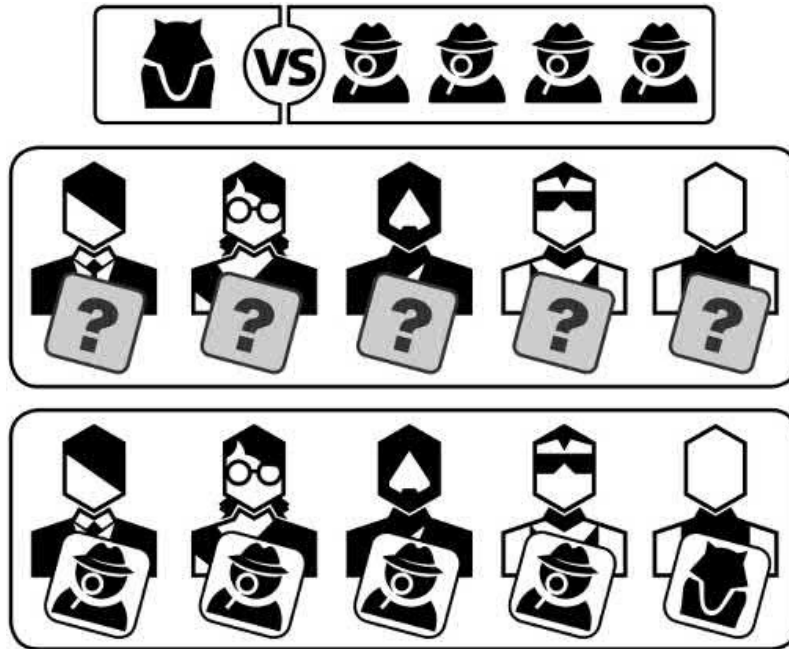


UNC-04 Hidden Roles



Description

One or more players are assigned differing roles that are not publicly revealed at the start of the game.

Discussion

While uncertainty lurks in many games, in Hidden Roles games, uncertainty is at the very heart of the gameplay. We can broadly talk about three types of Hidden Roles games: social deduction games, traitor games, and competing roles games. We touched on this topic earlier in the chapter about game structure (see Chapter 1). Social deduction games are team games in which the object of gameplay is to deduce the team allegiances of the players, as in the classic open-source game *Mafia* (which, ten years after its invention, was recast as *Werewolf*).

It's worth noting that in these games, usually, only one team faces uncertainty. The werewolves know who all the villagers are, and as such, the werewolves are playing a role-playing game whose win condition is to successfully deceive the villagers for long enough to devour them. The villagers are playing a deduction game where the evidence is mostly in the social interactions

at the table rather than the almost non-existent mechanical interactions. In this section, we'll generically refer to the "villagers" to represent the team, typically positioned as the thematic protagonists, that has less knowledge of the game state, and "werewolves" to describe their opponents, who know the identities of most or all players.

Shadow Hunters, *Two Rooms and a Boom*, and *BANG!* are exceptions to this general rule. In these games, the players do not know the identities of any of the other players (except for the Sheriff in *BANG!*, who is known to all). This gives these games a different feel, as there is less paranoia, as all players are on an equal footing, and an early part of the game is players trying to determine who is on their team without tipping their hand.

Traitor games, as distinct from social deduction games, have some other win condition for the "villager" side besides revealing the traitors. In *Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game*, players try to reach Korhol (or some other destination), and the game operates as a cooperative game (see "STR-02" in Chapter 1). However, a traitor may lurk among the players, secretly sabotaging them. In traitor games, the traitor, upon discovery or self-revelation, often shifts into a different role with a new win condition, new actions, and different player powers.

Traitor games need to use hidden resolution systems so that players can cause trouble while maintaining anonymity. In *Battlestar*, players play cards face-down during the crisis phase, trying to sum up to a value of cards of a certain color. Because the cards are played face-down, the traitor can sabotage the crisis resolution effort without revealing himself or herself; although, through deduction, the other players may start to uncover their identity. *Dark Moon* has players roll dice behind a screen. Each player must select one die to use to resolve the action. Traitors may use their worst rolls so as not to benefit the team, but showing a bad roll does not guarantee a traitor, as a loyal player may just have a bad roll and have no good dice to choose from.

In our final category, competing roles games, players are not on fixed teams and have hidden identities, but revealing those identities is not directly tied to winning or losing. *Ravenous River* and *Coup* are examples of competing roles games. In *Ravenous River*, each player is secretly assigned one of seven animal identities. Animals eat one other type of animal and are in turn eaten by one other type. Players use cards to manipulate the positions of any animals, not just their animal, seeking to end the round in the same region as their prey and not their predator. Deducing the identities of the other players can help in executing a strategy but isn't worth any points toward victory.

