

Unboxed: Board Game Experience and Design*Gordon Calleja*

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Acknowledgments, introduction, conclusion, notes, bibliography, and index. 288 pp. \$30.00, paperback. ISBN: 9780262543958

Since its inception, the field of game studies has been sweepingly synonymous with that of digital games studies. The staggering growth of the global video games industry was projected by Statista to reach \$249.60 billion in 2023 and grow to \$363.20 billion by 2027, and the significant impact of games and digital culture on society account for this. However, analog games have not atrophied into obsolescence. According to Businesswire, the board game industry was worth \$18.93 billion in 2022 and is projected to grow by over 13 percent to \$39.99 billion by 2028. Although the analog world has been dwarfed by the digital one, it is clear to those of us who work within it that it is not a low-tech, lesser option for those with slow Internet: it is a design and player-experience space with its own unique affordances, in which its screen-free social dynamics and material qualities are among its most vaunted attributes. It is also, in significant ways, deeply tied to the affordances of digital culture—among other things, through the publishing platforms of Kickstarter and Gamefound and similar sites and through the community development of social media. All that is to say how welcome it is we are now seeing analog game studies filter more conspicuously into game studies at large. It is tempting to believe game studies now embrace analog

design not merely as part of the historical back story of digital games, but as a field in its own right with its own future.

In *Unboxed: Board Game Experience and Design*, Gordon Calleja builds a framework for a broad theory of how board game players experience games and how to design for them. As a precis, once you have player attention there are five significant ways through which that attention is converted into involvement. The first is through ludic involvement (buy-in of the player objectives and how the rules broadly function). After this come four other intersecting and often simultaneous forms of involvement: social; fictional (player imaginative participation in the story world's setting); narrative (a composite of two elements he terms "scripted narrative" and "emergent narrative"); and material involvement (pp. 26-44). By scripted narrative Calleja means the more overt deliveries of narrative into a game (such as event cards) and by emergent narrative he means that generated by players making meaning from causally related mental images derived through the playing of the game (p. 35). Calleja keeps these terms—attention and involvement—distinct from the synonym-like "immersion," which he reserves for a specific meaning of "imagined habitation" within an agency-affording world (p. 203). With this player involvement, designers may generate affect, providing an experience of emotional resonance.

Calleja builds this framework through wide and broad reading of the subject area—Johan Huizinga, Roger Caillois, Brian Sutton-Smith, Miguel Sicart, Soraya Murray, Thomas Malaby, Greg Costikyan, Katie Salen Tekinbaş, and Eric

Zimmerman (all the names you expect to see are here among more)—and through extension into adjacent areas like literary theory, material studies, anthropology, and the psychology of touch (among others). Calleja further builds this framework through a broad appreciation of analog games (he cites not only board games but also role-playing games and tabletop war games, including a set of late 1970s to early 1980s Napoleonic miniatures rules by Bruce Quarrie that I, too, am rather nostalgic about), design practice (he is a board game designer), industry awareness (he is a publisher), and through interviews with thirty-two high-profile board game designers and critics, including Reiner Knizia, Corey Konieczka (Battlestar Galactica, among others), Manuel Rozoy (T.I.M.E. Stories, among others), Geoff Engelstein, and Quintin Smith and Matt Lees from the YouTube review site Shut Up & Sit Down.

The book makes a significant contribution to the field, adroitly straddling the potentially precarious scholar-practitioner divide, melding them into a coherent reading experience—at least for this scholar-practitioner. Although the broad theory itself merits further exploration, the tracing of the narratologist-ludologist dimension of game studies is highly accomplished—especially the spotlight given to the work of Marie-Laure Ryan. And the nine-space grid of a narrative model—with three forms of temporal scale (macro, scene, micro), three kinds of narrative (emergent, scripted, and both), and the three kinds of focalization (character, group, world)—appears to offer genuine utility for scholars. It is enjoyable to see the short shrift given to

the terms “fun” and “theme,” each calcifying and unhelpful in their own way. It is also seemingly impossible to read *Unboxed* without being in awe of Anadine, a fifteen-year-long RuneQuest tabletop role-playing game campaign Calleja played from childhood into his teenage years. This, indeed, is immersion that is surely hard to chase.

My single major criticism is that the title undersells the considerable value of this book's contribution to the field. *Unboxed* is rather a milquetoast heading to encapsulate what Calleja has to offer, and the subtitle, *Board Game Experience and Design*, feels like it should help more than it does. It seems, from Calleja's personal website, that the book once had the title *Cardboard Lives: Boardgame Design and Experience*, which is a little more arresting but suggests a title never really settled. And although “experience,” “design,” and “board game” are perhaps all supposed to be in the mix somewhere, the words never quite find the right place to make the title sing. If there's ever a T.I.M.E. Stories adventure where you can go back in time and contribute to the marketing team meeting, I would suggest something bolder like “Critical Concepts in Board Game Design,” or perhaps, “How Board Games Work: Designing Player Experience,” or, my final pitch before the portal recloses, “Involved: A Critical Framework For Board Game Design.” Titles are hard, and even if this one misses the mark, the contents assuredly do not. I will be recommending this book to students, and I will be paying attention to what Gordon Calleja has to say in the future.

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