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Anni's research interests include researching alternative approaches to game design and how they impact the final product, but she has a preference to design said games rather than writing about her findings, since sometimes those topics are extremely hard to put into writing.

SKETCH FIRST, PLAY LATER

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Abstract

Every designer has their method when designing a game, be it a video game, boardgame or even an alternative controller game (or anything else that fits in the middle). There are multiple methods to choose from, designers tend to stick with the methods they have been taught or the more popular ones, while some prefer to explore to find something that makes more sense for them by exploring alternatives. One of the many alternative approaches to game design is starting from the illustration, which can be somewhat unconventional since visuals are the last thing to be produced, but starting from the end can aid the design process by setting a theme from the beginning to serve as an anchor for the mechanics and narrative present in the game. Various boardgames have utilised this approach with multiple levels of success, *Scythe* designed by Jamey Stegmaier and published by Stonemaier Games in 2016, is an example where the design started from the illustration. The illustrations created by Jakub Rozalski inspired the creation of the narrative for the game and inspired certain game mechanics. Games such as *Sleeping Gods*, designed by Ryan Laukat and published by Red Raven Games, and *Flamecraft*, designed by Manny Vega and published by Cardboard Alchemy, are other examples where the illustration has either been what kickstarted the design process or has heavily influenced the final game. Having these examples leads to an investigation of better understanding of how illustration can originate the design of a boardgame or influence its design process, to achieve this some game designers have been invited to participate in an interview to gather intel to understand the validity of this approach, its flaws and how designers from different background utilise illustration while creating a boardgame.

Introduction

This research does not intend to provide a holy grail or a new revolutionary way to design boardgames. Rather, it explores an alternative approach to designing said games, in this case, processes that have started or have been heavily influenced by illustration. If this topic seems interesting, I invite you to continue reading and hopefully by the end it will generate a discussion about alternative approaches to game design, but if your objective, as a reader of this research, is to find the “correct way” of designing boardgames, this is the wrong expectation.

The idea of starting to explore an illustrated approach to game design appeared while deciding on the topic of the dissertation to obtain my master’s degree in Game Design and Playful Media at Universidade Lusófona, which quickly expanded from being a report on the design process of one boardgame to explore an alternative approach to game design applied to boardgames. This specific approach arose after an initial conversation with my advisor where my academic and professional background (animation and illustration) were discussed along with how it could help create an interesting investigation. This led to the suggestion of researching boardgames where the design started or was heavily influenced by illustrations, attempting to develop a method that other designers could follow in their projects.

Alongside showing the possibility of starting the game design process with an illustration, determining what are the benefits/disadvantages and, eventually, theorising how this approach can be systemised, this research also revisits popular

game design frameworks that are taught to students. Since those frameworks have been developed with videogames in mind, they cause some issues when transposed to boardgames, but that isn’t the only issue with them, since there are debates if the designer benefits from having a rigid framework when it comes to game design.

Since the illustration is a central element of this research it is essential to define the word. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines illustration as “a picture or diagram that helps make something clear or attractive” (Merriam-Webster, n.d, Definition 1A), and that is the definition we are going to use for the duration of this research.

In terms of structure, this paper is divided into five different sections, each exploring a different subject relevant to this research. The first section, “Background”, explores multiple game design frameworks that are usually taught in game design courses and the issues that they present when designing boardgames. The second section, “From Illustration to Boardgame”, explores existing boardgames that have started or have been heavily influenced by illustration. The third section, “Methodology”, exposes the method and the objectives to conduct the remainder of the research by reaching out to designers and interviewing them with relevant questions. The fourth section, “Discussion”, provides an analysis based on the results obtained by interviewing designers. The fifth and final section, “Conclusion”, wraps up the research by exposing the advantages and disadvantages of having the illustration

play a central role in the design process, and reflecting on the possibility of future studies.

