



Nerdverse Unshuffled

Show Notes

Episode 4: Worker Placement

15 January 2024

Episode summary and chapter markers

Ever heard a bunch of board game fanatics express strong opinions about something called worker placement games and wishing you knew what they were going on about? In this episode, Jacques and Fayyaad get all worked up about worker placement. This type of game has become very popular since it was introduced in 1998 and has resulted in a variety of examples and variations. Fortunately, once you have a better understanding of this term, a whole smorgasbord of games awaits! Your hosts look at the expectations and variations that come with this popular style of board game. They also discuss the reasons worker placement games have become as well liked and successful as they have. And if you ever want to try one out for yourself, this episode discusses a large variety of worker placement games that each do something unique. So let's learn and discover more about worker placement in board games.

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Resources and links

Nerdverse.co.za articles

- ⊕ Board Game Jargon Primer <https://www.nerdverse.co.za/category/everything/boardgames/board-game-jargon-primer/>
- ⊕ Definition of worker placement <https://www.nerdverse.co.za/everything/board-game-jargon-primer-part-9/#worker-placement>

Games (in chronological order)

- ⊕ *Carcassonne* (2000) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/822/carcassonne>
- ⊕ *The Manhattan Project: Energy Empire* (2016) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/176734/manhattan-project-energy-empire>
- ⊕ *Tzolk'in: The Mayan Calendar* (2012) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/126163/tzolk-mayan-calendar>
- ⊕ *Teotihuacan: City of Gods* (2018) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/229853/teotihuacan-city-gods/>
- ⊕ *Beyond the Sun* (2020) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/317985/beyond-sun>
- ⊕ *Alien Frontiers* (2010) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/48726/alien-frontiers>
- ⊕ *Endless Winter: Paleoamericans* (2022) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/305096/endless-winter-paleoamericans>
- ⊕ *Keydom* (1998) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/294/keydom>
- ⊕ *Kingsburg* (2007) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/27162/kingsburg>
- ⊕ *Architects of the West Kingdom* (2018) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/236457/architects-west-kingdom>
- ⊕ *Stone Age* (2008) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/34635/stone-age>
- ⊕ *Argent: The Consortium* (2015) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/144797/argent-consortium>
- ⊕ *A Feast for Odin* (2016) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/177736/feast-odin>
- ⊕ *The Gallerist* (2015) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/125153/gallerist>
- ⊕ *Dune: Imperium* (2020) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/316554/dune-imperium>
- ⊕ *Everdell* (2018) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/199792/everdell>
- ⊕ *Viticulture* (2013) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/128621/viticulture>
- ⊕ *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs* (2020) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/291508/tiny-epic-dinosaurs>
- ⊕ *Champions of Midgard* (2015) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/172287/champions-midgard>
- ⊕ *On Mars* (2020) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/184267/mars>
- ⊕ *Raiders of the North Sea* (2015) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/170042/raiders-north-sea>
- ⊕ *Flamecraft* (2022) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/336986/flamecraft>

Sources

- ⊕ "Tetromino" (Wikipedia article), 2024-01-14 (Retrieved 2024-01-14).

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tetromino>

Episode link & contact info

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Host bios

Jacques van Heerden is a writer, editor, and tabletop enthusiast who grew up gay and nerdy in a small South African town. Today he finds nerdy things to obsess about all the time. He discovered tabletop roleplaying games in his 20s, board gaming in his 30s, and he's been hooked on both ever since.

Fayyaad Hendricks is a board gamer, former video game reviewer, writer, musician, artist, and cook. He's got a love of trivia and horrid puns. He was introduced to modern board gaming in 2010 and has discovered much to love about this hobby.

Episode transcript

Welcome to worker placement

00:00:14 Fayyaad: Hello and welcome to Nerdverse Unshuffled, a geeky podcast where we introduce you to the language of board games. We are your hosts, Jacques van Heerden and Fayyaad Hendricks.

