

LEARNING GAME CHALLENGE

WINTER 2015-2016

RESULTS ANNOUNCEMENT

Hello, TGC game design community!

Many thanks to those of you who participated in our
Winter 2015-2016 Learning Game Challenge!

In order to maintain objectivity throughout the judging and ranking process, we organized our scoring rubric around five categories: Learning Objective Alignment, Overall Mechanics, Clarity of Instructions, Novelty, and Aesthetics. Since our stated focus was on alignment between learning and play objectives, we weighted that category with a **2x multiplier**.

When all was said and done, we had a great time playing the finalists' games. They were engaging, thoughtfully designed, and (with some iteration) all worthy of publication for the larger community. We were very happy with the range of themes and concepts that entrants produced for this challenge, and it's our hope that it will inspire others to develop quality learning games going forward.

Now... on to the winners!

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SCORING RUBRIC

	Needs Improvement 0-2	Satisfactory 3-5	Exemplary 6-8
Objective Alignment x2	Learning and play objectives are substantially misaligned; no or only superficial player engagement with the target subject matter	Learning and play objectives are mostly aligned, though some mechanics do not overlap with the target learning objectives	Learning and play objectives are aligned at a 1:1 ratio; overlap between gameplay and real world application is seamless
Overall Mechanics	Gameplay lacks flow, is overly complex, and/or is not playful	Gameplay is straightforward, reasonably challenging, requires strategy, and/or is mostly playful	Gameplay is straightforward, easy to master, reasonably challenging, requires strategy, and is playful in nature
Clarity of Instructions	Instructions for play are missing and/or unintelligible	Instructions for play are reasonably clear, though some wording and/or grammar errors introduce confusion	Instructions for play are extremely clear and enable play among novices immediately out of the box
Novelty	Game is mostly unoriginal, replicating another in its entirety or nearly in its entirety	Game is mostly original, reallocating only a few mechanics from other commercial or learning games	Game is original, reallocating other games' mechanics only in service of reinforcing learning objectives
Aesthetic	Game is visually unappealing, lacks consistent art style, and/or requires a substantial visual overhaul	Game is mostly visually appealing and maintains a consistent art style but may require some artistic revision and/or additional art assets	Game art assets are exceptionally well-designed and thematically consistent with few (if any) necessary revisions
TOTAL:	???		

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FIRST PLACE
UNDERLINGS OF UNDERWING

Underlings of Underwing was a blast to play. Aside from a few unclear rule/mechanics (a small number required artistic license on our part), the game's core is incredibly solid. Alisha did a fabulous job weaving together color theory content with a light-hearted narrative and, most importantly, the learning objectives (i.e., matching specific colors to make desired hues and hue combinations).

STRENGTHS

- The simultaneous random and/or definitive element drawing adds a layer of unpredictability that 1) keeps all players invested in monitoring the board state and 2) allows for highly strategic play (especially among older/more experienced players)
- The game felt especially fresh and unique as wild hatchlings led to cascading ripple effects across the board; this encourages players to work collaboratively as well as competitively in order to win

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Though there were opportunities to demonstrate knowledge and learning through combining elements, more could have been done to define and utilize "warm" & "cool" colors
- Some of the dragons' effects felt underwhelming as there were multiple duplicates from dragon to dragon; it might be nice to mix things up a bit more with new/different effects (both positive and negative)
- To keep the mining mechanic fresh, it would be helpful to incorporate map/tile randomization a la *Settlers of Catan*

OBJECTIVE ALIGNMENT	OVERALL MECHANICS	CLARITY OF INSTRUCTIONS	NOVELTY	AESTHETICS	
6	7	4	7	6	36

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SECOND PLACE
HAPPY LITTLE PLANETS

As we've found working with others in educational design, science-centric games are a huge challenge. Mapping the learning and game objectives, in particular, can be incredibly tough when the underlying content is abstract, difficult to replicate in game form, or doesn't make sense through metaphor. Happy Little Planets, however, manages to accomplish that goal in a playful, user-friendly way.

STRENGTHS

- The learning objective-game objective alignment for HLP is pretty consistent as far as real world food webs and limiting factors are concerned; would work as both a recreational family game and a classroom activity in a biology class
- The planet construction mechanic makes player worlds feel unique and gives a sense of agency over how a planet can/should be organized throughout play
- As rounds progress, strategy becomes an important part of competitive play, and it behooves players to pay attention to what their friends are trying to do with their land and weather

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Rules for the game need some clarification (e.g., how are land and climate cards distributed each round; do ALL animals/resources operate as limiting factors?)
- Learning/game objective alignment is mostly well designed, though it might be good to build additional "real world" information into the planet core types and bonuses
- It would be helpful to frame animal "luring" as natural selection (i.e., environments favor particular qualities among organisms, and those organisms create a fertile environment for other organisms to feed; avoid an unintended "intelligent design" feel)

OBJECTIVE ALIGNMENT	OVERALL MECHANICS	CLARITY OF INSTRUCTIONS	NOVELTY	AESTHETICS	
5	6	4	6	7	33

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THIRD PLACE
HAN CHARACTERS

Han Characters is a beautiful game. The brush-like strokes of the characters on the parchment-style cards immediately drew us in (no pun intended), and the tiered difficulty added an interesting twist on how play could be extended without need for expansion packs or additional resources. The unique word-stealing mechanic had us guessing at one another's strategies during every round.

