

A Well-Played *Fiasco*: A Game About Powerful Collaboration and Poor Narrative Control

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Abstract: The role-playing game *Fiasco* (Morningstar, 2009) provides an interesting case of collaborative narrative construction in the context of a game about a collective series of failures. Addressing the mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics of the game (Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubeck, 2004), this paper addresses the specific interactions of mechanics that give rise to the game's collaborative dynamics, and the sense of "fun" that evolves from the tension of narrative construction and character destruction. Implications for understanding collaboration and failure in learning are discussed, as well as instructional implications of the game's rule structures.

Introduction

"*Fiasco* is a game that is fun; it helps you to imagine. I hope you have fun while everything goes wrong." — Wil Wheaton (in Morningstar & Segedy, 2011)

In recent years, the field of games and learning has made significant inroads into understanding the connections between play activities and learning practices. However, it has perhaps inordinately focused on *digital* games — of the papers presented at the Games+Learning+Society conferences, the vast majority have involved computer, console, and mobile games, with only a fraction of the body of research being devoted to understanding the ways that games and play occur in other forms. In this paper, I attempt to broaden the focus of gaming experiences and forward an understanding of the meaning of narrative, collaborative games through a "well-played" analysis of a casual, tabletop role-playing game: *Fiasco*, created by game designer Jason Morningstar (Morningstar, 2009).

Fiasco provides us with a number of interesting and unique features that make it worth investigating in this context, and illustrates a number of potential mechanics that provide provocative instigations to the game-based learning community. In particular, I focus on the game as system in which a *collaborative narrative* is created by its players, as well as one in which *failure* is featured — not just as an acceptable outcome, but as the ideal one. As Wil Wheaton's quote from *The Fiasco Companion* (Morningstar & Segedy, 2011) indicates, the fun of "everything going wrong" is a central component of this game; I argue that *Fiasco* provides a distinct contrast to the forms of play that often dominate mastery-based forms of game-based learning, and even the implicit conception of productive failure (Kapur, 2008) that is central to many games. Note: Throughout this paper, I will reference examples from a satirical *Fiasco* Playset performed by members of the audience during this session — entitled "Games+Learning+Impropriety" — and created specifically for GLS 9.0 (1).

Powerful Ambition and Poor Impulse Control

Fiasco was published by Bully Pulpit Games in 2009, an independent role-playing game company run by Morningstar and his frequent editor, Steve Segedy. The theme of the game is provocatively unusual for most tabletop role-playing games, which have historically been dominated by the fantasy, science fiction, and adventure genres. In *Fiasco*, players collaboratively create new characters for each game session based on the guidance of a minimalistic "Playset" consisting of 144 options for players to choose from. A "Playset" consists of a set of potentialities for a game session — while certain objects, and even character names may persist between sessions, each group of players and random rolls of dice yield very different stories. As a role-playing game, the emphasis is decidedly upon role-playing characters that are developed on the fly through the course of play of a common narrative.

For a tabletop role-playing game, the materials are quite minimalistic: The game does not require multiple types of polyhedral dice, miniatures, or graph paper. Consequently, there are no "player classes," no statistics to keep track of, nor additional "levels" to acquire. All that is required to play is a set of standard six-sided dice — four dice per player, two light and two dark — as well as blank index cards and pens. After creating characters (during "The Setup" stage), players act out a series of scenes, creating the story of the game with one another, dealing with complications to the story added halfway through (at "The Tilt"). The Setup involves the most use of the dice: players first roll them, then use the numbers rolled to choose elements from a Playset that will serve as the initial basis for their game.

