

## Adaptation and Space: Thematic and Atmospheric Considerations for Board Game Environment Construction

Megan Condis

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

### Abstract

This piece will investigate how the design of a board game's play space (and the rules that govern movement through that space) are an important way that game designers can work to evoke the original text they are adapting. A tool that goes beyond decorative elements like illustrations on the game box or collectable game pieces, the configuration of the game space and the movement rules turn the game system into an instrument for creating atmosphere, shaping how players will interact with each other and their environment. I will look at two examples: *Dawn of the Dead*, a 1978 board game based on the George Romero film, and *Lord of the Rings*, a 2000 board game adapted from J.R.R. Tolkien's classic series. These two games feature very different board designs that evoke diverse strategic (and emotional) responses from players. *Dawn of the Dead* restricts players to a single, very cluttered and crowded game board littered with obstacles and hidden enemies. This spatial setup helps to recreate the feelings of claustrophobia and paranoia that permeate the original film. *Lord of the Rings*, on the other hand, spreads its actions across multiple game boards, requiring players to move their tokens across multiple self-contained maps as they make their way through the game. This design decision recreates the feeling of an 'epic journey' as depicted in the novels. In addition, the game uses space to model an internal, spiritual conflict; the corrupting influence of the Ring on its bearer is represented spatially on its own board.

**Keywords:** Board Games, Space, Board Game Design, Game Mechanics, Game Systems, Adaptation, Dawn of the Dead, Lord of the Rings.

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For many years, when film scholars thought to mention toys and games based on movie franchises, they would often describe them under the sign of crass commercialism. These products were viewed as little more than advertisements for the films in question, or as slap-dash attempts to wring a little extra profit from fannish dupes willing to fork out their hard-earned cash for collectible crap associated with their favourite brand (Engelhardt 1986; Kline 1989; Wasko, Phillips, and Purdie 1993). They were dismissed as pop culture schlock, obviously unworthy of scholarly attention and perhaps harmful to the children to which they were marketed.

More recently, studies of popular culture like Jonathan Gray's *Show Sold Separately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts* (2010) began to give these objects a bit of much-deserved attention. Gray argues that, far from encouraging mindless consumption,

toys and games based on popular franchises enable consumers a chance to take up, remix, and redeploy their favourite stories on their own terms. For example, Gray describes the 'opening up' of storytelling possibilities within the *Star Wars* franchise enabled by the extremely popular line of action figures that accompanied the film's release: 'Films required set plots, themes, and endings that would in turn aim for resolution [...] toys allowed children to play up or down established themes and make their own substantial imprint on the *Star Wars* universe' (2010: 178). According to Gray, the toys inspired fans to replay and also to re-write and reinterpret the *Star Wars* universe.

However, board and video game adaptations of popular media franchises are a little more complex, involving the interaction of two distinct reinterpretations of the original source: that of the game's

creators, who attempt to distil their interpretation (and thus shape player decision-making) by creating a set of rules that will govern the game, and that of players, whose decisions will create the 'story' each play-through tells. If we look at a ludic adaptation such as a board game based on a popular novel or film as an 'intertext designed to be looked through, like a window on the source text... to be looked into and through as well as at' (Leitch 2007: 17), then we can begin to understand how they function as tools for players to rewrite (and therefore, critically read and interpret) a text. When converting a film or a novel into a game, designers create game mechanics to facilitate players as they craft their own version of the original story, guiding their play (and the experiential narrative that develops as a result of that play) by building limitations into the game environment that encourage or discourage certain actions, or help to create a certain mood. Ian Bogost calls this kind of argumentation 'procedural rhetoric', the encoding of concepts and conclusions into the rules that govern interaction with a game environment and/or with one's fellow players (2007). In the best ludic adaptations, the 'transcoding' (Stam 2005: 12) of a linear narrative into a game space governed by rules of token movement and token-environment interaction, turns the game itself into an instrument for creating a story; shaping how players interact with each other and the world of the game to produce a unique interpretation of the original narrative. And yet, because of the open-ended nature of game systems, these rule sets also allow room for players to craft their own interpretations as they play the game.

