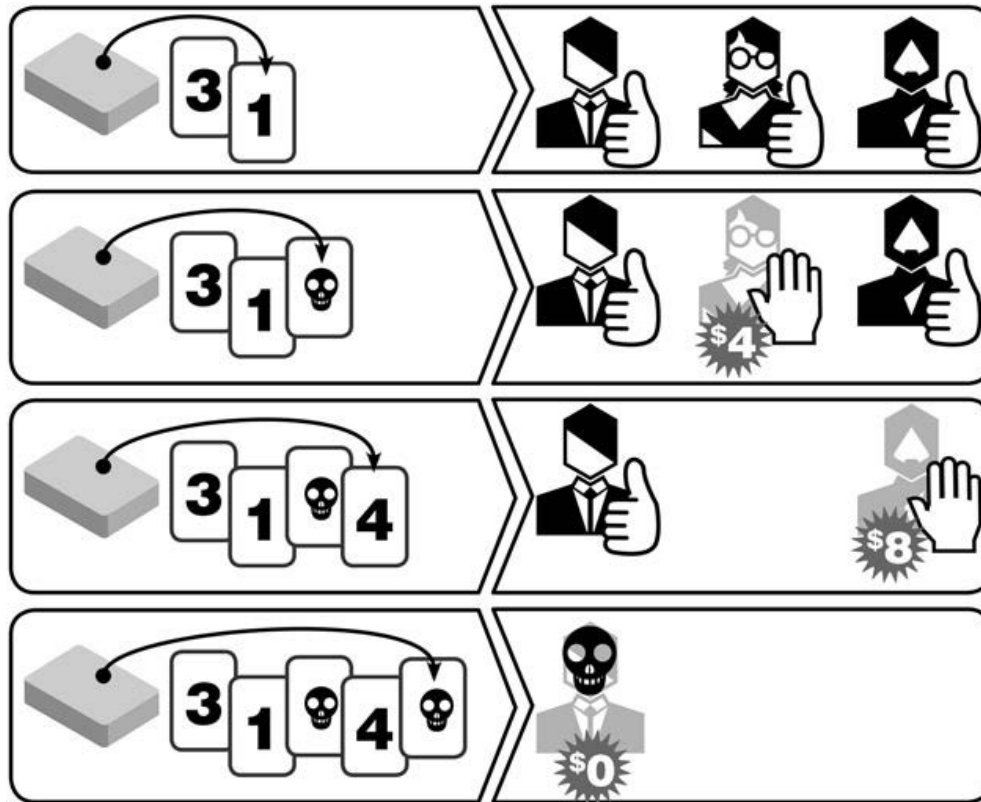


UNC-02 Push-Your-Luck



Description

Players must decide between settling for existing gains, or risking them all for further rewards. Push-Your-Luck is also known as press-your-luck.

Discussion

A good example of a game whose central mechanism is Push-Your-Luck is Sid Sackson's *Can't Stop*. In *Can't Stop*, the active player rolls four dice and advances up to two pawns in tracks numbered from 2 to 12, based on matching the sum of any two dice to the numbers on the tracks. The player may choose at any point to stop rolling, and lock in their progress along the tracks, or reroll to attempt to advance again. However, if after rolling, the player cannot match the sum of the dice to any of the three active tracks the player is advancing on, the player "busts," and all progress from that turn is lost. Push-Your-Luck is a type of wager in which players have less control over the ante or the stakes than in most casino games.

An important dynamic in push-your-luck games is how changes to the stakes can alter player behavior. In *Can't Stop*, when a player reaches the top of any numbered track, the track is closed, and nobody else can score it. The first player to reach the top of three tracks is the winner. Players may be more timid at the start, but when one player is close to reaching the top of a track, competitors also racing up that track usually become much more aggressive and risk-tolerant, as they attempt to close the track themselves. This is doubly so when a player is close to winning the game, and the other players try to win it all themselves in one epic turn. When there's nothing to lose, why not press-your-luck?

Some of the behaviors and emotions that Sackson evokes in *Can't Stop* stems from behavior that echoes the sunk-cost fallacy, in which investing additional resources into some goal is based not on the chances for succeeding, or the expected return on the investment, but on an emotional connection to what has already been invested in the past. In addition, Sackson is also depending on the difficulty in computing probabilities in *Can't Stop*. Avid gamers, whether raised on *Backgammon* or *Catan*, are adept at calculating probabilities featuring 2d6, but calculating the probabilities of successfully rolling at least one of two or three different numbers on 4d6 is the kind of thing that few players can do in their heads. This obfuscation is critical, since games in which expected values can always be calculated exactly can feel stale and boring.