Playsets are thematic and provide the settings, relationships, objects, and character needs that will drive the rest of the game. Those created by Morningstar and other officially-released Playsets vary quite widely in theme —

from “Tales of Suburbia,” set in a 20th century suburban housing development to “London 1593,” set in Elizabethan England. And, as the game is simple to adapt to multiple contexts, player-created Playsets abound, ranging from “All the Damn Time,” in which all players play the same character at different times in his life to an adaptation of the complex, city-building, roguelike computer game *Dwarf Fortress*. Perhaps in an attempt to make the salacious themes of many of the game’s original Playsets more palatable to a wider (and younger) audience, *The Fiasco Companion* includes additional Playsets such as the teen-centric “Fiasco High,” which aim for a lighter tone.

Each Playset is broken into several sections, reflecting key constraints that will guide players in the creation of their own unique game experiences. Rather than adopt pre-set characters during The Setup, players use the dice to pick specific Playset components, typically “Relationships,” “Needs,” “Locations,” and “Objects.” These provide seeds for the creation of characters and the story tensions that guide the game session. For example, since each Playset component refers to the connection between two players in the game, a player may choose a “Relationship” of “Family > Longtime industry rivals” to place between herself and the player on her right, while the next player may choose to flesh out that relationship with a “Need” of “Revenge... for the downfall of Jaymie Ludlow.” With just those two snippets — and the subsequent Relationships, Needs, Objects, and Locations chosen with other players at the table — players develop the barest outlines of characters, name them, and pick the settings and objects that will play a role in the evolving story.

It is important to note that with all Playsets, the goal of the game is to develop a disastrous situation or set of situations that unravels through the course of play —*Fiasco* is overtly a “game about powerful ambition and poor impulse control,” as *Fiasco*’s promotional tagline teases. Once The Setup choices have been pinned down, players strive to maximize their character’s goals (say, “wants revenge on his sister for her role in the accidental death of grad school crush Jaymie Ludlow”), while also acknowledging that a *failure* to achieve that goal may provide fodder for an even more enjoyable narrative experience for the group.

The game has been described as a “Coen Brothers RPG,” or a “story game” that attempts to mimic the uniquely shambolic noir-style narrative structure of many films by director/writers Ethan and Joel Coen, which include *Fargo*, *Blood Simple*, *Burn After Reading*, and *Barton Fink* and other similar exemplars in this film genre (such as *A Simple Plan*). *Fiasco*, while featuring much more freedom to shape the story than many traditional role-playing games, enforces this structure through several simple yet elegant game mechanics. First and foremost, there is no “game master” or “dungeon master”; characters collectively, collaboratively, and sometimes competitively develop the unique storyline that evolves from the choices made during The Setup.

After The Setup, dice are returned to the center of the play space for use in the rest of the game. As scenes play out in the first half of the game, players proceed clockwise around the table, choosing to (1) “Establish,” or describe a scene involving his or her character, naming other character(s) they wish to interact with; or (2) “Resolve,” letting the other players describe the scene he or she must play out. For scenes in which the player chose Establish, others who are not involved in the scene use the color of the remaining dice (light or dark) to indicate how *they* would like the scene to end. For example, if the grad student character Jerry Kapowski confronts Professor Mary Jacobs about her knowledge of Jaymie Ludlow’s murder with the hopes that she would acknowledge Jerry’s suspicions that she was involved, all of the players other than Jerry’s and Mary’s would determine the outcome for Jerry *during the scene*, choosing to give Jerry a light die if they believe he should succeed in finding out more about what Mary knows, or a dark die if they believe he should not. In scenes in which the player chooses to “resolve,” he or she determines the scene’s outcome and picks the appropriately colored die. In both cases, the scene progresses until its logical end, incorporating the die choice into the story on the fly.

The game progresses this way, allocating dice each turn with the player receiving the die and giving it away in the first half of the game, and keeping it in the second half of the game. Accumulated dice are rolled again twice — first, halfway through the game, at which point the difference between light and dark totals drive complications (“The Tilt”) that affect the game, such as “Tragedy: Death, out of the blue” or “Guilt: Someone panics.” At the end of the game, accumulated dice are rolled once more and differences calculated again, for each player to develop a montage that describes what happens at the end of the story (“The Aftermath”). At this point, the game is over — there are no point totals, the characters do not proceed into another game scenario (c.f., the recent “American Disasters” Playsets; Morningstar, 2013), and the story has wrapped up.