Background

One of the first contacts with game design theory that a student has is the Mechanics-Dynamics-Aesthetics (MDA) framework, developed by Hunicke, LeBlank and Zubek (2004). This framework directly transcribes the player's perception of the game to the equivalents of the designers, this means that rules, systems and "fun" are equivalent to mechanics, dynamics and aesthetics (Hunicke et al., 2004). To better understand how this framework functions it is essential to have an understanding of what each of those terms means.

Mechanics are an element that various academics have tried to define and come to a consensus. The MDA defines mechanics as the various components of the game in a level of data representation and algorithms (Hunicke et al., 2004), meaning that the mechanics dictate how the game is going to be played. Later Järvinen (2008) expanded on the definition provided by Hunicke et al. and stated that mechanics are verbs, meaning that they exist to guide the players to have certain behaviours to achieve their goals. Dynamics are in essence how the players interact with the mechanics, putting it in simpler terms, the game system. Aesthetics are referent to an emotional response in the players while interacting with the game system.

Four years after the presentation of the MDA, Jesse Schell presented the Elemental Tetrad (Schell, 2008). In this framework, games are described as an experience. To create an

experience ingredients are required, in this case, technology, mechanics, story and aesthetics, which are connected but also ordered in a hierarchy. These are ordered from less visible to more visible, the technology is at the bottom as the least visible, aesthetics is the most visible, while the mechanics and story share the same level of visibility in the middle.

In the Elemental Tetrad, aesthetics holds the same meaning as the definition presented in the MDA but with a small addition, meaning that it is referent to the emotional response that the players have when interacting with the game but also adds the visual appearance of the game. Ideally, the aesthetics influences the rest of the elements but also receives influence from the other elements. Mechanics remain the same as discussed before, the mechanics are what makes the game a game. The story refers to the narrative setting of the experience. Technology, despite being less visible to players, holds importance in the Elemental Tetrad, it is what makes the game work, and also limits what can be done with the remaining elements.

Although these are well-known frameworks, they provide a rigid structure, which raises the question if game design processes should be so strict and restraining and if they can be applied when designing a boardgame as opposed to a videogame. This debate started in 2015 on the Game Developer website, formerly known as Gamasutra, with an article written by Duarte entitled "Revisiting the MDA framework" (2015). Duarte mentions that boardgames depend on at least one player learning the rules of the game and then being willing to explain them to the remainder of the players since boardgames don't offer automatic feedback as their digital

counterparts. This leads to the players actively implementing the rules throughout the game, which as mentioned before is something that doesn't happen in videogames, since on the latter "players can learn how to play on the fly; but boardgames do not have this leisure" (Duarte, 2015). This doesn't make boardgames inferior to their digital counterparts but it means that when designing them there needs to exist an adaptation of the popular frameworks to work without harsh restrictions and better accommodate the medium. Duarte (2015) ends the article by stating that the MDA can still be utilised when designing a boardgame but not in the state it was originally presented. This leads to a new proposal for understanding the MDA framework, where the player and the designer are put in the middle, creating a user-centred approach where all the elements are connected. This adaptation helps to create a more dynamic model which allows user participation in the design process.

How a designer decides to start their design process becomes something personal to each designer, while some may prefer to start from the mechanics and build a game from there, some might prefer to start from the narrative and adapt the gameplay to enhance the narrative, others might prefer to think of an initial theme and build the game from that.

By analysing the MDA (Hunicke et al., 2004) and the Elemental Tetrad (Schell, 2008), it is possible to observe that the aesthetic part of games tends to be left for the end. This raises the question of "What happens if the design process starts from the illustration?", which isn't a common approach since it's seen as "time spent in art on your prototype is most likely

wasted, especially if you don't plan on self-publishing" (Englestein, 2021, p.43). Games like *Sleeping Gods* (Laukat, 2021) and *Scythe* (Stegmaier, 2016), are proof where the illustration played an important role during the design process by influencing various aspects of the games and still allows to create successful boardgames.

