A FATHER AND SON EXPERIENCE IN GLOOMHAVEN

PAUL GESTWICKI & ALEXANDER GESTWICKI

INTRODUCTION

Gloomhaven (Childres 2017) is a notable board game for many reasons. It is an ambitious design that combines elements of tactical miniature combat, resource management, legacy gameplay, and branching narrative in a unique fantasy setting. From a production perspective, it involves hundreds of cards, sealed boxes, permanent stickers, and roughly 22 pounds of cardboard. It is only the second game published by Cephalofair Games founder Isaac Childres, whose first Kickstarter campaign for the game raised $386,104 and whose second printing earned more than ten times that amount (Childres, 2015, 2017). *Gloomhaven* rocketed to the top position in the overall, thematic, and strategy categories on hobbyist site Board Game Geek (BGG) where it remains as of this writing; according to BGG administrator Scott Alden, this top ranking has only changed six times since its founding in 2000 (Alden, 2017). We believe that this means it is a game that deserves to be well played.

We, the authors, are a father and son pair. Paul is 42 years old, a Computer Science Professor, a lifetime gamer, and a married

father of four sons. Alex is the eldest of these boys, 12 years old, a Boy Scout, and an avid reader. We have played games together for practically all of Alex's life, starting with simple games such as *The Bird Game* (Wernhard, 1974) and *Reiner Knizia's Amazing Flea Circus* (Knizia 2003) and leading up to some of our more complex current favorites, *Mage Knight Board Game* (Chvátil, 2011), *Runebound* (Litzsinger, 2015), and *Charterstone* (Stegmeier, 2017). Paul began using BGG to log all of his plays in January 2016; between January 2016 and December 2018, we logged 937 board game plays together. We started playing *Gloomhaven* in February 2018, and we have logged 63 plays since then, a count that includes all attempts at scenarios, not just the number of sessions.

A note for readers who have not yet played *Gloomhaven*: this is a spoiler-free article. The only information shared that one would not know from reading the game's rules is a summary of the introduction to the first scenario and a brief discussion of a specific non-unique monster's special abilities.

Game Systems and Theme

It is important to have an overview of the fundamental systems of *Gloomhaven* in order to contextualize our play experience. *Gloomhaven* is a relatively complex game as evidenced by its 52-page rulebook and 122-page scenario book. Interested readers can reference the rules online or view one of many rules explanations available on the Internet.

Gloomhaven is a fantasy adventure game set in an expansive, changing world. Each player controls a character, but these are neither stereotypical heroes nor conventional Tolkienesque orcs and elves. Instead, the characters are loosely affiliated mercenaries, each with their own motivation for adventure. The opening scenario establishes that the characters came to the eponymous city of Gloomhaven just looking to make enough

coin to buy a meal. The game is designed to focus on the stories of these characters in a persistent world: players may come and go, and characters will retire, but the changes to the world are permanent, enacted by writing on game components, placing stickers on cards and the map, and breaking the seals on secret game content.

Gloomhaven plays out over two overlapping games: the scenario game and the campaign game. During an individual scenario, one to four players each control a character in a tactical miniatures game. Modular boards are laid out in accordance with the instructions of the Scenario Book, and these boards are populated with enemies, traps, and treasures. Each scenario specifies the players' victory condition, such as defeating a specific enemy, clearing the board of enemies, or obtaining a particular treasure. The difficulty of each scenario is based on the levels of the characters attempting it, and players can optionally raise or lower the difficulty with concomitant increases or decreases in rewards.

Each player has a set of cards that are particular to their character's class, and the player chooses a subset of these for use in a particular scenario. Each card has two abilities, a "top" and a "bottom" ability, the top often being combat-related and the bottom being movement-related. On a player's turn, he or she plays two cards—one for its top ability and one for its bottom. The starting hand contains between eight and twelve cards (depending on the character class), and so after just a few turns, players have to "rest" to regain used cards. Some cards have powerful effects that remove the card from the scenario irrevocably, and each time a player rests they must also eliminate a card. Hence, the total cards available to a player is always diminishing, and a player is eliminated when they are out of cards.

Most of the effort in a scenario is focused on moving around

the map and attacking enemies. Each attack has a basic strength that is modified by flipping a card from the corresponding attack modifier deck. This is a deck of small cards that has modifiers ranging from -2 to +2; each player has their own attack modifier deck, and there is another that is shared by all enemy attacks.