00:00:30 Jacques: Welcome to this episode, where we look at one of the most popular and most common board game mechanics: worker placement.

So a quick disclaimer before we begin. Although we try to discuss each jargon term separately without using terms we haven't covered in previous episodes, this is not always possible. Do not fear! You can find definitions of all these jargon terms on Nerdverse.co.za.

00:00:56 Fayyaad: In this episode we are going to be looking at the very popular game mechanic that often features in games we have strong opinions about. It's also super popular, so you're bound to run into it in your board game journey.

00:01:08 Jacques: If you have ever been intimidated by the vast number of games that describe themselves as worker placement games, or if you're familiar with the genre and would like to learn some fascinating facts about it, listen on.

A little light reading (and a brief discussion)

00:01:25 As we do it every episode, let's start with an abbreviated definition from the Board Game Jargon Primer. Take it away, Fayyaad.

00:01:35 Fayyaad: Thank you very much. So one of the most popular mechanics in the last 10 to 15 years is worker placement. BoardGameGeek lists over 3,000 games that use worker placement as a mechanic, which should attest to its popularity. In worker placement games, the shared game board contains a series of spaces where players can place components — often meeples — which are considered to be performing work in that space, which rewards the players with the resources, points, further actions, and so forth. In a lot of worker placement games, the use of the space is exclusive, so other players can't use it once it's been claimed. And you'll only be able to do that action again once the worker vacates that space, and that's the... that's the definition from the book.

00:02:22 Jacques: So there is a lot to unpack in that definition you just quoted. So what do you... What do we mean when we refer to workers?

00:02:30 Fayyaad: So a worker can be any component — cardboard, plastic, wood — anything that indicates which actions a player is claiming for that round. You normally place that component on the board to indicate, "I'm doing this and no one else can."

00:02:49 Jacques: Yeah.

00:02:49 Fayyaad: As we discussed in the components episode, meeple is the term for usually vaguely human shaped wooden token. So some of the kind of thing you'd find in *Carcassonne*, but anything that looks like a figurine of some sort — could be animal, it could be human, could be whatever you

need it to be. These are still called meeples. It's still going to be called a meeple for the purpose of the game.

But I do prompt listeners to listen to our last episode if they haven't yet on components. We get into a deeper discussion of meeples amongst other components.

00:03:30 Jacques: Yes, there are a lot... There are a lot of components. And meeples obviously are only one type of component that can be used to track actions, like we just discussed. We did mention a couple of other ones, so there's the cardboard chits seen in *Manhattan Project: Energy Empire*, coloured wooden pieces in *Tzolk'in*, or even dice.

00:03:54 Fayyaad: So the game *Teotihuacan* is a modified form of worker placement where instead of meeples you're using dice to indicate that this is what I'm doing. And what makes it interesting is that you can use the different faces of the dice to represent either how your worker's doing something, or in what **capacity** your worker's doing something — or, in the case of *Teotihuacan*, the **power** of your workers, so how many of a particular resource you get back when you are using a space. Some games will ask you to roll the dice. Many worker placement games don't. We played *Beyond the Sun* recently, which uses dice. Because you're placing those dice down onto the card spots to claim those actions. As long as you've got permission to use it from the technology you've upgraded, you can use the space. So it is a worker placement game in that regard.

00:05:06 Fayyaad: *Alien Frontiers* is a delightful version of a worker placement game with dice that asks you to roll the dice. And where you can place your workers depends on the values you've rolled. So there's... You're never getting left with nothing to do, but the more powerful spots require you to have very specific combinations of dice values.

00:05:35 Jacques: Yeah. The one game that I'm thinking of in that context is *Eternal Winter* [correction: the game Jacques is referring to is *Endless Winter*]. In that case, several people can put their worker on the same column, at least, of actions. But it just becomes less rewarding? Like the actions become slightly less stronger, there's slightly...

00:05:54 Fayyaad: Yeah, that's right.

