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Bad Company: Designing a Game About Integrity

This paper details my process of designing a game I call *Bad Company*. It is a game in which each player represents a small business or company, trying to reach a threshold of success. In this case, 5 points represents that threshold. Players use cards that will allow them to either "Collaborate" with another company (automatically giving that company a point) in an attempt to earn a point for themselves, or "Accuse" a company of a certain wrongdoing in attempt to detract a point from their score. These attempts will be determined successful or have no effect, depending on a coin flip. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the principle of integrity and how it has inspired my game, then explain how certain limitations and discussions with my group lead to a solid set of mechanics. Next, I will present the importance of meta game for the experience players will have, and how the resulting playtests demonstrate that my game caters to "Socializers." Finally, I will discuss specific feedback my game earned, how I might improve it, and determine if my game successfully implements the principle of integrity.

Sitting down with my team of Janet, Patrick and Andrew, we decided to have an election (or two) on which principle we would base a game design around. It wasn't necessarily that we couldn't agree on a principle. We simply needed to pick one that sounded like it would bring ideas to fruition, then we could bounce those ideas off of each other. The winner was 'Integrity.'

Because Janet is a professor, she immediately challenged each of us to come up with a personal definition of integrity; which was a good way to rouse up inspiration. Most of our group's definitions were centralized around honesty. I felt mine leaned slightly more towards making moral decisions. Of course, morality can be a bit fickle, depending on each individual's perception. Even still, being asked to define integrity made me instantly recall a recent interaction I experienced at work.

I work with a small business that does paint jobs and water-transfer graphics as a service for customers. We have a wholesaler with which we have a contract so that customers may select their graphics as an option when they come to us. Recently, however, our company started taking an interest in providing supplies for those who wanted to learn how to do their own water-transferring at home. Because it is an uncommon practice with many steps, supplies are not easily accessible to the average DIYer. Our company saw the opportunity to reach this market and began selling supplies, making our wholesaler take notice of us as a something of competitor. However, neither company stepped on each other's toes, due to slightly different markets --we still had to buy from them (and other wholesalers) to actually get the supplies. Still, the threat was there; we were gaining success by selling supplies *along with* our service. 'How long before they decided to produce the supplies themselves, and sell to other businesses?' the other company might have wondered. Here is where integrity came into play… Our business offered a few of the wholesaler's water-transfer film online as an option for buyers -- resale was not the intended use of supplies between our businesses. However, the other company turned a blind eye for a time. Then, during a huge project, where one-hundred and fifty pieces needed to be completed at the same time for a client, we discovered that some of the supplies were of poor

quality. We ordered more, and received more faulty material. Because the material was forcing

us to re-do work (and since a third of it was unusable) we asked for a refund. The wholesaler

chose this time to create a transaction of our wrong-doings. They told us that we, in fact, owed

them all of our profits from the supplies we were re-selling, since it was not their intended

purpose. We could "deduct the cost of the faulty supplies from what we owed" them. Amusingly,

none of their supplies had been sold, and thus were we able to evade their accusation.

Because of this unique experience, I thought it would be fun to create a game where

players held roles of different companies that had the opportunity to work together, or blackmail

each other. Based on my inspiration, I wanted there to be three players: "You" as a small

business, "Company Coalition"- a supplier that you work with, and "Competition" a company

that serves as direct competitors to your market. Each company would have their own

wrongdoings, as well as dirt on the other two. The interactions would be loosely based on this

illustration:
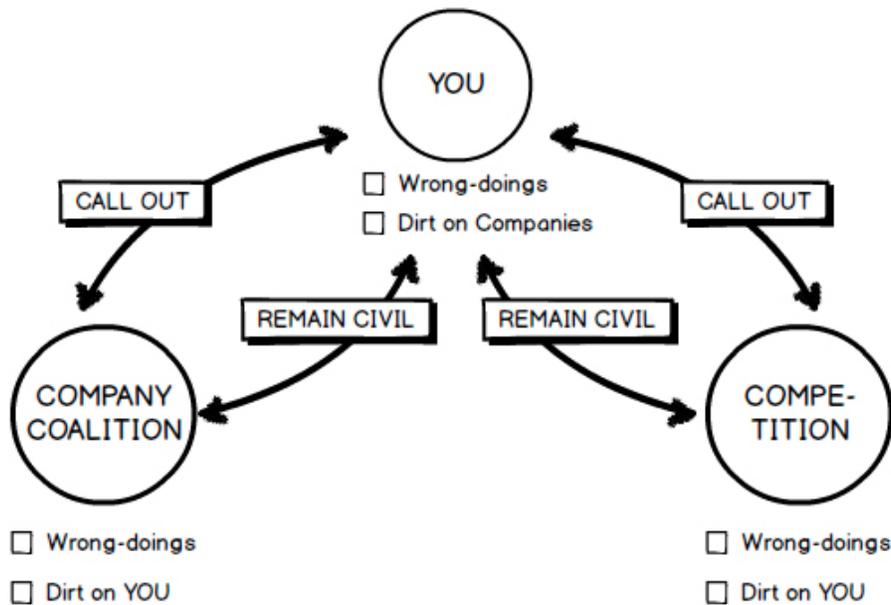
When I discussed this concept with my group, they liked the idea of competing as companies. It allowed us to be competitive without the results of the game getting too "personal." We had just recently listened to a presentation by Doug Woolsey, who argued some of the negative effects of competition, and how games might be much less fun if the competition is too involved (to the point where an individual may feel personally attacked). As we discussed, it was clear this game was perceived as a multi-player. Thus, I had to make some changes in order to keep each player on the same playing field (lest the game become too complicated). Therefore, my model needed to be changed to where each player was essentially just a "Company." There wasn't the automatic allegiance with the one labeled "Company Coalition", nor aggression toward the one labeled "Competition." No special rules needed to be developed for each person.