The campaign game describes the rules for how players choose characters, level them up, purchase equipment, select scenarios, unlock new characters, encounter interactive narrative events in the city and the wilderness, and, crucially, retire their characters. Each character has a Personal Quest that defines a condition by which that character retires, meaning that its player must start a new character to continue the campaign. This fits well into *Gloomhaven's* grim setting: the characters are not archetypal fantasy heroes but individuals with their own motivations for joining an adventurer's guild.

The campaign includes many aspects of "legacy" gameplay, meaning that decisions have permanent consequences. (The name for this mechanism comes from *Risk Legacy* (Daviau & Dupuis, 2011), the first commercially-successful game to deploy it.) Two good examples of this are character class unlocking and the world map. The game box includes 17 smaller boxes, marked only with unique icons, that contain the materials for each character class. Six of these are available from the start of the game, while others become available when specific in-game conditions are met, frequently upon the completion of Personal Quests. The world map is a large and mostly-empty board, but new locations for scenarios are unlocked during play; these are marked on the board using permanent stickers. When a scenario is completed, the sticker and the scenario book are marked to indicate that they may not be played again for their campaign effects.

PLAY EXPERIENCE

Progression

A scenario of *Gloomhaven* presents a very different power curve than conventional fantasy adventure board games. Most such games represent a power fantasy in which the character gets progressively stronger, encountering greater challenges as they progress. This is seen in some of our favorite games mentioned in the Introduction as well as genre classic, *Talisman* (Harris, 1983). By contrast, in *Gloomhaven*, you become progressively weaker throughout the scenario. Many of a character's most powerful cards require removing them from the scenario when they are played, often for significant effects and experience points, but then they may not be used again. Keeping in mind that the cards also serve as a gameplay timer—run out of cards and your character is eliminated from the scenario—this means the short-term gain can lead to longer-term stress. This interesting decision is at the heart of what makes a scenario of *Gloomhaven* so compelling: there is rarely an easy choice, and there is always a consequence. It is an excellent example of what Burgun (2011) describes as endogenously meaningful ambiguous decision-making.

While characters become weaker during a scenario, they become slowly more powerful during the campaign. Leveling up a character means that new cards become available; however, the character's hand size does not change, which means that choosing the cards for a given scenario actually becomes a harder and more significant decision. This challenge scales with a player's familiarity with the game, producing a great example of the cognitive-based *fun* described by Koster (2013): it is the form of fun where challenge and skill rise in tandem, leading players into a state of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990).

As described above, when a player's character satisfies their

Personal Quest, that character retires, and the player must create a new character for the next scenario. The new character will almost certainly be weaker than the one that retired. However, the starting level of new characters and the strength of new characters are also tied to legacy aspects of gameplay, so the more you play, the more powerful your starting characters will be. This is another example of elegant balance between skill and challenge. A new player would be overwhelmed by the choices required to play a fifth-level character, but veteran players will be able to draw upon a rich cognitive model of *Gloomhaven*'s various systems. Hence, the veteran would not be intimidated to start a character at a higher level, even of a new class. Even though all the character classes have different foci, they all play within the same fundamental systems.

Competition and Cooperation

Gloomhaven is cooperative in the sense that players either win together or lose together. However, what makes *Gloomhaven* a truly excellent cooperative game is that it includes incentives not to cooperate. This point was clearly articulated by Lees (2017), and we would like to expand upon that point here. Many cooperative board games, including the iconic *Pandemic* (Leacock, 2008), task players with working together toward a shared goal. There is no reason not to cooperate, and so it is a forced cooperation; that is, pure cooperation is the only viable way to play the game as it is intended. By contrast, *Gloomhaven* contains many systems that incentivize seeking personal rewards instead of cooperative goals. One example of this is treasure: that which is looted by one player belongs to that player alone, and neither items nor gold can be traded between characters. Obtaining treasure has an opportunity cost, since a character who is looting is spending valuable time and cards without contributing to the goals of the scenario. To be clear, then, a player who seeks personal gain is generally making the scenario

more challenging for the entire party. The competition for scarce resources is embedded within the larger cooperative framework.

Another example of incentivized competition can be found in Battle Goal cards. At the start of each scenario, players secretly choose one of two randomly drawn Battle Goal cards. These provide a personal goal for that player that, if they meet it, earns personal rewards. However, these goals are often at odds with the shared objectives of the scenario. This leads players to make the difficult choice between self-serving actions that may earn them rewards or cooperative actions that serve the scenario goal. Crucially, the rewards from Battle Goal cards are only earned if the players collectively succeed in the scenario.

