



Nerdverse Unshuffled

Show Notes

Episode 8: Time in board games, part 2 - Rounds and phases

19 May 2024

Episode summary and chapter markers

In the first part of this two-part episode, Fayaad and Jacques discuss three fundamental terms for tracking time in board games - rounds, turns, and actions.

What *exactly* is the difference between these terms? Do they even mean different things, or are they all just different words for the same thing? Fear not! Things may get tricky and complicated, but there are ways to figure out what's happening, and when. By the end of these episodes, you'll be able to hold your own in conversation with even seasoned gamers. And more importantly, remember what to do and when.

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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/>
- ⊕ "Time in board games", Board Game Jargon Primer Part 9 <https://www.nerdverse.co.za/everything/board-game-jargon-primer-part-9/#time-in-board-games>

Games

- ⊕ *Scythe* (2016) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/169786/scythe>
- ⊕ *Imperial Settlers: Empires of the North* (2019) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/270844/imperial-settlers-empires-of-the-north>
- ⊕ *7 Wonders* (2010) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/68448/7-wonders>
- ⊕ *Sushi Go!* (2013) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/133473/sushi-go>
- ⊕ *Alien Frontiers* (2010) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/48726/alien-frontiers>
- ⊕ *Pit* (1903) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/140/pit>
- ⊕ *Ticket to Ride* (2004) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/9209/ticket-to-ride>
- ⊕ *Clank!: A Deck-Building Adventure* (2016) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/201808/clank-a-deck-building-adventure>
- ⊕ *Clank! In! Space!: A Deck-Building Adventure* (2017) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/233371/clank-in-space-a-deck-building-adventure>
- ⊕ *Fantastiqua: The Rucksack Edition* (2012) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/125046/fantastiqua-the-rucksack-edition>
- ⊕ *Great Western Trail* (2016) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/193738/great-western-trail>
- ⊕ *On Mars* (2020) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/184267/on-mars>
- ⊕ *Arkham Horror* (2005) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/15987/arkham-horror>
- ⊕ *Chutes and Ladders* (-200) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/5432/chutes-and-ladders>
- ⊕ *Ludo (AKA Pachisi)* (400) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/2136/pachisi>
- ⊕ *Zombie Dice* (2010) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/62871/zombie-dice>
- ⊕ *Rory's Story Cubes* (2005) <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/20545/rorys-story-cubes>

Designers

- ⊕ Vital Lacerda, <https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgamedesigner/12396/vital-lacerda>

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 and introduction

00:00:15 Jacques: Hello and welcome to Nerdverse Unshuffled, a podcast where we discuss the language people use when they talk about board games. We are your hosts, Jacques van Heerden and Fayyaad Hendricks.

00:00:29 Fayyaad: Have you ever tried to learn a new game and wondered, what on earth do they mean by rounds, turns, and actions? If you've ever felt confused about whether these means different things, or if they're just different words with the same thing, well, this is the episode for you. In this episode, we are discussing time keeping in board games. The term is used to explain when different things happen in board games and when to track what players do over the course of the game.

00:00:53 Jacques: Yeah. So the first thing to note about the concept of time in board games is that it actually covers several related terms. So each of these terms actually deserves to be discussed at some length, and we're going to try to do that as much as possible in this episode. But we're also trying to balance out just having a reasonable amount of time and keeping the episodes to a place where you can actually listen to it in one big section.

We will mention a few examples and few exceptions throughout the course of this, but we are going to basically have to split this into two episodes, because there's just too much to cover. I mean we've significantly expanded this entry since the original publication. And I mean there... It's like the more you look into this, the more complexity you can find in how games use these terms because there is no...

00:01:53 Fayyaad: Oh yeah.

00:01:55 Jacques: ...there's no sort of Academy of Board Game Terminology that insists on everybody using the same words.

00:02:05 Fayyaad: But with that, let's get into the definitions.

What is a round?

00:02:08 Jacques: Yeah. So the first time-related term we're going to be looking at is *rounds*. So as always we're going to just read from the book and then we will discuss in a bit of depth. So take it away, Fayyaad.

00:02:23 Fayyaad: OK, so there are three main variations of what board game designers consider a single round. The first one is a full iteration of the game. Everyone has — every player has had a single turn until gameplay has cycled through every player at least once. Note that that “at least” is important. And the simplest and most common round is from the starting player, and it goes clockwise around the table. Once everyone, every player's had a single turn to go, that's one round. Some game mechanics can reverse this mid game or dictate that the play order follows some sort of turn order track on the game board. But it does vary from game to game.

