

Metagames

by Richard Garfield

Introduction

Disclaimer: My professional background is primarily in the paper, hobby industry. I have studied and designed games in a very broad range but tend to approach games from what I call an orthogame perspective. An orthogame is a 2 or more player game where there are victory conditions. Typically I think about single player games and role playing games separately. Unless I say otherwise I am talking about orthogames.

Road to Discovery: When I was in high school I played a lot of games that required diplomacy. For a while I felt that each game should stand alone, and you shouldn't count a player's behavior in one game for or against them in the next. This of course is hopelessly idealistic, and couldn't in practice be done, and I quickly abandoned that point of view. This means that these games are, to some extent, inherently unfair to someone joining a group of regular players. By the same token, this was part of the appeal to the regular players, the way people's reputations and play styles became known and evolved. This was where I learned that as a player I had to be aware of the metagame.

Later in my college career I started game ladders and leagues from time to time. I was always amazed at how much this added structure seemed to increase the appeal of the game. Would we have played as much spades as we did hearts if I had made that the league? Could gin have taken the place of chess? I believe the underlying game was important in each case, and that individuals may have participated more or less in a different league, but that by far the biggest contributor to the amount of play was the structure in which the game was played, and how strongly that structure was backed by other people. That is, the mere fact that a game was being played regularly added to its appeal. This was where I learned as a game organizer I had to be aware of the metagame.

Definition of Metagame: My definition of metagame is broad. It is how a game interfaces with life. A particular game, played with the exact same rules will mean different things to different people, and those differences are the metagame. The rules of

poker may not change between a casino game, a neighborhood nickel-dime-quarter game, and a game played for matchsticks, but the player experience in these games will certainly change. The experience of roleplaying with a group of story oriented players and playing with some goal oriented power gamers is entirely different, even though the underlying rules being played with may be the same.

There is of course no game without a metagame - by this definition. A game without a metagame is like an idealized object in physics. It may be a useful construct but it doesn't really exist.

Motivation: My motivation for thinking about the metagame is mostly academic, driven from my interest in understanding games; how they work and what their appeal is. I think metagames are in general poorly understood and not often thought about, and that could be for a good reason. It is hard to leverage metagame to be make a better game, since the metagame is only indirectly involved with game design. Indeed, the majority of a game's metagame is probably unalterable by game designer or publisher. Nevertheless, the metagame is incredibly powerful, and whatever you can do to make your players metagame experience good is going to be worth a lot of effort. I believe that a compelling metagame is what separates a hobby from a game.

Categories of Metagame

I will divide the metagame into four broad categories:

- What you bring to a game.
- What you take away from a game.
- What happens between games.
- What happens during a game

To: Usually players bring something to a game. Some of the things brought to a game are:

- Game Resources
- Strategic Preparation
- Peripheral Game Resources
- Reputation

Generally the more a game is played the more relevant this category of metagame is. If you are playing random games with your pals then pretty much all you bring is a reputation and a general outlook on games.

From: Players always take something away from the game - these are the stakes of play. Of course I don't just mean money, though that is sometimes an issue, but more generally status, the stigma of being the loser or the pride of being the winner.

There is a social contract in playing a game - that you care about winning (or more generally - doing well). If you don't then the game is pointless and feels like a waste of time. This is particularly easy to see when you are playing with strangers, or anonymously over the net. It is a real letdown when playing and you realize the other player doesn't

care, and show this by not paying attention or playing to a reasonable standard, or even by quitting when the conclusion is not forgone. Anyone who has had a player lose intentionally knows exactly what I am talking about. This is not exactly correlated, as you might think, with how casual a game is. Even very casual games breakdown when it becomes clear a player or players don't care about doing well, or are throwing games.

One reason why it might be that rated play has more of a place on line than it does face to face. It could be that this delivers some sort of promise that can't be given otherwise.

Some of the things which can be taken from a game:

- Money
- Prizes
- Standing in some larger competition - leagues, ladders, ratings, or tournaments.
- Reputation
- Doing well for it's own sake (or not doing poorly.)
- Resources for future games.
- Access to other games, or players.
- A story

It is worth noting that many of the things listed have a 'circular' value to the player. Why should a player care about a tournament or standings or a reputation or enhanced game resources if they don't care about the game? Often these things of circular value help separate the folk who are liable not to care from those that do, and so help create a community of stable players.

