its fabula and sujet. The picture of the cosmonaut is strictly decoration, one of a number of stock images of the USSR. The song plays in the background and sets a certain tone, but is not really relevant.

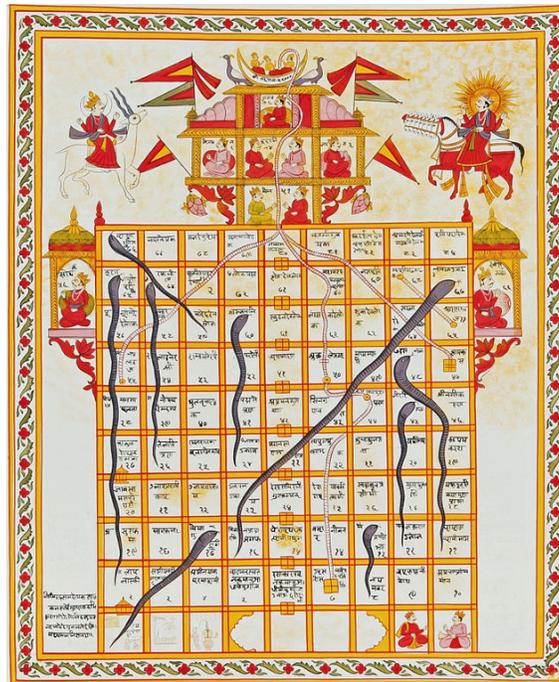


This acquisition of culturally laden decorations seems to be a common fate for abstract games. Early pinball and pachinko games, for instance, had very little decoration. In the United States, pinball faced stiff moral and legal opposition for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest decorations on pinball games (e.g. on

*Baffle Ball*) often vaguely suggest a baseball diamond, or other games of skill; these were later superseded by patriotic themes. None of this was an accident. The cultural arguments against pinball focused on whether or not it was a game of skill, culminating in the 1976 hearing where Roger Sharpe demonstrated his pinball chops in the courtroom, explicitly comparing it to baseball. By that point, the American pinball machines that had survived destruction at the hands of sledgehammer-wielding moralists were diversifying across a wide range of themes, including some that were virtually X-rated. (This sujet boom does not seem to have happened with pachinko until much later). As with Amiga's *Tetris*, though, the sujet of pinball games usually had nothing to do with the game mechanics. Pinball mechanics tells a story about influencing a fast-moving, hectic physical system through very limited controls. That fabula remains the same whether the sujet is baseball, Marilyn Monroe, or K.I.S.S.

Similar dynamics appear with every major family of games. For instance, the pachisi family of games have a fabula that emphasizes players blocking one another's progress. In keeping with that, their sujets often emphasize frustration: think of names like *Sorry!*, *Aggravation*, and *He ce сърди човече*, which translates to "don't get angry, man". But in other respects, their sujet seems to jump around on the basis of cultural whims. *Ludo* is stripped down to a sort of an art-deco feel. *Parcheesi: The Royal Game of India* has a design and packaging that suggests it is ancient and exotic, while *Trouble* went the opposite route, with a futuristic plastic board (at least for 1965) and the famous Pop-O-Matic dice.

The simple chase games in the snakes-and-ladders / game-of-geese family are also illustrative, especially as they have become the archetype for almost all Western board games. *Paramapada sapaanam*, in its ancient versions, seems to have had a didactic religious sujet: in some versions, the squares on the board are explicitly seen as reincarnations of the soul.



Game of geese, whose origins are fairly obscure (and the subject of much dubious speculation) may also have had some moral lesson: many versions depict the *golden* goose, laying golden eggs, which seems like a reference to Aesop. Other modifications of the game, like John Harris' 1804 game *Emulation* (which my cousin Beth introduced me to) were even more explicitly didactic. Harris explains that children playing *Emulation* would:

“...be led, almost imperceptibly, to admire and adopt the virtues of Obedience, Truth, Honesty, Gentleness, Industry, Frugality, Forgiveness, Carefulness, Mercy, and Humility; and to view in their real colours the opposite vices of Obstinacy, Falsehood, Robbery, Passion, Sloth, Intemperance, Malice, Neglect, Cruelty and Pride.”

This seems quite a lot to ask from a game whose entire mechanic involves spinning a top and moving your piece the resulting number of spaces. Meanwhile, more commercially-minded game designers took other routes, repackaging game-of-goose into a wide variety of play and adventure themes, such as *Candyland*. Even now, it would appear that most board games are, by default, modified versions of game-of-goose.

These sketch histories bring us to the real question, which is quite relevant to game design: how do sujet and fabula interact? Harris' claims about the moral lessons contained in a purely random game seem far-fetched. Surely the *actual* lesson of *Emulation*—the lesson in the fabula—is not that Industry and Gentleness are admirable virtues, but that the race goes to the lucky. At the same time, the fabula of snakes-and-ladders is not too far removed from the way that Hindus and Buddhists often describe reincarnation. Again, it seems significant that there are no examples of Pachisi being used as a didactic game. The fabula of pachisi is about frustration and blocking your opponent's ambitions. Backgammon, which is mechanically similar to pachisi, has been called the “cruellest game on earth”. In Raffi Khatchadourian's *New Yorker* article, he mentions a literal backgammon death match between two strangers in Moscow. Superficially, the mechanics of backgammon and pachisi are not so different from game-of-goose. You roll dice, and you move pieces around a board. But their fabula are completely different. No one is going to use backgammon for a Sunday-school lesson about Industry and Gentleness, and no one is going to play a *Candyland* death match, either.