An interesting thing to note about game design is looking back and realizing that it actually *could* have turned out the way it was initially thought of. It was at this point, I recalled from the presentation by Doug Woolsey, that the system of the game could take notes from what is found to be successful in other games. Thanks to the fact that many of the parties I go to these days involve card games, I knew I wanted something with rules people could easily catch on to, and have them laugh while they play.

My next game iteration came unexpectedly. Returning from a long weekend, our group was supposed to a have some form of playtest to demonstrate the direction we wanted to go when designing our game. I had very little supplies on my person, and almost no time to work with, but I still wanted some way to have my group play my idea. The time and supply constraint wound up doing me a huge service: it made me think of the fundamental mechanics to the game.

What was the absolute minimum I could do that would successfully demonstrate my game concept to me group? I was miraculously able to concoct a quick game with two pennies. Each person would play a 'Company.' We would take turns, and try to be the first to 5 points by choosing to either Collaborate with or Blackmail another 'Company.' For this iteration, the commands were simply verbal. This illustration demonstrates the game concept:
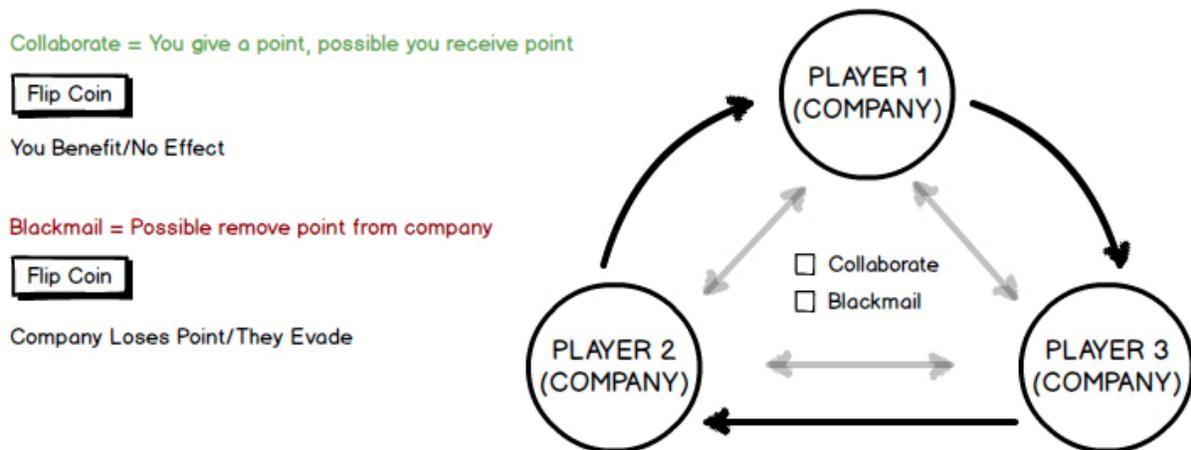
I observed that as my group played the game, they were exhibiting small bouts of metagame. Patrick and Janet would often describe their actions in more detail. Rather than simply saying, "I am going to blackmail Janet," Patrick would say, "Well, since Janet is trying to blackmail me, I'm going to blackmail her!" Or, one would say, "Since you helped me out, I'm going to collaborate with you." I noticed that the in-game banter seemed very similar to the things businesses would say/think about each other, were they blackmailing/collaborating with each other. This made me want to make the gaming environment conducive to metagame, encouraging this banter. The theme of integrity felt much more apparent when the players would give meaning to their decisions.

As for feedback, my group suggested that I change the word 'Blackmail' to 'Accuse' to make a bit more sense as an action. They also suggested that I add cards to my game, with different ways of collaborating, or various things to accuse each other of. Patrick amusingly blurted that an Accuse card could say something like, "I saw you with your mistress!" This feedback was very useful in helping me realize how I wanted to make my game more fun. To add that laugh-factor that I envisioned in my head, were my friends and I to play this game at a party. After all, I did want the banter to remain playful, and not too overly competitive.

