



THE BOARD GAME AS A NARRATIVE MEDIUM

Pawel Bornstedt

Abstract

Drawing on analyses of a range of German board games, this essay offers an overview of the development and definition of board games and an exploration of why board games are a legitimate medium for storytelling.

Keywords

board games, narrative, metagame, media, storytelling, German analog games, history

[Editor's Note: This is an excerpt from the author's 2022 Masters of Education thesis titled *Das Brettspiel als narratives Medium*. Translated from the German by Evan Torner.]

Media, as Marie-Laure Ryan has described it, are like a *piping bag*: stories are a kind of formless mental construct or, in our metaphor, icing. The piping bag is the medium. Only through the use of the medium does a concrete narrative emerge, pressed out in a decorative form that invites our consumption. Different media can tell the same story, and yet their differing structures will produce different forms.¹

If one's idea of board games begins with *Hey, Don't Get Angry* (*Mensch ärgere dich nicht*), then one can hardly imagine how they, as an independent medium, can convey something on a narrative level. And yet stories and/or storyworlds² from board games have been used in other media, and vice versa.

¹ Marie-Laure Ryan, "Transmedia Narratology and Transmedia Storytelling," *Artnodes* 18 (2016): 37-46, here pg. 37.

² "To read a narrative is to engage with an alternative world that has its own temporal and spacial structures. The rules that govern these structures may or may not resemble those of the readers' world." Storyworld means the mental model of these alternative worlds, which are also simultaneously transmedial, such that the *Star Wars* films, comics, books, board games, etc. all play in the "world" of *Star Wars*. When a new work is written that takes place in this world, then it also needs to abide by the rules, knowledge, and other stories, etc. from *Star Wars* as well. See: Kirsten Zierold (2011) *Computerspielanalyse. Perspektivenstrukturen, Handlungsspielräume, moralische Implikationen*. Trier: WVT, pg. 92, as well as Ryan (2016), pg. 4, and Uri Margolin. "Character," in David Herman's, ed. (2012) *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*. 6th Edition, pp. 66-79, here pg. 52

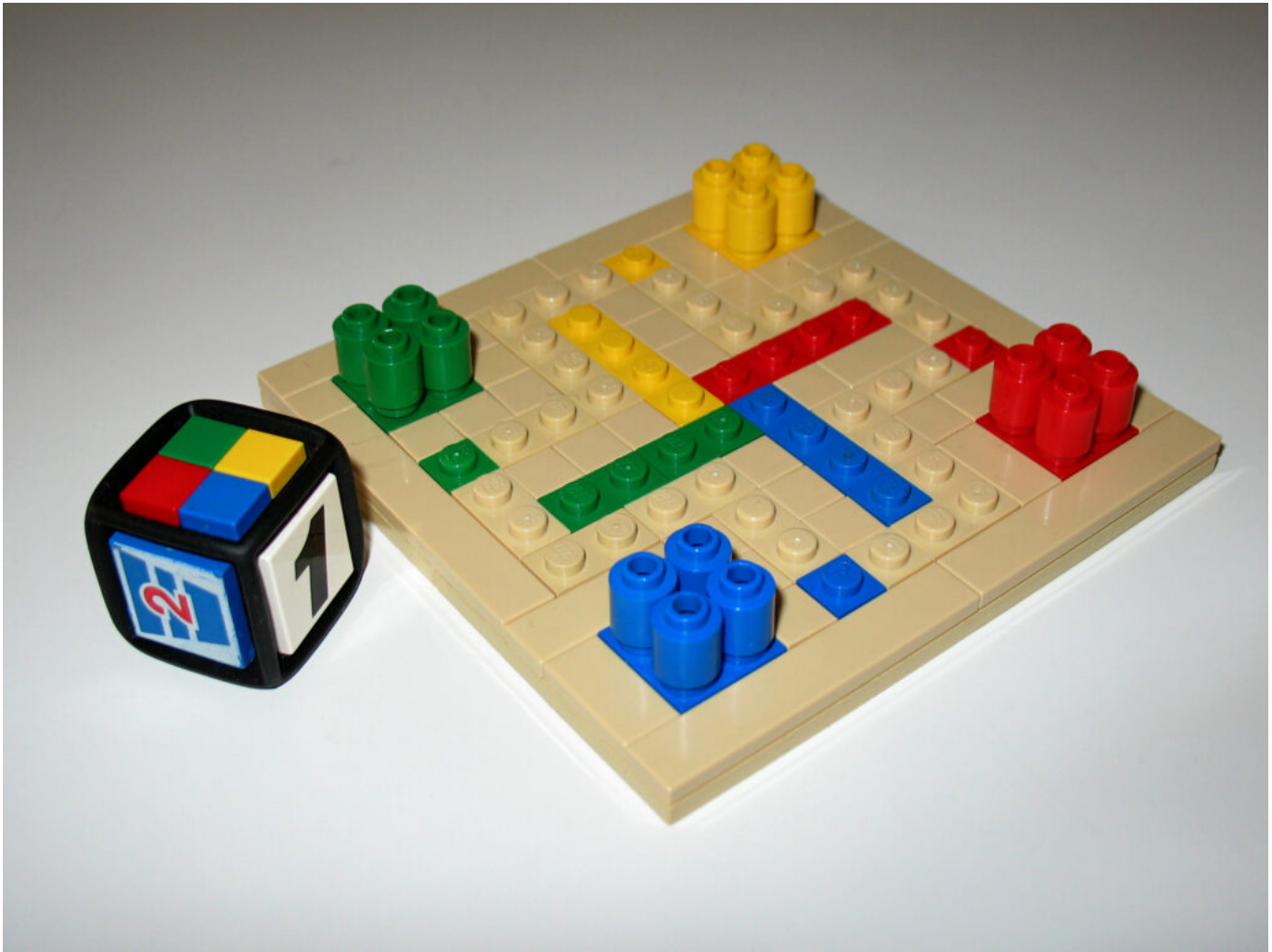


Figure 1: Lego version of *Mensch ärgere Dich nicht* (Hey, Don't Get Angry). Photo by kosmolaut CC-BY @ Flickr.

On the one hand, the TV show *Batman: The Animated Series* (1992) received a whole series of board games,³ as did the *Hellboy* (1993-) comic series,⁴ as well as the computer game *This War of Mine* (2014),⁵ to name but a few examples. On the other hand, many board games get computer-game versions made,⁶ and the storyworlds created for them are continued in books.⁷

³ TV Series: Eric Radomski and Bruce Timm: *Batman: The Animated Series*. USA 1992–1995; exemplary board game: Pete Walsh and Kevin Wilson. *Batman: The Animated Series Adventures – Shadow of the Bat*. IDW Games 2021.

⁴ John Arcudi and Mike Mignola. *Hellboy and the B.P.R.D.: 1952*. Dark Horse Comics, 2015; Board game: James Hewitt and Sophie Williams. *Hellboy: The Board Game*. Mantic Games 2019.

⁵ Computer game: *This War of Mine*. 11 bit studios, 2014; Board game: Michał Oracz and Jakub Wiśniewski. *This War of Mine*. 11 bit studios 2017.

⁶ For example, for the already mentioned *Gloomhaven*, the computer game: *Gloomhaven*. Asmodee Digital, 2021.

⁷ For example, Stefanie Schmitt, *The Legends of Andor: The King's Song*. Stuttgart 2015. The background information on the world and the main characters is from Michael Menzel's board game *The Legends of Andor*. Cosmos 2012.

It is thus not controversial that the board game serves as a legitimate medium for media transfer and/or that it can be seen as a legitimate medium for telling and expanding upon a story.⁸ But how did it come about that board games apparently became one of Ryan's piping bags?

Board Games: History and Development

The oldest board games date back to 5000 BC. Numerous other sources indicate that board games were known and popular throughout antiquity and the Middle Ages,⁹ across all social classes.¹⁰ They were mostly games of chance or strategy in which figures/tokens were drawn according to given rules until a clear goal was achieved; the opponents had the same starting conditions with the same figures.¹¹ This type of board game is called the "classic" board game.

