Takenoko – Game Mechanics Breakdown

Variable Objectives

If all players were trying to accomplish the same things, there would be direct conflict at every step of the way. Hidden objectives mitigate direct conflict and add a layer of deduction.

- Related theme: Conflict.
- Game with this mechanic: Risk (modern rules variant).

Tug of War

Directly opposing objectives (bamboos of a certain height and eating bamboos) have a tendency to create moments of heightened tension. Whenever a game has a tug of war mechanic (especially if it is zero sum), pacing becomes important. In this case the hidden objectives, escalating scoring opportunities and scoring on the fly all helps avoiding stalemates.

- Related theme: Conflict
- Game with this mechanic: Arm Wrestling.

Variable Rewards

Different objectives have different payoff in terms of victory points. Players can take greater risks for greater rewards. Allowing for risk taking is a way of increasing excitement and also a way of avoiding players losing hope of winning when they have fallen behind.

- Related theme: Uncertainty of Outcome.
- Game with this mechanic: Machi Koro.

Action Selection

Instead of e.g. roll-and-moving to a space that determines which action the player can take, players can choose their own actions. This gives the opportunity to make tactical decisions, or in other words interesting choices – a staple experience of good game design. In order for this to work, the choices have to be balanced. By making drawing new objectives one of the actions, the designer has made sure that players never get completely stuck.

- Related theme: Agency.
- Game with this mechanic: Pandemic.

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Constrained Action Selection

The choice to let players pick three tiles and use one of them mitigates some of the randomness of the traditional "draw a card" mechanic. The players get to make interesting choices, but also have to adapt their strategy to the randomness of the draw.

- Related theme: Agency.
- Games with this mechanic: Ticket To Ride.

Points of Influence

By tieing actions to the characters, players know that even if the state of the board will have changed when their turn comes around, it won't have changed so much that trying to strategize is pointless. When game state changes are too chaotic, players "check out" between turns. The goal is to create an experience that is interesting also to players who are waiting for their next turn.

- Related theme: Predictability.
- Game with this mechanic: Parcheesi.

Predictability Jammers

Mechanics of uncertainty can be used to maintain a desired lightness[1] in the gaming experience. The weather die, the fact that all players manipulate the same system, and hidden information (draw pile and objectives) all work to make it harder to plot out a course of action too many moves ahead. This can help avoiding a phenomenon known as analysis paralysis (AP) where a player thinks so long about what to do that the other players get tired of waiting.

- Related theme: Chance/Mastery.
- Game with this mechanic: Catan.

Board Building

As identified by the students in class, modular boards that are constructed differently every session allow for increased replayability. Parallells can be drawn to procedurally generated content in video games. Building the board as part of playing the game also gives players a sense of having co-created a unique design. It is common for players to comment on the aesthetic qualities of the final garden and take pictures of it after the game is over.

- Related theme: Creativity.
- Game with this mechanic: Castles of Mad King Ludwig.

Scoring Escalation

The growing garden, added irrigation channels, and added improvement tiles – nothing is ever removed – assures that scoring starts out slowly and eventually picks up until it pushes someone to reach the end condition. The experience goal is to create an appropriately bounded event.

- Related theme: Pacing.
- Games with this mechanic: Jeopardy.

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[1] The concept of weight in board games refers to a combination of factors including complexity and how much of a "brain burner" the game is.

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