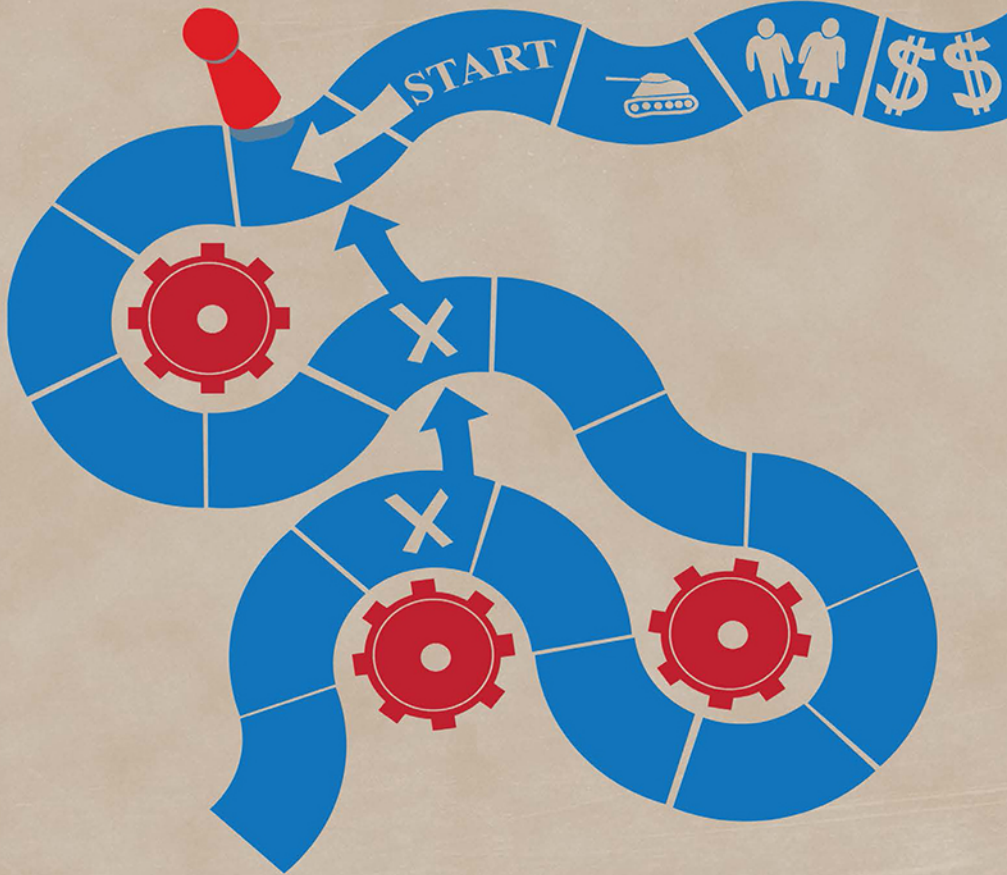


CRC PRESS GUIDES TO TABLETOP GAME DESIGN

CARDBOARD GHOSTS

Using Physical Games to
Model and Critique Systems



Amabel Holland



CRC Press
Taylor & Francis Group

Cardboard Ghosts

Games can be used to model systems because they are themselves systems. Video games handle this under the hood and teach you as you play, but because board games are operated manually, and require the player to understand the system beforehand, they can be a valuable tool for recognizing, understanding, and critiquing real-world systems, including systems of oppression. These systems, often unseen and misunderstood, haunt our world. Board games turn these ghosts into pieces of cardboard we can see, touch, and manipulate.

Cardboard Ghosts: Using Physical Games to Model and Critique Systems explores both the capabilities and limitations of overtly political board games to model systems and make arguments. Two major approaches are considered and contrasted: one, built around immersion and identification, creates empathy. The other, applying the *Verfremdungseffekt* to distance the player from the game, creating space for reflection. Uncomfortable questions of player roles and complicity when modelling oppressive systems are examined.

Throughout this book, board game designer Amabel Holland draws connections to computer games, literature, theatre, television, music, film, and her own life, framing board games as an aching human art form, albeit one still growing into its full potential. Anyone interested in that potential, or in the value of political art in today's world, will find many provocative and enriching ideas within.

Key Features:

- Surveys the history of commercial board games as a polemical and persuasive form.
- Explores games existing at the edges of the industry that push the boundaries of what games can do and be.
- Grapples with the ethical and moral considerations of simulating real-world horrors.
- Provides a case study of the author's influential game *This Guilty Land*.
- Lively prose and personal anecdotes makes complicated theory digestible for a wide audience.