These examples demonstrate that *Gloomhaven* makes sacrifices meaningful. There is an incentive to be selfish, which means that choosing to be selfless comes at a real cost. We have seen it in each others' faces as we play, the furrowed brows that indicate that we are trying to choose between an immediate selfish gain and a maneuver that is better for the party. During our analysis of *Gloomhaven*, it was Alex (the younger author) who pointed out that this is essentially the tension of free will and morality: choosing good is only virtuous if you could have chosen evil.

We observe that certain kinds of actions have leaned us more toward cooperative or competitive play. Working together toward a scenario's objectives requires a cooperative approach with occasional selfish maneuvers to maximize treasure or satisfy Battle Goals. We share an interest in unlocking and experimenting with new classes, and so actions that move toward unlocking classes and retiring characters are pursued cooperatively. For example, when we know one character needs to go to a particular location or region for their Personal Goal, we will generally prioritize that action. Even though items and gold are not shared, looting some treasure chests results in unlocking new locations and new items appearing in the town

shop. Therefore, we will regularly take a cooperative approach to accessing treasure chests as well: even though most of the time only one character gets the treasure, there is still shared delight in revealing what is inside. Of course, some chests are also trapped, which can lead to disappointment or schadenfreude, depending on the circumstances.

The campaign regularly requires the party to make a collective choice. For example, the party must draw a random Road Event when traveling between scenarios, and these require choosing one of the two available options. We find ourselves discussing the expected costs and benefits of each path. Although we recognize that our characters are not heroes *per se*, we regularly choose what seems to be the more altruistic and order-preserving options. The in-game consequences are cleverly designed such that one does not always know whether an altruistic or selfish approach will yield better tangible rewards; this increases our engagement with the narrative, as we see our choices have real and sometimes unintended in-game consequences.

Another layer of cooperation is required due to the complexity of the game: players have to cooperate to understand and remember the rules, and failures here can lead to unexpected dynamics. As described earlier, the game provides a recommended level of difficulty for a scenario based on the levels of the characters attempting it. It also provides additional rewards for attempting a level at a higher level, or lesser reward for attempting at a lower level. Our first experience in lowering the level was an early scenario that required the elimination of all the enemies on a wide open board. We were both playing stealthy characters who specialized in taking down one target at a time, and we did not have a "tank" to absorb damage as we tried to eliminate a crowd of enemies. It was disheartening for us to reduce the level of the scenario after a series of failures, but we were able to complete it after doing so. It was not until after the session that we reviewed the rulebook and realized

we had actually been attempting the scenario at a higher than recommended difficulty, which means we had dropped it down and succeeded at the recommended "normal" level, not an "easy" level.

INTERESTING GAME PROPERTIES

For the player who enjoys the tangible elements of the hobby, *Gloomhaven* is bountiful. Within the enormous box one finds hundreds of cards of varying sizes and types, individually-boxed miniatures, sealed character class boxes, plastic bits, envelopes, a sturdy board, giant sheets of stickers, and nigh-countless cardboard chits. It presents a real logistical problem for storage, and it is likely intimidating to those who are not enamored of game "bits," a point we will return to later. Indeed, *Gloomhaven*'s success on Kickstarter was almost certainly because of its grandiosity: board gamers on Kickstarter seem to be drawn to ambitious and original designs.

We find the attack modifier decks to be particularly intriguing. A first level character's initial attack modifier deck consists of twenty cards whose average value is zero (ignoring, for our analysis, the two special cards that give double damage and a guaranteed miss, respectively). Players can add and remove cards from this deck as part of character advancement. Each individual change has relatively small statistical impact. For example, the lowest card in the starting attack modifier is a single -2 card. A character who is able to remove that card changes the average value of the deck by one-tenth, from zero to 0.1. One one hand, this is hardly a noticeable change; on the other hand, the player now knows that they will never hit and have a modifier worse than -1. Also, taking that unwanted card out of the deck produces a rare feeling of *fiero* during the campaign game. Hence, while the statistical impact of an individual change may be small, the emotional impact of that change is high.

Unlocking a new character is always exciting for us, but we did find ourselves occasionally disappointed to see that a character appeared to be geared toward larger parties than our twosome. While support-type characters are probably of great use in a larger party, we could not help but feel deflated afterward, given the length of time between character class unlockings. That said, part of the fun of the game has been that Paul has been painting the miniatures, so unlocking a new character has also meant both the opportunity to paint a new miniature and the pressure to do so. Interested readers are welcome to visit Paul's blog to read more about painting the base set *Gloomhaven* characters and, should we finally unlock all the character classes, a planned spoiler-filled post with the rest.