In modern times, from the end of the 18th century, so-called "war games" were introduced. Although they primarily served as military training and exercise for Prussian officers, they also served as entertainment and can therefore be viewed as the predecessors of modern wargames,¹² i.e. board games that depict a military, often-historical conflict in which the player's strategic performance is decisive for victory. However, after two world wars, war-themed games in war-weary Europe were reduced to a small niche. In the following post-war period, i.e., when both time and opportunities were again available for play, board games were increasingly viewed as a legitimate and relaxing leisure activity.¹³ Games such as *Cluedo* and *Scrabble*,¹⁴ still widely played today, were ascendent in Europe in the 1950s and 1960s. In America, however, wargames enjoyed increasing popularity among the civilian population,¹⁵ especially thanks to *Tactics*¹⁶ in 1954.

Wargames helped bring about two fundamental changes to board games: First off, the fighting parties were no longer fundamentally identical in set up.¹⁷ Second, complex military aspects of a military operation were (and are) reduced to simplified numbers—range of movement of different types of troops, combat strength depending on troop strength, effects of terrain on movement speed, as well as offensive or defensive combat actions and much more, depending on the complexity of the game, with the probabilities now being simulated with dice rolls.¹⁸ Even today's

⁸ See Anna Weigel-Heller. "'Fictions of the Internet'. From Intermediality to Transmedia Storytelling in 21st-Century Novels." *Series of Alternative Contributions to Narrative Research* 5 (2018): pg. 31.

⁹ An example for antiquity is Nine Men's Morris (which has not changed in all that time, see Frank Meier. *Von allerley Spil and Kurzweyl. Spiel und Spielzeug in der Geschichte*. Ostfildern, 2006, pg. 21). In the Middle Ages, it was called *hnefatafl*.

¹⁰ See Serina Patterson. "Introduction: Setting Up the Board" in: Serina Patterson, ed. *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*. New York: 2015, pp. 1–20, here pp. 2–4 and Meier 2006, pp. 20–22, 61–70.

¹¹ *Hnefatafl* is a notable exception. In this game, there was (and is, it is still sold commercially and therefore also played) a defender who had to flee with his king across one of the four corner squares, the attacker had to prevent this, but has twice as many pieces as the attacker does. A good summary of the other rules of the game can be found in Meier 2006, pg. 178.

¹² See Elsa Romfeld und Torben Quasdorf. "Worum es sich zu spielen lohnt. Krankheit im Brettspiel am Beispiel von *Pandemie*" in: Arno Görge and Stefan Simond, hrsg. *Krankheit in Digitalen Spielen*. Bielefeld: Interdisziplinäre Betrachtungen, 2020, pp. 301–324, here pg. 308.

¹³ Toni Krause. *Analoges Spiel im digitalen Zeitalter. Das Brettspiel – Eine Nische zwischen YouTube und Wohnzimmertisch*. Graz 2020, pg. 30.

¹⁴ Anthony Pratt, *Cluedo*. Hasbro 1949, and Alfred Butts. *Scrabble*. Hasbro 1948.

¹⁵ See Marco Arnaudo. *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game. Narrative Trends from the Late 1960s to Today*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2018, p. 43.

¹⁶ Charles Roberts. *Tactics*. Avalon Game Company 1954.

¹⁷ War games introduced different troop strengths, types of troops, terrain, etc.

¹⁸ See Arnaudo 2018, pg. 198. and Péter Makai. "Games and Gaming: Quantasy" in: Stuart Lee, ed. *A Companion to J.R.R. Tolkien*. Chicaster 2014, pp. 530–544, here pg. 532.

digital strategy games still often rely on this principle.¹⁹ An illustrative example from *The Battle of the Five Armies*,²⁰ a comparatively simple, modern wargame:

During an attack, one of the following applies: the more troops attack, the more dice the attacker has at his disposal. The basic rule here is 5+, which means that the defender has to accept losses for every die that is five or higher. However, this can be modified in many ways. If, for example, an attack takes place over a ford or up a mountain, the first round of combat²¹ is 6+, because the attackers have a much more difficult time storming the defender's lines due to the terrain. If there are any defenses, the 6+ applies until all defenses have been destroyed.²²

The success of the wargames led to an increase in the diversity of the conflicts discussed, including wars and battles from the Middle Ages. *Chainmail*,²³ published in the 1970s, stood out in particular because it was the first board game to add optional rules for creating conflicts from the literary worlds of J.R.R. Tolkien or Robert E. Howard, in addition to being able to design one's own battles. Such fictional scenarios were an absolute novelty: before that, wargames were based on historical or fictional conflicts.²⁴

The consequence of this was revolutionary for the hobby games industry, because the ability to express various attributes and/or properties in numbers and to be able to integrate them into a fantasy world enabled a shift in perspective from playing as the commander of countless troops to playing only one or a few individuals, also shifting one's capacity to tell a story in a playful way.²⁵

This led to the rapid rise in tabletop role-playing games (TTRPGs), such as *Dungeons and Dragons* in 1974, as well as game books, which in turn influenced the first digital adventure games,²⁶ most of which were similar to Tolkien's world and the *Dungeons and Dragons* interpretation of it.²⁷ In TTRPGs, the game master (GM) verbally guides the other players through an adventure.²⁸ Typical for these types of games is the fact that they have few physical components and usually only consist of a minimal predetermined narrative framework, if any at all. The stories played are primarily created and designed by the GMs and players themselves, with almost no restrictions on narrative possibilities whatsoever, as long as the flow of the game follows the rules of the story world. This is

¹⁹ Depending on the desired complexity of the digital game, it is likely additionally modified. An example of a faithful 1:1 implementation of the board game: *Panzer Corps*. Slitherine Ltd., 2011; for an adapted and simplified variant: *Codename: Panzers*. CDV Software Entertainment, 2004.

²⁰ Roberto Di Meglio et al. *The Battle of the Five Armies*. Heidelberger Spieleverlag 2014.

²¹ A round of combat, not to be confused with "normal" round (all actions between the first action of the first player to the last action of the last player, without a player having a double turn), in this case means the first rolling of the combat results, i.e., the attacker first rolls the dice, then the defender. If any subsequent dice rolls occur, they are subsequent rounds of combat.

²² There are more rules, such as preferred terrain for unit types, influence of generals or capable troop leaders, and much more, but these are enough to illustrate the point. Di Meglio, et al. 2014.

²³ Gary Gygax and Jeff Perren. *Chainmail*. Guidon Games, 1971.

²⁴ See Makai 2014, pg. 532. Regarding the terminology between "fictional" and "fictional" see Georg Weidacher. "Fiktionale Texte – Fiktive Welten. Fiktionalität aus textlinguistischer Sicht. *Europäische Studien zur Textlinguistik* 3. Tübingen 2007, pg. 38.

²⁵ There were already games before that that dealt with fighting between individuals, e.g., battles between fighter pilots in the First World War (Mike Carr. *Fight in the Skies*. Guidon Games 1966) but, on the one hand, these were very rare and, on the other hand, these games did not technically produce any stories. See Arnaudo 2018, pp. 45-47.

²⁶ See Ulrich Götz. "On the Evolution of Narrative Mechanics in Open-World Games" in: Mela Kocher, et al. eds. *Narrative Mechanics. Strategies and Meanings in Games and Real Life*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag 2021, pp. 161–176, here pg. 163. and Arnaudo 2018, pg. 50. An example of the early computer games would be William Crowther. *Colossal Cave Adventure*. 1975.

²⁷ Arnaudo 2018, pg. 51.

