Emergent Boardgaming: Where Stories Come From

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By Ahmad Dialdin June 26, 2016



You know what I love about boardgaming? The stories that emerge from the gameplay. In this article, I wanted to shine a brief boardgaming-shaped light on a term that's usually reserved for video games: emergent gameplay.

Emergent gameplay is what happens when you have a game with simple mechanics and rules mixed with very light, broad strokes of a story or narrative, thereby allowing the players to generate their own stories themselves. Think Minecraft, the Civilization games or even the rebooted X-COM games. It's all about the impromptu and unplanned stories that you create from your unique sessions and experiences.

This happens all the time in boardgames and it's what sticks with me every time. Several types of games will bring this out in spades:

Deception Games:
We're talking your Resistance, Mafia, Coup, Battlestar Galactica and so on. The interactions between people in these games, especially thanks to hidden traitors, is pure conflict. Any story throughout all of time that's worth its salt is built upon conflict.
Cosmic Encounters:
I am giving this game its own category because, honestly, it deserves it. No other game creates scenarios and stories quite like this one. The rules are super simple, but the game-breaking powers that each player gets creates such a storm of imbalances, alliances, backstabbing and power struggles, you will end up with a deliciously messed-up space opera by the time someone emerges the victor.

Thematic Games:
Picture games such as Pandemic Legacy, Dead of Winter, Robinson Crusoe and Star Wars: Rebellion. We're talking games dripping with theme. Sure, they might have some semblance of story, but the way you play it turns it into something utterly personal and distinctive. I've got a couple of quick tales to that effect:

> In Dead of Winter, a friend of mine had a ninja as one of his characters. At one point, his ninja came upon a horse that he could either turn into valuable food for our desperately starving colony, or he could keep it and become a badass ranger ninja that can travel anywhere and kill anything without penalty. He made his obvious choice, morale dropped and it eventually cost us the game, but to this day he defends his decision.
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> Just this month, a friend and I were playing our fifth session of Pandemic Legacy. We decided that, even though the region was a powder keg waiting to happen, I had to risk going into Asia to fix a few issues, landing in a relatively safe Osaka.
> The only threat would be if we drew an Epidemic Card (not a rare occurrence) followed by a Tokyo card (extremely rare), resulting in an outbreak. I even said the immortal words: "**What are the odds of that happening?** It's one card in an entire deck of countries, and even then it has to be the bottom-most one!"
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> Crap. My character was scarred after that and became paranoid (an actual game mechanic), forever reminded of the time she foolishly went into dangerous territory and flaunted fate.

I'm only able to squeeze a couple of stories here, but let me know your emergent boardgaming tales! I guarantee you that no two will ever be alike.