00:05:59 Jacques: There's slightly less reason for doing it.

00:06:02 Fayyaad: Yeah, absolutely.

00:06:04 Jacques: Like if you do it, you're in a slightly worse position than someone who did it before you did. But at least you're not completely prevented from taking that action necessarily.

00:06:17 Fayyaad: Yeah, that's right.

00:06:17 Jacques: I'm quite a fan of worker placement games. It depends a great deal on the worker placement game, though. I mean not, not all of them are the same.

00:06:26 Fayyaad: No, absolutely not. And that's what I think makes them so wonderful is that very few of them are identical, even though they use the same mechanics.

Expectations and exceptions

00:06:37 Fayyaad: Should we get into the history of where worker placement came from?

The first worker placement game that we can trace back is acknowledged to be *Keydom* by Richard Breese. That was published back in 1998 by R&D games. Yeah, so it's not new. It's been around for quite a while. And dice placement came afterwards, so you can arguably say that the first worker placement game that featured dice was in 2007, *Kingsburg*.

00:07:16 Fayyaad: So let me talk a bit about what's common with worker placement games, because I don't think that we quite have the full picture of it just yet. You know, we've danced around a little bit about, you know, what worker placement is.

But let's talk specifics. It's important to remember that the action that you're choosing is a shared space. It's not one that's exclusive to yourself. What makes worker placement is the interactivity of the shared board, where everyone has the same pool of actions to choose from. But being able to choose them first makes worker placement interesting. So it also makes becoming the first player an interesting decision. And often it's its own worker placement space — is choosing to become first player. There's no immediate other resource gain from it. But you know, having taken away that first player action from someone else is important.

Fayyaad: Any game that uses worker placement and then does something interesting with it — so you're not just placing workers on the board and then pulling them off at the end of round or pulling them off at any point — any game that does this is usually called “worker placement with the twist”. Because, well, clearly we weren't expecting that.

00:08:47 Jacques: Yes. What a twist!

00:08:48 Fayyaad: So here's an example, right. We recently played *Architects of the West Kingdom*.

00:08:55 Jacques: Yes, we did.

00:08:57 Fayyaad: In a normal — what they call a normal worker placement game, your pool of workers is anything between 2 and maybe 8 workers. You don't tend to get a lot because that limits how many things you can do in any given round. And quite often in worker placement games, there's a whole worker placement spot for getting new workers.

But *Architects of the West Kingdom*, you get 30 to start with, and that's a lot of workers, right? But what makes it also slightly different is that each worker placement spot, for the most part, can hold any number of workers. But what you normally do with dice in a dice placement game — which is powering up the workers with the different pip values of the die. Just placing more workers there is the same thing as powering up your workers with dice.

And, you know, as other players see you getting more and more rewards, they're going to want to stop you. And so pulling workers off spaces isn't something that happens automatically at the end of a round. It's something that's a conscious decision by the players to, well, pull you off that space. It's like, no, you're getting a little too rich off that; you need to back off a bit.

00:10:18 Jacques: And while you're mentioning that, I'm thinking of games where also the order in which you take workers off of spots also has an effect on, say, which resources you get. Or maybe getting you a bonus. So in *Stone Age*, for example, when you're pulling off a worker, you get some resources that you can then spend to be able to pay for other actions, that pulling another resource... pulling a worker off of another space would get you. And if you do that in the wrong order, then you can't pay for it; then you don't get the benefit of doing the thing. So there's all these...

00:11:00 Fayyaad: Yeah, you screw yourself over in that regard.

00:11:04 Jacques: So that's very much the mechanic.

00:11:07 Fayyaad: I mean, some games enforce the order.

00:11:08 Jacques: Oh yes.

00:11:11 Fayyaad: *Argent: The Consortium*, for example; there's a very defined order from left to right. You know, if you do things in the wrong order, just purely by the way you place your workers, that can mess your plans up quite nicely.