²⁸ Sarah Lynne Bowman. *The Functions of Role-Playing Games. How Participants Create Community, Solve Problems and Explore Identity*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2010, pg. 8.

why Germans label these types of games with the Anglicism “pen and paper RPGs,” because they basically require nothing more than pen and paper to play. As for the heroes played by the other players, they have individual properties and attributes, which are usually determined randomly at the beginning of the game by rolling the dice. The players themselves usually first have to create a suitable backstory for their hero: for example, a particularly intelligent hero could have grown up in a monastery and been taught by monks.²⁹ This principle is similar to that of wargames; the complexity, characteristics and properties of a military unit were reduced to a few numbers; in TTRPGs the same applies to the skills and abilities of individual fictional characters.³⁰

For example, if the goal is to talk your way out of a tricky situation, a hero with a high charisma value will have a significantly higher chance of success, because the higher an attribute is, the higher the probability of success. As a rule in such situations, which are usually referred to as a “test,” the value of the tested attribute plus a random dice roll is added together. If the result reaches a certain value specifically required for this sample, the sample is passed. In the example in question, the hero would have successfully talked his way out of the sticky situation. If the result fails, there would be (usually negative) consequences, for example the hero could be arrested. Typical of a TTRPG is that the player playing the hero would have to tell the other players how exactly the hero is trying to talk his way out of this situation. It is also typical that the heroes go through several adventures and improve themselves, learning new skills and abilities, improving those they have already learned, etc. in order to be able to win even more difficult tests and achieve even greater heroic deeds.

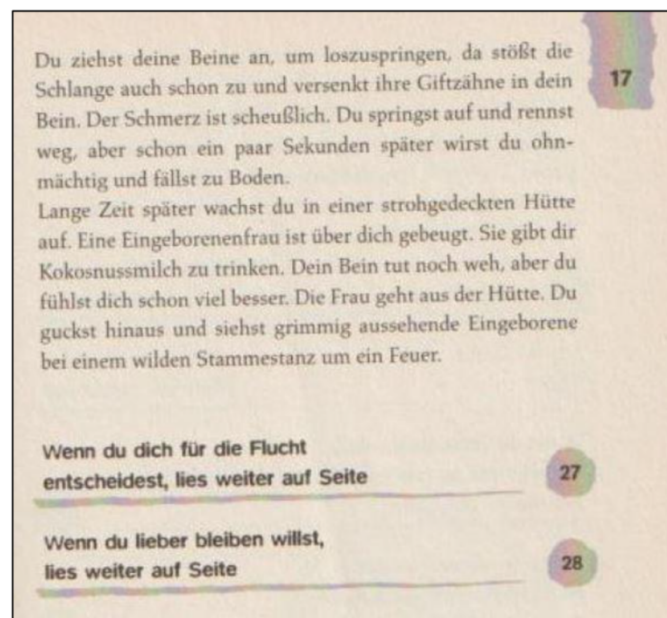


Figure 2: Page 17 from Edward Packard's *Die Insel der 1000 Gefahren*. Ravensburger-Taschenbuch 2022. Photo by author.

²⁹ Makai 2014, pg. 537. and Stewart Woods. *Eurogames. The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland 2012, pp. 25–28.

³⁰ “Reduced” is a relative term. The current (2018, “5E”) ruleset of *Dungeons and Dragons* already exists. The basic rules consist of 180 pages, although the actual story world is not even described in those pages. Just for the rules for creating a character, 52 pages seem to be required. *Dungeons & Dragons: D&D Basic Rules*. Renton: Wizards of the Coast, 2018.

Game books, on the other hand, are also known as “Choose-Your-Own-Adventure” and are still used today. They are books with multiple endings, during which the reader accompanies the protagonist on his adventures and can determine the further plot at certain points, possibly preventing the protagonist from dying prematurely. The complexity can vary between a fairly simple procedure according to the scheme “if the protagonist is to carry out action a, read on to page x; if he is supposed to do b instead, read on to page y”³¹ (often referring to passages instead of pages) and more complex decisions that have a more or less strong influence on the plot of the following chapters or books.³² The latter usually have a character sheet in which the protagonist’s health, equipment, skills, attributes, etc. must be kept up to date during the course of reading.

More complex game books are therefore not too dissimilar to TTRPGs in terms of gameplay. The main difference between TTRPGs and game books is the interaction and the narrative: in TTRPGs, in principle, everything is possible in terms of interaction, but they often have no predetermined narrative (just a story world with ludic rules), whereas game books have a given narrative with certain options for action at certain points. Neither TTRPGs nor game books are board games in the true sense, but they were still very formative for them, because they demonstrated that stories could also be told in a playful way. Both enabled and influenced narrative board games even decades later,³³ with the aforementioned mechanics of tests and passages being just two particularly prominent features.³⁴ The most commonly used narrative—heroes with certain skills, strengths and weaknesses master an adventure and become stronger as it progresses—has also been adopted in many board games that tell a story. Such board games are therefore similar to the literary Arthurian epics as well as *Bildungsromane*, because without “further education” in the form of improvement and becoming stronger, the later challenges would generally not be possible at all.³⁵

Until the 1980s, small breaks with the classic conventions of previous board games had contributed to their popularity. Another defining break came in 1987 with *Arkham Horror*.³⁶ Before that title, board games were played competitively³⁷ or semi-cooperatively.³⁸ *Arkham Horror* was one of the first and most influential purely cooperative board games in which all players played against the game itself, meaning that for the first time all players could win or lose together.³⁹ In the early 1990s, the popularity of board games slowed down, among other things, because of the rapidly increasing popularity of digital games,⁴⁰ but only temporarily: on the one hand, the Eurogames

³¹ One example is Edward Packard. *Die Insel der 1000 Gefahren*. German first edition as a Ravensburger Taschenbuch (2022), originally published Ravensburg 1996, as well as Fabian Lenk. *1000 Gefahren für den Bodyguard* Ravensburg: Ravensburger Taschenbuch, 2021.

³² E.g. John Dever and Gary Chalk *Gefahr in den Höhlen*. 5th edition, Munich 1990. (book series) or Swen Harder. *Reiter der schwarzen Sonne*. Revised and expanded 3rd edition, Frankfurt am Main 2014.

³³ One example: Brad Freeman et al., *Tales of the Arabian Nights*. West End Games 1985, which implemented both of the mechanics mentioned to let the player experience adventures in the stories from the Arabian Nights. Interestingly, the ending of the novel *Origin* (Saša Stanišić. *Origin*. 5th edition, Munich 2019) was also written like a gamecock, but such influence of gamebooks on literature remains an exception.

³⁴ See Arnaudo 2018, pg. 51. and pp. 114-119.

³⁵ Cf. Jutta Eming and Ralf Schlechtweg-Jahn. “Einleitung: Das Abenteuer als Narrativ.” in: Jutta Eming and Ralf Schlechtweg-Jahn, eds. *Aventiure und Eskapade. Narrative des Abenteuerlichen vom Mittelalter zur Moderne*. Göttingen 2017, pp. 7–34, here pg. 19. and Arnaudo 2018, pg. 32. The former makes reference to computer games, but the theses can easily be transferred to board games.

³⁶ Charlie Krank et al., *Arkham Horror*. Chaosium 1987.

³⁷ This means that players clearly play against each other, as in *Scrabble* or, as an example for this time: Howard Barasch and Richard Berg. *War of the Ring*. Encore 1977.

³⁸ This means that either teams play against each other, one player plays against everyone else, or each player has their own goals in addition to the collective ones, for example: Wendell Hill. *Quest of the Magic Ring*. Land of Legend 1975, or Manfred Burggraf et al. *Scotland Yard*. Ravensburger 1983.

³⁹ Romfeld and Quasdorf 2020, p. 307.

⁴⁰ Arnaudo 2018, pg. 194.

breakthrough came in 1995 with *The Settlers of Catan*⁴¹ and, on the other hand, interest in narrative games outside of the digital world gradually grew.⁴² In turn, this led to board games with concrete, predetermined stories that could be experienced in a playful way being published since the turn of the millennium, which were particularly successful.⁴³ This can be seen above all in their many supplements, such as for *Mice and Mystics* (5 supplements within 3 years) or *Star Wars: Imperial Assault* (48 supplements since the release of the base game in 2014).⁴⁴ To put it simply using a book metaphor, these supplements or expansions corresponded to a new volume or a new chapter, with new volumes not necessarily about the same heroes, but about the same world.

