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November 19, 2008
ITGM 705
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Cups

Synopsis

Cups is an abstract strategy game of intermediate-moderate difficulty for two players. It is not based on any natural analogies so some of the game rules can seem a little unintuitive at first. However, the relatively short play time (10-15 minutes) allows players to learn without losing a great deal of play time due to any potential misunderstanding.

While its final iteration might have a faint resemblance to *Go*, *Life*, or *Othello*, none of these served as the impetus for the project. My initial design goal was simply to incorporate game tokens whose ownership would fluctuate through game play. This originally took the form of two-faced “monsters” that could be faced toward, away, or perpendicular to the player appearing as their piece, the opponent’s piece, or a shared piece respectively. I had hopes the game would be simple, humorous, and enjoyable by younger audiences. Unfortunately I was unable to develop something both simple and compelling. As the game became more complex it also became more abstracted. Some players (myself included) did find correlations between the behavior on the game board and more ‘natural’ phenomena such as double agents and atoms collecting electrons. I was unable to reconcile the behavior I wanted the pieces to exhibit and the decisions I wanted the players to make with these analogies though. I found the games veering away from my interest in token player relationships. In hindsight it might have been better (per Hieronymi’s suggestion) to begin with an analogy opposed to a mechanic.

Cups was my elaborate and obtuse senior undergraduate capstone project *Pips*. *Pips* was an alpha version of an online, multiplayer, turn-based, strategy game developed in flash over the course of six months. It was an investigation of the relationships between individual freedoms and group structures in a game space similar to *Settlers of Catan*. In *Pips* players create networks of “cities” whose structure governed how much direct control over an individual node a player had. While there was all kinds of interesting research, the game had a nearly vertical learning curve and was relatively unplayable without guidance. It wasn’t a total failure however. Most matches degenerated into one player attempting to retain the sovereignty of their “cities” while another tried to assimilate everything and irrevocably destroy any distinction between players.

I have seen similar behavior in other places. Instances where an onerous individual forgoes the game system’s dedicated goals in order

to create as much havoc for all parties involved, particularly in utilizing self destructive tactics to cause an immediate and drastic strategic impact. Sometimes this is to be cheeky, sometimes it's to break the game, sometimes its to bring about dynamics of the system that are interesting, but overlooked or unintended.

The idea that a player could subordinate their and their opponent's pieces into collective that was beyond their or any player's control stuck with me. In all the complex relationships I had constructed in *Pips*, I figured I might be able to make something passable If I focused on just this one play pattern.

In my mind the simple 'monster game' i had envisioned needed to offer as much reason for sacrificing exclusive control over a player's pieces as retaining control. For this I had two general solutions. First, there needed to be a goal that superseded any interaction between the pieces. Second, if the three state token (controlled piece, non-controlled piece, shared control piece) could be combined to create different effects, then the value of the 'shared' state would be increased.

Resource collection as a goal was a simple solution to the first problem. Taking a note from *Pips*, and thus from *Catan*, and thus from any number of other games, these resources initially came in several varieties. Unfortunately, any strategic depth this might have added was quickly buried under the complexity of keeping track of how many of what kind resource one had and needed to win. It was hard enough, (and still is to a degree) just to keep track of the *total* number of resources one had possession of let alone what kinds. Thus the resources now come in only one flavor, "resource" flavor. Also, while some interesting situations arose from more random or player chosen resource placement, the other mechanics proved to be difficult enough to refine under *consistent* environments that their placement was eventually standardized.

Creating methods for the tokens to interact was straight forward. Initially they could take or give resources, destroy another token, and finally convert it part way or completely. Once I began testing I found that things were already so complex that destroying tokens or complete conversions were quickly cut. Next I removed any qualifiers for the actions (such as having multiple friendly tokens enclosing an opponent) except for the partway conversion action.

Despite my hopes, once the game began to gel, it never really seemed to provide the kind of experience I had hoped for. The co-opting of another player's piece(s) was at best initially surprising, but more often the player internalized it in the same fashion as any other mechanic. Obviously it's too much to ask that a player become invested in an abstract playing piece in such a short time frame. I had hoped though that the mechanic would have provided more tension.

Finished Game



Appendix : Rules

Goal:

The first player to control 10 resource tokens wins.

Setup:

Place one resource token on each marked space on the board. (Twelve in all).

Give each player 6 cups. (The cups do not begin play on the board).

Place a marker on the score chart at 0 for each player.

Gameplay:

The youngest player goes first. On a player's turn they may either place a cup on the field, perform an action with the cups on the field, or pass. Play continues until a player has control of 10 resource tokens, or both players pass consecutively (see **Early Endgame**).

Each time a player gains or loses control of a resource token, mark their new total on the score chart.

A player may not "undo" a previous player's action.

Shared Cups:

Cups that are turned 90° are under control of both players. During a player's turn, the shared cup acts as a friendly piece. It can move, steal, give, and assist in converting other cups. HOWEVER, it does not "stick" to friendly cups and friendly cups do not "stick" to it. (see *Moving a Cup*).

Any resource tokens in a shared cup count towards the totals of both players at all times.

Shared cups can never be returned to the exclusive control of one player.

Placing a cup:

A cup may be placed in an space not occupied by another cup. If the space holds a resource, place the resource in the cup. Make sure the cup is placed with the red side facing toward the player who is placing the cup.

Actions:

Instead of placing a cup a player may perform one of the following actions; Move a Cup, Steal a Resource, Give a Resource, or Convert a Cup.

Move a cup:

Any cup on the field that a player controls may move into any adjacent space unoccupied by another cup. HOWEVER. If the moving cup is under the sole control of the player, and is adjacent to another cup under the sole control of said player, the moving cup must preserve this adjacency. In other words, cups of the same kind stick to one another, cups that are under shared control can move about unhindered. (see **Shared Cups**) *Be wary, it is possible a collection of three or more cups (in a triangle grouping) to become unable to move.*

If a cup moves into a space that contains a resource token. Place that token in the cup.

Steal a Resource:

Any cup a player controls exclusively, or that a player shares control over, may take one resource token from an adjacent cup.

Give a Resource:

Any cup a player controls exclusively, or that a player shares control over, may give one resource token to an adjacent cup.

Convert a Cup

If a cup that an opponent controls exclusively is adjacent to two or more friendly controlled cups, the opponent's cup may be turned 90°. From that point on will count as a "shared cup" (see **Shared Cups**).

Early Endgame

If both players pass consecutively then use the following criteria to declare a winner. If none of these criteria are met the game is a draw.

The player with the most controlled resources.

The player with the most *exclusively* controlled resources (resources that are in cups under the exclusive control of the player).

The player with the most exclusively controlled cups.