

Worker Placement



Worker Placement, a type of Action Drafting (ACT-02), is often credited to designer Richard Breese and his game, *Keydom*, in 1998. Nonetheless, it was *Caylus*, by William Attia, that popularized the mechanism and inspired its name.

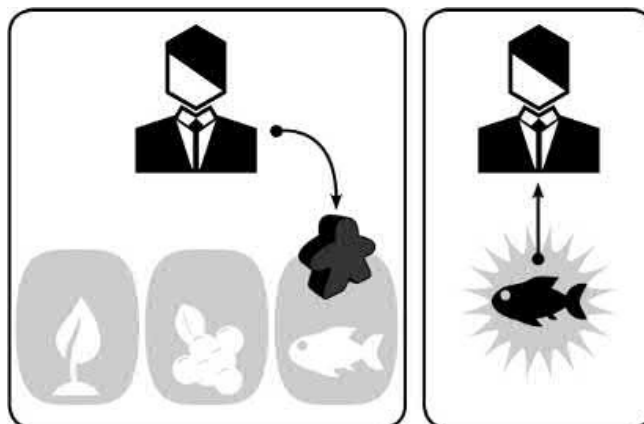
Mechanically, Worker Placement is isomorphic to action drafting. Players select actions in turn order by placing one of their pawns, or workers, into the action space, or building. This is the core mechanical concept and thematic conceit, and the mechanism has proven so durable because of that tight theme-mechanism correspondence. It's easy to understand why placing the worker in the sawmill will generate wood.

Worker Placement can be described as action drafting, or even as a highly specialized type of auction, but while resource allocation mechanisms may share mathematical similarities and incentivize similar player behavior, the experience of these mechanisms can vary a great deal based on how they're presented. Their intelligibility to the player will also vary a great deal based on the setting, theme, and logical coherence of the mechanism. *For Sale's* auction is readily understood by players, as it is squarely in context. An auction for property is a familiar concept, even if most players haven't ever bought a house at an auction. The thematic scaffolding, provided by *Dungeon Petz*, on the other hand, falls short in terms of making its mechanism intelligible. Why is it that the largest group of workers secretly assigned to an action get to take the action first? There's no strong connection to a real-world dynamic that helps players remember and understand the rule. The Worker Placement metaphor of placing a worker in a production building to generate a good helps players understand the structure and incentives of the underlying game system, which is one reason why it is such a popular core mechanism.

In this chapter, we'll talk about other implications and expectations of the mechanism, including blocking, gaining workers, adding buildings, and more, as we delve deeper into this touchstone of modern design.

The term "Worker Placement" has lost some of its cohesion, and today, it is often used as a synonym for a Euro-style game, irrespective of the presence of workers or action drafting. Thus, it would not be out-of-place for *Terraforming Mars* or *Roll for the Galaxy* to be described as "Worker Placement." We will restrict our analysis to games which use action drafting, recognize some form of blocking, and conceive thematically of some kind of worker. This narrower definition also excludes quite a few games which employ the worker metaphor but not its underlying mechanism. For example, we exclude cooperative games like *Charterstone* and *Robinson Crusoe: Adventures on the Cursed Island*, because these games lack a true drafting or blocking element. Games with workers placed onto private tableaux like *Orleans* and *Through the Ages: A Story of Civilization* or games in which workers represent a currency or bid marker rather than a draft marker, as in *Jórvík*, *Spyrium*, and *Keyflower*, are also outside the scope of our definition. However, our definition is intended only to limit the scope of our analysis and not to stake a claim on how the term should be used by anybody else. Whatever words we use, we believe these elements of drafting, blocking, and thematic coherence are important distinguishers that deserve a term by which to refer to them.

WPL-01 Standard Worker Placement



Description

Players select actions, in turn order, by placing a worker from their supply on a building associated with a specific action and then execute that action immediately. The round ends when all workers have been placed, at which point they return to their owners' pools and a new round begins.

Discussion

This familiar structure, typified by games like *Lords of Waterdeep* and *Agricola*, is an improvement over the ur-game, *Caylus*, in which buildings resolved after all Worker Placements were complete. The immediate resolution makes for faster play and obviates the need for players to remember which resources they will receive when making their next placement. Later games, like *The Manhattan Project* and *Tzolk'in: The Mayan Calendar*, have workers returning only when their owners recall them. In the former, players get the building's reward on placement, while in the latter, the reward is tied to the moment of recall, since the reward escalates the longer the worker is left out on the board. With each passing turn in *Tzolk'in*, workers rotate over on the ingenious gear system to a higher tier of rewards that will be distributed when the worker is recalled.