The second variation is a complete run through a set of phases, and each phase each player could have multiple turns.

And the third one is one full depletion of a set of something — could be cards, workers, points, whatever it is — or any similar mechanic that indicates that your components need to be replenished. And you find that this common in games where the previous definition of rounds where we spoke earlier doesn't make enough sense, or where those definitions are too tiny, too discrete a unit for the game that we're talking about.

00:03:41 Jacques: Okay.

00:03:42 Fayyaad: That's a lot..

00:03:44 Jacques: Yeah, that is a lot. I mean, so that's a lot of definitions for a single term, and we've only just started. So I'm I wasn't kidding when I said at the beginning that this is a complex — it's not even just in one term. It's like a complex of terms, you know. You will have seen a lot of terms being used in those definitions that we'll have to go into more detail later on in this episode. So we'll get to what a turn is in part one. And then I think we'll get to phases in Part 2.

00:04:19 Fayyaad: Yeah. I think so.

00:04:20 Jacques: But in the course of your definition so far you mentioned this idea of a start player. Now the term seems pretty self-explanatory, but can we just discuss that quickly?

00:04:31 Fayyaad: Yeah, sure. So a lot of games ask you to remember or identify who the player was who started the game, who took the first turn of the game. Usually for the sake of fairness, a lot of games specify that when we reach the point at which the game is ending or has ended, every other player needs to finish the round. And sometimes all the players, including the start player, has an additional round. It depends on the game. And other games, they don't care who the start player is; you know, as soon as the game is identified as having ended, the game ends. That's it. There's nothing more to do or say.

00:05:11 Jacques: Yeah, yeah. I mean some games do end quite abruptly, I think.

00:05:17 Fayyaad: *Scythe*, for example, yeah.

00:05:18 Jacques: *Scythe* for example. And then we also played a game this weekend where it also sort of just... Okay, so the one person does this and then the game ends. Oh, it was *Imperial Settlers: Empires of the North*, where once somebody gets to 25 points, that's it — that's the end of the game.

00:05:38 Fayyaad: That's it. Exactly. Yes.

00:05:40 Jacques: Nothing else happens. You're done. You know, put a stick, a fork in it. So, I mean that's quite that's quite fun, although it can be quite surprising if you're not paying attention to what everybody else is doing.

00:05:52 Fayyaad: Exactly. Which is why...

00:05:53 Jacques: Yeah, you need to be very careful with games like that. I think also *Scythe* I lost quite decisively the first time I played it, specifically because I wasn't keeping track of like, "Wait, wait, wait. So when does is game ending?" You know: "Oh, wait. Oh no, I haven't managed to do anything I planned to do about... The game's done, you've missed your chance, buddy."

00:06:21 Fayyaad: We're probably going to cut this bit from the episode, but with *Scythe* what I found that if someone has landed their third star for getting towards victory, the game is two or three rounds from over. So it's like you better be sure that you got your ducks in there at that point anyway.

00:06:35 Jacques: Yeah. No. Yeah, no, that's exactly, actually what happened. But yeah, let's not get into too much detail for particular games, but okay.

So just back to the idea of a round what do you mean, what *exactly* do you mean when you say "one full depletion of components"? Why is that a good way of telling when a round has ended?

00:06:58 Fayyaad: I think the best way to illustrate that is by example. And one of the best examples I've got is with the game *7 Wonders*, right? Which takes place over three ages of humanity in terms of inventing and building things. But each age is a small deck of cards, right? And because there's no concept of start player — all players are playing simultaneously — the idea of a round doesn't make sense until you say, "Okay, you know when all the cards are finished for one age, that's when you know that round has finished because it was playing simultaneously."

00:07:40 Jacques: Okay, okay.

00:07:42 Fayyaad: Yeah. So the way that *7 Wonders* works — because you look at your hand of cards and you take one out and you pass that entire hand along to the next player. That's what we mean by one full

depletion because then they say, "Okay, by the end of that one, once all the cards are out the hands, the round is over."

00:08:01 Jacques: OK. So I mean that that I suppose it does actually make sense in terms of tracking the progress of the game. So it's either, you know, we've got this many players around the table and each of these players has had this many rounds. I mean they've all participated in a certain number of rounds and now the game is finished versus...

00:08:23 Fayyaad: Yes, exactly.

00:08:31 Jacques: OK. So here's a pile of components and we're going to track, you know, the progress of the game by just going like, OK, so once these are gone, that's the equivalent of having gone around the table a certain number of times, yeah. OK.