The uncertainty in all of these types of games is not the operational uncertainty of attempting an outcome without knowing whether it will succeed, but it still is a kind of output randomness that injects noise between a player's intention and the results of his or her action. In *Mascarade*, player roles can move around from player to player, such that a player may not know what role he or she has at any given time, which creates a lot of uncertainty. Like in *Coup*, players can claim the actions associated with any role, but unlike in *Coup*, roles can get shuffled and players may not look at their own role cards freely; they must spend their turn doing so.

An important source of uncertainty in social deduction games in particular is in the unstructured conversation during which players discuss potential targets and coordinate for the upcoming resolution phase, typically a vote. The conversation phase offers players the opportunities to lie, obfuscate, bluff, posture, or hide in a shroud of silence. Experientially, this phase is crucial, and whether players enjoy this genre of the game rests largely on how much they enjoy this part of the game.

Some games attempt to enforce some structure in the discussion phase, by creating mechanisms with in-game consequences that players must grapple with. In *Salem 1692*, players play action cards on one another that impact status and abilities, including accusation cards that operate in place of the voting phase of other social deduction games. In *Shadow Hunters*, players give cards with yes/no questions to other players, which they must answer. In *Ravenous River*, as mentioned above, a player may have the opportunity to manipulate the positions of a few animals, including animals other than themselves. These actions, and their potential point-scoring consequences, provide evidence of the player's secret identity. This is related to hidden end-game goals (VIC-06).

We've touched briefly on *Werewolf* in its most basic form. However, its most popular commercial iterations, such as *Ultimate Werewolf* and *The Resistance: Avalon*, feature a dizzying array of additional roles, each of which changes the dimensions and possibilities of gameplay. Some roles offer players additional private information about other players and their roles or team identities. Others can protect players from being eliminated, which injects performative uncertainty into the elimination action. Some roles provide an elimination power, which can be helpful to the "villager" side but might actually cloud the situation and make it more difficult to assess who the "werewolves" are because players don't know which team eliminated which players.

There's much more to be said about the various types of roles possible in these kinds of games, which is beyond the scope of this work. However, one

role is critical to consider: the role of the moderator. In many social deduction games, the need to hide substantial aspects of the game state from a shifting set of audiences makes these games inherently fragile and subject to inadvertent revealing of information or even tolerance for some mild cheating. Because these games also have unstructured conversation phases, driving the game toward a conclusion can sometimes be difficult. That's why many of these games call for a moderator who does not play the game, at least in the sense that the moderator can neither win nor lose, but simply administrates the game, and especially enforces time limits, whether formal and agreed upon or informal and socially accepted.

Since the moderator is the only person who knows the complete game state, playing as the moderator can be quite appealing to players who enjoy spectating and people-watching. The moderator role can also be performed with theatricality and has an element of role-playing that sits in its own layer of game-engagement that is separate from the core game engine. And of course, like any refereeing role, the moderator can have both unintentional and intentional impacts on the course of the game through their manipulation of soft power, like when to call a discussion to a close and insist on a vote.

Perhaps for these reasons, the moderator role has been eliminated in many modern designs. In *One Night Ultimate Werewolf*, a prerecorded voice, run by an app, takes players through the paces of each round, such that a moderator is not required. In *Dracula's Feast*, both the moderator and the idea of player elimination are removed, and players have asymmetric win conditions, some of which are not tied to discovering other players but to being accused of inhabiting certain roles. These differences put the game firmly into the competing roles category rather than the social deduction category. In order to get around the problem of sharing information secretly, players each have a "Yes" and "No" card that they can show to the one player asking them a question. These games can often have multiple players winning by fulfilling different conditions. *Two Rooms and a Boom* is particularly instructive in this area.

Voting-based player elimination is very common in social deduction games, and that mechanism can create negative social consequences. From the perspective of a cultural critic, these games are intended to recreate uncomfortable social and political realities like mob justice, betrayal, and schoolyard cliques. Some games lean into these dynamics, like *Secret Hitler*, which not only requires that players step into a magic circle where they may have to self-identify as a Nazi, or as Hitler himself, but must also participate

in a morally gray universe in which even non-Fascists might pass Fascist policies. Designers need to take care that players understand the nature of the magic circle that they're stepping into, and what might be expected of them in their suspension of real-world rules during play.

Sample Games

BANG! (Sciarra, 2002)
Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game (Konieczka, 2008)
Coup (Tahta, 2012)
Dark Moon (Derrick, 2011)
Dracula's Feast (Hayward, 2017)
Mascarade (Faidutti, 2013)
One Night Ultimate Werewolf (Alspach and Okui, 2014)
Ravenous River (Shalev, 2016)
The Resistance: Avalon (Eskrisge, 2012)
Salem 1692 (Hancock, 2015)
Secret Hitler (Boxleiter, Maranges, and Temkin, 2016)
Shadow Hunters (Ikeda, 2005)
Two Rooms and a Boom (Gerding and McCoy, 2013)
Ultimate Werewolf (Alspach, 2010)
Werewolf (Davidoff and Plotkin, 1986)