Between: What happens between games is a big part of the appeal to many players. Some of the things which might happen between games are:

- Reputation gathering & circulation.
- Strategy research.

- Resource circulation.
- Other game preparation, such as painting miniatures or preparing scenarios.

One obvious thing about this category of metagame is that there has to be play repetition in order for it to make sense. If you can provide your players a solo, downtime activity players can really start to make a hobby out of your game.

During: The influence of real life on a game is always present. This may be:

- Fatigue
- Outside game bonds
- Game mechanics or state affected by world
- Trash talking

Case Study - Magic

Magic has an interesting and many tiered metagame, some facets of which are inherit in the design, others which were intentionally made, and some of which were imposed by the player. It is probably worth noticing how distinct and important the metagames associated with all the major elements of the hobby game industry are.

Historical miniatures and wargames: The granddaddy of the hobby industry allows you to compare your performance to your historical counterparts.

Roleplaying: Your play group is creating a story, and between the games are setting the stage for the next part of the story.

Non historical miniatures: This shares something with magic, while magic you assemble and compete your deck, in miniatures you assemble and compete a miniature army.

To: Magic was distinctive in that players each bring half the cards for the game, and choosing the game resources to bring is a large part of the appeal to many players. There is some parallel to other games like chess, preparing openings and lines of defense, or

bridge, preparing bidding systems. Another parallel is to sports, where you choose which players to field. It might be the case that Magic allowed this level of metagame to be available to a wider class of players. Some players prefer to bring less to the game and then play sealed decks or drafts. In this case they are choosing to limit themselves to more traditional metagame preparations, such as strategy. This is such an important part of the game that there are players who specialize in it, players who are known not as players but as deck constructors and analyzers.

From: There are a wide variety of contexts in which Magic is played, from informal game group play to cash tournaments and leagues. Originally many players played for ante, they wagered one of their cards on a match.

Between: Between the game there is circulation of game resources and information. From the very start, even before Magic was positioned as a tournament game, this was a part of the game, because players weren't given all the cards in the game. In fact, they weren't even given lists of cards so they knew what was out there, exploring the game was viewed as part of the game.

During: In tournament play fatigue, of course, plays a part. Reputation is important in all levels of play. While some people strive to be the best players and win the most, others strive to win with particular decks or types of decks, or to prove particular cards are good.

What was designed in: Of course the deck construction and competition was fundamental to the game. I expected players to make their own rules regarding which cards were legal and not, and how the rules worked in ambiguous situations.. This is because my standard was the board and card games I was used to playing - when I play Monopoly with a new group I expect to play by their house rules.

What players changed on their own: Players demanded consistent rules on which sets they could play with and how the cards interacted. I believe the importance of this is a function of how much crossover there is in playgroups - in Monopoly I don't believe there is much. Magic by its nature has a lot. Players demanded limits on the number of cards of each type allowed - even though we attempted to design the game without that restriction. I now believe that this was as much a concern stemming from the collectors as from the players - and have seen it recur in other card games with no real game reason.

What we changed: While we supported the changes the players wanted, like card restrictions and consistent rules, there were two much more fundamental areas we initiated changes:

Magic is a game: In the early days a lot of the excitement engendered by Magic was the thrill of opening a booster and getting a 100\$ card. This had a negative effect on the game however, in that the cards were immediately unplayable due to their value, if accessible at all. It doesn't take a genius to realize this isn't going to be the stable state of a long term hobby game. We ignored cries from community about keeping prices up and heeded those to make the game available and affordable. This led to crashes in card values but I believe was important to the long term health of the game.

Position as a Sport: Magic over time has been positioned as a mental sport. There are 2000 tournaments a week, with centralized rankings. The effort that the designers and developers go to in order to keep the game interesting for the top level player is prodigious. This has led to some more casual players feeling alienated, and was a decision we made to do. Of course - if we hadn't positioned it this way the more serious players might have been alienated. Also, casual players who play with casual players still exist, the only place they have been alienated is when a sizeable portion of their play group became more serious.