00:08:38 Fayyaad: Yeah, several times, exactly.

00:08:40 Jacques: So I mean, it does kind of make sense in terms of why it's called a round.

00:08:45 Fayyaad: Yeah.

00:08:45 Jacques: And I suppose the other question to ask is: Do all games have rounds?

00:08:51 Fayyaad: No, they don't. I think that the only commonality between all games is that at least all players will hopefully at some point get a turn, but everything else is up in the air. You know, even when it comes down to terms, you may not even get actions. It could be your turn but you can't do anything. But yeah, no short answer: no, all games do not have rounds.

I'll give an example of *Sushi Go*, for example.

00:09:24 Jacques: Mm-hmm..

00:09:24 Fayyaad: Right. You can play the game and everyone's taking turns. It's like *7 Wonders* in that everyone is receiving a hand of cards from the previous player and then passing on that — taking one out, passing the hand of cards to the next player.

00:09:37 Jacques: Okay.

00:09:39 Fayyaad: But everyone's playing simultaneously. There's no concept of a round.

00:09:43 Jacques: Okay. Right, yeah.

00:09:44 Fayyaad: So I think you'll find, especially in games where the play is happening simultaneously, the concept of a round doesn't make sense. The game *Alien Frontiers* also doesn't have the concept of a round just because everyone... Once the game starts, it just goes around and around and around. There's no need to identify who the start player was, how many rounds you played and so on. It's like, yeah, everyone just takes their turn around the table until the game is over.

00:10:14 Jacques: And then obviously, you know just talking about start player: the start player can change between rounds as well and then that's also an added little bit of complexity.

What is a turn?

00:10:25 Jacques: But that does bring us nicely to the question or the term *turns*. So what do how do we define a turn?

00:10:35 Fayyaad: OK. So a turn, which you'll see sometimes being called an action turn, is generally taken to mean the set of actions of a single player.

00:10:44 Fayyaad: Yeah. And now we're going to go into more variation on things. It may change depending on the phase that you're in, but there are two main types of turns, right. So you've got sequential turns where every player takes one turn one after the other, and it goes on to every...

00:10:51 Jacques: Mm-hmm.

00:11:04 Fayyaad: Or you can have simultaneous times where players all act at the same time. So like I mentioned earlier, *Sushi Go* or *7 Wonders*. Those are...

00:11:12 Jacques: Yeah.

00:11:13 Fayyaad: ...simultaneous. Most games we know of are sequential.

00:11:17 Jacques: Yeah, because it's easier to keep track, I think. Yeah. I mean, there are... I mean, like we said at the beginning, we are going to be looking at some exceptions and games — either things that the game does or that you can do separately to mess with this a little bit.

The question of sequential versus simultaneous, I mean that's an interesting aspect to keep track of or to take note of when you're looking at a game, right, because those are very... those can be very different experiences. Like the one is sort of — it feels a lot more organised and maybe slightly less chaotic.

00:12:05 Fayyaad: Yeah. Yeah. So I mean simultaneous turns are either the game where it's full chaos and just things are happening, or your actions affect others so little that it doesn't matter what you're doing. For example, *Sushi Go*, where all you're doing is receiving a set of cards and so on. You pick one out and you pass what's left to the next player.

00:12:31 Jacques: Yeah. Actually on that subject, let me ask you this question quickly and we can decide, you know, what we think of this: But if you look at a game like *Pit*, [where] you're doing that simultaneous sort of cross bidding and everyone's bidding at the same time and there's lots of shouting and like "Three!" and "Two!" and "4! 2! 3! 1!" There's this sort of loud, boisterous, sort of simultaneous conversation going on. Would that count as a turn? Or I can't remember what they used, what phrase they use for that.

00:13:10 Fayyaad: This is a game that doesn't have turns, it's got rounds.

00:13:15 Jacques: Okay. So that's an example of a game with rounds not turns, okay.

00:13:20 Fayyaad: Yeah, a fantastic example.

00:13:22 Jacques: Yeah, it's a lovely game. It is very much chaos. If chaos is your thing, you should check out *Pit*. It's a very old game from 1903, but it's beautiful. It's so much fun.

00:13:37 Fayyaad: Yeah. And I mean for a game that old, it's still solid.

00:13:39 Jacques: Yeah. I mean, definitely if you can embrace the sort of chaos of all that simultaneous action going on at the same time, then you're going to be having a good time.

What are actions?

00:13:52 Jacques: So then I think the next one is actions, and that's the simplest one that we're looking at, the most sort of basic one thus far.