I added two new features to my game, based on my observations and the feedback I received. First, I added the mechanic of players giving their company a name. I wanted them to feel a connection to their company, that increased their desire to win, but would also allow for amusing collaborations and accusations to ensue, with each game rendering its own inside jokes and a different feel during the playthrough. Second, I provided cards with the scenarios. Fifty percent were Accuse cards, and fifty percent were Collaborate cards. The Accuse cards in particular incorporated varying degrees of immoral actions (from tagging the Mayor's house to not recycling), to pay tribute to the nuance that morals can be relative to individuals.

I constructed my play pieces and did a playtest of the "complete" game with my friend, Anna, and her mom, Linda. I was very happy to see that the changes I incorporated had the desired effects, with metagame running strong! Upon observation, the in-game banter was easily a by-product of the Accuse/Collaborate actions. Soon, backstories were being developed as interactions persisted. For instance, Linda named her company "Linda's Linens." I had named my company "Chastity Belts Inc." Based on our Accuse/Collaborate actions and their level of success, Linda made up the backstory that the "old ladies running the linen store were not fond

of being a associated with [my] company." Furthermore, some cards were played to support the backstories or supposed reputations of the companies. For example, Anna had an Accuse card that stated "Your products emit an odd odor," which she promptly handed to me. When I flipped the coin to discover that she had successfully accused me, we all erupted into laughter. The feedback received was that the play experience was enjoyable. However, we encountered a problem of going through the entire deck of cards, because I made the threshold of success 10 points. From this data, I decided to keep the threshold a low number (5 points).

After this playthrough, I was effectively able to label my gamer type as "Socializers" due to the fact that my game catered to a social experience. According to Zicherman's article on Player Motivation, Socializer-type players are marked by their desire for a game to be the "backdrop for meaningful long-term social interactions." Because the key effects I wanted to encourage during gameplay included banter and joking, the Socializer types are easily attracted to the play experience that *Bad Company* offers.

In class, I had my final playtest, where members outside of my group played my game in order to give me critical feedback based on categories of story, gameplay, mechanics, aesthetics and system. This would determine how successful my game was through a fresh set of perspectives. During this playtest, I observed another great metagame. My companions, instead of reading their cards exactly as is, would "spice up" accusations and collaborations by inserting very specific details. For instance, one Accuse card stated, "Your celebrity endorser doesn't even use your product!" Jacob gave this card to Cassandra (whose company was called "Victoria's Secret Stash") proclaiming, "Your endorser, Jennifer Aniston, doesn't even wear anything from 'Victoria's Secret Stash!'" Also, right as Torrie's company "Hungry Hippos" was about to win,

every single player decided to accuse her of something --to great effect. Right on the crux of success, all the companies took action to knock her off the pedestal, to the point of putting her in last place for a time. Some playful yelling ensued after that.

After the game's completion, everyone provided feedback on the different categories. Under the category of Story, my game was given a 4.5 (to represent comments of, "It's a 4 or 5"). The members of this group said my theme was very easy to pin-point, and story could easily be developed based on gameplay.

For Gameplay, itself, the game earned another 4.5. They noted that the game was fun and unique, and the interactions were enjoyable. They also stated that it was not a challenging game, though they felt this was not a negative aspect to gameplay. It did not require you to "get good" at it. It was simply fun!

The team graded my mechanics 4.5, and gave the suggestion that I clarify one instruction: When it you choose whether to Collaborate or Accuse a company, *they* must flip the coin. This was not made clear in the rules, which meant that occasionally the wrong person would flip the coin.

For the Visuals category, my game was given a 3, because it was in its working prototype phase. Rather than just leaving it at that, however, the group actually offered suggestions of what the cards could look like, if the game moved beyond the beta stage. The offers were that my cards could look like memos (e-mails) or contracts with a manila folder as the back side. Other than that, they said the feel was good and all aspects were clear and comprehensive.

For the last category, System, I was given a unanimous 5/5, because the players all enjoyed my game; a great success!

Based on this feedback, I can easily picture a future for this game. While I feel a little nervous to pursue it -seeing as I have never before thought of making a card game in my life- I felt that the tests proved it could have some success in the market! Looking back, I personally feel like the theme of Integrity is not something being actively thought of, because the game wound up taking on a more playful tone than a serious one… but I am encouraged that a reflection of Integrity is still at the core and can be discussed, post-gameplay. Finally, something that may still need work is the fact that if too many players utilize the Accuse cards to negate points, it may be difficult to reach the "threshold." However, more cards, or the low 5-point score (as well as a limit on the number of players) can counteract this effect, adequately.

Overall, the experience of designing a game from start to finish was unique. I liked that we had to come up with some form of inspiration, or develop our own definition of the theme, because it made the process easy to become passionate about. I learned that while inspiration can lead thought-process, the most important first part of development is creating fundamental mechanics. Then, the next thing you should ask yourself is how you would like players to experience your game. From there, design can come very easy, and the theme can be built on those foundations. I rate this experience 10/10 (Would play again).

References

Garfield, Richard. "Metagames." (2000).

Woolsey, Doug. "Out of the Dark Place: Designing The Hunt." Slideshow (2014).

Zicherman. "Player Motivation." Chapter 2 (2011).