This study looks specifically at two board game adaptations of popular filmic and literary franchises. I define 'board game' here as an analogue game system composed of an environment (be it abstract or representative) that defines the boundaries within which the game is played and which is 'largely', though not entirely, 'set and unchangeable' (Applecline 2003). Tokens are the 'dynamic components... those things that you hold in your hand and move around the board' (Applecline 2003). Said movement is governed by a set of rules created by the game designer, and certain configurations of the board defined by those rules represent a win condition. For example, any board configuration

representing a 'checkmate' (wherein the king token is unable to make a move to escape capture on his next turn) is the win condition for chess.

The first game I will examine here is Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings*, a German board game developed and released by Fantasy Flight Games in 2000 while the film adaptations of J.R.R. Tolkien's famous trilogy (1954; 1954; 1955) were still in development. The game was then scooped up by Hasbro for release in the United States in 2001 to 'capitalize on the success' (Woods 2012: 76) of *The Lord of the Rings: Fellowship of the Ring* (Dir. Peter Jackson) that same year. *Lord of the Rings* is currently 'available worldwide in 17 languages, with sales of over one million copies' (Knizia 2004: 27). It has spawned multiple expansions (Fantasy Flight Games 2013), 'received the prestigious game award Spiel des Jahres (Game of the Year) in 2001 for "Literature in Games"' (Zagal, Rick and His 2006: 28), and is widely considered the 'most popular collaborative board game ever' (Zagal, Rick and His 2006: 28). The second case study is *Dawn of the Dead*, a 1978 board game by Simulations Publications, Inc. based on the George A. Romero film. This game was so popular among its fans that they moved to preserve it for future gamers by making it freely available for download after it went out of print (Fawcett n.d.; Mick 2012).

These two games represent very different eras in the history of board gaming, as well as two very different games marketplaces. *Dawn of the Dead* is an example of a niche game aimed at a small market of board game hobbyists. The game inherited much of its rules structure, as well as its minimalist aesthetic and reliance on dice to adjudicate conflicts between player-characters and their foes, from pen-and-paper role playing games like *Dungeons and Dragons* and miniatures-based strategic war games, both of which were very popular in the U.S. gaming market in the 1970s (*Going Cardboard: A Board Game Documentary*, Dir. Lorien Green, 2012). *Lord of the Rings*, on the other hand, came out of the modern German board gaming market; a market in which new games receive reviews in popular newspapers, talented games auteurs (like Reiner Knizia) are minor celebrities who are credited with 'above the title' credits on games boxes, and relatively large budgets can be funnelled into hiring talented artists and designers (ibid.).

And yet, despite the differences in their production histories, these games do have one thing in common: they take seriously the notion that adaptation, in this medium, involves gamification. That is to say, these adaptations do more than simply import decorative surface elements from their parent texts such as evocative illustrations on their game boxes or recognisable character names slapped onto game tokens in order to market themselves to fans of the original. Rather, the games' mechanics are where the real work of adapting takes place. These games' designers created two unique systems through which players could traverse famous stories. They made a set of tools that allowed players to rewrite and reinterpret those stories again and again over the course of multiple play-throughs. Comparing these two systems, each of which imagines player interactions and player/environment conflicts quite differently, makes clear how much room for creative interpretation such adaptations allow for on the part of game makers and game players.

For example, Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* does not simply rely on the artwork by famed Tolkien artist John Howe (Knizia 2004: 23), and the lengthy synopsis of Tolkien's novels that is embedded in the rules book to demonstrate his fidelity to the source material. Instead, Knizia wrote that

even though [he] couldn't cover the entire story line, [his] aim was to stay within the spirit of the book so that the players would experience something similar to readers of the book. These design goals would have many consequences for game design (Knizia 2004: 22).

