

A Transmedia Comparison of Digital and Tabletop Board Games
Brian Magerko
Experimental Game Lab
Georgia Institute of Technology

Digital computer games are a relatively new entertainment medium that has formed several distinct genres, such as first-person shooter games or real-time strategy games. Each genre has associated with it a typical set of mechanisms that the players use to interact with the game model (i.e. game mechanics). The evolution of mechanics over the past several decades have both given way to new genres (e.g. the real-time strategy game) as well as solidified earlier game experiences (e.g. the arcade shooter). Designers use previous games, real world systems (e.g. biological processes or how cities are run), films, and pure imagination to create new game experiences. However, the design of digital games has yet to heavily focus a wealth of applied game mechanics used in a medium far older and more matured than they are - board games.

Board games have an incredibly varied set of mechanics that has only blossomed in the current rise of popularity of board games in the West. A quick review of a major board game site, Board Game Geek, elicits a list of mechanics, such as "crayon rail system" and "auction/bidding", which are rarely discussed if at all in the digital game world. I contend that both being more familiar with this domain as well as making use of a transmedia comparison between the digital and analog domains can help designers be more fluent in the language of game mechanics.

This paper will present the research goals of the Digital Tabletop research group, which are to: a) identify the key game mechanics in board games that make them engaging or entertaining and then b) identify how those mechanics relate to current or hypothetical digital games. Rather than simply explore how board games can be adopted to digital counterparts, we are interested in how understanding the underlying mechanics can be used to influence design innovation in the digital realm. A secondary interest is in exploring the opposite relationship by studying digital games that have been adapted as board games (e.g. Doom or Starcraft). This paper will go through several case studies of analyzing modern board games, present our findings, and point to a generalized approach to conducting this type of transmedia analysis. We will review: Munchkin, a card-based game that is a humorous take on traditional RPG games; Ra, an auction-based board game that presents incredibly complex odds calculations for players; Starcraft, a board game adaptation of the famous digital game; Settlers of Catan, a famous tile-based board game; and Lost Cities, a card game based on chance and exploration.

We anticipate that this work will lead towards a contribution to the larger question of building a taxonomy of game mechanics, such as the one currently under development by Zagal and Mateas. Having a common language and set of references across games, digital and analog, is key in being able to constructively discuss, compare, and analyze the mechanics of games. This paper will look towards this future work and describe a methodology of surveying games with a specific mechanic in mind (e.g. cooperative play) to contribute to such a taxonomy.