Can't Stop is unforgiving. A single miss, a single roll of the dice that fails to advance a runner on a track, leads to a bust. In *Yahtzee*, players roll five dice, and may choose to keep any number and reroll the rest before being forced to score the results. However, players are limited to a total of three rolls. In *Favor of the Pharaoh* there is an additional restriction that players must keep, or lock, at least one die result before rerolling the remaining dice. In *Tiny Epic Galaxies* players may spend a specific resource to purchase additional rerolls.

Alternatively, instead of focusing on the die roll, Push-Your-Luck can be implemented in the chase for rewards. In *Roll Through The Ages: The Iron Age* players race to build monuments, but the first player to complete the monument will get a larger reward than all subsequent players. Players must choose between participating in the race for monument completion, or devoting their resources to a different pursuit. Similarly, in *Incan Gold*, (also known by its original name, *Diamant*, which remains its European title) players simultaneously choose whether to explore more deeply into a temple in hopes of turning up more gems on the next turn of a card from the expedition deck, or to leave. At first, there is no risk attached to staying in, but after the

first of a type of hazard card is revealed the danger is that a matching hazard will be revealed and all gems discovered will be lost. Players who leave early get to retain all their gems gained so far, while players who remain will be splitting new treasure with fewer players, making staying in the cave more rewarding as well as riskier.

Formula De ties a player's movement to gears represented by dice. Higher gears allow players to roll dice with more sides, up to a D30 for top gear—but curves offer a speed limit past which cars take damage. Take too much damage and you're out of the race!

Dice are a common means of implementing a press-your-luck mechanism, but they are far from the only one, as per the aforementioned *Incan Gold*. In *Oh My Goods!*, cards representing resources are played face-up into a market row until two cards showing a half-sun icon are revealed. Players must assign their workers after seeing one market row revealed, and can assign workers to tasks that require more goods to be completed than are currently showing in the market row. A second market row is then revealed, which may provide sufficient resources for players to complete their work... or not! Notably, the game allows players to assign workers to work in way that will yield the maximum reward, which requires all resources be available, or to work for a lesser reward, in which case a resource can be missing. This allows players to choose the stakes and probabilities of their wager, while retaining the “bust” outcome that characterizes these games.

Press-your-luck can be the central mechanism in a game, but it appears just as frequently as a part of a larger game. In *Ra*, players draw tiles from a bag to create an auction lot. Prior to each draw, the active player may call an auction, but auctions are more often triggered when a *Ra* tile is drawn out of the bag. There are multiple dimensions of luck-pressing baked into play: tiles are worth different amounts to players based on a set-collection mechanism (see “Set Collection” in Chapter 12), some tiles will impact players negatively, while other tiles are highly desirable to all players. Drawing another tile instead of calling the auction can radically change the overall value of the lots, and change them differently for each player. Towards the end of the round, when only one player remains, that player continues drawing tiles until he or she wishes to stop and purchase the lot. However, if a *Ra* tile is drawn at this point, the round ends immediately and the player loses his or her opportunity to buy. It is not uncommon to hear chants of “Ra! Ra! Ra!” during this phase of a game, demonstrating how meaningful the stakes feel in this masterpiece.

Ra's Push-Your-Luck mechanism permeates the whole game, yet it is clearly in service to the auction-and-set-collection core. In many games, the

Push-Your-Luck element is a layer of flair rather than a core of the experience. In *Mystic Vale*, a kind of deck-building game (see “CAR-05” in Chapter 13) players flop cards to establish their mana pool for the turn, until three spoils symbols are showing on the cards. Players may choose to risk flopping an additional card to expand their mana pool, but if another spoils symbol shows, the player busts and loses his or her turn. This mechanism is entirely optional and additive, and players can play and win without ever engaging in it, but it can be wisely leveraged to accelerate a deck’s construction too.

Push-Your-Luck as a mechanism is straightforward to understand, even if the risks can be difficult to calculate, and it easily creates drama, tension, and excitement. It should be considered an essential part of every designer’s toolkit.

Sample Games

- Backgammon* (Unknown, 3000 BCE)
- Can’t Stop* (Sackson, 1980)
- Favor of the Pharaoh* (Lehmann, 2015)
- Formula De* (Lavauer and Randall, 1991)
- Incan Gold* (Faidutti and Moon, 2005)
- Mystic Vale* (Clair, 2016)
- Oh My Goods!* (Pfister, 2015)
- Ra* (Knizia, 1999)
- Roll Through The Ages: The Iron Age* (Lehmann, 2014)
- Tiny Epic Galaxies* (Almes, 2015)
- Yahtzee* (Lowe, 1956)