



Nerdverse Unshuffled

Show Notes

Episode 6: Theme

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Episode summary and chapter markers

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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/>

Games

- ⊕ *Jenga* (1983) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/2452/jenga>
- ⊕ *On Mars* (2020) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/184267/mars>
- ⊕ *Chess* (1475) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/171/chess>
- ⊕ *Go* (-2200) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/188/go>
- ⊕ *Backgammon* (1630) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/2397/backgammon>
- ⊕ *Poker* (1810) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/1115/poker>

- ⊕ *The Gallerist* (2015) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/125153/gallerist>
- ⊕ *Scythe* (2016) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/169786/scythe>
- ⊕ *Res Arcana* (2019) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/262712/res-arcana>
- ⊕ *Modern Art* (1992) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/118/modern-art>
- ⊕ *Ginkgopolis* (2012) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/128271/ginkgopolis>
- ⊕ *Memoir '44* (2004) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/10630/memoir-44>
- ⊕ *Blitzkrieg!: World War Two in 20 Minutes* (2019)
<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/258210/blitzkrieg-world-war-two-20-minutes>

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

Transcript

Welcome and introduction

00:00:15 Jacques: Hello! And welcome to Nerdverse Unshuffled, a geeky podcast where we introduce you to the language of board games.

00:00:23 Jacques: So before we get stuck into discussing today's topic, we need to mention something we forgot to mention in the Components episode: Rule books! This very important, overlooked board game component didn't really get much love in our discussion, but we plan to make up for it by giving it its own episode. More on that soon!

00:00:46 Fayyaad: Yes, but: disclaimer. During the course of this episode, we may refer to jargon terms without explaining them. Do not fear! You can find definitions and discussions for any jargon terms we use in this episode – or any other episode – by going to Nerdverse.co.za and looking up the series of articles titled "Board Game Jargon Primer".

00:01:06 Jacques: And as we mentioned, each jargon term will get its own podcast episode. So check us out and keep an eye (or ear) out for future episodes. But now, on with the show!

A little light reading

00:01:23 Jacques: In this episode, we're going to discuss board game themes: how they're implemented, whether every game needs one, and what bearing the theme has on the game itself. So. As we do with every episode, let's start with the definition from the Board Game Jargon Primer. Take it away, Fayyaad!

00:01:41 Fayyaad: Thank you. A game's theme is the metanarrative around the game's setting. A well-developed, strong theme helps with immersion into the game, and helps us rationalise the game's mechanics.

A weak theme – or what we call a theme that's been "pasted on" – is when there's a disconnect between what you're doing in the game and the game's actual overarching theme. In other words, you could put just about any theme on the game and it still works for the purposes of understanding what you're doing.

Bonus definition: Metanarrative

00:02:11 Jacques: Okay, so that definition used a very big word: "metanarrative." What do we mean by that? Isn't that just a bigger word for the story of the game?

00:02:20 Fayyaad: No, not quite, no. The meta is anything that's the level above something, so the narrative of a board game is the story that takes place as the players are playing. You'll find that the theme is the larger narrative frame in which the story is going to be taking place, so you can consider that the metanarrative. Yeah? And if you want to go one level up from there, then the *meta* metanarrative would be us playing the game. But that's getting a little bit off topic, I think.

00:02:52 Jacques: Okay. So we have been discussing this and what you're saying, if I'm understanding you correctly, is that basically the narrative is: whatever story the game tells you in the rulebook or on the box. And the metanarrative is the way this story is embodied in the components, the mechanics, etc.?

00:03:06 Fayyaad: Yeah. No, that is it exactly. It's the... what goes on above just the text. It's more than just the world that we're playing in; it's how we're going to be using that world story to interact with the game.

So. Many. Themes!

00:03:28 Jacques: But let's look at a couple of examples of common or popular themes.

00:03:36 Fayyaad: Sure, that's a big one. I mean, where do we start with that? Because there are probably about as many board game themes as there are book and movie and TV show themes.

So you can start with the broad categories of the popular ones — fantasy, sci-fi, horror, which is also in itself just a very broad category because there's sub-subcategories of each of them. You have tons of games set in very different, real history eras that we've experienced. You've got futuristic games, you've got historical games, you've got stuff set in the here and now, very modern stuff. There are games about travel, exploration; nature, farming, and production; you name it, you've probably got a game about it.

