No Game's Land

The Space Between Competition and Collaboration

DAVID PHELPS, TOM FENNEWALD, EMILY SHEEPY, AND ELLEN JAMESON

Think over the various analog games that you have played during the course of your life. Once you have called to mind a range of games, ask yourself: what was the closest moment I ever came to experiencing the choice of a *genuine sacrifice* within a game itself?[1]

In-game sacrifice here does not mean sacrificing engagement with the game itself— "Should I play this game or do something different with my time?"—nor being prompted to sacrifice something based on considerations outside of the game—"Should I play below my skill level to allow my friends or loved ones to have a positive experience playing the game?" Rather, it means that the game itself positioned the player, through its mechanics and/or narrative, to make a genuine sacrifice of oneself that would be brutally consequential for one's gameplay.

> [In most games], you are never torn between helping others and helping yourself.

1. "Genuine sacrifice" is defined as making a decision between the greater of two good outcomes, requiring the sacrifice of one for the other.

Outside of role-playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and larp where the narrative itself is to some extent player-generated, we struggled to identify card and board games that position players to make such a sacrifice.[2] Indeed, what comes to mind are examples of games in which we are busy racing towards a goal or brawling against our opponents, or engaging in social activity. Rarely, if ever, are we faced with an in-game dilemma of two competing goods, one of which we must sacrifice (at a costly loss) to the other.

Yet such decisions dominate our own lives. In caring for our friends, we know that sacrifices of one good for another are powerful and momentous experiences that color how we feel, shape how we act, and transform who we become. Further, we see genuine sacrifices occurring in MMORPGs and larps where players have to make difficult choices about who to send into battle, how to distribute the rewards of battles amongst multiple players, and if the storyline calls for it, what friendships or allies to put on the line. So why are there no board games that tap into this fundamental aspect of human life?

In the following essay, we detail the creation and empirical research behind an original board game that positions players to make genuine sacrifices from start to finish. But, first, we will re-tell an old story that illustrates the journey we took, including the many instructive wrong turns, that led to the creation of what we now call *Troubled Lands* (2015), and its kid-friendly version, *Difference* (2015).

A TROUBLED CHOICE

A long time ago, there lived an empress who faced an important decision: who will take the helm of her army after the unexpected passing of a general most wise and beloved. Fortunately, she had six promising candidates (the

2. Certain games like Disney's Kingdom Death: Monster (2015) evince a trend in this direction.

lieutenants of each division), but unfortunately she needed to act before word spread across the land about her vulnerable and leaderless army.

Yet, the empress could not decide. Which of these six lieutenants would fight as bravely and strongly as their predecessor? And outside of an actual battlefield how could she know? With the court advisors' help, she devised a game of war: a simulated battle in the style of a free-for-all brawl. Each candidate showed strength and bravery, fighting well to the very end.

Impressed by her candidates, but unable to decide amongst them, the empress devised a new simulation. If all the lieutenants could compete well, could they also collaborate well—gain each other's trust, communicate orders clearly, and work as a team? To test this, the empress pitted the six lieutenants against a legion of their own army. Outnumbered and overwhelmed, the lieutenants quickly generated strategies to combine their strength, cover each other's backs, and endure in the battle. They each lasted longer together than if they had fought alone.

Once again, the empress could not decide. Each candidate competed and collaborated well. What additional skills could she test? Her thoughts were interrupted by news from a messenger—an army from afar was journeying to pay the empress's kingdom an unwelcome visit. Immediately, her court advisors pressed her to pick one of the six lieutenants, any of them, even at random lest the army remain leaderless indefinitely. The empress argued in turn that if she picked one at random, not only would she overlook the most fit candidate to lead her army, but the other lieutenants would grow resentful against her and against the newly appointed general, causing division amongst her army. "Retire the other lieutenants into comfortable positions outside of the army," the court advisors retorted. Then we repeat this dilemma ad infinitum, the empress exclaimed. At that moment, she suddenly realized that the ability to negotiate through messy real-life dilemmas without clear-cut solutions and making choices in the face of the

contingencies, ambiguities, and vicissitudes of life was vital to their success. And so, the empress devised a new test.

