Basement of the spirits

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Basements of the spirits is my groups prototype of a viking game that had resource management. A viking game is a game that has a single looser instead of a winner like Jenga. I will not focus a lot on our on game in this essay, rather I will first tell about some thoughts we had about symmetrical vs asymmetrical gameplay in regards to viking games, and then about a conflict we identified in having a viking game that had resource management in it. Lastly I well reflect upon how a rather arbitrary resource improved our gameplay significantly.

In the beginning of the design process we tried to look at existing viking games in order to figure out what makes them work. Quite simple games came to our minds like Tag, Jenga, and Old Maid. It seemed to us like the games functioned in one of two ways. One type of games provided symmetric roles to the players, like Jenga, and the player loosing is the one who makes a big mistake. The other type of games like Tag provided asymmetric roles where one of the roles is the loosing role. Old Maid seems to be some mixture of these two concepts but I would mostly consider it to have symmetric gameplay. We tried to create both with symmetric and asymmetric roles, but ended up with an asymmetric game because that seemed most enjoyable when we included resource management.

We tried to create quite a couple different games with resource management. We made a simple stock trading prototype and a spatially based prototype where players could concur each others space. The gameplay of these games were somewhat enjoyable, but when they ended having a single looser instead of a winner, they did not feel satisfying at all. A lot of resource management games work in a similar manner to those we prototyped. The main mechanic of the games are, that you are able to invest resources in order to gain more resources at a later point. One of the enjoyable things about these kinds of games is to see yourself building a thriving economy, while you at the same time try make your opponents economies suffer. Experiencing this feedback, or the lack of this feedback loop, can be respectively either extremely satisfying or very painful. The problem we found with these prototypes was that the player who successfully created a thriving economy was not rewarded by winning. Rather the player simply avoided loosing, even thought she was could clearly have done better. I therefor believe that there might be some inherent conflict in creating a classic resource management game as a viking game[1]. The viking games we looked at all have in common that there is little to no difference between the players who are not loosing. If resources are introduced differences between players starts to show up. We had the idea of letting all the players start with a functioning economy and then slowly destroying players feedback loop, making the player who went bankrupted first loose. However we ran a bit out of time and therefore

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[1] I will even argue that this is probably the reason why we were given exactly this design challenge.

settled on making game with a mechanic similar to tag and then trying to find a resource that did not involve a feedback loop. We came up with two types of resources, we gave each players movement cards and we added some fuel around the map that the players could collect and use to fuel some power generators.

One of the players has the role of being a ghost and has to posses another player, who will then take on the role of the ghost. We found that the game-play was quite enjoyable for the player who was ghost, even though they were loosing, however the remaining players just walked around without feeling any purpose. When we added fuel spread around the board, the non-ghost role became a lot more enjoyable. From a strategic level I believe that the fuel adds very little to the game. However the act of simply walking around and collecting fuel were quite enjoyable, I think it is because it gives players some feedback before they either win or loose. To me this was quite a big experience because I normally aim for a quite minimalistic approach to game design, where I try to only introduce mechanics if it has some clear purpose in relation to other mechanics. However now I am beginning to think, that it might be fine to add mechanics simply because they add an enjoyable interaction. It might seem trivial but it is something that I have been considering for quite a while. I am in the process of creating a narrative puzzle platformer, where the main mechanic is that the player can change between two worlds. I am creating the game with a friend and one of the things we discuss is what mechanics we want to have in the game. Personally I prefer mechanics that somehow relates to the world changing mechanic. A mechanic along these lines could be a monster that changes the worlds independently of the player. My co-developer however likes mechanics that adds to the atmosphere and narrative of the game. An example of such a mechanic could be a flower that makes noises and creates screen shake when the player approaches. For a long time I have been disliking these kind of mechanics because they seems arbitrary to me. Now I am beginning to think that it might be a good idea to include some of these, because having a nice experience might be more important than having a beautiful set of rules.

In this essay I have first told a bit about the consideration and problems we found when designing a viking game that contained resource management. I have argued that there might be an inherent conflict between resource management games and viking games. Lastly I have tried to described some thoughts I have in regards to what kind of mechanics that I like in games. I am slowly accepting that it might be a good idea to include mechanics that simply adds to a nice experience.