00:04:26 Jacques: Yeah. We also have games about all kinds of things that people tend to obsess about, like trains, sports (like racing), the American west, pirates, spies, thieves, running a business, war and the military, and a whole lot more. And it is a bit of a free for all once it gets to theme, I mean...

00:04:42 Fayyaad: No, absolutely. And I mean that doesn't even touch on all the other official properties, the IP stuff that get board game adaptations. You know, the official books, the TV [shows], comics, video games — just about any pop culture thing you're going to find will most likely have a board game adaptation of it in some way or another. *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Marvel*, *Battlestar Galactica*, they're all over the place.

00:05:12 Jacques: Hmm, yeah. And some of them, like *Star Wars*, even have a whole range of them.

00:05:16 Fayyaad: Yeah, that's true.

00:05:22 Jacques: I'm relatively sure that you would be able to find a board game that, if not directly, is at least tangentially ...

00:05:25 Fayyaad: Tangentially related, you're right.

00:05:27 Jacques: A theme would be covered.

00:05:29 Fayyaad: Even if it doesn't exist now, most likely it will exist very soon in the future.

00:05:34 Jacques: Yeah. Well, I mean, if you think back to what we were talking about in the very first episode, with the sheer number of board games that are released every year...

A themeless game?

00:05:49 Jacques: Let's answer one of the questions that we asked at the beginning of the episode: Does every game need a theme?

00:05:52 Fayyaad: Absolutely not. Definitely no. You'll find that there are a lot of very popular games that have absolutely no theme whatsoever. So *Jenga* is a fantastic example of this. There is absolutely no pretence that what you're doing is doing anything except pulling blocks, and the blocks are just wooden blocks.

All you need to know about the game is that you know the goal is to remove a block on your turn. Don't topple the tower and put the block back on top after you've removed it. You don't need some metanarrative, or even a narrative, about the wizard who's constructed this evil tower that you're trying to dismantle block by block or whatever.

00:06:32 Jacques: Yeah.

00:06:34 Fayyaad: It doesn't need one.

00:06:40 Jacques: Yeah.

00:06:40 Fayyaad: Okay. I mean, if you put a theme on that game, it most likely it would have been a weak or pasted on theme at that point. A bad theme or weak theme can break the immersion of the game and you'll find that a lot of game reviewers will complain about weak theme quite strongly when they reviewed games.

00:07:01 Jacques: Yeah. And if you play a game with me where I'm, for example, struggling to figure out what the heck's going on, and the game has a theme and the theme isn't doing anything to help me figure out what's going on or making sense of what's happening in a turn, then I will get very huffy about it. Even though I am not actually a board game reviewer. But I will have an opinion about it.

But I'm glad we discussed metanarrative earlier, because it explains why I feel like I need a theme to help me make sense of what I'm doing as I play.

00:07:37 Fayyaad: Exactly. Just for myself. I don't care either way.

00:07:43 Jacques: Yeah, but speaking for myself, a theme really works best when the mechanics, components, and the art all work together...

00:07:51 Fayyaad: No, correct.

00:07:51 Jacques: ...to create some cohesive narrative experience that you can enjoy while you're playing the game, and that helps explain how everything that you're doing in the game works together to achieve a specific goal.

00:08:02 Fayyaad: No, you're right. I mean, I do suspect that the one reason that theme comes up so often in reviews is that when the game gets it right, it's almost invisible. This is what you *want* to happen. You don't want people to be thinking, "Oh, this is the theme of the game and this is why I'm playing." If

the theme is done well and the board game implementation is done well, the theme is invisible because you get absorbed into it. I think you know what they call the willing suspension of disbelief in reading is that you don't notice that's there. But when the theme or the link of the implementation is weak, you're going to be noticing everything about it.

One of the biggest complaints, for example, that some reviewers had with the game *On Mars* is that they couldn't make a thematic link between what they were doing and the game's theme. Some of it made complete sense, and some of it's like, "Okay, but *why?*"

00:09:10 Jacques: Yeah. I think that for me, something jumps out from the game in terms of like, wait: Okay, so everything else made sense, but now there's this extra thing that I have to do, but it seems like it's tacked on. It's not really integrated into the rest of what's going on. It's almost like almost...