STRENGTHS

- The game mechanics work well and provide a solid play experience no matter your background in the language; even as total novices, we were able to pick it up in a matter of minutes
- Dusty did a great job balancing simplicity with richness; after a few rounds, we began to realize how much content was buried in the more complex cards but never felt overwhelmed by the word/phrase construction process
- As noted above, the game's aesthetic design was fabulous

RECOMMENDATIONS

- We had some reservations about how the learning objectives mapped onto the play objectives; specifically, the game didn't seem to reinforce our knowledge/understanding of how one would write/draw or recognize the characters in the real world (i.e., it felt more like short-term pattern recognition than richly authentic language learning)
- It might be interesting to take advantage of the cards' UV coating since it's impervious to dry erase markers; instead of having players simply build words/phrases via trading into a discard pile, they could write/draw characters onto blank cards and keep them for scoring (i.e., reinforcing language acquisition)

OBJECTIVE ALIGNMENT	OVERALL MECHANICS	CLARITY OF INSTRUCTIONS	NOVELTY	AESTHETICS	
3	7	7	5	8	32

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HONORABLE MENTION
OPEN MARKET

Even before opening Open Market, the box art sells you on its friendly and inviting aesthetic. The ingredient caricatures are adorable, and the mechanics do a nice job demonstrating the basic constraints of supply and demand. We believe Tank and DPS have crafted a playful tool that highlights the proper way to run a restaurant featuring fresh foods from local farmers' markets. Gordon Ramsay would be proud.

STRENGTHS

- Players have multiple opportunities to strategize as item prices surge over time; the game does a great job showcasing the realities of hoarding when supply constraints kick in and vice versa (accentuated by the "sell" mechanic)
- The physical coin chits provide a nice tactile experience when exchanged for ingredients, something that would be especially beneficial for younger players who are just learning how to recognize, count, and manipulate real world money
- The game's simple and even flow seemed reasonably accessible for younger players (the ideal audience)

RECOMMENDATIONS

- "Recipes" include a list of ingredients but lack an actual end-item descriptor; this breaks the game's internal consistency (in terms of fulfilling orders at your restaurant); it would be helpful, for example, if the Grain/Dairy/Fruit card was replaced with a Parfait card featuring parfait artwork
- While important economic terms are included in the instruction, they aren't actually needed for gameplay--in fact, you can play (and win) the game without considering them at all; while this is fine for younger players, it would be nice to see alternate rules that dive deeper into the complexities of market/economic fluctuation

OBJECTIVE ALIGNMENT	OVERALL MECHANICS	CLARITY OF INSTRUCTIONS	NOVELTY	AESTHETICS	
5	4	5	5	6	30

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HONORABLE MENTION

AURORA

Aurora is a thoughtful entry in the science education genre. After all, who among us hasn't gazed up at the night sky and marveled at the beauty of life, the universe, and everything? The game affords plenty of opportunities to discuss how and why worlds form, and its combination of subject matter and mechanics left us categorizing it as something akin the Civilization series gone celestial (in a good way).

STRENGTHS

- Stunning artwork captures the player's imagination and immerses them in a sprawling universe as it unfolds; once you get a few turns into Aurora, it feels like an expansive game
- The game's mechanics (especially the passing of unused cards) adds an engaging, strategic element to how players can and should approach system development each turn
- Aurora is a very polished game; it was quick to pick up, the instructions were clear, and it struck us as both well-balanced and easily playable right out of the box

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Throughout play, it was never clear why accumulating resources would matter with no beings present to harvest/use them, and Resources didn't have a clear tie to the game's overarching learning objectives; retooling this feature (as well as Resource bonuses) would make Aurora more instructionally meaningful
- Like many games dealing with the development of life, Aurora feels a bit more like intelligent design than natural solar system and evolutionary development; it would be interesting to incorporate a Goldilocks Zone mechanic that provided a random chance for certain events to take place (rather than having them strategically organized by the player)

OBJECTIVE ALIGNMENT	OVERALL MECHANICS	CLARITY OF INSTRUCTIONS	NOVELTY	AESTHETICS	
2	4	6	5	7	26

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HONORABLE MENTION
ABSOLUTELY VALUABLE

Like science, math is a difficult educational category to design for, and it can be especially challenging to find real world correlates/applications for (often abstract) mathematical concepts. That's what makes

Absolutely Valuable a fairly unique entry: it goes where many designers refuse to go by helping players strategically consider what can/will make for an optimal use of numbers/algebraic knowledge.

STRENGTHS

- Within the game context, it's clearly beneficial to understand how absolute values are calculated since that knowledge can help individual players 1) speed up their planning and 2) make better plays with their number cards
- The ability to change gem values incentivizes diversification of resources and strategic pickup of fossils over gems (since fossils have a consistent value)
- The game features novel mechanics and encourages strategic competitive play to achieve the win condition

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Absolutely Valuable's learning and game objectives are a bit mismatched; there is overlap between the way players play their cards and the way absolute values are calculated, but the mechanics don't directly match a real world process, and it's not obvious how/why absolute values matter (i.e., there would be no reason for a miner to search for gems using absolute values the way they're presented in the game); further, the game can be played without discussing absolute values at all
- The game's aesthetics/artwork are appropriate for a short-term contest but would benefit from revision/polish in future editions (e.g., color shading, greater detail, textured images)

OBJECTIVE ALIGNMENT	OVERALL MECHANICS	CLARITY OF INSTRUCTIONS	NOVELTY	AESTHETICS	25
4	3	4	6	4	

x2