Most Worker Placement games employ the mechanism for all actions in the game. Turn order is typically set by placing a worker on a building that grants turn order priority. Increasing the number of actions that may be taken in a turn is themed as getting new workers, which is an action tied to a building. Maintenance costs are represented as feeding or paying for your workers.

Increasingly, there are games that incorporate some Worker Placement elements in the context of a broader game. Examples include *Copycat*, *Rococo*, and *Belfort*.

Sample Games

Agricola (Rosenberg, 2007)

Belfort (Cormier and Lim, 2011)

Caylus (Attia, 2005)

Charterstone (Stegmaier, 2017)

Copycat (Friese, 2012)

For Sale (Dorra, 1997)

Jórvík (Feld, 2016)

Lords of Waterdeep (Lee and Thompson, 2012)

The Manhattan Project (Tibbetts, 2012)

Mint Works (Blaske, 2017)

Orleans (Stockhausen, 2014)

Robinson Crusoe: Adventures on the Cursed Island (Trzewiczek, 2012)

Rococo (Cramer, Malz, and Malz, 2013)

Roll for the Galaxy (Huang and Lehmann, 2014)

Spyrium (Attia, 2013)

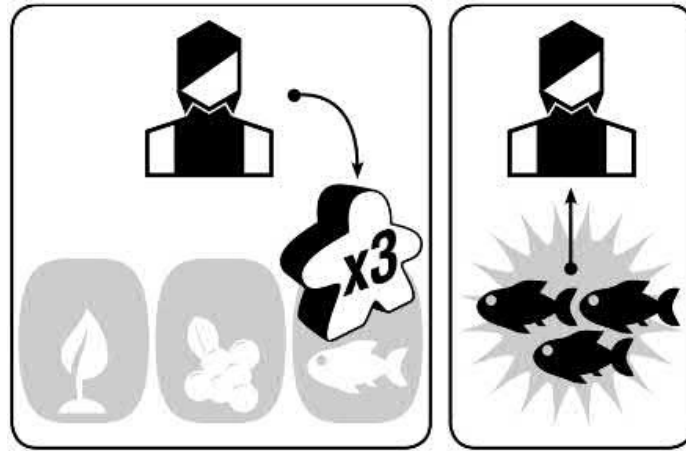
Terraforming Mars (Fryxelius, 2016)

Through the Ages: A Story of Civilization (Chvátíl, 1986)

Tribune: Primus Inter Pares (Schmiel, 2007)

Tzolk'in: The Mayan Calendar (Luciani and Tascini, 2012)

WPL-02 Workers of Differing Types



Description

Workers can differ in abilities, or can be upgraded and downgraded, or are valid for placement in different areas and buildings.

Discussion

Improved workers are a common variation on standard worker placement. Improved workers can count as more than one basic worker as in *Belfort*, or they may allow you to break standard placement rules, as in *Leonardo Da Vinci*. *Tzolk'in* puts a different spin on this idea by having the rewards for a space improve the longer that a worker is allowed to stay out on that space. Thematically, this can be understood as a worker spending more time working. Another take on this idea is the notion that workers can improve. In both *Praetor* and *Euphoria: Build a Better Dystopia*, workers, represented as dice, are more capable and provide better returns when they show higher numbers. Players can take actions to increase the values of these worker dice. In *Village*, workers can age and gain experience, which improves their effectiveness (Illustration 9.1).

Some games have workers who participate in different placement contests or have buildings that can only be accessed by certain types of workers. *Pillars of the Earth* has workers who can collect resources and master builders, who are placed during the second round of placement and who can access other actions besides resource collection. *The Manhattan Project* similarly features specialists, like scientists and engineers, and certain buildings require those



Illustration 9.1 Three different workers from *Manhattan Project*—Engineer, Scientist, and Laborer. Some placement spaces only allow specific types of workers to be placed there.

specialists to operate. *Glenn Drover's Empires: Galactic Rebellion* (previously known as *Age of Empires III: The Age of Discovery*) and *Viticulture* feature as many as eight different kinds of workers who might participate in majority contests and even battles in addition to taking actions.