00:09:30 Fayyaad: Almost pasted on? (Laughs)

00:09:32 Jacques: Pasted on, yes. But it's also as if the metanarrative that they've created for this game, this theme that they've created, wasn't enough to make it a good game. They had to add a whole bunch of extra mechanics in, because otherwise people were going to complain, "Ah, this game is too easy or this is too light," or whatever.

00:09:50 Fayyaad: Yeah, absolutely.

00:09:55 Jacques: And I generally prefer it when everything makes sense and does actually fit in.

But before we go any further, let's mention one type of game that we won't discuss in the rest of the episode. And these are examples of well-loved games with no theme at all. So those include Chess, Go, Backgammon, Poker, and Jenga. So a game that has no theme at all is often called an abstract game. But we'll cover that in its own episode.

What's in a theme?

00:10:20 Jacques: Why don't we just first discuss a handful of games and the extent to which theme matters in each of those?

00:10:30 Fayyaad: Okay, sure. So I mean the one of my favourite games that I like to think of when I think about a strong theme and a theme that makes thematic sense is *The Gallerist*, which is designed by my favourite designer I mention on almost every episode, Vital Lacerda.

The game has one of the strongest themes that I've seen in what would otherwise be a very abstract game. So just to explain: Players are taking the part of gallery owners and they're cultivating art by promoting specific artists. So they find these artists out in the gutters, where they're making a living in this one-roomed attic somewhere. And you as the gallery owner, this benevolent gallery owner, going out there, you're going, "Oh, my word. Such fantastic art coming from you. Why don't – in exchange for me promoting your art and making you big and famous – I will commission in future a piece from you at the price you're charging today, but after you've become famous."

And the artist with absolute adoration and thankfulness going, "Yes, yes, make me famous." And then you as a gallerist, then, gallery owner, you go out into the world, you do social media, you make them famous. You hype them up. And this artist suddenly starts rising up in the world. And you know, later on

in the game, you exact that promise from them and you say, "Right. You promised me a work at the lower price. I want it now please." And they go, "Perfect. You know you've made me famous. I will do it for you." And you know you're paying peanuts for this work from an artist that is now raking in millions.

And I've gotten a little bit overboard on that (laughs). But then you're going out into the world and you're saying, "Look, look! This artist is famous and I've got works from them. You want to buy this." And people walk into your gallery and go, "Yes. We want to buy this artwork," and they walk out of your gallery with artwork. That's fantastic.

00:12:49 Jacques: Yeah.

00:12:50 Fayyaad: I love the game so much, because you are... At least I could see the strong link between this theme and this story, this metanarrative that came out to me as I was playing. It's like, it made sense to me, you know? You've taken this artwork by this now famous artist, and it's either going up in your gallery and you're going to get a lot of points at the end of the game or you're selling it to either local or international markets and, you know, rinse, repeat, don't get paint in your eyes, I suppose. But I mean, you know what: for the most part, I could wax lyrical at length about Lacerda's games, because the themes in his games tend to be very strongly linked to the mechanics that are thrown in. But like I mentioned *On Mars*, sometimes it falls apart, but I can still see where it's coming from for the most part.

00:13:45 Jacques: Another example that you discussed in the book is *Scythe* by Jamey Stegmaier.

00:13:48 Fayyaad: Yes, no. It's got a fantastically strong theme. And in fact the game sold well, majority because of its theme, right? The theme isn't necessarily 100% congruent with the gameplay. The game is sold strongly on the basis of this fantastic and beautiful artwork by Jakub Rozalski and it poses this question: What if there were these massive, gigantic mechs roaming around the European countryside around World War One?

The artwork has got these beautiful, gigantic mechs outfitted to the nines with artillery and guns, walking on their legs. Beautiful, right? And then the game, you're mostly harvesting resources. You're getting oil, you're getting wheat. And you're using these mechs to mostly protect your workers. There's very little mech-to-mech combat. And in any given game of *Scythe*, you're lucky to see maybe three, maybe four actual battles the entire game. But because the battles are not actually what the game is really about, the theme lies a little? Well, plays fast and loose with the truth. It's very, very loose.