Let us pause at this point in our story to review the limits of competitive and collaborative games for engaging players in experiences of genuine sacrifice. Competitive games position players to work against one another to achieve some goal, whereas collaborative games position players to work together to achieve some goal. Neither of these situations—pure fighting or pure teamwork where the whole team wins or loses—demand of players to make genuine sacrifices along the way. Games, however, that simulate messy real-world dilemmas where players have to work across difference, confront conflict, and face chance may just lead to negotiations and sacrifices. Questions of whether these sacrifices are genuine or not, and if they can be prompted by simply combining competitive and collaborative play into a single game, are explored in the next act of our story.

The empress's new test would pit the candidates against each other—two groups of three—to see which of the candidates would be willing to make a genuine sacrifice as they served their group. The empress's court advisors, however, cautioned against using a simulation to test genuine sacrifice. After all, they argued, how can a sacrifice be genuine if the candidates know it is the very skill being tested? And further, how can a sacrifice be genuine if there is no felt loss for making the sacrifice. The empress attempted to solve these problems by not telling the candidates that she was testing their negotiation and sacrifice skills, and by adding the consequence that the losing team will no longer be eligible to be the next general. The court advisors were relieved to hear the empress finally devise a way to narrow the candidate pool, but they remained doubtful that any sacrifices that occurred in the game would be genuine ones.

The empress divided the lieutenants into two teams of three and pitted

the teams against one another announcing that this was a test of competition and collaboration, and only the winning team would continue forward as candidates to win the prized role of the general. The winning team worked well together—in key moments, its members willingly sacrificed themselves to get the edge on their opponents and help the team win overall.

Yet, the empress was unimpressed by these acts of self-sacrifice. By helping their team to win, and thus helping themselves to advance to the next round of the competition, what did the players actually put on the line? What loss was suffered? The empress still desired to see how each lieutenant would act in a situation where their sacrifice would cost them something that mattered deeply to them—such as their own life. But without the luxury to observe their actions in a real battle she was perplexed at how to test for this. Yet, unwilling to randomly select one, she decided to look for their skills in another place—their psychology.

The empress placed the remaining three into a series of free-for-all battles. She was curious to see how any one of the fighters would go about choosing which of the other two to target. To her surprise she found that two of the three tended to gang up on the third (not every time, but subtly, perceptibly she noticed a trend). Was there something about the third individual that she had missed—was he weaker than the other two and hence an easy target? Or, perhaps stronger than the other two so that they needed to team up in order to ensure that he would be beaten? And how had she missed this?

Or were the two just being friendly towards one another for reasons outside of the test? Familial associations? Old friends? Mutual admiration? Some social pressure? To find out, the empress devised a variant to the simulation: she introduced inequality. Every battle, one of the three would be positioned as being able to fight by only hopping on one leg. They would each take turns playing the position of a wounded fighter. (It is in this way

that she also learned that her remaining candidates were patient, steadfast, and, indeed, intent on being promoted).

Would this variant effect who was targeted? Would the two continue to target the third regardless of whether he was strong or wounded that round? Again, to her surprise, the two who had previously worked together not only ganged up on the third they appeared to sacrifice themselves to help one another. This signaled to the empress that the two held some bond outside of the test itself—that their sacrifices were a matter of friendliness or polity, not undergone for genuine reasons tied to the battle itself. After these psychology studies, the empress was no closer to finding her general. Worse, her advisors were fettered. They could see smoke in the distance signaling that the hostile army was approaching. With no leader for their own army, the court advisors committed to their final resort—empty reassurance.