Since its release, *Fiasco* has spurred a newfound interest in role-playing games without game masters, and has shot up the ranks at the online role-playing game community site RPGGeek, where it is currently listed as the second-most highly rated role-playing game on the site (RPGGeek, 2013). Morningstar has developed other narrative-based role-playing games, before and after *Fiasco*, including *The Grey Ranks*, *The Shab Al-Hiri Roach*, and the recent *Durance*, accruing acclaim for his innovative approaches to the role-playing game form.

The Mechanics, Dynamics, and Aesthetics of a Fiasco

One approach to developing an account of the “well-played” nature of *Fiasco* first involves isolating its components, then addressing the ways that the game’s components lead to particular experiences by its players. I adapt Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek’s (2004) “mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics” or MDA approach to this end, as a means of illustrating how the game’s simple mechanics give rise to its complex and interesting collaborative narrative play. By focusing on elements of the game’s explicit and implicit rule systems (mechanics), one can see how the game develops second-order strategies and approaches (dynamics) that build a sense of “fun” (aesthetics) for its players.

Mechanics

First off, it is surprising that such a compelling game experience can arise out of so few overt game mechanics. The most relevant of these mechanics for this argument are the game structures that embody constraints imposed upon players by the game’s rule system.

- *Dice Choices* — Used in *The Setup*, the random dice roll at the beginning of the game provides players the opportunity to choose elements of their characters’ stories (within constraints); players throughout the game choose light or dark dice to pass along to the player whose scene it is
- *Establishing/Resolving* — Players choose whether or not they will create the setting for a scene, and whether they or other players will determine its outcome (a light or a dark die)
- *Dice Transfers* — During a scene, players give a participant in a scene a light or dark die to shape the direction the story should go; at the end of scenes in the first half of the game, the receiving player passes the die along to another player
- *Dice Calculations* — At both *The Tilt* and *The Aftermath*, each player rolls accumulated dice, and calculates a difference between light and dark that affects the course of the rest of the game (in *The Tilt*) or the particular fate of their character (in *The Aftermath*).
- *Turns* — All play proceeds clockwise, with each player taking two turns establishing or resolving before *The Tilt*, and then two turns afterwards, before *The Aftermath*.

These minimal mechanics all drive *narrative* choices — elements of *The Setup*, who chooses the outcome of scenes, who accumulates which color dice, and how these accumulations of dice impact the story. All other elements of the game’s narrative are left to the players’ imaginations, be it finding out who is actually responsible for Jaymie Ludlow’s murder, whether or not Jerry will be successful in stealing the \$69,105 of conference registration money, or perhaps finding out if Dr. Mary will finally bed the alluring game designer she has her eye on. The game’s basic mechanics thus serve as *constraints* for the story’s development, but are not deterministic of any particular narrative.

Dynamics

One might wonder, then, how does a “fiasco” evolve from these game mechanics? In what specific ways do these game mechanics interact to support and shape the particular form of collectively disastrous narrative that the game is intended to model? Through the *interaction* of multiple base mechanics, we can see the development of second-order dynamics that illustrate the shaping of these narrative arcs.

One of the most critical interactions is between the mechanics of *Turns* and *Dice Transfers*. The most elegant enforcement of the narrative arc is through the simple reality of the limited supply of dice in the game — there are four per player, two light and two dark, yielding 12 total dice in a 3-player game, 16 in a 4-player game, and so on. *Fiasco*’s common pool of dice for all players is used up through the course of deciding small-scale narrative choices (*Dice Transfers*), and it should be no surprise that as the number of dice in the central pool depletes, so does the flexibility of players to change the outcome of a subsequent scene. That is, if characters tend to get their way early in the game (players receiving light-colored dice), then the pool of remaining dice will be skewed dark for the latter half of the game, and vice versa. This often yields either a storyline in which “everything goes wrong” at the end, or “everything goes wrong” early on, with characters successfully dealing with the repercussions for the rest of the game.