Digitization therefore did not prove to be the death of the popularity of board games, but rather as its catalyst—a strong community quickly developed, crowdfunding was made possible, etc.⁴⁵ Despite all the positive developments that board games owe to digitization, there was and is still a strong desire to remain in the analog scene: hybrid games, i.e., board games that work with digital support (e.g. an app as an opposing AI), have so far had little success.⁴⁶ The latest break in traditional conventions was the so-called “legacy” genre, which began with *Risk Evolution* (2011).⁴⁷ All games⁴⁸ played, from the first to the last, are linked together in terms of game mechanics and narrative. If a city is destroyed in the fourth game, for example, it remains destroyed in the following games. The consequences are permanent, because legacy games only make each game playable once—materials are destroyed, stickers are stuck on, sealed envelopes are opened, etc. All of these things mean that the game can no longer be restored to its original state and thus the traditional one convention of replayability is broken.⁴⁹ “Legacy” has established itself as a legitimate genre of board games, but restoration sets are now being sold for some legacy board games that allow the game to be restored to its original state.⁵⁰

It has been a very long journey for board games over the last 7,000 years, with many changes and developments,⁵¹ until they developed into a medium with which stories could be told. “Interestingly enough,” Arnaudo summarizes the development since the 1960s, “almost every step taken to transport the power of storytelling into board gaming has meant to shatter some of the traditional conventions of the hobby.”⁵² But if so many changes have taken place, what exactly remains of the classic idea of a board game? Or to put it another way, what is the definition of a modern board game?

⁴¹ Woods 2012, pg. 9.

⁴² Woods 2012, pg. 195

⁴³ See Arnaudo 2018, pp. 161–166.

⁴⁴ Jerry Hawthorne. *Mice and Mystics*. Plaid Hat Games 2012, and Justin Kemppainen et al. *Star Wars: Imperial Assault*. Fantasy Flight Games 2014. For reasons of space, all expansions are not listed here; if necessary, they can be quickly viewed via Boardgamegeek or the manufacturer’s website. The scope of such sequels varies immensely; they can consist of a single short side story, but they can also be adventures that continue the original narrative/storyworld and require several games.

⁴⁵ See Paul Booth. *Board Games as Media*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2021, pg. 162 and Arnaudo 2018, pg. 193.

⁴⁶ See Krause 2020, pg. 96. One of the notable exceptions to this is *Mansions of Madness*. In the first edition (Corey Konieczka. *Mansions of Madness*. Fantasy Flight Games 2011) the players played competitively, i.e. against each other, in the second (Nikki Valens. *Mansions of Madness*. Second Edition. Fantasy Flight Games 2016), the principle was changed and now the players played cooperatively against the app-controlled game. It is one of the few successful hybrid games. According to the Boardgamegeek database, the second edition is ranked 47th among the best board games, while the purely analog first version only reached 420th place. So there is certainly a small market for such games, but it is more of a niche.

⁴⁷ Rob Daviau and Chris Dupuis. *Risk Evolution*. Hasbro 2011.

⁴⁸ In this case, a “game” means all actions of the players taken between the start of the game and the end of the game.

⁴⁹ See Arnaudo 2018, pg. 182. and Romfeld and Quasdorf 2020, pg. 304.

⁵⁰ E.g. *Gloomhaven*.

⁵¹ At this point it should be noted that this is only a condensed representation and therefore some developments and influences could not be mentioned at all, such as the collectible card game, modular game boards (e.g., *Catan*) or the influence of video games.

⁵² Arnaudo 2018, pg.179.

No Board Game without a Game Board? Definition of “Board Game”

If a game consists only of cards, it is a card game, something completely different from a board game. If it only consists of dice, it is a dice game. However, as the condensed summary of the history of board games tried to show, many breaks with classic board game conventions have taken place, so that these classic categorizations have become difficult to adhere to. Even if a board is considered absolutely necessary for a board game, complications quickly arise: what if you want to play Nine Men’s Morris and make improvised use of stones and a playing field scratched into the earth? After all, there is no longer a game board, but everyone would still recognize it as the board game Nine Men’s Morris (as long as they are familiar with the game itself). What about games like *Catan*? This game has a modular game board.⁵³ Also, what about games where the actual playing field consists only of interchangeable cards?⁵⁴ The same dilemma exists with card games, by definition they only consist of cards, but games like *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*⁵⁵ have other components in addition to cards, such as playing figures and markers. This game also creates a kind of playing field using cards on which the playing figures can move.

However, another well-known term, namely that of “board games,” would also not be applicable, as solo games are becoming increasingly popular⁵⁶ and are by no means a novelty in themselves.⁵⁷ Accordingly, there are no longer games that require company while playing.⁵⁸

In English, in addition to the term “board game,” there is also the term “tabletop,” which is also occasionally used in German-speaking countries. This means “any game that requires a tabletop for play.”⁵⁹ Since the term “board game” nevertheless remains popular in the German-speaking world,⁶⁰ but is essentially the equivalent of the English “tabletop,” and even in English a generic “board game” is used for all of the aforementioned categorizations,⁶¹ “board game” is used in this work. also means any game that needs a tabletop to play. The only category that is expressly not discussed further here is that of TTRPGs, because “roleplaying games”⁶² include a wide range of play styles from largely improvisational to story-in-a-box.⁶³ On the one hand, however, this is about the

⁵³ In *Catan*, the game board, i.e. the titular island, is first assembled from individual parts (usually randomly), so that a new island is created with every game. In *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Kosmos 2021, Michael Menzel), you can also mention a modular game board; there is a fixed game board, but it has numerous removable tiles, so that it becomes modular again. since each of these tile fields basically has three options (front, back and removed tile). For example, the following can be visible on field 31: simple trees (front), secret tree bridge (back), burning tree bridge (removed tile).

⁵⁴ Like *The Tainted Grail: The Fall of Avalon*. In this game, players travel through the land of Avalon, represented by maps. However, only a few cards are laid out at a time – while the heroes being played are traveling, other parts of Avalon can be seen.

⁵⁵ Nate French and Matt Newman. *Arkham Horror: The Card Game*. Fantasy Flight Games 2016. The addition “card game” serves to differentiate it from the actual *Arkham Horror*, which, among other things, has a game board as a component.

⁵⁶ See Nathan Cutietta “A Mental Model Approach to Deception in Single-Player Board Games.” *Analog Game Studies* 6 (2019) <https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/03/a-mental-model-approach-to-deception-in-single-player-games/>

⁵⁷ An example: Arnold Hendrick. *Barbarian Prince*. Dwarfstar Games 1981.

⁵⁸ See Krause 2020, pg. 26.

⁵⁹ Woods 2012, pg. 5. For the sake of completeness, it must be noted that “tabletop” is also the name of a subgenre of wargames, the main characteristics of which are the lack of playing fields and a large number of very detailed game figures. However, this subgenre is not relevant at this point, so it will not be discussed further.

⁶⁰ See Krause 2020, pg. 25.

⁶¹ See Adam Brown and Deb Waterhouse-Watson. “Playing with the History of Middle Earth: Board Games, Transmedia Storytelling, and The Lord of the Rings.” in: *Journal of Tolkien Research* 3.3 (2016), pp. 1–32, here pg. 1.

⁶² Note: “Roleplaying games” and “role-playing games” are both legitimate spellings.

⁶³ See Anastasia Salter and Anne Sullivan. “A Taxonomy of Narrative-centric Board and Card Games.” in: Sebastian Deterding, et al. (eds.) *FDG '17: Proceedings of the 12th International Conference on the Foundations of Digital Games*, No. 23, <https://doi.org/10.1145/3102071.3102100>, here pg. 2.

desideratum of narrative board games, which already tell a story themselves, not about the stories that the players largely (have to) invent themselves.⁶⁴

On the other hand, TTRPGs in particular have been comparatively more researched in the little research on board games, so this is merely a reference to that.⁶⁵

Theoretical Models

One thing has never changed in all these years when it comes to the reception of board games, however, namely that it always consists of two levels: the level of the *game itself* and the *meta* level, i.e. the act of playing the game itself.⁶⁶ Stuart Woods describes this meta-level, which is called “meta-game” or “metagame” in English-speaking research, as follows:

When a group of players sit down around a table to play a game, the social metagame begins. The very act of sitting together to engage in competitive play establishes a framework for social interaction that can never be entirely separated from the play of the game itself. If we sit with children or inexperienced players, this metagame may manifest in self-handicapping. With more experienced players we may manipulate, kibitz and plead in ways that bring the game to life. Alternatively, we may sit in silence and imagine that this game-above-the-game is not occurring. Nevertheless, [...] this does nothing to alter the situation [...]⁶⁷

Alluding to Paul Watzlawick’s famous quote (“You can’t *not* communicate”),⁶⁸ Woods also speaks of “never not playing.”⁶⁹ This meta-level is therefore more than a fixed framework between the beginning and end of the game,⁷⁰ it is a social construct in which “[Players] work together to create the game world and enforce its separation from the social context,”⁷¹ which is why they appear gameplay and meta levels should be kept as separate as possible. He was also able to prove this empirically when, among other things, his study came to the conclusion that, for board gamers, engaging with the processes of gameplay is much more important than the outcome. Therefore, the game is played “worse” when playing against inexperienced players or house rules are introduced, even if this improves the gaming experience. Cheating to win is downright hated, as is bringing activities from the *meta* level into the game level, e.g. when a married couple doesn’t play against each other because they don’t want to argue or when there is a threat of consequences in the real world.⁷² Yet these levels merely appear to be separate.