00:11:30 Jacques: That does seem like that's also sort of a common feature of a worker placement games: it's that sense of competition, that level of interaction you're expecting between players. You're paying close attention to what all the other players are doing, because, well, obviously they're interacting with the board and they're taking a spot that you might want and you're kind of measuring up: "Okay, so what do I want? And what do my competitors want? And how can I get in their way **and** get what I want?"

00:12:00 Fayyaad: Exactly that, right. It's maximizing that sweet spot of getting what I want, but also denying others players what they just need.

00:12:11 Jacques: It can be tricky and tough to get used to, but there is a... It's a very satisfying, I think, strategic space that you're in for that game. Yes, let's pause for a bit here and be back after the break.

Ad break

00:12:41 Jacques: Hi, Jacques here from Unshuffled. Thank you for downloading and listening to the show. We're a very new channel and we really appreciate your support. If you like what we do, please like and subscribe to hear about new episodes. If you'd like access to bonus features, reviews, discussions, affiliate links and more fun downloads, consider supporting us on Patreon or Ko-Fi if you're financially able. Otherwise, you could always help us get the word out about the show by leaving us a positive review on your favourite podcast app. And now back to what we were talking about. Wait. What we're talking about?

Variations on a mechanic

00:13:20 Jacques: So I mean, is there... are there any other common elements of worker placement games we want to mention before we move on to variations?

00:13:29 Fayyaad: I did want to make a mention about *A Feast for Odin*. Which is unusual for a worker placement game, in that in most worker placement games you get like five, six, seven, eight spots in

which to place your worker, and everyone's then competing for those spots. *A Feast for Odin* has something like 30 different worker placement spots and every single one there's something completely different, and it's glorious.

And then some games make the worker placement spots just really, really, really limited and you've got no option but to get in each other's way. So, for example, Vital Lacerda's *The Gallerist* has only four worker placement spots. And in a four player game, everyone's going to be kicking each other out of a worker placement spot in order to reap the benefits of that spot. It's delightful.

00:14:27 Jacques: It's a great example of how you can build a lot of complexity into a worker placement game.

00:14:35 Fayyaad: No, that's true. You don't need a lot of worker placement spots to make for a very complex worker placement game, as evidenced by *The Gallerist*.

00:14:44 Jacques: Yeah, I mean, it is very well designed.

00:14:48 Fayyaad: Absolutely. Vital Lacerda is a master of game design.

More recent games that use worker placement tend to have been tending to combine it with other really, really different mechanics, such as deck-building for example. So that gives us a game like *Dune: Imperium* by Paul Dennen, which you know it's exactly that: worker placement combined with deck building. And it works really, really well just because of the way the game's been put together. And another, you know, less, more finicky version might have been less successful, but I mean Paul Dennen just did it so amazingly well.

00:15:35 Fayyaad: Other developers combine it with, for example, tableau building, which is another episode for another time. So we get games like *Everdell*, for example, where the worker placement is really, really important in the early game, but in the later game, the tableau building and the engine is far more important than your workers will ever be at the end of it.

00:16:05 Fayyaad: Worker placement runs this large gamut and holds quite a large space in modern board gaming. We mentioned *Tzolk'in* earlier on, *The Mayan Calendar* by Tascini and Luciani, and it's one of the most innovative worker placement games that I have seen. Because players are placing their workers onto these gears. And the board is beautiful: it's got all these cogwheels on the board and you're physically turning the cogs every round. And as these gears turn on the board, your workers are moved to new spaces, so able to do new actions every single round, which is fantastic.

Except for the fact that you can only do one of two things: either put workers on gears or take them off. And you get torn between needing to do something with your workers now versus, you know... You got the harvest coming and you need to feed people with corn. But I also need to get points. And it's fantastic in so far as worker placement games go. And just the way the gear system works in that the game takes us on a timer. It makes it an interesting proposition for worker placement is that it's not your standard static space.