Patrick Lee recently proposed that the early video game *Where in Time is Carmen Sandiego* (1989) better captures the sujet of the *Dr. Who* television series than any of the video games that were actually direct spin-offs of the show. Lee writes:

*Doctor Who is a show that celebrates creativity, wit, courage, pacifism, and the infinite possibilities of adventure, but the Doctor Who video games are about following instructions, pushing boxes, collecting trinkets, and listening to context-free zingers.*

We can plausibly generalize this insight: games are at their best when the fabula and sujet complement one another, rather than work at cross-purposes. There is a reason why *Emulation* has disappeared, and why pinball games tend to have themes that connote frantic activity, rather than quiet contemplation. This is an analysis that seems to pay dividends, now and then. For instance, of the many electric-loop-sounds-a-buzzer games, once a staple of county fairs and *Boys Life* DIY projects, why has *Operation* lasted while the others fell by the wayside? The answer has to involve the fact that the nervous tension of precise hand-eye-coordination coupled with unforgiving, instant disaster works well with the sujet of surgery. Among the other versions of this game that I've seen, we might highlight an attempt to trace the outline of Bart Simpson's spiky hair. Challenging as that may be, it connotes an emotional narrative than has nothing to do with fabula in question. *Operation* wins.

There are, however, questions. I ask myself: what about a game like *Bioshock: Infinite?* (Which I should note here that I've never actually played.) It won universal acclaim, despite the extraordinary dissonance between the intricate, nuanced political intrigue of its sujet, and the fabula, which seems little removed from *Duck Hunter*. What about tabletop role playing games? Back in 1980, Cecil Adams wrote that *Dungeons and Dragons* “requires nonstop mathematical finagling that would constipate Einstein [and]...combines the charm of a Pentagon briefing with the excitement of double-entry bookkeeping.” We might extend this observation to point out that the mechanisms of most RPGs slow down and become more mathematical exactly when the action in the sujet speeds up (typically during combat). Yet the genre has been popular, to say the least.

And what about *Monopoly*, surely the most commercially successful modern board game, which tends to belie the usual claim that it is one of the worst designed? *Monopoly* has its origins in a game designed by Lizzie Phillips in 1903, intended to have a didactic sujet in favor of Henry George's economic theories. That narrative was flipped on its head by Parker Brothers in the 1930s, who created a sujet based on cutthroat capitalism in the notorious gangland town of Atlantic City. More recently, we have seen a proliferation of licensed and unlicensed *x-polies*, put out by your local chamber of commerce, and the fans and/or marketing department of every show on television. Thus we have *Betty Boop Monopoly*, *Duluthopoly*, and so forth. Clearly, this is not a game that is too concerned with its sujet.

*Dungeons and Dragons* and *Monopoly*, however, are both games which tend to be heavily modified by house rules. It is a truism that games, like folk music, are always evolving, but this does not mean they are all

evolving at the same rate. Chess mechanics have changed quite a number of times, including some radical departures like the *sittuyin* and “short assize” layouts, both of which speed up the game. But this has occurred over the course of centuries, and chess today is hardly different from chess in the 1700s, except for the occasional use of timers. By contrast, almost every household has a different way of playing *Monopoly*. Role-playing and collectible-card games are similarly protean, to such an extent that the “official” rules are often restricted to formal tournaments, and create a very different fabula than the way the games are normally played among friends. Similarly, I have seen children take games with cooperative, didactic sujets (“let's all work together to save the whales”) and quickly repurpose them: (“let's divide into teams and whoever saves the whales *first* wins!”) In still other cases, the game designers seem to be aware that players aren't happy with the game mechanics as is, and encouraging modifications without making those modifications canonical. Witness, for instance, the proliferation of cheat codes for video games.

We might argue, then, that as games evolve, their fabula and sujet are seeking to complement one another, or else die trying. *Bioshock Infinite* seems to rely on the first-person-shooter mechanism mainly out of tradition, the way that *Monopoly* and *Trivial Pursuit* rely on the game-of-goose mechanism, even though that isn't really the direction their sujet is headed. *Monopoly's* other mechanic, more closely aligned with its sujet, is a resource/investment game. That field has come into own with games like *Settlers of Catan* and *Agricola*, that have no simple-chase mechanics left at all. Notably, although there are randomized elements in *Catan*, they don't affect the investment mechanism itself, whereas in *Monopoly* the choice of what to invest in is essentially made by the roll of the dice. Perhaps at some point the descendants of *Bioshock Infinite* will transcend the FPS mechanic in a similar manner. Again, in the computerized versions of RPGs, which are now legion, all the “mathematical finagling” is done by the machine, which (crucially) allows complex battles to take place in more or less real-time.

I have been focused here on the evolution of games, and I do believe that games are a good example of an evolutionary field. Humans must play, but we are not locked into playing any particular game, so there is ample room for selective pressures to operate. I have many doubts about whether or not the analysis I'm presenting here is an adequate description of how games evolve. (*Monopoly* is so bad, and has done so well...) As a game *designer*, though, I'm quite convinced. The quickest way to design a terrible game is to take an off-the-shelf mechanism like game-of-goose or first-person-shooters, and then try to paste a new theme over it. Similarly, I think the best approach to designing games is to introduce new mechanics, with new fabula, and find a sujet that matches those fabula.

Though not necessarily in that order.