⁶⁴ Some of these TTRPGs have story worlds that also appear in regular board games (with a game board, dice, etc.), for example, in addition to the previously mentioned *Dungeons and Dragons*, there is, among other things, the board game Amanda Birkinshaw and Barry Yearsley. *Dungeons & Dragons: The Fantasy Adventure Game*. Hasbro 2003. These games do not count in the RPG category.

⁶⁵ A short list of the research in question can be found in Brown and Waterhouse-Watson 2016, pg. 5. For an example, see also Bowman 2010.

⁶⁶ Paul Wake. “Token Gestures: Towards a Theory of Immersion in Analog Games” in: *Analog Game Studies* 6 (2019): <https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/token-gestures-towards-a-theory-of-immersion-in-analog-games/>

⁶⁷ Woods 2012, pg. 206.

⁶⁸ Paul Watzlawick, et al. *Human Communication. Forms, disorders, paradoxes*. 12th unchanged edition, Bern 2011, pg. 60.

⁶⁹ Woods 2012, pg. 206.

⁷⁰ Krause 2020, pg. 44.

⁷¹ Woods 2012, pg. 208.

⁷² Cf. Woods 2012, pp. 163, 176-183, 195-198 and 213.

On the one hand, there are board games that actively bring the meta level into the game level,⁷³ and on the other hand, immersion in analog games is created by the fact that the boundaries between the two are blurred and the players are mentally in both levels virtually simultaneously,⁷⁴ just as the reader is “immersed” when reading is located in that interstitial area between the fictional diegesis and the reader’s “real” world.⁷⁵ But this requires that all players submit to the rules and the dice rolls,⁷⁶ and in accordance with the willful suspension of disbelief,⁷⁷ surrender to the illusion of playing in another world⁷⁸ and reach the state of “flow”. Flow, first defined by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, summarizes Arnaudo as “a deeply pleasurable state of increased focus on a challenging activity,”⁷⁹ i.e., a positively perceived feeling of being completely absorbed in an action or fictional world⁸⁰ while the demands for action and your own abilities are in balance.⁸¹ The previously mentioned examples of cheating, among other things, destroy this illusion because they break the rules of the game and inevitably draw attention back to the here and now, thus abruptly interrupting both the flow and the immersion for everyone involved in the game.⁸²

Regarding immersion, the following should be said: Just as reading is more than just looking at writing, playing board games is more than just moving pieces.⁸³ With regard to reading, there is a lot of research on various situation models⁸⁴—but the principle is the same; when reading, a mental image of what you have read is created, which is then modified or supplemented in the course of reading. However, this only works when one’s reading ability has reached a certain



Figure 3: A card from the German version of *Dead of Winter*. Jonathan Gilmour sowie Isaac Vega. *Winter der Toten: Ein Spiel mit dem Schicksal*. Plaid Hat Games 2014.

⁷³ An example of this is Jonathan Gilmour and Isaac Vega. *Dead of Winter: A Crossroads Game*. Plaid Hat Games 2014. See the corresponding card image.

⁷⁴ See Arnaudo 2018, pg. 21; Wake 2019, as well as Caja Thimm and Lukas Wosnitza. “Das Spiel – analog und digital” in: Caja Thimm, ed. *Das Spiel: Muster und Metapher der Mediengesellschaft*. Wiesbaden 2010, pp. 33–54, here pg. 45.

⁷⁵ Dietrich Krusche. *Zeigen im Text. Anschauliche Orientierung in literarischen Modellen von Welt*. Würzburg 2001, p. 322.

⁷⁶ Mattia Thibault. “Notes on the Narratological Approach to Board Games” *KOME – An International Journal of Pure Communication Inquiry*. (2016): pp. 74–81, here pp. 77–79.

⁷⁷ “The assumption is that the brain is a powerful entity with the ability to work its own magic.” The immersion of the board game is similar to going to a cinema, where the recipient devotes themselves to the film and ignores the hall, the people sitting next to them, etc. in order to indulge in the immersion of the film. See Anthony Ferri. *Willing Suspension of Disbelief. Poetic Faith in Film*. Plymouth 2007, pp. 80–86, cited p. 80.

⁷⁸ Arnaudo 2018, pg. 22.

⁷⁹ Marco Arnaudo. “The Experience of Flow in Hobby Board Games” *Analog Game Studies* 4 (2017)

<https://analoggamestudies.org/2017/11/the-experience-of-flow-in-hobby-board-games/>

⁸⁰ Krause 2020, pg. 54 and Thimm and Wosnitza 2010, pg. 44.

⁸¹ See Michael Mosel. “Das Computerspiel-Dispositiv” Michael Mosel, ed. *Gefangen im Flow? Ästhetik und dispositive Strukturen von Computerspielen*. Boizenburg 2009, pp. 153–180, here pg. 163.

⁸² Krause 2020, pg. 36.

⁸³ Iris Bäcker. “Lesen und Verstehen (Sinnbildung)” in: Alexander Honold and Rolf Parr, eds. *Grundthemen der Literaturwissenschaft: Lesen*. Berlin 2018, pp. 140–155, here pg. 140.

⁸⁴ The “Transportation Imagery Model” should be mentioned as an example, cf. Anneke de Graad, and Letticia Hustinx. “Transported into a Story World: The Role of the Protagonist” in: André Lardinois, et al., ed. *Texts, Transmissions, Receptions. Modern Approaches to Narratives*. Leiden 2015, pp. 114–132, here p. 115.

level.⁸⁵ According to the models of Wolfgang Lenhard⁸⁶ as well as Cornelia Rosebrock and Daniel Nix,⁸⁷ various high-hierarchy (e.g., global coherence formation) and low-hierarchy processes (e.g., recoding letters and decoding words) must be automated as far as possible so that the cognitive power for the mental image is available. Only an experienced reader can muster the cognitive power to immerse themselves in what they are reading. Only then can this person find joy in reading and history.⁸⁸ Accordingly, when it comes to board games, only those who do not focus on individual rule sequences, the meaning of individual markers, etc. can find joy in the story told through the board game and have the cognitive power to delve into the events of the game and experience immersion. They must concentrate. To put it simply: in contrast to an experienced reader, an inexperienced reader cannot easily enjoy the story being told.⁸⁹ The same applies when the medium changes to board games. Experienced board gamers therefore find it easier to have more cognitive capacity for mental models, as they are no stranger to complex rules and procedures,⁹⁰ just as rhetorical devices or idioms are to experienced readers.