CRC Press Guides to Tabletop Game Design

Series Editor: Geoffrey Engelstein

Thematic Integration in Board Game Design

Sarah Shipp

Graphic Design for Board Games

Daniel Solis

Cardboard Ghosts: Using Physical Games to Model and Critique Systems

Amabel Holland

Cardboard Ghosts

Using Physical Games to Model and Critique Systems

Amabel Holland



CRC Press

Taylor & Francis Group

Boca Raton London New York

CRC Press is an imprint of the
Taylor & Francis Group, an **informa** business

First edition published 2025
by CRC Press
2385 NW Executive Center Drive, Suite 320, Boca Raton FL 33431

and by CRC Press
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

CRC Press is an imprint of Taylor & Francis Group, LLC

© 2025 Amabel Holland

Reasonable efforts have been made to publish reliable data and information, but the author and publisher cannot assume responsibility for the validity of all materials or the consequences of their use. The authors and publishers have attempted to trace the copyright holders of all material reproduced in this publication and apologize to copyright holders if permission to publish in this form has not been obtained. If any copyright material has not been acknowledged please write and let us know so we may rectify in any future reprint.

Except as permitted under U.S. Copyright Law, no part of this book may be reprinted, reproduced, transmitted, or utilized in any form by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying, microfilming, and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without written permission from the publishers.

For permission to photocopy or use material electronically from this work, access www.copyright.com or contact the Copyright Clearance Center, Inc. (CCC), 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923, 978-750-8400. For works that are not available on CCC please contact mpkbookspermissions@tandf.co.uk

Trademark notice: Product or corporate names may be trademarks or registered trademarks and are used only for identification and explanation without intent to infringe.

ISBN: 978-1-032-81668-5 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-032-81344-8 (pbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-50083-4 (ebk)

DOI: 10.1201/9781003500834

Typeset in Minion
by SPi Technologies India Pvt Ltd (Straive)

Contents

Series Preface, viii

Acknowledgements, ix

Author's Biography, x

CHAPTER 1 ■ Stories and Systems 1

CHAPTER 2 ■ Mechanical Metaphors 7

SYSTEMS AND SYNTHESIS 7

LITTLE SISTERS AND CELLAR DOORS 8

THE STONES OF *TURNCOATS* 9

THE HIDDEN MODELS OF COMPUTER GAMES 11

SYSTEM KNOWLEDGE IS SYSTEM MASTERY 13

COGNITIVE LOADS 14

PRIMITIVE POLEMICS 16

NOTES 18

BIBLIOGRAPHY 19

CHAPTER 3 ■ The Paper Time Machine 20

HISTORY OF PROFESSIONAL WARGAMING 20

AVALON HILL AND THE BIRTH OF COMMERCIAL
WARGAMING 23

JIM DUNNIGAN AND THE PAPER TIME MACHINE 24

MECHANICAL COMPLEXITY IN WARGAMES 25

NOTES 27

BIBLIOGRAPHY 28

CHAPTER 4 ■ Wargaming as Technique	30
<hr/>	
GAMES AS ARGUMENTS	30
KUBRICK'S TWO GOLDEN EAGLES	32
THE WARGAMING OF <i>ROOT</i>	35
OBJECTIVITY IN MODELING	35
COMPLICITY IS REQUIRED FOR SYSTEMIC MODELING	37
NOTES	38
BIBLIOGRAPHY	39
CHAPTER 5 ■ Immersion and Identity	41
<hr/>	
IDENTITIES	41
ROLES AS EMPTY AVATARS	42
ROLES AS OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPRESSION	43
ROLES IN HISTORICAL GAMES	45
DETAIL AND TEXTURE	47
MY FAVORITE STORY	48
NOTES	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY	51
CHAPTER 6 ■ Agency and Viewpoint	53
<hr/>	
A THING THAT HAPPENS TO YOU	53
<i>PAX PORFIRIANA</i> AND <i>PAX PAMIR</i>	53
VIEWPOINT AND HORROR IN <i>MELTWATER</i>	56
ORDINARY COMPLICITY AND FANCY HATS	58
COMPLICITY IN <i>JOHN COMPANY</i>	62
ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS OF IMMERSION	64
NOTES	65
BIBLIOGRAPHY	66
CHAPTER 7 ■ Alienation and Distance	68
<hr/>	
LIMITS OF IMMERSION	68
TOO CLOSE TO THE GEARS	69
THE VERFREMDUNGSEFFEKT	70
THE V-EFFECT IN <i>MOTHER COURAGE</i>	71
MEDIA LITERACY	73
NONHIERARCHICAL ART AND THE MONOFORM	75

ALIENATION IN BOARD GAMES	77
NOTES	79
BIBLIOGRAPHY	81
CHAPTER 8 ■ <i>This Guilty Land</i>	82
<hr/>	
THE CONCEPT	82
MODELING CIVILITY AND COMPROMISE	83
MODELING A BROKEN LEGISLATURE	84
DISTANCING PLAYERS FROM ROLES	85
WORKING AGAINST TEXTURE	86
WORKING AGAINST FLOW	87
EMOTIONAL TEXTURE	88
LIMITS OF ALIENATION	89
NOTES	92
BIBLIOGRAPHY	93
CHAPTER 9 ■ Challenges and Hopes	94
<hr/>	
USEFUL DOUBTS	94
ETHICAL CHALLENGES	95
PRACTICAL CHALLENGES	99
POLITICAL ART IS A CUSTARD PIE	102
THE FUTURE	105
NOTES	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY	107
 INDEX, 108	

Series Preface

The history of games goes back at least 5,000 years, and game materials are routinely found in archeological digs around the world. They are an integral part of what makes us human.