As mentioned above, a player's most important decisions during a scenario of *Gloomhaven* are which cards to play and when to rest. In addition to the two abilities, each card and rest action has an initiative number from 1 to 99; these numbers, along with those on the randomized monster tactics cards, determine turn order. *Gloomhaven* includes an important rule that players do not reveal what specific numbers they are playing when they choose their cards: we lay our cards face down to show we have chosen them, and when the other player is ready, we reveal simultaneously. Players can share general information about what they are planning to do, but not the specific numbers. This has led us to organically develop a terminology about our planned initiative. One of us might ask if the other is going "early", and the response might be "yes, really early" or "mid-early" or "more early-mid." This breaks the 99 possible initiative values into rough, relative chunks. We can communicate about these ranges quickly without falling into analysis paralysis: when timing is crucial, we can make a plan that we hope will succeed, without spending inordinate time on the planning. Sometimes we still end up in the wrong sequence, and the random values on

the enemy tactic cards are generally unpredictable, which means we also have plenty of surprises.

Rule-bending

The previous discussion of card selection provides an appropriate segue into another important topic: *bending the rules*. While a video game will enforce its rules through software, a board game can only enforce its rules through a social contract and players' knowledge. In competitive games, players will hold each other to the rules in a competitive game due to the desire to win within the game's structure, what Caillois (1961) calls *agôn*. A cooperative game provides a different kind of social contract, however, as nothing except the players' consensus stops them from bending or breaking rules to meet their desires. For example, a simple cooperative game like *Hanabi* (Bauza, 2010) requires players to hold their cards backwards, so only their fellow players can see their values. A player could peek at their cards, which would make the game much easier, but fellow players hold each other accountable to the rules. Whether the players collectively win or lose, the playing of the game was legitimate.

Gloomhaven provides a tightly designed puzzle, and some missions required us to attempt them several times in order to succeed. However, there were some cases where we found ourselves so frustrated that we bent the rules in our favor in order to finish particularly difficult missions. One example was a mission involving enemy oozes, which have a random chance to produce additional oozes. The nature of random generation is that it's possible to get a string of extra enemies' appearing that leaves the mission practically unbeatable. Hence, there have been a few cases where we flip yet-another-ooze-spawn, groan in unison, and then quietly reshuffle the deck for a different result.

The attack modifier decks is also prone to strings of good or

bad luck. Usually, this adds to the enjoyment and tension within the game. However, we have witnessed an interesting occurrence of rule-bending within the tumult of managing multiple attack modifier decks and initiatives. The order of actions changes every round based on the initiative scores on players' selected cards and enemy tactics cards. With so many to keep track of, we find that we sometimes get them out of sequence. Most of the time, when we discover that we made a sequencing error, we simply unwind the steps and play the same cards again in the right sequence; indeed, if the result was catastrophic for our party, we always roll back and follow the "right" sequence. However, we have occasionally had cases where something truly epic happens in the card reveals, after which we discover we had the sequence wrong. In some of these cases, we agree that it was too fantastic of a result to revert, and so we opt for cinematic excitement rather than perfect fidelity to the rules.

We had a similar situation in which Alex's character had a Personal Goal to defeat a large number of a certain type of enemy. It was his first character, and we played roughly twenty different scenarios without seeing a single instance of this enemy type, let alone enough for him to retire his character and try a new one. We ended up searching for this particular enemy type on the Internet and discovered a thread of similarly-befuddled *Gloomhaven* fans who had the same Personal Goal on their characters. A helpful community member pointed out a particular mission path, and hence we were able to meet this character's Personal Goal and try some more characters. We had sacrificed some of the thematic mystery of the world and some strictness of legacy gameplay in order to produce what we believed (and still assert) was a greater good. After all, if the game had role-playing and a gamesmaster, Alex's character at this point would have certainly visited every tavern in *Gloomhaven* to gather rumors about how to hunt down his hated enemies.