From Illustration to Boardgame

Although having boardgames where the design has started from the illustration is a rare occurrence because, as mentioned before, it is seen as a waste of time to worry about art in the early stages since it is time taken away from the development of the prototype (Englestein, 2021), in the early stages of this research, there were already two designers that had allowed the illustration to play an important role in the design process, Ryan Laukat and Jamey Stegmaier. These cases were identified due to Laukat being credited both as the designer and artist for the published games, and Stegmaier due to being vocal about the development of *Scythe* (Stegmaier, 2016).

Looking at Laukat's work, two games are worth highlighting for this research, *Klondike Rush* (Laukat, 2017) and *Sleeping Gods* (Laukat, 2021), due to the way that they were designed, one has a more traditional approach to game design and other focus more on the illustration. In 2018 Laukat was invited to the Tabletop Network to do a keynote presentation where the main focus was discussing his approach to game design, from here it was possible to draw three main conclusions. The first conclusion is that his design approach has more of a narrative focus rather than mechanical, the

mechanics exist to enhance the narrative experience of the game, for him, this helps the players to better distinguish the games and have a unique way to describe the games and/or their gameplay experiences by focusing more on the events rather than how it was played. The second conclusion, the only record of a game that Laukat designed started with the mechanics was *"Klondike Rush"* (Laukat, 2017), which ended up being his least favourite game to design and left some regret attempting to create a game where any theme could be applied. For Laukat leaving the theme and narrative for the game as a final step leaves the players wondering who they get to be while playing the game, and the main trade-off of designing a game starting from the mechanics is that it will always have a lacking narrative. The third, and final, conclusion is that Laukat approaches his design process as a movie production process starting with an illustration for the cover of the game, followed by writing an elevator pitch about the narrative and then, after having all those elements, start thinking about the various mechanics that are going to be present in the game. During Laukat's presentation, it is also possible to see some images of *Sleeping Gods* (Laukat, 2021) in the early stages of development utilising this approach.

Scythe (Stegmaier, 2016), originated from the illustrated series entitled "The World of 1920+" by Jakub Rozalski, a Polish illustrator. During an interview for "The Game Design Lab Podcast" (Barrett, 2017), Stegmaier explains how he initially found an illustration in ArtStation which led to talking with the illustrator to obtain the rights to utilise it in a boardgame. This contact then sparked the collaboration between Stegmaier and Rozalski, the mechanics of the game were thought out

to further immerse the players in the game world created by the illustrations.

Starting the research with two designers and knowing that it is possible to design a boardgame starting from the illustration, then led to the question if other designers have taken this approach. The next section explores the method for the data collection for the remainder of the research, the objectives in further investigating this topic and formulating a plan to reach out to various boardgame designers.

Methodology

Contacting different game designers was an essential step for this research, this allowed us to collect their thoughts and opinions about starting a game from the illustration and allow it to influence the rest of its development.

It was essential that all the contacts were consistent and allowed the designers to express themselves. To achieve that it was necessary to define which topics should be discussed, and why they are relevant to the research, create a set of questions that would allow us to reach those objectives and after sorting them thematically, reflect on the various replies.

Ideally from these various inquiries, it would be possible to determine the design process of various game designers and how the illustration is being utilised during the process, gather multiple and diverse opinions about the advantages and disadvantages of incorporating illustration in the design process, understand if this approach could be used if the designer isn't an illustrator, understand the opinion of the designers

in regards of utilising artificial intelligence (AI) to generate images, but also have the opportunity to ask if the designers have any knowledge if others might have a similar approach to game design, and also allowing them to make comments on the on-going research.