And yet the scholarly study of games as a craft, tabletop games in particular, is a relatively recent development. Their study has gone hand in hand with an explosion of creativity in tabletop games, and increasing cultural penetration and acceptance in all their forms.

Because of their centrality to the human experience, it is unsurprising that the study of games touches on many spheres. Art, science, philosophy, storytelling, psychology, math, social dynamics, and system engineering are just some of the disciplines that inform and guide the design of games, and our reaction to them.

The goal of this book series is for each volume to take a tightly focused look at a single topic within this spectrum, authored by an expert in the field. The diversity of topics demands a diverse set of authors, each of whom brings their particular knowledge, experience, and perspective to the realm of game design.

It is in this spirit that we are very pleased to bring you this volume of the CRC Press Guides to Tabletop Game Design.

Geoff Engelstein
Series Editor

Acknowledgements

There are three people without whom this book would not exist.

Geoff Engelstein, my editor, who asked me if I wanted to write a book. He knew when to indulge my digressive tendencies and when to reign them in.

Samhain Bones, my partner, who gave me the time and space to write it. Many of the ideas first found their fullest articulation in conversation with her.

Erin Escobedo, my chosen sister, who changed how I thought about games. When I reached out she grabbed my hand and held it tight, and that's a debt I can never repay.

Author's Biography

Amabel Holland is a board game designer, developer, and publisher, and in those capacities is responsible for over a hundred board games. Much of her work is experimental, concerned either with the potential of games as political art, or with the nature of games as cultural artifacts. According to the *New Yorker*, she is “widely considered one of today’s most innovative game designers.” She’s not so sure about that, but she’ll take it. A lifelong resident of the Detroit area, in her free time she creates video essays about games and their potential.

Stories and Systems

Years ago, I read something that changed how I thought about games. In a roundabout way, it changed my life.

I would love to share it with you, but it's gone. It was a post on a trashy trans Tumblr blog,¹ and it was scrubbed away in late 2018 along with all the other joyously unclean things in an attempt to make the site more palatable to investors, advertisers, and credit card processors. Maybe the most important thing I have ever read, a real *On First Looking Into Chapman's Homer* sort of thing, and it's gone forever because a cell phone company thought the weird horny website would finally become profitable if it wasn't weird and horny.²

The post was written by a trans woman who was a board game designer, and it was about how badly games model romance and intimacy. Games are really good at modeling combat, she argued. You can measure someone's hit points or exhaustion or morale, and you can whittle that down – track someone's willingness to continue fighting. But when games try to model something as ineffable as attraction or affection, it is rendered as a kind of combat: whittling down the opposing side's "emotional hit points", or doing enough tasks (giving gifts, choosing the right dialogue options) to increase their mathematically-measured affinity for you. It's a clumsy model at best, a clear example of everything looking like a nail when all you have is a hammer. At worst, it plays into the toxic idea of someone being "owed" affection or intimacy because they've spent x number of dollars or spent y amount of time with you.

Her conclusion, as I remember it, was that games don't yet have the tools to model such things, and they might never get them. Because games, and board games especially, reduce everything to something tangible and measurable. Something as slippery as political influence becomes a wooden cube in your color. Happiness is a piece of cardboard scooting up a track. Games are blunt, obvious things, a collection of yes/no binary states and strict rules. A game cannot hold a poem's shades of meaning, metaphors melting into each other, contradicting, expressing, reaching: it strips all that away, literalizes it, turns it into a single thing that can be counted and held.

She expressed it as anguish and frustration. I shared in that, and still do. But I also saw a tremendous amount of potential in that process of literalizing. Games are bad at mechanically modeling love, grief, and melancholy because it must give those incorporeal things a physicality. But what if you *wanted* to give something incorporeal a physical form? What if that very act transformed something inscrutable into something comprehensible and observable?

At the time that I read this, I had designed a few dozen published games. Many of them were in the tradition of historical conflict simulations – games that sought to model history and make arguments about it. But until I read that Tumblr post, it hadn't yet clicked that I could use games to literalize, model, and understand *systems*, particularly political systems and systems of oppression. Like I said, it changed how I thought about games.

I also said it changed my life. In what I could only characterize as a cosmic coincidence, some time later its author, Erin Escobedo, sent me an email. The lady who rewired my brain wanted my company to publish her first board game, *Meltwater: A Game of Tactical Starvation*. Afterwards, we became friends. In this trashy, crabby trans woman I recognized a lot of myself, or, to be more precise, I recognized things I had always *wanted* for myself. Erin didn't crack my egg,³ but when it did crack, she gave me a direction to run toward instead of from.

The story of how my egg cracked isn't particularly interesting, and I'm not going to share it here. The short version is that I recognized myself in other trans people who shared their experiences, and who gave me the language and concepts I needed to understand myself. That information was not available to me throughout most of my life. If I saw depictions of trans people in media, it wasn't trans people sharing their own