00:15:14 Jacques: Yeah, definitely if you look at the box art for that game, you will have a very different idea of what's going to happen once you... Especially once you take those little minis of the mechs out of the box and you put them on the board.... You'll have a very different expectation of what's going to happen than what necessarily will transpire in the game. And if you go too heavy on the combat side of it, you are going to lose the game.

00:15:44 Fayyaad: Yes.

00:15:45 Jacques: You will not have a successful game if you focus on that side of it.

Let's look at the complete opposite, so a game where the theme is entirely incidental.

00:15:59 Fayyaad: One of my favourite examples of a game where the theme is pasted on is Tom Lehmann's *Res Arcana*. The theme tells you it's this game about these magicians battling it out for power, trying to get control of these places of power on the game [board], but there's not much more to it than that, right? It's resource managing that you've got to get bits and pieces here, you've got to spend them there. You could literally replace this game's [theme] with just about any other theme, right, and it's still going to work.

00:16:33 Jacques: Yeah.

00:16:34 Fayyaad: And there's nothing wrong with it. There really isn't anything wrong with the mechanics and theme's interaction, but a stronger theme, a better thematic tie between what you're doing and what you're seeing would have made the game so much more immersive.

00:16:54 Jacques: So let's get back to *The Gallerist* because I wanted to chat to you about how the theme and the mechanics work together in that game. So how does all of what you were telling us about the game actually look on the board itself? How do the art, the components, and mechanics bring the theme to life?

00:17:15 Fayyaad: So the game is... It's surprisingly minimalistic in terms of the board itself, until you start looking closely at things. There's this beautiful representation of the four galleries in the square. There's the central area, the plaza, where your meeples gather. And there's a city off in the distance, and that's where you can buy new contracts. There's one side that looks like it's got some spaces for where you do the international selling. The actual pieces of art are beautiful, beautiful art that is commissioned especially for the game, right?

00:17:58 Jacques: Oh nice!

00:18:00 Fayyaad: All of the artwork pieces are actually pieces of art in their own right that I actually wouldn't mind hanging on my walls if I had them. They are beautiful.

And the game... Your own personal play area, in front of you, looks like the inside of a gallery. So when you're putting a piece of art in your own gallery, it looks like you're actually hanging that up on the wall. It's really cool.

00:18:25 Jacques: Hmm. Yeah. Just so one of the reasons I wanted to give listeners a little bit of an idea of what it actually looks like on the table is that reading your description of *The Gallerist* again while working on the notes for this episode, I was reminded of *Modern Art*, which is another game with a very similar theme, which we discussed in the Creators episode. So essentially the objective in both games is the same. You pick an artist, you increase their fame and thereby the price of their art, and then sell them to make money and win the game.

00:18:47 Fayyaad: Yeah.

00:18:59 Jacques: But *Modern Art* has completely different components and mechanics. It's quintessentially a game about auctions. So I mean, even though *Modern Art* also has you buying artwork for your gallery, the game plays completely differently.

00:19:15 Fayyaad: But you know what? Let's pause there for a break and we'll be back right after this.

00:19:46 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 can 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 were we talking about?)

A matter of taste

Jacques: Welcome back! So how important is it for a game to have a good theme? Fortunately, you don't need a theme to put a collection of mechanics together into a cohesive game. If you are going to have a theme in your game, though, you can be pretty sure that people will have an opinion about how well you've implemented it.

Each of us has very different preferences in terms of theme, so I for one I wouldn't say that I *require* a strong theme. But it's a big selling point: it's a big selling point for when I'm buying games, or when you're trying to convince me to play a game or try a new game out. If it's got a strong theme, and especially if it's a horror theme, I will be quite.... I mean, my arm becomes increasingly bendable. My rubber arm.

00:21:24 Fayyaad: Although I find of late that you're a bit more amenable to games with themes that are weaker or not as strong.

00:21:34 Jacques: What I really have a problem with is when I'm specifically looking forward to the theme and the theme sounds really cool or there's a part of the theme that really sort of grabs me and I'm really looking forward to getting stuck in.

00:21:47 Fayyaad: Yeah.

00:21:52 Jacques: If the theme is... If it disappoints me. If the execution of the theme disappoints me, I'm more likely to be annoyed and irritable than if a game has a theme that doesn't really matter too much. Like *Res Arcana*, I didn't really find the theme's incidental nature to be a problem.