With these objectives in mind, it became easier to create a set of six questions to better understand the incorporation of illustration in the design process, if it is an intentional process, if it is something that they always follow or if it is something occasional, and if more designers follow the same approach. The following set of six questions were thought to help obtain the desired information for this research:

1. Could you describe your game design process in a summarised way?
2. When designing a boardgame, is the illustration only the starting point to inspire the narrative or does it also play an active role when coming up with mechanics and defining certain gameplay aspects?
3. Do you see any flaws in starting the design from the illustration and further incorporating it into the design process?
4. What is your opinion on the validity of starting the design from the illustration? Does the designer need to be an illustrator, or is it enough to have an illustrator who is equally excited about the project for it to work? This then leads to a follow-up question, if the designer doesn't have the funds to hire an illustrator, can this approach still be valid if the designer stick figure drawing or AI to generate certain images to serve as the starting point?
5. Do you know more designers that have a similar creative process, where the design might have started from illustration?

6. Do you wish to comment or share more information regarding the purposes of our research?

Having defined the questions that would eventually be sent out to various boardgame designers, it is necessary to reach out to them and find them. From the beginning, two designers in mind could, possibly, provide valuable feedback for this research. To have a better understanding of this method it is essential to gather as many replies as possible, this was the next step in the research. The main platform utilised was Board Game Geek (BGG) since it "has become a source of information used also by scholars and game designers" (Kritz, Mangeli and Xexéo, 2017), the forum section allows players, boardgame enthusiasts and designers to connect. Taking advantage of this feature, it was possible to create an entry to ask the BGG community if they were aware of other boardgames that might have originated from the illustration or that have been heavily influenced by it, this led to some results that later were confirmed and if the information was proven to be correct, the designers responsible for the games were contacted. All designers were contacted the same way via an email invitation explaining the purpose and objectives of the research.

Using these methods it was possible to uncover a total of ten game designers, from which four agreed to participate in the research. Although some of these designers gave their consent to have their names shared, to maintain consistency throughout the discussion the participants are nominated as Designer followed by their initials.

All of these designers were recruited because of the uses of the incorporation of illustration in their design processes.

Designer R. L. was contacted after discovering that they are both a designer and illustrator. Designer J. S. was contacted because of how they used illustrations as inspiration for the narrative and design of their game. Designer M. V. was contacted because they changed the setting and design after coming across and getting inspired by the work of the illustrator who ended up producing the artwork for the published game. Designer F. J. was contacted after learning that their game concept originated from a picture in a book.

Due to the typology of the research, taking a ground theory approach to analyse the collected data was what proved to be more efficient to later formulate a theory with a foundation on the collected data. The next section provides a discussion and analysis based on the data collected from the interviews, throughout there will be some citations and quotations pulled directly from the interviews.

Discussion

The first question asked the designers, "Could you describe your game design process in a summarised way?", starting with this question allowed them to briefly explain their design process, with or without the inclusion of illustration, this allowed us to understand how game design processes can be something personal to each designer but still maintain some similarities with others. Designer R. L. admits that "often find myself thinking about games and game mechanics. When I have an idea I write down a few notes in my phone or notebook. If I have more time, sometimes I sketch out what the game might look like set up on a table", here it is possible

to start seeing that illustration can start having an impact in the early stages of development. One interesting aspect in Designer R.L.'s process is that often they take a "moment to paint the cover (box art) (...) because it acts as an anchor for the whole project. Now I know what I'm shooting for and having that box illustration guides me when creating the story of the game, the general look, the mechanics, and the graphic design". There are some similarities with Designer M. V.'s process since they mentioned that they like to "write down some wacky ideas with very brief descriptions (...) then I usually forget about it for a long time", those ideas then start serving as an archive where in the future can be picked and start designing.

Just from these two designers it is possible to see that illustration plays a different role in their respective design process, but it still serves as an anchor for the theme of the boardgame. Designer F. J. provided an interesting approach to designing a game, "when I looked at the map of Gotland divided into settings and regions, I immediately recognised that this would be playable as a boardgame", the observation of an illustrated map allowed the creation of a game with area control, worker placement and deck building while maintaining the historical context of Gotland in the 1100-1400 period. Designer J. S. prefers to get an illustrator involved further in the design process, only after having a functional and engaging game, which normally results after "brainstorm the idea (mixing theme and mechanisms), create the initial prototype, playtest it locally and/or solo, then process the results, iterate, and repeat. If the game shows promise, repeat the playtest/process/iterate steps".