00:14:02 Fayyaad: Yes, that is the simplest, most basic thing. So it's literally one thing a player can do, right? In a lot of games, your action could be your entire turn. It's literally just what you do.

00:14:17 Fayyaad: So you look at for example, *Ticket to Ride*, you've got a bunch of things you can do on your turn, but you only take one of them, right? So your actions are literally: take cards, play cards, play trains.

00:14:36 Jacques: Hmm.

00:14:37 Fayyaad: In other games, what you've got is it's not just the one action. You can do a whole bunch of them; up to either a number of them, up to a certain allocation, up to... it varies from game to game.

00:14:57 Jacques: Yeah.

00:14:59 Fayyaad: But, you take a look at a game like *Clank* or *Clank in Space*, right? Your actions are limited by what cards you've got in your hand. So you could do up to 5, 6, 12 actions depending on how, on what you've managed to do with your with your cards, because some cards will pull more cards into hand, giving you more actions to do.

00:15:07 Jacques: Hmm.

00:15:19 Fayyaad: So that is a game where one action isn't going to end your turn, but in a lot of simpler games, yeah, one action will end your turn.

00:15:30 Jacques: And then I think another good example we can maybe just talk through in this sense is another game we played yesterday, which is *Fantastika*. So in that case there are some actions you can take where you've just got the one action.

00:15:43 Fayyaad: Yeah.

00:15:51 Jacques: And then you've also got a bunch of free actions you can do pretty much at any time. And then there's a specific action you can take that consists of several parts.

00:15:51 Fayyaad: Yes.

00:16:01 Jacques: And then there's another one where your turn basically consists of you taking one action (quote unquote), but that action actually consists of doing the same thing a number of times. You're just like repeating it.

00:16:14 Fayyaad: Exactly. Yeah, yeah.

How can you tell the difference?

00:16:20 Jacques: So I mean, this can get very complicated and very confusing very quickly. But I thought... Let's just recap very, very quickly. So just in terms of turns, actions, and rounds, what's the hierarchy there? Like what, how do those three things fit together?

00:16:33 Fayyaad: Okay, so you have one action or many actions inside a turn, right? And then many turns — one per player, usually, inside a round. And then X amount of rounds inside the entire game.

00:16:50 Jacques: Okay. Right. Okay. I mean, that's just as a way for people to keep track, or keep score at this point of where we are and what and how any of this stuff fits together. I think that for me, kind of, I find that a very useful framework to keep in mind. It's like how, wait, wait, where...

00:17:13 Fayyaad: How they all fit together.

00:17:13 Jacques: Yeah. Like, which thing comes first.

00:17:17 Fayyaad: Although I wanted to point out, I wanted say to you: probably a good place to point out what you spoke about earlier: free actions, right?

00:17:26 Jacques: Okay.

00:17:28 Fayyaad: And a lot of games have got all sorts of different names depending on the game. Because we recently played *Great Western Trail*,

00:17:33 Jacques: Oh yeah. Also yesterday.

00:17:43 Fayyaad: Also yesterday. And there is that concept of those free actions, kind of, in that if you can't do anything else, there are those double actions you can do on the side of your board.

00:17:56 Jacques: Yeah.

00:17:58 Fayyaad: But you look at a game like *Fantastika*, it calls them free actions. It's like literally actions that you can take at any time in your turn, right? So they don't count towards your specified number of actions for the round, so it doesn't count towards your — in some games — the single action that you've got per round.

00:18:21 Fayyaad: You look at Lacerda games. He calls them executive actions, and they aren't necessarily free, but they come as a consequence of one or... In some games they are free. It really just depends on the game; it gets complicated. But we'll get back to the Lacerda thing when we talk maybe in the second episode, when we talk about reactions.

00:18:48 Jacques: Yes.

00:18:49 Fayyaad: That's when I wanna talk about executive actions, because that is a lot of where executive actions come from. But like in *On Mars*, you can do executive actions. You have to pay for it, to do extra actions, but they don't count towards your standard actions of that round. It gets complicated.

00:19:07 Jacques: Yeah, yeah, I mean it does take experience to keep track of all these things, but also I think even experienced gamers get confused when they're using these terms. And I think very few people could actually give you a proper definition of what any of this stuff means, so I think it's...

00:19:28 Fayyaad: Because the definitions change so much.

00:19:31 Jacques: I think that in my experience, it's been helpful to know that, look, there are all these different terms and they all do actually mean different things. And yeah, you know... I think I would like to talk about one of my favourite examples of a complex way of managing actions and turns, which is *Arkham Horror*, second edition.