Therefore, learning a board game itself can become its own “hero’s journey” at the meta-level, where the player himself optimizes his moves and tactics and thus becomes a “stronger” and more experienced player as the game progresses.⁹¹ One should remember Johan Huizinga’s “homo ludens,” cited in most research on games.⁹² In the words of Stefan Derpmann, in brief: “[...] [Huizinga] shows that the person who plays develops through the game and thereby unfolds.”⁹³ Regarding the game level, Roger Caillois categorized *all* games in a scheme still discussed in game studies.⁹⁴ In this scheme, there are four categories—“agon” (competition), “alea” (coincidence), “mimicry” (disguise) and “ilinx” (vertigo)—each of which lies between the poles “paidia” (joy) and “ludus” (rules of the game). Although this scheme dates back to the 1960s and applies to all games from sports to crossword puzzles to children’s dress-up,⁹⁵ the scheme can also be applied to modern board games: agon corresponds to the competitive aspect, alea to the chance-based aspect, mimicry, to a certain extent, like putting yourself in the shoes of fictional board game characters, and ilinx corresponds to the game’s flow. Depending on the board game, the categories have different degrees of strength. paidia originally corresponds to spontaneous playing with toys, without a goal, simply for the joy of playing. Although the motivation when playing board games is in principle intrinsic in nature,⁹⁶ the course of the game is usually associated with many coincidences.⁹⁷ Furthermore, components and rules should be “[p]lacative, simple, easy to understand, pragmatic [...]—appropriate to the medium.”⁹⁸ But since even the simplest board games have clear rules about victory and defeat, as well as rules for the game itself, and since these rules must be strictly adhered to so that the board game can function at all, all board games can be assigned to the area

⁸⁵ See Ursula Christman. “Lesen als Sinnkonstruktion” in: Ursula Rautenberg and Ute Schneider, eds. *Lesen: Ein interdisziplinäres Handbuch*. Berlin 2015, pp. 169–184, here pp. 177–179.

⁸⁶ Wolfgang Lenhard. *Leseverständnis und Lesekompetenz. Grundlagen – Diagnostik – Förderung*. 2nd revised edition, Stuttgart 2019, pg. 15.

⁸⁷ Daniel Nix and Cornelia Rosebrock. *Grundlagen der Lesedidaktik und der systematischen schulischen Leseförderung*. 7th edition, Hohengehren 2014, pg. 15.

⁸⁸ Bäcker 2018, pg. 147

⁸⁹ Richard Gerring. “Conscious and Unconscious Process in Readers’ Narrative Experiences” in: Greta Olson, ed. *Current Trends in Narratology*. Berlin/New York 2011, pp. 37–60, here pg. 55.

⁹⁰ Cutietta 2019 and Arnaudo 2017.

⁹¹ Krause 2020, pp. 51.

⁹² Krause 2020, pg. 17.

⁹³ Stefan Derpmann. *Ludische Gestaltungs- und Handlungsmuster im Innovationsprozess*. Duisburg 2010, pg. 9.

⁹⁴ Thimm and Wosnitza 2010, pg. 39.

⁹⁵ Gunter Runkel. *Das Spiel in der Gesellschaft*. Muenster 2003, pg. 11.

⁹⁶ Krause 2020, pg. 39.

⁹⁷ Eming and Schlechtweg-Jahn 2017, pg. 19.

⁹⁸ Romfeld and Quasdorf 2020, pg. 316

of *ludus*.⁹⁹ However, depending on the complexity of the game or its rules, the *ludus* aspect varies in intensity.¹⁰⁰

According to Clara Fernández-Vara, (digital) games should be viewed more as *texts* in research,¹⁰¹ which is why, on the game level, a comparison with the literary division into *histoire* and *discourse* is useful.¹⁰² Game studies has dealt very intensively with such parallelisms and divided games (in this case *digital* games, later generalized to *all* games) into their narrative and ludic aspects, narratology and ludology, whereby both pairs of terms mean essentially the same thing.¹⁰³ Narratology is similar to literary *histoire*—“what is being told?” is its main focus, but it also determines the “how it is being told” of the discourse as long as it has absolutely no playful relevance. Ludology deals with all playful aspects, correspondingly, albeit greatly simplified: “what and how is it played?”¹⁰⁴

This division led to an academic debate sometimes referred to as a “blood feud.”¹⁰⁵ On the one hand, there were the ludologists who viewed the (digital) game primarily as a game in itself and viewed potential narratives, if at all, only as a means to an end.¹⁰⁶ Opposite them were the narratologists who saw the stories at the center of the (digital) game, in which ludic aspects only served to tell this story.¹⁰⁷ In the meantime, there are still preferred forms of this narrative, but there is also relative consensus that ludic and narrative elements influence each other and that games cannot therefore be classified in one of these extremes, but rather a mixed form,¹⁰⁸ or in Stefan Schubert’s words “partly narrative, part game, part cultural artifact.”¹⁰⁹ This also applies to board games.¹¹⁰ There, the gameplay can also be divided into narrative and ludic levels.¹¹¹ When it comes to board games, too, they influence each other and therefore cannot be categorized as one of the extremes. This narrative level is the crucial point why, in my opinion, board games should be viewed as a narrative medium.

Board Games as Narrative Media

A text can be viewed as “narrative” as soon as there is at least one actor, when different points in time can be determined and, during these, a causal transformation process from initial state *x* to

⁹⁹ Marie-Laure Ryan. “Fictional Worlds in the Digital Age” in: Susan Schreibmann and Ray Siemens, eds. *A Companion to Digital Literary Studies*. London 2006, pp. 250–266, here pg. 255.

¹⁰⁰ Marie-Laure Ryan. “From Narrative Games to Playable Stories: Toward a Poetics of Interactive Narrative” in: *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*. (2009), pp. 43–59, here pg. 45.

¹⁰¹ Clara Fernández-Vara. *Introduction to Game Analysis*. 2nd edition, New York 2019, pg. 5. Booth transfers this appeal to board games, see Booth 2021, pg. 2.

¹⁰² Michelle Herte. *Forms and Functions of Endings in Narrative Digital Games*. New York 2021, pg. 15. and Wolf Schmid. *Elemente der Narratologie*. 3rd expanded and revised edition, Berlin 2014, pg. 225. According to Schmid’s ideal genealogical model, it is, in fact, irrelevant which medium presents the story.

¹⁰³ Thomas Widra. “Auf dem Weg zu wahrer ‚agency‘” in: Michael Mosel, ed. *Gefangen im Flow? Ästhetik und dispositive Strukturen von Computerspielen*. Boizenburg 2009, pp. 29–60, here pg. 40.

¹⁰⁴ Martin Henning. *Spielräume als Weltentwürfe. Kultursemiotik des Videospiele*. Marburg 2017, pg. 97.

¹⁰⁵ Hanna-Riikka Roine. “How You Emerge from This Game Is up to You: Agency, Positioning, and Narrativity in The *Mass Effect* Trilogy” in: Mari Hatavara, et al., ed. *Narrative Theory, Literature, and New Media. Narrative Minds and Virtual Worlds*. New York 2018, pp. 67–86, here p. 69.

¹⁰⁶ Andrew Mactavish “Licensed to Play: Digital Games, Player Modifications, and Authorized Production” in: Schreibmann and Siemens 2006, pp. 349–368, here pg. 350.

¹⁰⁷ Zierold 2011, pg. 23.

¹⁰⁸ Rob Gallagher. “Plotting the Loop: Videogames and Narratability” in: Zara Dinnen and Robyn Warhol, eds. *The Edinburgh Companion to Contemporary Narrative Theories*. Edinburgh 2020, pp. 174–186, here pg. 184 and Henning 2017, pg. 31.

¹⁰⁹ Stefan Schubert. “Videospiele als Populärkultur. Narrativität, Interaktivität und kulturelle Arbeit in *Heavy Rain*” in: Christoph Just, ed. *Digitale Spiele. Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven zu Diskursfeldern, Inszenierung und Musik*. Bielefeld 2018, pp. 155–178, pg. 156.

¹¹⁰ However, the cultural aspect is usually only mentioned in passing. Dealing with this aspect in more detail is, among others, Booth 2021.

¹¹¹ Arnaudo 2018, pg. 39.

final state y takes place, whereby all of this is only a minimal definition.¹¹² These minimum conditions also apply to transmedia.¹¹³ According to Werner Wolf, narratives arise on a mental level, with the medium itself only providing the triggers that are cognitively decoded, which is why even pictures and sculptures have the potential to become narratives.¹¹⁴ Using these minimal definitions, *all* board games would have to be narrative, because they all have a clear starting position and a different state at the end, with various situational changes occurring on the playing field in between. If one assumes Wolf's theses on narratives, every illustrated component of a board game would have to have its own narrative—every standee, every miniature,¹¹⁵ every illustrated card, the game board itself, etc.