Knizia began by constructing multiple game boards that players would rotate around, moving through the many locations featured in Tolkien's novels. Building the game so that it takes place on multiple boards creates the feeling that the players' journey is epic and expansive, too big to be easily contained on a single map.

Players take on the role of (up to) five hobbits from the Shire (Frodo, Sam, Merry, Pippin, and their early travel companion Fatty, who was only briefly mentioned in the novels); the least powerful, least capable members of the Fellowship of the Ring. Thus,

the hobbits/players must work together if they want to have any hope of making it all the way to Mordor to destroy the One Ring. Knizia believed that 'to do Tolkien's masterpiece justice, the players would have to play together.... The game system had to intrinsically motivate [co-operative] play' (Knizia 2004: 23), and he designed the game so that the players would team up to battle a *procedural* adversary embedded within the game itself (as opposed to competing against a fellow player).<sup>1</sup> Knizia told one interviewer,

My challenge was to create an atmosphere in the game that pushed people together and made them naturally want to stay together. The opponent comes from the game system.... The players realize after the first few turns that they get hit so quickly with so many bad things that if they want to just go off by themselves they have no hope (Knizia 2002).

The majority of these 'bad things' take place on yet another board, the 'Summary Board' with its 'Corruption Line' (see Figure 1). At the beginning of the game, the hobbits are placed at one end and their adversary, the evil wizard Sauron, resides on the other. This board depicts the *internal* struggle between selfishness and self-sacrifice that takes place as the One Ring corrupts its bearers by rendering it visible in *spatial* terms. Unlike typical board game environments, this is one racetrack where players *do not* want to move forward, as each step towards Sauron represents the hobbits falling further and further under the influence of the Ring's evil power. If Sauron meets a hobbit token on the board, the player is 'corrupted' by him, lost as a companion to the Fellowship, and removed from the game. Furthermore, if the Ring bearer is corrupted, it's 'Game Over' for the entire team.

Thus, a *spiritual* conflict that takes place within the hearts and minds of Tolkien's characters is gamified, abstracted into a quantifiable relationship between tokens on a game board. All the player characters must work together to protect themselves from Sauron as he slowly approaches them, racing to get to Mordor before his corruption overtakes them from the inside. Furthermore, it is up to the players to determine exactly how their version of the fellowship will function. Will they follow the direction of a single leader or make decisions democratically?



Figure 1: The top game board pictured above features the Corruption Line. When player character tokens move forward on this line, it represents their on-going temptation by the evil power of the One Ring. The bottom board is one of the four location boards included in the original game: Moria. The other three locations are Helm's Deep, Shelob's Lair, and Mordor. Players swap these out as they move through the game, an act that symbolizes the hobbits' journey across the landscape of Middle-earth. Additional locations can be purchased to extend the game as a part of the Friends and Foes expansion (Fantasy Flight Games 2001).

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Will they abandon their fellows to preserve the integrity of the mission or will they insist that no one be left behind?

In comparison, in *Dawn of the Dead* (see Figure 2) players compete against one another, taking the roles of zombies and human survivors during an apocalypse. The board game requires Roger, Peter, Steve, and Fran (the four survivors featured in Romero's film) to secure the entrances to an abandoned shopping mall and clear out all the zombified shoppers roaming the building, so they can use it as a safe haven from the undead.

The game environment is contained on a single board representing the mall. The board is packed full of obstacles—doors that can be opened and shut, glass walls that can be shot out or broken by zombie attacks—and the walking dead. The density and complexity of the environment both reflects the feelings of paranoia and claustrophobia that run through the film and creates a need for strategic thinking among players as they create barriers between themselves and the undead hordes, or try to funnel them

into convenient shooting galleries.