We have deeply enjoyed our experience playing *Gloomhaven*, and we have been happy with the weight of the rules, the pace of unlocking new content, and the unfolding of the world's narrative—but it's not a game for everybody. Our first two games were played with a previously-unmentioned third player: Jessica, who is Paul's wife and Alex's mother. She also plays all manner of board games, stranger neither to party games nor crunchy Euros. However, she dislikes fiddliness in a game and has no particular affinity for miniatures. She also is ambivalent about legacy gameplay (despite having won our *Charterstone* campaign) and would have no qualms about peeking into secret content or stories. Jessica found the rule preventing our sharing specific initiative values to be frustrating, as she prefers to plan out the specifics of each move rather than accept ambiguity. Having a third player also meant more enemies on the board to manage and more down time. Clearly, this is not the game for her. We found our play experiences to be much more enjoyable as a father-son pair when Jessica gracefully bowed out of the campaign. Indeed, this also speaks to the cleverness of *Gloomhaven's* design, that it is robust to having a player leave the campaign. (Paul later took over Jessica's character after retiring one of his own, and the reader will be glad to know that this character also met its Personal Goal.)

THE INTERGENERATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Intergenerational Play

We have had several discussions in preparing this article about the nature of intergenerational play, focusing on *Gloomhaven* and also reflecting on our gaming relationship more broadly. We believe that we play primarily as peers. There are relatively few moments where Paul pauses the game, switches into didactic mode, and tries to impart wisdom about courtesy in victory or grace in distress. These moments are more common with Alex's younger siblings, and certainly were more common with Alex as

well in years past, but he has grown into a skillful and gracious player. In *Gloomhaven* in particular, we have both helped each other to make good tactical decisions and identified synergies between our characters. The times we have most disagreed have been about the choices presented in Event cards. Some of these have been rooted in different interpretations of the text on the card, where the author was leaving parts of the story implied that Paul noticed but Alex did not recognize. In such cases, Paul explained his interpretation, and Alex learned to recognize the narrative cues. There was one frustrating case, however, that led to frustrating negative results not so much due to our interpretation and decision, but a rare instance of poorly-written, ambiguous prompts.

The other cooperative games that we have played most often are *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game* (Selinker et al., 2013) and *Runebound* with the *Unbreakable Bonds* expansion (Fanchi & Litzsinger, 2017). These games also feature hidden information in the form of cards, but neither has any real incentive to keep such cards secret. We are impressed by *Gloomhaven*'s semi-competitive scenario game, where the secrecy of a player's Battle Goal provides a real incentive not to bend the rules around hand management and action selection. This also prevents quarterbacking, which is the unpleasant phenomenon seen in some cooperative games where one dominant player "plays" other players turns for them.

Despite playing primarily as peers, we do have different experiences and expectations. Alex has mostly played games with Paul: he has almost no experience playing games with anyone outside his immediate or extended family. That is, Alex does not have much else to compare intergenerational play against. Paul, on the other hand, has played games with friends through life's various stages. Reflecting on this, he still sees playing with Alex as being very similar to playing with a gaming friend. Playing with his son, there is generally more focus on the game itself

rather than table talk because, living together, there are many opportunities to discuss the events of the day. Playing with adult friends over a beer tends to involve much more banter about work and current events, and the general catching-up that friends do when they see each other rarely.

Intergenerational Authoring

In the spirit of sharing our intergenerational experience, we would like to conclude by sharing a reflection on how we write this article. After reading the call for papers, Paul asked Alex to consider whether he would be interested in the collaboration, to which he readily agreed. Paul dumped about two page's worth of ideas into a document in order to determine what might be of interest to the journal's readers, and he asked Alex to consider what he considered the most interesting aspects of the game. Alex wrote a short draft, which he expanded into three paragraphs after discussing it with Paul. There were several weeks where we did not work on the paper but occasionally talked about it.

We rebooted our efforts by meeting around the dining room table with a stacks of index cards and sticky notes. We organized our ideas together and fit them to a skeleton, with specific ideas or anecdotes written on thirty index cards that were organized under six headings and subheadings. Paul transcribed these into Google Docs, adding text to flesh out the ideas as well as references to related games and research, while Alex did the mathematical analysis of the starting attack modifier decks. Alex asked about citations while doing unrelated academic work, and we used this article as an example of how references work, mechanically and culturally. Alex reviewed the article independently, leaving comments via Google Docs, which Paul reviewed and resolved from his office. After Paul's final pass through the text, he turned it over to Alex with the suggestion to read it beginning to end, identify any vocabulary that was

unfamiliar so as to avoid misrepresenting our experience, and leave any questions in the document as comments. We reviewed Alex's 15 comments and decided we were ready to submit. We hope you enjoy reading the article as much as we enjoyed composing it.

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