Wanting to further understand the synergy between illustration and boardgame development, it was essential to better understand how the illustration was being utilised while designing. Various theories started to form, was it only being used as a starting point to inspire the narrative for the game or was it also influencing the gameplay aspect of the game? The replies to the second question, “When designing a boardgame, is the illustration only the starting point to inspire the narrative or does it also play an active role when coming up with the mechanics and defining certain gameplay aspects?”, were almost unanimous amongst all the designers. The illustration served both as a starting point for the narrative but also influenced when coming up with mechanics and other gameplay aspects, Designer J. S. shared some insights on how the illustration has affected some of their published titles “For [Boardgame 1], the art led me to making the game more about the threat of combat than actual combat. For [Boardgame 2], the worldbuilding led to several significant mechanisms that otherwise would not have been in the game. And for an upcoming game, the artists had a lot of freedom in creating an entire planet, and aspects of their illustrations became fundamental elements of the design”. This question also allowed Designer R. L.’s illustrator roots to emerge, “I rarely design games around mechanics. I almost always start with a narrative situation and a piece of art. When I’m designing, I’m usually shooting for a certain feel. The feel of the game helps me decide which mechanics to use”. Designer M. V. commented that their design style leans heavily into theme and narrative since it is what they enjoy creating and playing, “sometimes I have an idea and the illustrations come from a style guide I write up for the artist,

and other times I am working to make the gameplay fit the narrative as much as possible”. Designer F. J. focused mostly on talking about the process for their most recent game, in this case the illustration served only as the starting point for the game, “the map divisions of Gotland into administrative regions was a starting point (...) even if the game is historically inspired, it must be playable. I’m taking liberties with the source material to get a better gaming experience”.

At this point there were various positives about including the illustration in the design process, but what are the disadvantages of this approach to game design? This was the main reason for asking the designers the third question, “Do you see any flaws in starting the design from an illustration and further incorporating it into the design process?”. Designer R. L. provided a well-rounded reply from a designer and illustrator perspective, “one of the biggest issues with designing this way is that it can be easy to get emotionally attached to something that isn’t working. In game design (and many other crafted art forms), it’s a vital skill to be able to cut things that aren’t working (...) sometimes I hold onto illustrations or illustration styles for too long”, the main takeaway from here is that it is easy to get attached to work that has been done because of the time invested in those tasks, and so it isn’t perceived as a waste of time there is a tendency to try holding onto it. This is a sentiment shared by Designer J. S., “the biggest risk in letting illustrations impact the design is that it can loop back around the other way: the design may then require a lot of revisions to the art, which can be expensive, time-consuming, and frustrating for the artist”, which was also something mentioned by Designer

M. V., “the artist has to be 100% on board and willing to participate. If it becomes too personal and there isn’t room to shift the theme or design, then things can fall apart”.

After identifying how designers utilise illustration in their design process and the issues/flaws that it has, it is time to understand if this approach could still work if the designer and illustrator aren’t the same person, and discuss the usage of AI to generate images.

Starting with the uses of AI, there was a consensus in the sample that it is distasteful and disrespectful for artists and that there are better human-made alternatives which can start as a starting point for the designs that could, possibly, later lead to collaborations between designer and illustrator. Designer J. S. said “for a designer who wants to build their design based on some visual elements, I recommend looking at places like ArtStation for inspiration from the many human-created illustration there”, Designer M. V. suggested talking with an artist beforehand to see if they would be interested in a collaboration with shared royalties, “if it’s just a job for them, you probably won’t get the kind of commitment and collaboration that I feel makes a thematic game shine. You can of course still get AMAZING artwork this way, but there is a noticeable difference”. Designer M. V. also expands on the topic of AI by saying “I just find the technology to be distasteful and disrespectful to creators. Until it becomes something that does not need to steal in order to function, I wouldn’t touch it”.

