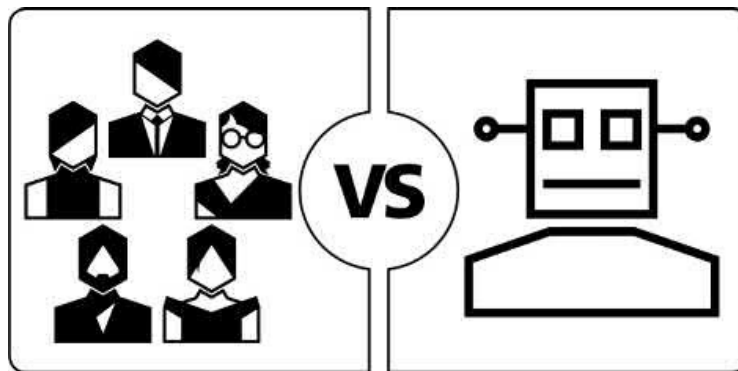


STR-02 Cooperative Games



Description

Players coordinate their actions to achieve a common win condition or conditions. Players all win or lose the game together.

Discussion

Quite a few games call for cooperative play among players, including team games, one-vs.-many games, role-playing games, and games with secret traitors. These can be viewed as belonging to a hierarchical category of cooperative games. Some might even include solo games in this group. For our purposes, we'll treat each of these as separate categories and limit ourselves here to "pure" cooperative games in which all players play on one side and win or lose as a group.

Since 2008, when Matt Leacock released *Pandemic*, the genre of cooperative tabletop games has exploded. Earlier games like *Sherlock Holmes: Consulting Detective*, *Arkham Horror*, and *Lord of the Rings* laid a foundation and enjoy enduring popularity, but Leacock started a wave of innovation in cooperative gaming that continues to reshape modern gaming a decade and more later.

Cooperative gaming is accessible because it lowers barriers to entry for a game. Disparities in skill level can often make a competitive game a sour experience both for the expert and the newcomer. Complex competitive games can be intimidating to new players. Being coached by your opponent in such a game introduces some negative play dynamics because of the misaligned incentives of helping your opponent. The power imbalance between the players can also create awkward social dynamics. Cooperative games put

players on the same team and foster comradery while allowing experienced players to help teach both the mechanics and strategy of the game, without facing conflicting incentives. For many new players, cooperative games are not only a gateway into gaming but a mainstay of their ongoing consumption of games.

Cooperative games can broadly be placed into two categories: those with artificial intelligence (AI) and those without. Cooperative games with an AI, like *Sentinels of the Multiverse* and *Mice and Mystics*, feature an opponent or opponents who behave according to a simple artificial intelligence, encoded by the designer. In *Sentinels*, the AI is driven by a deck of cards that governs the actions of the enemy villains and the players they will target. *Mice* has a simple algorithm that players use to control the play of enemy figures.

Non-AI games like *Hanabi*, the revolutionary Antoine Bauza title, and *Mysterium* present players with a puzzle to solve and limitations on time, resources, and interaction that players must contend with. However, these games have no villain or opposing force that drives the action and actively confronts the players.

Another consideration for the designer of cooperative games is keeping the difficulty consistent while scaling with a number of players. If each player has a set number of actions they may perform on their turn (as in *Pandemic*, for example), four players will have twice as many actions per round as two players. While there are many techniques, a very common design pattern is alternating between a player taking a turn and the game taking a turn—basically alternating “Good thing” (player actions) with “Bad thing” (game actions). This scales naturally as the number of players increases.

Another distinction between different kinds of cooperative games is whether each player retains agency over their in-game resources, actions, and choices or they seek consensus for all decisions, even if they nominally represent separate in-game characters. We might call the former game a partnership game and the latter a collaborative one. In general, cooperative games will tend to be played collaboratively unless the rules specifically and substantially impede this collaboration and force players to make independent decisions rather than build consensus. Examples include limits on communications, time, and focus.