00:22:15 Fayyaad: The theme didn't help or hinder the game. It was *there*, but it certainly didn't push the metanarrative any further. I mean, personally I find I'm quite theme agnostic. I don't care too much if the theme is weak or strong. I care more about whether the mechanics are weak or strong.

00:22:33 Jacques: Hmm. Yeah.

00:22:39 Fayyaad: You know, going back to that discussion earlier of *On Mars*.

00:22:44 Jacques: Mmm.

00:22:45 Fayyaad: I didn't have a problem with the fact that some of the mechanics didn't seem to make much sense from a metanarrative perspective because the rest of it, you know, made enough sense that I could hand wave it. And it's like, fine. I can give it a pass because the rest of it is okay and the rest of the game was actually a lot of fun.

Another game with a weak theme, but I love the mechanics, is *Ginkgopolis*, but we'll talk about that one a bit later on. What I do find is that any games that have World War One or World War Two themes built on it, I almost have this mental block against it, no matter how good the game actually is. It's like one of the reasons I've not had any interest in playing *Memoir '44* is because I'm not interested in... I never found any glory in World War One or Two, right? But that said, I do have a game called *Blitzkrieg!: World War Two in 20 Minutes*. And theme aside, the game is a lot of fun. But I do have that mental block.

00:24:03 Jacques: Yeah. I think that's maybe something we can ask our listeners, what they experience. Because I'd actually be really interested to know how important themes are to people generally. I think for me, just knowing how important theme is for me, how easy it is to seduce me with a good theme, I kind of have to be careful. I can't just buy every horror game. Just because the theme is good doesn't mean I'm going to like it. You know, the gameplay might not be my thing. I might not enjoy it at all.

I don't know if I would go as far as to try and make a claim of when theme really came into its own as a component of board games or as an element of board games?

00:24:57 Fayyaad: You know, *Chess* is very lightly themed. I mean it is a war game, right? But I mean, that's got a theme, kind of.

00:25:10 Jacques: Yeah, I mean I suppose basically what I'm saying is, I don't feel confident that we can be the arbiters of the first game with a proper theme. But I do think it's something that's become more and more obvious and more called out in games now, being developed now. Whether that's a good thing or a bad thing, you will probably have an opinion about it.

How does this jargon help us?

00:25:41 Fayyaad: But I think we should move on.

00:25:43 Jacques: Yes, I think it's about the point now where we kind of need to wrap up the episode.

00:25:480 Fayyaad: Yeah.

00:25:50 Jacques: And we have discussed this tangentially already, but we like to end the episode by just looking at how this jargon helps us. So primarily I would suggest that you decide for yourself how important a strong theme is to you and if so, which themes do you really enjoy? And just keep that in mind when you watch or read board game reviews. Then also just keep in mind that just because someone likes a particular theme doesn't mean you have to agree.

00:26:25 Fayyaad: That's correct.

00:26:28 Jacques: Just because it's the new hot thing, or everyone is suddenly making a nature-based game, or everyone's raving about this stuff... If doesn't do it for you, it's fine. Don't worry about it. And if a strong theme isn't high on your list of requirements for a new game, it's also just good to know that when you're evaluating which games are worth getting.

It's also worth keeping in mind when you're watching or reading or listening to a board game review. If it isn't a big issue for you, good for you! So I think it's basically just... It's not so much in the sense that theme is necessarily a very difficult jargon term to understand, but it is something to just decide for

yourself how important it is, and how it can help — how knowing that information can kind of help you make choices as a consumer.

00:27:28 Fayyaad: Yeah.

[Music]

Conclusion

00:27:32 Jacques: 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 this podcast.

You can find articles and discussions about the terms used in this podcast over at nerdverse.co.za. You can also find articles on a host of other subjects, including tabletop roleplaying games, interviews, events, and how tos.

Your hosts were Jacques van Heerden and Fayyaad Hendricks. Music, editing, producer: Fayyaad Hendricks. Executive producer: Jacques van Heerden. Unshuffled is a Nerdverse Productions podcast.

Credits

Hosts: Jacques van Heerden and Fayyaad Hendricks

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