With the usage of AI out of the way, it remains the question of the designer and illustrator need to be the same person

for this approach to be successful, with the collected data it becomes clear that it is not a necessity but being the same person can lead to some issues that were already discussed, such as Designer M. V. said “if the designer is also the illustrator, they run the risk of being too close to their “baby” and not seeing that some things you think are the main focus, are just a distraction for observers”. Designer J. S. also provided valuable feedback from a publisher’s point of view, “it depends if a game designer is self-publishing or submitting to a publisher (for the latter, it is the publisher who is responsible for the art, not the designer)” and that “game design and illustrative art are two completely separate skill sets - it’s very rare for the same person to be equally talented in both”.

Obtaining these replies from designers with various backgrounds was fundamental to better understand an alternative method to game design, in this case, one that has started from the illustration or that has been heavily influenced by it. At this stage designers were also asked if they were aware of other designers that might have a similar creative process, despite only Designer M. V. replying that he was aware of some cases, such as Henry Audubon, the designer of *Parks* (Audubon, 2019) and *Trails* (Audubon, 2021), that that was an example of someone who “share a similar idea that having something visually stunning can lead to wonderful game designs”. Audubon was contacted but never replied. Designer R. L. provides a brief explanation of why there might be a lack of awareness of other designers’ creative processes with an interesting comparison “so many tabletop designers work like book authors; they work alone and without lots of funding or a team of people to collaborate with”.

In the end, designers were invited to share additional information or share comments about the research. Designer R. L. started by stating that “this is a valuable subject to research and that many game designers could benefit from it” and Designer M. V. commented on the success of their most recent boardgame and that “this kind of collaboration is how I like to work, especially with talented people who are as invested as me”.

Analysing all the data collected from these interviews, it is possible to understand that there is an alternative method to game design where the illustration is incorporated and that it can achieve games that have success, where the final product feels more connected between all the elements (narrative, gameplay and visuals).

Conclusion

The objective of this research was to answer if it was possible to design a boardgame starting from the illustration and what the impact that it can have throughout the development process.

This question led to contacting various game designers, even though only a fraction accepted to participate in the research by being interviewed, to better understand their design process and to attempt to understand the role the illustration plays during the development of a game. Overall the designers stated that the illustration serves as an anchor throughout the development process of the game, that it creates a common element across the theme, narrative, mechanics and visuals of the game which then leads to a more cohesive and immersive

game. An interesting aspect of starting the design method from the illustration is the ability to sketch out what the game would ideally look like as a finished product in the early stages of development, which further helps in anchoring the game.

Even if the illustration is the central element of the whole method, the designer does not need to necessarily be an illustrator, it can be achieved with the collaboration of an illustrator, and if that isn't possible there are various tools available to designers such as AI to generate images which can be used as a foundation for the design, but if there is a preference for human-made illustration it is possible to utilise platforms such as ArtStation.

Having the illustration as a central element during the design process can have some disadvantages. If the designer and the illustrator are the same person, there can exist the necessity of holding on to already produced art so it isn't seen as a waste of time or resources, this is also something that can happen while collaborating or hiring an illustrator. Art and design usually move at different paces, which can cause frustration to the illustrator due to constant revisions of their work to better fit the design, which later can also be seen as wasted money.

As it was mentioned in the beginning this method is not the solution to all game design issues, it is not because the designer started from the illustration that all the mechanics, narrative or the whole design of the game are going to magically appear without having to do any work. This method still needs further research to better understand the impacts that it has on the games, in future steps of this research it will

be essential to attempt the creation of a method utilising the data gathered with the various interviews and applying it to the design of various boardgames while taking notes of the process to do further reflections.

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