00:17:28 Jacques: *Tzolk'in* is one of those games where taking a worker off at the right time also has an effect. And then sometimes it just so happens you've got a couple of meeples waiting to bear fruit,

essentially, and then somebody takes that first person marker and just moves the cog on two extra ones, and then you're past the point where you wanted to be.

00:17:59 Fayyaad: Oh no, that happened to me. Absolutely.

00:18:05 Fayyaad: The one essential worker placement game that I think everyone should play is *Viticulture* and we need to talk about that one for a bit, just because it's fantastic.

00:18:15 Jacques: I came to *Viticulture* very, very late. I mean, I only played it for the first time this year. And I was surprised by how much I liked it. I'd played enough worker placement games, and games with the same sorts of mechanics, that I was comfortable enough when they explained the rules. I was like, "Oh, okay, that makes sense." Like, that makes sense because I can kind of... I understand what that rule...

00:18:43 Fayyaad: You can connect it to other games that you played.

00:18:46 Jacques: Yes, and I can understand how that particular mechanic or that particular rule is going to affect my decision space when I'm playing.

00:18:54 Fayyaad: Correct. And I think what makes playing a lot of games with similar mechanics interesting is that you get a feel for it, right? If someone tells you, "Yes, this is a worker placement game", you've got an inkling immediately what you're going into. If I tell you... Right, you've not played *A Feast for Odin*, for example. But if I tell you, "It's got worker placement. But you've got your board on which you're trying to fit these tetrominoes onto a board to cover spaces, but the way you get them is via the worker placement." Without even looking at the game, you've already got an inkling of what's coming.

00:19:37 Jacques: And you kind of also have — and this is something I'm starting to realize is more and more important to me — it gives me an idea of how to choose what I'm doing during my turn. And worker placement, I think, is pretty good at that as a part of designing games. It's a very clear way of signalling to someone, "Okay, these are the places you need to be looking."

00:20:04 Fayyaad: So it brings us back to *Viticulture*, right, because you're only ever looking at one season's worth of actions at any given time. Even though the board contains, what, 4, 8, 12, 16 — 16 to 20 different actions, different spaces. The fact that the game thematically moves from season to season, in this progression, you're only ever looking at that one season's worth of actions at any one point in time, which reduces that overload. And allows you to think, "Okay, wait, I need to plant the grapes because in the future time, yes, I'm going to need to reap them and, you know, make the wines. But that's for a future season. Right now, we're just trying to get grape seeds."

00:20:46 Fayyaad: I mean once again with *Viticulture*, what sets it above other worker placement games is that inclusion of what they call the Grande Meeple, which basically allows you to circumvent the rule of "once a place is taken, it's taken; you can't do that action". The Grande Meeple is kind of like your last resort. If someone has done something that you really, really, really need to do this round, you can, but only once, with that Grande. It's kind of like an overseer, I suppose.

00:21:26 Jacques: You're sending the boss of the wine farm to go sort out this issue.

00:21:30 Fayyaad: That Grande Meeple is a stroke of pure genius. It literally takes a very, very average worker placement game and turns it into something absolutely fantastic experience just by that one addition.

00:21:48 Jacques: And I mean that idea has definitely been taken up by other games, I think. So you lent me your copy of *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs* at one point and for that one, you can actually use multiple meeples. So if somebody's put down one meeple on a space, you can then use your Grande Meeple in that space as well to also take that action. And then if a third person comes in, they can either use a Grande and another Meeple or they can just use three separate, normal meeples. Which also is very smart because that also gives you choices of, "Okay, so this means I have fewer actions maybe this round, but it does give me this resource that I desperately need. And I can take that even though this is a highly contested space.

00:22:43 Fayyaad: *Energy Empire* does the same thing. So *Energy Empire* doesn't use meeples, doesn't use the wooden pieces, but it does have the cardboard chits that represent your workers. And very much like *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs*, you're not barred from using a space just because someone else has gone there. But it does get progressively more expensive, to a point where you've got to think, "Hold on, I could be spending three workers to do that one thing versus one worker to do this other thing, which is not as optimal, that doesn't go directly towards my long-term goal, but it means I've got these other two workers that I can spend elsewhere again, instead of spending all of them on this one action."