For some players, collaborative play contributes to the “alpha player problem,” also known as “quarterbacking,” in which some player takes control of the group discussion and decision-making and creates a negative play experience by overriding other players. There are many possible reasons for the

rise of an alpha player problem, many ways that problem can manifest, and a thicket of contributory social dynamics that are beyond the scope of this work. While some players and designers believe that the alpha player problem is a group-composition problem or a problem of unshared assumptions rather than a design problem, some design choices will make a game more vulnerable to alpha player takeovers. In particular, when all players share the same information and the game state is not too complex, alpha player behavior becomes likelier.

At the other end of the spectrum are games which cannot be taken over by an alpha player. *Magic Maze* and others of its type make player communication a game mechanism, such that players can't freely share information or advise one another on how to play. *The Mind* takes this to an extreme by forbidding players from having any kind of communication about which cards they hold. These types of communication limitations (UNC-06) may be presented like any other rule, but they do not actually create a bright line of which conduct is and is not permitted. Rather, these games can be played somewhat differently by each group, with the precise contours of allowable communication varying by tacit or overt agreement. This approach is deeply polarizing, and some players will utterly reject these kinds of games or cast doubt on whether they are games at all. That said, these communication restrictions have the potential to create incredible experiences that connect participants to one another on an almost mystical level.

Communication limitations are only one approach to preventing players from achieving consensus-based play. *Space Cadets*, *Space Alert*, and *FUSE* introduce a real-time element that forces players to make independent decisions because there is no time for players to collaborate. Other games attempt to strongly connect players to their roles, provide them with hidden information, or make operating their roles especially complicated. *Mechs vs. Minions* and *Spirit Island* both make it challenging for players to decipher each other's powers and possibilities. *Sentinels of the Multiverse* attempts something similar by providing each player with a unique preconstructed deck. Escape room games from *T.I.M.E Stories* to the *Exit* and *Unlock* series sometimes bar players from sharing information too specifically as well. The variety of challenges and puzzles these games offer, and even the various roles that players can take in the solving effort, all help ensure that every player finds a satisfying way to participate in the game.

Another notable trend in cooperative game design is the conversion of one-vs.-many, "overlord"-style games into co-ops with the assistance of an app. *Mansions of Madness: Second Edition* and *Star Wars: Imperial Assault*

both introduced apps that allow the games to be played cooperatively. More generally, games are being released with cooperative and solo modes alongside competitive modes of play. Sometimes, as has been the case with *Orleans* and *Oh My Goods!*, cooperative modes have been introduced in expansions to competitive games.

The ongoing design exploration of cooperative games and their possibilities is one of the most exciting and fruitful trends in tabletop gaming today. Designers are encouraged to experiment with this popular and adaptable game structure.

Sample Games

Arkham Horror (Krank, Launius, Petersen, and Willis, 1987)
Exit: The Game (Brand and Brand, 2016)
FUSE (Klenko, 2015)
Hanabi (Bauza, 2010)
Lord of the Rings (Knizia, 2000)
Magic Maze (Lapp, 2017)
Mansions of Madness (Koneiszka, 2011)
Mechs vs. Minions (Cantrell, Ernst, Librande, Saraswat, and Tiras, 2016)
Mice and Mystics (Hawthorne, 2012)
The Mind (Warsch, 2018)
Mysterium (Nevskiy and Sidorenko, 2015)
Oh My Goods! (Pfister, 2015)
Orleans (Stockhausen, 2014)
Pandemic (Leacock, 2008), and the complete line of *Pandemic* games
Sentinels of the Multiverse (Badell, Bender, and Rebottaro, 2011)
Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective: The Thames Murders & Other Cases (Edwards, Goldberg, and Grady, 1981)
Space Alert (Chvátíl, 2008)
Space Cadets (Engelstein, Engelstein, and Engelstein, 2012)
Spirit Island (Reuss, 2017)
Star Wars: Imperial Assault (Kemppainen, Konieczka, and Ying, 2014)
T.I.M.E Stories (Chassenet and Rozoy, 2015)
Unlock! series (Various, 2017)