While all of this may be true, however, such board games would not necessarily be able to tell stories on their own. Since the same could be said about argumentative or descriptive texts, Wolf suggested the following addition to the minimal definition of narrative:

[...] the representation of at least rudiments of a world that can be imagined and experienced, in which at least two different actions or states are centered on the same anthropomorphic figures and are related to each other in a potentially meaningful but not necessary way through more than mere chronology.¹¹⁶

But if you consider that a variant of the Tarot game was already popular in the 15th century, in which the players used the cards to invent short stories (not re-tell them),¹¹⁷ this definition is not sufficient for board games. This definition would also apply to various wargames in which, in a war scenario, the actions in the world of the game are centered on the units (of whatever size) and the actions in more than just one chronological connection (but also tactically, usually it is also known what both sides want to achieve and why). Nonetheless, it would be difficult to argue that wargames fundamentally tell stories. In his analysis, Arnaudo combined ludic and narrative elements in his definition of narrative board games and summarized them in a total of thirteen features that at least largely occur for a board game to be considered narrative.¹¹⁸ In his opinion, in a condensed, partly summarized form, the following applies:

A board game must have content and be able to represent it, as well as appropriate components, rules and mechanics¹¹⁹ (1-3).¹²⁰ Events depicted are not only thematic but also causal (5). All of this helps to create and complement the fictional world depicted in the game (4). Players control individual characters that enable identification (6). These characters are

¹¹² Mariano Longo. *Fiction and Social Reality. Literature and Narrative as Sociological Resources*. New York 2017, pg. 11.

¹¹³ Petra Grimm and Michael Müller. *Narrative Medienforschung. Einführung in Methodik und Anwendung*. Munich 2016, pp. 58–63.

¹¹⁴ Werner Wolf. "Narratology and Media(lity): The Transmedial Expansion of a Literary Discipline and Possible Consequences" in: Olson 2011, pp. 145-180, here pp. 147-149 and 160 as well as Antonius Weixler. "Story at First Sight? Bildliches Erzählen zwischen »diachroner Zustandsfolge« und »synchroner Zustandhaftigkeit«" in: Andreas Veits, et al., eds. *Einzelbild & Narrativität. Theorien, Zugänge, offene Fragen*. Cologne 2020, pp. 56–87, here pg. 62.

¹¹⁵ Game figures can be roughly divided into four categories: Pawn (the classic game figures from *Hey, Don't Get Angry*), Meeple (rough representation of the shape of the figure, like the little wooden men like in *Carcassonne*), Standee (illustrated cardboard figure on a stand like in *Dead of Winter*) and miniature (usually detailed 3D plastic figures, as in newer *Risk* editions).

¹¹⁶ Werner Wolf. "Das Problem der Narrativität in Literatur, bildender Kunst und Musik: Ein Beitrag zu einer intermedialen Erzähltheorie." in: Ansgar and Vera Nünning, eds. *Erzähltheorie transgenerisch, intermedial, interdisziplinär*. Trier 2002, pp. 23–104, here pg. 51.

¹¹⁷ Arnaudo 2018, pg. 5 and the Tarot cards in general.

¹¹⁸ Arnaudo 2018 pg. 20; Throughout his entire work he does not separate the two levels.

¹¹⁹ Mechanics is considered a ludic element, with the help of which the game functions and enables the gameplay to take place. For example, there can be a deck of cards that is always shuffled randomly and the cards drawn are used to carry out a common opponent's move. Dice rolls (e.g. to know how far a figure can move) are also considered mechanics.

¹²⁰ For better comprehensibility, the respective characteristics, according to Arnaudo, are in parentheses.

significantly different from each other, have their own goals, and change throughout the game, which in turn promotes player interest (7–11). The strategies players use correspond to the strategies and possibilities of what their individual characters might use in their fictional world (12). Finally, the ludic design of a board game must have a progressive structure (13).¹²¹

The emphasis here is that these characteristics at least “mostly occur” in a board game, because some games that clearly tell a story do not meet all criteria, which in turn makes comparisons and analyzes difficult. There are other attempts to categorize narrative games¹²² that have legitimate arguments, but these are either too narrow¹²³ (focused on a specific area) or too broad (allowing too few distinctions between the games).¹²⁴ “Eurogames” are an example. Their designers are often accused of focusing purely on the game mechanics when designing new games (ludic level) and only imposing an arbitrary theme on the product at the end.¹²⁵ Admittedly, most Eurogames do not have a story in the actual sense,¹²⁶ most only have a theme, such as *Catan*, with the settlement of an island, or *Ticket to Ride*,¹²⁷ with the construction of railway lines. Accordingly, all components also correspond to this topic. However, a board game’s theme always belongs to the narrative level, because otherwise, as far as the ludic aspects are concerned, it would be irrelevant whether single-colored cards were simply drawn instead of cards with colored moves. Furthermore, a ludic discourse is also possible in Eurogames, as Booth demonstrated using three board games about the colonization of Mars: narrative elements repeatedly appeared, including capitalism, neoliberalism, technological progress etc.¹²⁸ Sometimes the theme itself can be a message conveyed through the board game. For example, *Junta*¹²⁹ is a political-satirical examination of the instability in banana republics. Even with thematic board games, the topic can be serious—*The Grizzled* deals critically with the psychological stress on soldiers in the First World War.¹³⁰ All of this applies to all board games with a theme, not just the Eurogames. Furthermore, Stewart Woods’ empirical research on this revealed that although a story is not considered significant in Eurogames, a game’s thematic nature is viewed as at least somewhat important by the vast majority of players.¹³¹ However, such a distinction between topic and narrative is missing in the previously mentioned models.

¹²¹ Arnaudo 2018. For a detailed explanation with examples, see pp. 21–35.

¹²² For an example, see Salter and Sullivan 2017, pg. 3. They divide board games into storycrafting games, unordered story games, story exploration games, and ordered story games. However, their model does not allow for Eurogames, among other things, although these can still tell stories.

¹²³ Salter and Sullivan 2017, pg. 3.

¹²⁴ E.g. with Arnaudo, whose characteristics only allow a limited distinction between board games.

¹²⁵ Romfeld and Quasdorf 2020, pg. 310.

¹²⁶ One notable exception is *Vlaada Chvátil. Dungeon Lords*. Czech Games Edition 2009. In this game, the players themselves have become the masters of their own dungeon and try to protect it from the heroes. It is worth mentioning, as throughout the entire rulebook text, there are two characters from the game who comment and/or explain the rules as if the reader were actually being introduced to their new job.

¹²⁷ Alan Moon. *Ticket to Ride*. Days of Wonder 2004.

¹²⁸ See Booth 2021, pp. 59–76 (in detail), or 75. (Conclusion).

¹²⁹ Tsao Vincent et al. *Junta*. New edition, Pegasus Games 2011.

¹³⁰ Fabien Riffaud and Juan Rodriguez. *The Grizzled*. Cool Mini Or Not 2015. The goal in this game is not about a glorious storming of enemy trenches, but simply the survival of the enemy troop, despite dangers, traumas, phobias and injuries that increase as the game progresses.

¹³¹ Woods 2012, pp. 151, 163 and 167.