Those sorts of interesting decisions that you have to weigh up for yourself when you play different types of worker placement games. It's, it... It makes my brain very happy.

What's so great about worker placement?

00:23:44 Fayyaad: But we do have to ask at this point, so why has it become so insanely popular? To the point where, like I said, there are over 3,000 games that use this mechanic in different ways. Why are they so popular? So the one thing I can say absolutely from my perspective is that there's that luck versus strategy dichotomy. I'm not in favour of luck-based games where everything hinges on a roll of the die and you cannot do anything to mitigate. It's not my favourite way to play anything.

00:24:24 Jacques: You say that cause you're very unlucky in board games. (Laughs.)

00:24:28 Fayyaad: I am unnervingly unlucky in board games. My rolls seem to be statistically improbable. Mitigating your luck with being able to strategize and it's like... The only person at fault if I do badly in the worker placement game is myself because I failed to think enough steps ahead, or I failed to take advantage of spaces that I could have, whatever. It's not the fault of the dice. So that's one of the main reasons I personally love worker placement games.

00:25:03 Fayyaad: Which brings in too, you know, that strategy we were talking about this earlier — it's the strategic effect of being the first player. It is important to be able to, in a round, get that first dig at whatever spaces you want. Because as the round progresses, your options become narrower and narrower — even with options with games like *Energy Empire* and *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs*. Yeah, well, yeah,

you can pay for options, but it means then that you do have to consider, “How about if I **don't** do that instead? ”

00:25:39 Jacques: Yeah, well, I mean, the example of *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs* is: you place a worker on the spot where you roll a dice — or you where you roll a die, singular — to figure out, okay, what is the result of this breeding program? And then you suddenly get two dinosaurs for the price of one and you only have food for one. And then you look at the board and you're like, “Well, I was doing this other thing, but now I need to go and find some food. Now I need to actually spend extra meeples on a space to produce food for this dinosaur. Or I can do what I was going to do and maybe buy a fence to keep these two dinosaurs separate.” So now I'm going to have to choose what's going to cost me more. Is it worse if the dinosaurs escape? Or is it worse if they starve? Or is it worse if they eat each other?

And it's such a silly, simple, little game, but it does feel like those decisions matter. And then it's like, okay, well, there is still an element of luck in a lot of these worker placement games.

00:26:51 Fayyaad: So I think what you said just now is critical, is that: your decisions matter. In that it doesn't feel inevitable and to the point where, “Oh no, it's now it's up to fate,” kind of thing. But I think the other side of what makes worker placement so popular is it's interactive, right? You're all vying for the same spaces on the board in order to do the same thing, which is score a heck of a lot of points, but you may be able to go about it in a different way to someone else.

00:27:25 Fayyaad: And I think part of it also is that you know, worker placement feels like it's almost analogous to real life. It's like yeah, people are going there, they're doing something. They're mining; they're getting ore out the ground. Or they're producing wines. They're... whatever the case may be. We're not going to say “real life” with breeding dinosaurs, but we know people are breeding cattle and sheep and things on a ranch and it's the same sort of thing.

00:27:54 Jacques: Yeah, I mean, it has a real-world analogue.

00:27:58 Fayyaad: Exactly.

00:27:58 Jacques: It does feel rewarding. It's a very strange sensation the first time this happens in a board game. It's like well, I've just managed to produce “wine” or a new baby dinosaur or something, by placing all these little meeples in a very strategic kind of process-aware way. And now I've achieved this thing. It's like, well, that's actually very satisfying. Why is it so satisfying?