"Surely," they consoled the empress who appeared slumped in her throne, "your army will outlast any army that comes our way because all the other empresses in your position in all the other kingdoms are not nearly as thoughtful, judicious or steadfast as you. Each other empress—." "What did you say" the empress interrupted, and then up on her feet, "I know how to test for genuine sacrifice."

If the first part of the story taught us that pure competition and pure collaboration are not arenas that breed genuine sacrifices, then the second part has taught us that combining the two—fighting and teamwork—produces pseudo-sacrifices: sacrifices that carry no experiential weight of loss, or are carried on for reasons outside of the game itself.

If the common conventions of analog games—competitive, collaborative, or semi-collaborative (such as Shadows over Camelot (2005) and other variants with traitors and hidden goals, such that all can lose but only some players can win)—do not elicit the kinds

of genuine sacrifices we are interested in, then where can we turn? In creating Troubled Lands, the designers turned to the situations themselves that fostered the content of interest: messy real-life political negotiations. They then studied the components of these situations and translated the following ones into game mechanics:

Multiple, competing yet reasonable stakeholder interests,

Structural inequities that differentially advantage and disadvantage stakeholders,

Uncertainty of what level of trust to grant each stakeholder,

Personal morals about how far one is willing to go or not go in a negotiation

Dilemmas between competing values that are both deemed good.

Each of these elements—from a plurality of stakeholder interests, to pre-existing inequities, to fluctuations of trust, to the pull of personal morals, to dilemmas of competing values—seem to provide a situation that is ripe for rich negotiation and genuine sacrifice. Indeed, we can imagine how a number of conventional analog games could be transformed if they integrated any or all of these mechanics, from *Diplomacy* (1959) to *Settlers of Catan* (1995) to *Pandemic* (2008).

Yet, even with these mechanics in place, the designers of *Troubled Lands* found that as long as the goal of the game positioned players to act purely competitively (one winner) or collaboratively (all players win or lose together) the affective experience of a genuine sacrifice still failed to occur.[3] Research documenting players gameplay[4] revealed that even when prompted to negotiate in situations of conflicting interests, structural inequities, uncertain relationships, personal morals, and competing values, players' negotiations sounded

3. Thomas J. Fennewald and Brent Kievit-Kylar. "Integrating Climate Change Mechanics into a Common Pool Resource Game." Simulation & Gaming. (December 2012): 1-25; Tom Fennewald andBrent Kievit-Kylar. "Beyond Collaboration and Competition: Independent Player Goals in Serious Games" Games and Learning Society. (2012).
4. Tom Fennewald. "Analyzing Game Discourse Using Moral Foundations Theory." (2015) Paper given at the Digital Gaming Research Association (DiGRA) in Lüneburg, Germany.

much more like friendly competition and playful banter (in the competitive variant), or more like math discussions about how to evenly distribute points (in the collaborative variant). The designers eventually found a solution that went beyond both competitive and collaborative goals. This solution, which makes up the third variant they tested, was fraught with rich negotiations and genuine sacrifice.

"We had everything we needed—competition, cooperation, inequity—but we lacked one thing: the empress in the same position as me," explained the empress. The court advisors were puzzled and a bit worried. The time for decision had come—they could not wait even a half day longer—yet the empress was not making sense. Had all this testing and training made her a bit unwell? "Our final battle," she announced, "will again be comprised of two groups of three. The remaining candidates in one group. The losing candidates in the other. Each group will consist of the strong player, the wounded player (hopping), and the severely wounded player (hopping and one-handed)." One court advisor broke out laughing—a terrified hopeless sound that he did not bother to conceal. The empress continued, "The strong, wounded, and severely wounded will battle until one remains. But, the one who remains is not necessarily the winner. A player wins if they simply outperform their same position in the other group. Performance is based on how quickly you eliminate other players as well as how long you live. There will be three rounds, so that each player has a turn to play each of the three positions. At the end of the three rounds we will declare who the next general is."