Sample Games

Age of Empires III: The Age of Discovery (Drover, 2007)

Belfort (Cormier and Lim, 2011)

Euphoria: Build A Better Dystopia (Stegmaier and Stone, 2013)

Glenn Drover's Empires: Galactic Rebellion (Drover, 2016)

Leonardo Da Vinci (Acchittocca, Brasini, Gigli, Luperto, and Tinto, 2006)

The Manhattan Project (Tibbetts, 2012)

Pillars of the Earth (Rieneck and Stadler, 2006)

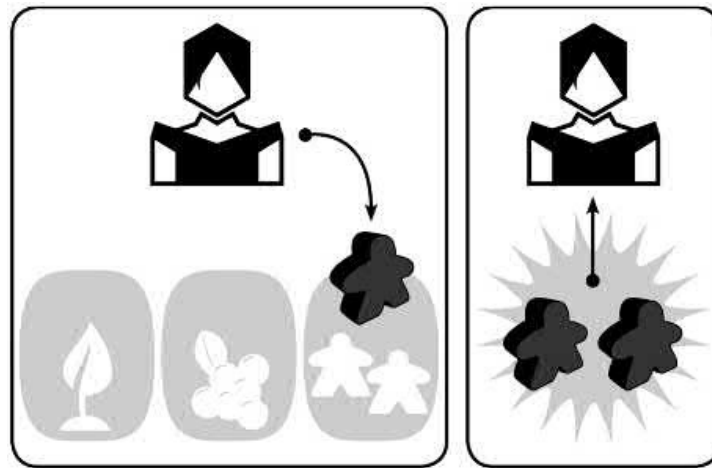
Praetor (Novac, 2014)

Tzolk'in: The Mayan Calendar (Luciani and Tascini, 2012)

Village (Brand and Brand, 2011)

Viticulture (Stegmaier and Stone, 2013)

WPL-03 Acquiring and Losing Workers



Description

Workers beyond the original complement may be acquired in some manner, either temporarily or permanently. Workers may also be lost as the game progresses.

Discussion

Rather than improving existing workers, many games allow the acquisition of new workers. These new workers represent substantial growth in a player's overall action budget, and as such, acquiring more workers is often a dominant strategy. In *Stone Age*, the reproduction hut is typically chosen first or second in every round. Because of the power of adding workers, designers have taken to metering worker growth. In *Lords of Waterdeep*, all players receive a new worker on a fixed turn in the middle of the game. *Caverna* requires that players build housing for new workers to acquire them—an investment of resources up front that the new worker's productivity will pay for in the future. Any kind of purchase price on a worker has to be considered in light of the number of actions that the worker will be able to take and the returns those actions will provide. Usually, buying workers early has a higher payout than buying them late for this reason.

In *Last Will*, the number of workers a player may deploy varies each turn based on the place in turn order that they choose. More workers mean going

later in the turn order, thus reducing the expected value of those additional workers, since the best spots will be taken by the time those extra workers are up for placement. *Euphoria* sets a hard cap on the total value of pips that can be showing in a player's pool of available worker dice, which sharply limits a player's incentive to collect more workers.

Temporary additional workers are featured in *Snowdonia*, *Russian Railroads*, and *Power Grid: Factory Manager*. These workers will return to the general pool after use and must be hired or acquired again for reuse. A similar way to throttle player appetites for more workers is through a feeding or worker upkeep cost for permanent workers. *Agricola* is famous for the unforgiving tightness of its feeding mechanism and the substantial penalties incurred for failing to feed your family, while *Stone Age*'s toothless approach makes a starvation strategy quite viable.

Worker attrition is the flipside of this dynamic of gaining workers. *Euphoria*'s workers may get too smart and, as a group, have too high a pip value, at which point one escapes (or perhaps, is sent for re-education ...). The aging workers of *Village* eventually pass on, and the workers in *Praetor* retire. Other games actively encourage sacrificing workers for a benefit. *Asgard* is a visceral example, but discarding a die in *Alien Frontiers*, themed as landing a spaceship (the die) on a planet to establish a colony, is mechanically identical.

Sample Games

Agricola (Rosenberg, 2007)

Asgard (Zizzi, 2012)

Caverna: The Cave Farmers (Rosenberg, 2013)

Euphoria: Build a Better Dystopia (Stegmaier and Stone, 2013)

Last Will (Suchy, 2011)

Lords of Waterdeep (Lee and Thompson, 2012)

Power Grid: Factory Manager (Friese, 2009)

Praetor (Novac, 2014)

Russian Railroads (Ohley and Orgler, 2013)

Snowdonia (Boydell, 2012)

Stone Age (Brunnhofer, 2008)

Village (Brand and Brand, 2011)