00:19:54 Jacques: Yeah. So like that game is famous for confusing people when they're playing it because they can't keep track of the different terms, some of which we haven't discussed yet. So I'm not going to get into too much detail at this point, but we will get back to that, I think.

00:20:12 Fayyaad: I mean, if it is any consolation to anyone that's confused by *Arkham Horror*, the fact that there's so many flow charts available on the BoardGameGeek website...

00:20:21 Jacques: Yes.

00:20:23 Fayyaad: ... is a testament to how complicated it is and probably shouldn't be.

00:20:28 Jacques: Yes. Yeah, I mean it should be relatively simple. Again it should be relatively simple depending on the game. And I think some games make it easier for you to keep track of what exactly happens at different points, and kind of just streamlining that.

00:20:49 Jacques: But talking about flow charts, I mean we had to add a flow chart in the book to explain how all these things fit together. So you know, flow charts are your friend. I'm a big fan.

Actions & choices

00:21:00 Jacques: I mean, let's just look at actions in a little bit of detail. So I mean it does seem like it's a fundamental part of what defines a game, right?

00:21:12 Fayyaad: Yeah, it is. It literally is the core of any game. It's literally it drives the game from turn to turn.

00:21:20 Jacques: Yeah.

00:21:22 Fayyaad: It is like the atom of the game, in that every action implies a decision and a deliberate choice to do that action, which is why everyone hates *Snakes and Ladders* as a game lacking any decent decision making. You could put the game on autopilot, take the players away, and because there's no decision-making, the game plays itself and the outcome is almost exactly the same.

00:21:51 Jacques: I mean, it's also a little bit unfair to *Snakes and Ladders* because we've discussed this separately...

00:21:57 Fayyaad: It was made as a life lesson.

00:21:59 Jacques: Yeah, it's not really a game. It's trying to teach you something, or it's trying to express a philosophy, but that doesn't make it a great board game. It makes it a very bad board game.

00:22:11 Fayyaad: No, it doesn't, but it does bring you why *Ludo*, for example, or *Parcheesi* in some places in the world, is a superior game to *Snakes and Ladders*, right? It's because you have some — even though you're going with the dice — there is a decision to make: which of these four pieces are you moving around the board? It makes a difference.

00:22:31 Jacques: So I mean, even in a very simple game, *Zombie Dice*, so even in that game, your action is basically: you roll the dice and then you decide: Am I going to keep rolling?

00:22:45 Fayyaad: And that's your decision, right? That's your action is...

00:22:47 Jacques: That's where the decision lies. There's no more complex thing that happens.

00:22:53 Fayyaad: No, absolutely. It doesn't need to be, right? But that — just that making a choice is exactly what makes... I mean, let's look at an even simpler game than that, and you can barely call it a game, is *Rory's Story Cubes*.

00:23:11 Jacques: Oh, right.

00:23:12 Fayyaad: And it's dice with pictures on them, right? And you roll these dice and you have to make a story out of what's going on in the pictures. It's still that decision: Which order do I put the pictures? Which, you know, how do I connect...? So it's a pure imagination so but it is still a decision you have to make. It's still the discrete thing I have to do so in that game.

00:23:36 Jacques: In that case, because I haven't actually played *Rory's Story Cubes* the way that the way that you're supposed to, I've just used them as props in in other games. But in terms of *Rory's Story Cubes*: do they have turns and rounds?

00:23:54 Fayyaad: No; you can if you want, but there's no score keeping. There's no... When I say it barely counts as a game, I mean that quite literally, because a game is defined by the boundaries of: it starts and ends. There is a definite start, there's a definite end to it, you know, even if that end is hyper nebulous. The fact that we have a condition for what we can call the end of the game makes it a game. Which is why, as much as I hate to say this, *Snakes and Ladders* still counts as a game in this regard because it has an end: as someone reaches the 100 space they've won, right?

00:24:31 Jacques: Yeah.

00:24:33 Fayyaad: *Rory's Story Cubes*, there's no end. You just decide, "Ah, we're done telling stories for today," and leave it.

00:24:39 Jacques: Yeah, fair enough. Speaking of ending things and leaving things, that is actually where we're going to leave this episode. We are going to get back to the other parts of this definition, so we're going to be looking at phases. We're also going to be looking at reactions, and we're going to be looking at some more exceptions and some more peculiarities of how different board games have used these terms.

Conclusion

00:25:18 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.

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