Yet, the empress knew that the declared general would not necessarily be the one who outperformed those in his same position in the other group the most often. The declared winner would be the one who in managing this dynamic came to appreciate and make genuine sacrifices. She was delighted to see that the genuine dilemmas came into play immediately.

The weakest player in both groups made a bid to team up with the second-most weakest player reasoning that the two would survive longer against the strong player. The strong player simultaneously proposed for either of the weaklings to join him by his side, "whoever wants to live longer join me" in an attempt to prevent the two from teaming up. This put the second-most weakest player in quite the dilemma—team up with the weakest or the strongest? Then the weakest player placed the strongest player in a dilemma by pleading, "please let me live a while before you defeat me so that I may at least outlive the weakest player on the other team. I cannot outperform him without your help." The strongest player replied, "But helping you could cause me to lose to my counterpart, if my counterpart defeats the other two more quickly than I do." "We've been negotiating long enough that you might have already lost. Sacrifice yourself and let me defeat you. That will surely make me outperform my wounded counterpart." "Would you make the same sacrifice to me when you play the role of the strongest position?" And now the most wounded person was in a dilemma over whether to make future promises and more crucially, whether or not to keep these promises.

Each round the candidates placed each other into new dilemmas. Eventually, one of the candidates made the genuine sacrifice that the empress was testing for—playing the role of the strong he let the two weaker players live long enough to outperform the weaker players on the other team. He knew this was not good for himself, but he could not bring himself to let the rest of his army down, when he could help everyone else win. Afterwards, appearing before the court officials, he could not explain precisely why he had done it. It certainly was not for reasons outside of the game (the value of a bond), nor because he thought it would help him win the game (that the other players would reciprocate a sacrifice in future rounds). He simply saw a way to help his army succeed while he happened to be in a privileged

position (the strongest of the three) to make that decision. And so, a new general was found.

The empress succeeded in designing a test for genuine sacrifice by designing a game that prompted messy negotiation while at the same time positioning players to compete against counterparts participating in mirror battles. This is the design move that *Troubled Lands* ultimately made. This move works well because it incorporates a key ingredient to real-world messy negotiation situations: non-zero-sum win conditions in which all, some, or none of a given group of negotiators may win. We call this goal type "independent" because players succeed or fail independently of whether individuals in their group succeed or fail. Let us first take the time to look at *Troubled Lands* and its game play, and then how independent goals are incorporated.[5]

Designed by Tom Fennewald and Brent Kievit-Kylar to model real-world messy negotiation situations, *Troubled Lands* is played with multiple groups of three players. Within each group of three, players adopt three distinct roles: a rancher, a farmer, and a lumberjack. Each group of three sits at a separate table and no interaction occurs between tables. Instead of playing against – or with – the others in their group, players engage in a tournament in which each player aims to be in the top 50% of players for their given role from amongst all of the tables. Thus at any given table, all, some, one, or none of the players might win.

For readers familiar with the card games *Bridge* or *Barbu* (also *Barbuda*), this scoring mechanism may sound familiar in the form of Bridge tournaments and Duplicate Barbu. In these games, players sitting at different tables are given duplicate hands (e.g., every player sitting on the North side of the table has the same starting hand),

5. For an overview of Troubled Lands, see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eIchwB6xJJI

and scoring is based on how well you outperform all the players at different tables who have duplicate hands to yours. Yet these games do not delve deeply into the human experience of making a genuine sacrifice, because the players at your table are locked into a zero-sum competition. Indeed, aside from your partner, you are never readily compelled to help other players; you are never torn between helping others and helping yourself.