00:28:28 Fayyaad: I like the example of *Champions of Midgard*, which uses worker placement combined with dice rolling, but the dice are your warriors. So you know, how well they do in battle, yeah, that's up to the dice. It's fine. But how you recruit those warriors and how you set out to feed them and send them on voyages, that's up to you and your decisions on the board. You've got to weigh up that risk–reward of, “Yeah, I want to be able to do that but I don't know if I'm going to have the dice warriors to do it later on.” I mean, one of the big parts of *Champions of Midgard* is there's a troll at the gates of the village every round, and somebody has to go and fight the troll.

00:29:30 Otherwise it's bad for everyone.

00:29:31 Fayyaad: You know if nobody fights the troll, everyone gets blamed, right? And the blame tokens are negative points at the end of the game, so you know, that's incentive to go and fight. But sometimes, there are more important things going on than the troll at the gates to the village. As weird as that sounds, so you've got to weigh that up, right? You've got to weigh that risk–reward. It's like, do I fight the troll off? And you know, yeah, it means I can give one of my blame tokens to someone else. But it means that that's a worker I'm not using to get bigger points maybe fighting monsters overseas.

00:30:10 Jacques: Yeah. No, that's also a very satisfying worker placement game. It's a great example as well of games, I mean of worker placement games that do also include an element of chance. So it's not guaranteed that this is necessarily always going to have this exact outcome.

00:30:32 Fayyaad: Oh no, absolutely, right? But you can mitigate by, you know, including more dice; just have more dice. That means your likelihood of getting a good roll is much higher.

00:30:42 Jacques: And for example, in something like *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs*, again, there is a spot where you can put a meeple and then it okay, "Well, I'm guaranteed to have this dinosaur and only this dinosaur, and there won't be any surprises."

00:30:56 Fayyaad: Correct. Yeah, so I mean that mitigation in favour of your strategy, I think, is important, yeah.

00:31:02 Jacques: And that also ties in with action scarcity. So weighing up the risk and return; do I think that this is worth risking this whole turn being wasted, but also something like *Tzolk'in*, it's like, okay, well, if I move the gear up two, I'm going to screw over three other players at the table. But I might also just be screwing myself. So you have to, you do have to be careful. So it's not a thing of like, "Okay, well, I can do this with impunity." I mean, at every point, your decision matters. That's a great experience at the table.

00:31:38 Fayyaad: I think that's what makes worker placement great, is that your decisions matter.

00:31:42 Jacques: Your decisions matter, and depending on what the game is, your choices can be very, very deep. Sometimes they can be... If you want a simple worker placement game, there are those as well.

00:31:54 Fayyaad: Absolutely. There's a worker placement game to suit just about any complexity level. Whether you're a beginner to board games or whether you're a veteran or board games, there is a worker placement game for your range of play. So you can go from as simple as *Stone Age* to as complicated as ... pick a Vital Lacerda game — *On Mars* is possibly one of the most complicated games I know, and it's a worker placement game, but my word it is insanely detailed and complex.

00:32:31 Jacques: Yeah, that's one of the games I haven't played at all yet.

So I mean, there's a lot of things that make worker placement — it's not just fun for players; I think it's also a very entertaining, challenging space for a game developer to be in. Like, how do I come up with a worker placement game that's new and fresh and different...

00:32:52 Fayyaad: Oh, absolutely.

00:32:54 Jacques: ...does something slightly differently. And how do I make this thing more fun? How do I apply it to a different genre, maybe? Or is there some way to upend the expectations a little bit?

How does understanding this terminology help us?

00:33:10 Jacques: But then why does, how does this jargon help us? How does this term “worker placement” help us?

00:33:16 Fayyaad: So like we've discussed in this episode, worker placement games have a lot of similar or shared elements in that players are doing very similar things across a range of board games, you know across range of themes. And once you've seen how the different games approach this mechanic, it's much easier to learn a new board game and learn a new mechanic. And it allows you to tell at a instantly you know what makes this particular game unique, even though it uses the exact same action or an action with a slight modification to it.