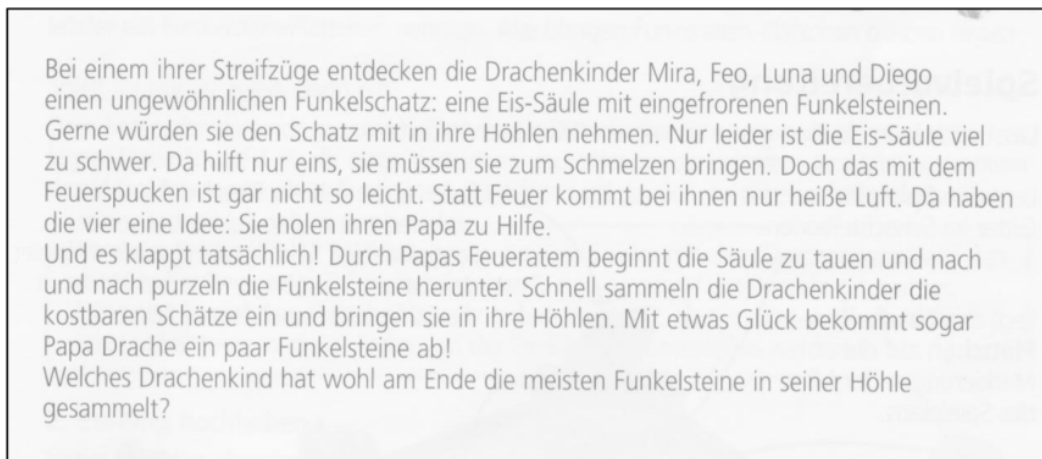


Figure 4: Narrative epilogue to Klaus Teuber's 1991 board game *Drunter und Drüber*, pg. 2. Photo by author.

A game excerpt from *Funkelschatz* by Günther and Lena Burkhardt, in which children are asked to call over a "daddy dragon" to help. This is an example of a leading story introduction to a boardgame. As the game progresses, daddy dragon melts an ice pillar while the dragon children try to collect as many crystals as possible. When the pillar is completely melted, the game ends.

Another example is board games that tell a (usually very short) introductory story at the beginning, which is then played to the end in the game itself.¹³² Some even have an epilogue that is meant to be read after the game.¹³³ This occurs primarily in board games designed for younger children, but not exclusively.¹³⁴ Such games would also not fit in any of the models mentioned. However, since a topic can be assigned to the narrative level, as do introductory stories and epilogues to the games, Eurogames and children's games cannot nevertheless simply be ignored in narrative models.

Non-Narrative, Thematic, and Narrative Board Games

For the reasons mentioned above, I therefore propose to carry out the following categorization inspired by the history of board games and to differentiate board games into *non-narrative*, *thematic*, and *narrative* board games, whereby the transition is fluid and the division depends on the ratio of the presence of the narrative to the ludic level. It is historically inspired because it reflects the development of board games to a certain extent. First of all, for thousands of years there were almost exclusively narrative-free board games, the "classic" board games. Since the post-war period at the latest, *thematic* board games (e.g. wargames) have increasingly gained a presence, which was also consolidated in other game genres (e.g. Eurogames) by the 1990s at the latest. A few years before that, the influence of TTRPGs and game books ensured the increasing presence of the narrative level in board games, so that by the 21st century, at the very latest, we could talk about

¹³² Example: Günther Burkhardt and Lena Burkhardt. *Funkelschatz*. HABA 2017. In the above figure, dragon children find a huge ice pillar with crystals. Since they cannot melt them alone, they call their dragon daddy to help. As the game progresses, the dragon father melts the pillar while the dragon children try to collect as many crystals as possible. When the pillar is completely melted, the game ends.

¹³³ E.g. Klaus Teuber. *Drunter und Drüber*. Hans im Glück 1991. See also Appendix VIII.1.i., the episode of the Schildbürger's "wild building" of roads, walls and riverbeds takes place exclusively in the game itself.

¹³⁴ Example: Jeremy Lennert. *Darkest Night*. Second Edition, Victory Point Games 2018. The royal army was defeated by the necromancer, the country is occupied by him, now the heroes try to fight the necromancer in a kind of partisan battle as the game progresses.

narrative board games that tell their own stories, while the board game medium (and thus also elements of its own ludic level) is in service of telling these stories. Applied to the model, the categories can be divided as follows: Board games *without* narrative are those that can be classified almost exclusively on the *ludic* level. This includes all abstract board games like *Scrabble* or classic board games like *Hey, Don't Get Angry*, etc. *Hnefatafl* also clearly belongs to this category but is closer to thematic board games because it has a theme, albeit a weak one (capture/escape of the kings), which, however, is not otherwise developed further in any way. The same applies to chess and its figures, whose historical development is, however, too complex to describe in detail here.¹³⁵ Themed board games are those that, well, have a clearly identifiable theme. This can simultaneously be a message conveyed through the medium of board games. This category includes various Eurogames, wargames and the majority of children's games. Board games with introductory stories or similar are closer to narrative games (e.g. *Drunter & Drüber*), those that place a particularly strong focus on ludic aspects, those without narrative (e.g. *Azul*¹³⁶ or *Monopoly*,¹³⁷ which has almost 3,000 different reskins.¹³⁸ To put it simply, thematic board games are those that cannot be placed in any of the other extremes.

Narrative board games, in turn, are those that tell a story accompanying or during play (i.e. not just introductory and/or concluding), have individuals as protagonists, and the world narrated makes sense according to the Possible Worlds Theory.¹³⁹ In all of this, however, the narrative level is clearly more dominant than the ludic one and it is not a ludic victory, but reaching the narrative end that is the real reward.¹⁴⁰ One of the board games of this type mentioned so far is *Mice and Mystics*.¹⁴¹ Even if I do not further deal with TTRPGs, they would also be assigned to this category. In other words: we can only speak of narrative board games if their stories could also be told in an interesting way using other media.

Conclusion

Board games have had a long development, in the course of which they have increasingly evolved from narrative-free, abstract games into a medium that can communicate a message or tell entire stories. Since board games differ immensely from one another, however, it is difficult to make a clear distinction when categorizing them, so I have created a model with smooth transitions (*non-*

¹³⁵ Daniel O'Sullivan, ed. *Chess in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age. A Fundamental Thought Paradigm of the Premodern World*. Berlin/Boston 2010.

¹³⁶ Michael Kiesling. *Azul*. Pegasus Games 2017. In this game, players build tile-like "azulejos". Apart from this context and a few visual elements, there are no other notable aspects on the narrative level.

¹³⁷ Charles Darrow. *Monopoly*. Parker Brothers 1935.

¹³⁸ See Salter and Sullivan 2017, pg. 1. "Reskin" basically means the same game as the original, but with a different topic. The very fact that they can have reskins confirms the interchangeability of the theme in such games and thus their extremely weak, nevertheless existing narrative level (the theme is always omnipresent on various cards, game characters, etc.). Related to *Monopoly*, these include: Catherina Lehmann. *Monopoly Fire Department*. Café Viereck 2021, Austin Rucker. *Monopoly Gamers*. Hasbro 2017; Rob Daviau, etc. *Monopoly: Looney Tunes*. Hasbro 2000.

¹³⁹ In short: The fictional world doesn't have to be like ours, and yet it can still make sense despite magic or something similar, as long as it doesn't break its own rules and thereby appear illogical. For more information on this see Nicole Mahne. *Mediale Bedingungen des Erzählens im digitalen Raum. Untersuchung narrativer Darstellungstechniken der Hyperfiktionalität im Vergleich zum Roman*. Frankfurt am Main 2006, pg. 30 and Alexander Schindler. "A Possible Worlds Theory Approach to Narrative: Conflicting Perspectives in Peter James's *Dead Simple*" in: Vera Nünning, ed. *New Approaches to Narrative. Cognition – Culture – History*. Trier 2013, pp. 137–148, here pg. 146 and Ryan 2018, pg. 425.

¹⁴⁰ Krause 2020, pg. 46 and Herte 2021, pg. 1. Although Herte deals with narrative computer games here, the principle of reaching the narrative end as a reward is transferable in this case.

¹⁴¹ In *Mice and Mystics*, the king of the country is bewitched by a witch. First he marries her, then he becomes deathly ill. The prince and some loyal companions want to expose the witch, but are first captured by her. While they were awaiting execution, the court sorcerer (one of the companions in question) turns everyone present in the cell into mice. Transformed, they first try to escape, then defeat the witch and save the king -- all the time, mind you, as mice.

narrative / thematic / narrative board games), which is based on the presence of the narrative level in relation to the ludic one. Even if not *all* board games are narrative, the board game itself can still be viewed as a narrative medium.



Pawel Bornstedt was born in Bielsko-Biala in Poland and holds a Masters of Education (2022) from Albert-Ludwigs-Universität in Freiburg im Breisgau, Germany. He teaches German and History at Rhein Gymnasium in Sinzig, Germany.