The key to *Troubled Lands* is that the players at your table are not your opponents. To the contrary, you all share common resources and you all have good reason to cooperate with one another, but you also have good reason to look out for your best interest—and hence players are often caught needing to decide if, how, and when to cooperate (or not) with the others at their table. Emotionally, this can be difficult as players are making a genuine choice between helping others in need and increasing their own chances of success. This decision-making process about helping self or group is made even more interesting and difficult because one of the players, the lumberjack, is completely dependent upon harvesting forests for points, yet in the game a certain number of forests must be kept, lest the entire group suffer in the wake of environmental damage. With limited space to plant the desired resources such as forests, pastures, and fields and extreme inequity between players, some roles are better able to plant resources and score points than others. Indeed, within this inequity and complexity even defining what a fair move is can be difficult within the negotiations of players.

Having to share a common space and yet winning or losing independently of others results in players making difficult choices about when, how, and why to cooperate or not. Through their choices, players can often appear to engage in collaborative play, in competitive play, and oftentimes both within the same game. The

range of affect is also powerful: sometimes one group will feel as though they have achieved world peace through compromise and another will lament the inevitable breakdown of any negotiation. The game can also be emotionally taxing: conversation during rounds is often long, as players debate what to do next, who has responsibility to do what, and who should be allowed to score points next. In essence, the experience turns out to be quite political. Occasionally, players will only act with aggression, but this is not the norm. On the other extreme, some players will act so collaboratively that they allow other players to win as they sacrifice their own chance to be the best farmer, or rancher, or lumberjack across all the tables. However, usually players opt for some middle ground between complete competition and collaboration. The in-game negotiation of this middle ground, this no game's land, makes Troubled Lands a game rich with affective experience for players.

Players are not often used to compromising between competition and collaboration and/or negotiating across their own and across other players' moral motivations as they make these difficult choices for themselves. All of this, again, leads to vivid affective experiences for players. In our research on the independent condition, in which a discourse analysis of player conversation was conducted, a diverse range of moral motivations were thematized by players. Using Jonathan Haidt's work[6] to identify moral motivations of the players, we found the following moral claims at play in players negotiations: claims of *caring*, where one player assists another player because they are sympathetic to them losing; *fairness*, where players try to establish an even exchange, defined by the players both in terms of equal scoring potential and equal opportunity to act; *liberty*, where players justify actions of self-interest on the grounds that they are not directly

6. Jonathan Haidt. The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided By Politics and Religion. New York: Pantheon Books, 2012.

harming other players; and *sanctity*, where players call for action to preserve the state of the commons (the forest) for emotional and/or aesthetic reasons.

In particular, we witnessed some fascinating statements. For example, a lumberjack said, "I'll lose so that you guys can win" – which he said he did because he felt strong empathy for the other players, an example of care. We also saw another lumberjack player with opposite, self-interested motivations: "So If I keep taking trees, you can watch it fall," to which other players replied (while laughing) "Yeah! Please, please don't take trees!" Other players discussed affinity to the forests in the game that is akin to Haidt's description of sanctity: "… it was like this whole game we were trying to keep things green and then these last two rounds we were, I felt like we were doing something really bad because we don't want to hurt the earth."

We also found that players discussed strong emotive inner struggles regarding how to balance their multiple competing values–such as protecting the beauty of the game space and helping others to score points. Players likened these personal dilemmas in the game to real life dilemmas in which they must choose between multiple competing goals.

Now that we have begun exploring No Game's Land, we are drawn to the many attributes of games that support a range of affective experiences beyond those offered to us by competitive and collaborative games. These attributes include both the simulation of messy negotiations (which we modeled through competing interests, inequitable abilities, and uncertain relationships) and the win condition that is tied to non-zero sum logic. Our exploration continues in David Phelps' version of *Troubled Lands* for kids, called *Difference*—an easy-to-learn, quick-to-play, negotiation game that

positions students as young as 10-years old to have to confront genuine dilemmas as they negotiate across difference. We have found that because these games position students to negotiate across moral claims and to engage in genuine sacrifices that they provide an active and engaging entry point into philosophical classroom discussions on inequity and social justice issues. In other words, No Game's Land is a rich and affective domain of play and we encourage fellow game designers to journey through this area in their own unique designs.