00:33:56 Fayyaad: So just talking about the modification: *Raiders of the North Sea*. That breaks the entire worker placement mould by giving you only a single worker. Yeah, you still get two actions out of it because you place your worker into a spot to do something, and then you pull the work off another spot to do that. So I mean, by me telling you, “Yeah, it's a worker placement game,” immediately you've got the idea that, “Oh, we're getting putting workers down.” And I just have to tell you, “Well, the other side of it is that you're also pulling a worker off, and you get to do the action.” Fantastic.

00:34:28 Jacques: Yeah, and it does help to explain like what kind of table experience you're going to be having. So it is going to be competitive, generally. It is going to be a question of making those choices and being strategic and luck playing less of a role necessarily and you kind of have an idea, I think, of what you're in for in terms of how much you're going to need to be thinking about something. Or how you're going to be thinking about what you're doing at the table. And I quite like that. What I will say is that I have also been caught short by expectations about what a worker placement game plays like.

00:35:13 Jacques: Because when we played *Flamecraft*, which is a beautiful, very cute game, it's very sweet. You know, the artwork is lovely and whatever. And I got completely trounced when we played it because I was so focused on getting resources that I didn't realize how easy it was to get resources.

00:35:38 Fayyaad: Yes, because at heart it's a race.

00:35:40 Jacques: I was focusing entirely on the wrong thing. And I think one of the ways that knowing a little bit more about worker placement games and sort of the different forms that they can take, has also helped me figure out where maybe I went wrong in *Eternal Winter* [again, *Endless Winter*]. So just realizing, “Okay, well, worker placement doesn't mean completely exclusive worker placement spots.”

00:36:07 Fayyaad: No. Correct.

00:36:09 Jacques: And sometimes it is actually necessary to take that bit of a hit in efficiency and go, “Well, this isn't the perfect move, but it is a necessary move.”

00:36:16 Fayyaad: Me telling you, "Yeah, it's worker placement," does give you a starting point for understanding some of the game's mechanics.

00:36:25 Jacques: Yeah. Yeah, it's a starting point rather than an explanation that's so simple that you can just skip all the other rule explanations. It gives you a starting place to then go, "Okay, well, what makes this worker placement game different? How does this worker placement game implement this sort of genre expectation?"

00:36:48 Jacques: So as a final sort of thought on how this jargon helps us, I did want to say that despite their differences, worker placement games, like I was just mentioning often share a set of basic assumptions and mechanics in this sense are a bit like movie genres: not every gangster movie is the same, but they share enough elements that you can start to recognize recurring elements as they're introduced.

And being familiar with the genre also makes it easier to spot when the movie or the board game or whatever departs from that convention. So the more comfortable that you are with the genre or the mechanic as a whole, the easier it becomes to see how a specific game, either the follows or subverts those conventions.

00:37:28 Fayyaad: Oh no, absolutely, it's exactly the same.

00:37:32 Jacques: And that's, that's where learning all this stuff really becomes fun, because every time we get a new worker placement game to the table, it deepens my enjoyment and my understanding of what's going on. Just as a reminder, we are recording a bunch of these podcast episodes ahead of time and then sharing it with our loved ones and people that we know and getting some listener feedback from them about some things and we're trying to figure out how to make this the best podcast we possibly can. We're very new to this. But it's fun. Like, I'm having a blast.

00:38:08 Fayyaad: And I'm loving this.

Conclusion

00:38:08 Fayyaad: Thank you for listening. You can follow us on various platforms and join the conversation on discord links in the episode description wherever you found at podcast, you can find articles and discussions about the terms used in this podcast over at node versus here at today. You can also find articles on the hosts of other subjects, including tabletop role-playing games, interviews, events, and how tos. Your hosts were Jacques van Heerden and Fayyaad Hendricks. Music, editing, and producer Fayyaad Hendricks. Executive producer Jacques van Heerden. Nerdverse Unshuffled is a Nerdverse Productions podcast.

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