Furthermore, the movement rules (Fawcett n.d) for human and zombie tokens recreate the traditional slow-zombie movie dynamic. Zombies move slowly but relentlessly. They are constantly drawn towards their human prey whenever they catch a glimpse of their delicious flesh, but they quickly forget about them as soon as the humans move out of sight. Occasionally, a 'hidden zombie' (one that is only revealed when a human stumbles upon its location, which is chosen at the beginning of the game by the player controlling the zombies) can surprise a human player, turning what was thought to be a safe corner of the mall into a battleground and incorporating the common horror movie tactic of the sudden 'jump scare' into the game mechanics.

Humans, on the other hand, are quick and clever, able to navigate around the zombies provided they don't allow them to get in too close and overwhelm them with their sheer numbers. Human players also have the benefit of ranged weaponry in the form of their guns; however, marksmanship is a



bitten, killed, and transformed into one of the undead. Zombie Steve is the biggest threat the survivors face because, in life, he knew the location of the secret entrance to their safe house on the upper level of the mall. Zombie Steve rallies several zombies to the location of a false wall the survivors built to conceal their safe house, gets them to chew and tear through it, and sets them loose inside, forcing Fran and Peter to flee the mall in a helicopter that is precariously low on fuel.

The game rules also provide for the possibility of a player character being reanimated as a zombie, one whose ability to rally other zombies to its location and enhance their movement speed make it especially dangerous to its former allies. The 'capture' of a human player's token and its conversion into a zombie token reflects the basic source of horror in any zombie film or story: the possibility that one's will might be erased, or worse, superseded by the will of another. This fear has been a key component of zombie narratives since its origins in Haitian myths about 'shambling corpse[s]... brought back from the dead to toil in the fields and factories by miserly land-owners' (Boon 2007: 46), though in modern zombie fiction the force that takes hold of a body is more likely to be a virus or some form of alien radiation than a Voodoo priest.<sup>2</sup> In the film version of *Dawn of the Dead* (Dir. George A. Romero, 1978), Roger poignantly expresses this fear when he is bitten in an attempt to secure the entrances of the mall. He begs Peter to shoot him before he turns, mournfully telling his friend:

You'll take care of me, won't you Peter? You'll take care of me when I go.... I don't want to be walkin' around like that.... Don't do it 'til you're sure I am coming back. I'm gonna try not to. I'm gonna try not to come back. I'm gonna try... not to...

Peter neatly summarises the horror of the zombie when he tells Fran that 'they're us, that's all'. His description implies that any one of them might wind up becoming a zombie, that their bodies might betray them by coming back without them at the helm. In the *Dawn of the Dead* board game, reanimation means that a player loses control of what used to be their token. The piece that served as their 'body' in

the game world is transferred to the control of the player running the zombie pieces.<sup>3</sup> The player is forced to watch as that body turns on their teammates just as the characters in the film are faced with disposing of the zombified corpses of their former loved ones and fellow survivors.

Both the *Lord of the Rings* and the *Dawn of the Dead* board games adapt linear narratives into game environments, which are governed by rule sets that steer players as they craft their own adaptations of classic films and works of literature. The rules constrain player actions to ensure that those adaptations are in keeping with the themes of the original work, but they are flexible enough to allow each playthrough to result in a different re-telling. This opens up the possibility for new insights and new interpretations of the original text. Such ludic adaptations are more than mere commercial cash-ins or knock offs. They are interpretive tools worthy of study by both game designers and adaptation scholars.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is true for the original version of the game, at any rate. A later optional expansion called *Lord of the Rings: Sauron* (2002) included additional rules that allowed for another player to take the role of Sauron and oppose the hobbits on their quest.

<sup>2</sup> Peter makes reference to the Haitian origin of the zombie myth when he delivers the film's tagline: 'When there's no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth'. Peter explains that was a saying he heard from his grandfather, a Voodoo priest in Trinidad.

<sup>3</sup> The game also contains a set of solitaire rules that allow for a single player to control all the human tokens. The zombies are operated according to set movement rules. In such a scenario, a human token reanimated as a zombie would pass into the control of the game itself, turning from an ally in the fight for survival into an obstacle used against the player.

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