Games of *Fiasco* necessarily take a “bad turn” because the dice allocation throughout the game provides players with an equal number of opportunities for their characters to get what they want, and for their characters to be

thwarted in the attempt. Compounding this, a disproportionate allocation of dice (*Die Transfers* interacting with *Establishing/Resolving*) leads to the chance that not all players end up with an equal number of dice, and thus a greater subsequent chance that consequential *Die Calculations* will be under their influence (at *The Tilt*, in particular).

Therefore, a dynamic emerges that (in at least the best-played *Fiasco* sessions), conveys a sense of entertaining, collective doom to the players. There is no such thing as a “winner” in *Fiasco*, and the movement of dice in the game reinforces this for all players to see. The *collaborative* structure of the game begins to emerge through the crafting of an ideally coherent and fun narrative in which players’ choices are simultaneously fodder for the development of the story and also signifiers of an inevitable, often hilarious catastrophe for the characters.

Aesthetics

Finally, we turn to “fun.” The aesthetic of “fun through failure” pervades *Fiasco*, supported by these game mechanics and the collaborative narrative dynamics laid out above. But, why is failure “fun”? Aren’t we, as gamers, supposed to view “failure” as a state to be overcome in our progressions toward increased skill and mastery within a game-based context (Ramirez, 2012)? Or, aren’t we as education researchers, supposed to view “failure” as a useful tool that leads to the accrual of new knowledge, skills, or practices?

An element heretofore not discussed in this paper, but which is clearly central to the “fun” of *Fiasco* is *role-play*, studied extensively in games from its earliest days (e.g., Fine, 1983) through digital forms (e.g., Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008). Through the process of role-playing characters within a game of *Fiasco*, players are faced with a critical tension between individual and collective narrative development. On each turn, players act within a scene with one or perhaps two other players at a time, and at these moments, are responsible for following through with their characters’ goals while also acknowledging the constraints of the dice. The social, contextual, and ultimately *collaborative* nature of role-playing fosters a joint creative enterprise, one in which not only are characters created anew each time the players roll the dice on a new Setup, but an entire world is crafted through their joint activity. To satisfy the entire group, sacrifices must be made.

And so, perhaps, the “fun” of *Fiasco* evolves from the joy one can have in the push-and-pull of both collaborative narrative construction and individual character destruction, from balancing the individual goals of shaping a character with a story that can’t end well for someone. A good game of *Fiasco* works as a temporary and fluid narrative space, one created for a just few hours to play around in and then part with willingly. There are ultimately no long-term consequences for the players, and the joys of causing fictional strife within the game space seem akin to what Gee discusses as a game-based “psychosocial moratorium” (Gee, 2003). I argue that a “well-played” game of *Fiasco* is, in some ways, like an improvisational, collaborative (and obviously much more transgressive) version of *The Sims* — one in which the simulation of a world and its people is recognized as a space in which one can tinker, improvise, imprint their knowledge of media (e.g., the tropes of Coen Brothers-style films) — then tear it all down for the sake of creating an entertaining group experience.

Collaborative Narrative and Failure In Learning

Ultimately, Games+Learning+Society is a community that is interested in games not just for games’ sake, but for what these media can reveal about learning and action in the world. And so, it seems reasonable to consider what a “well-played” analysis of a game like *Fiasco* can help to inform us about learning, education, and games for impact. On the face of it, the noir-like themes of *Fiasco* seem a relatively poor fit to many of our contemporary, formal, and politically conservative educational contexts, but this assessment may be at least partially incorrect. In “Better than Ritalin!: Playing With Students,” a chapter in *The Fiasco Companion* (Morningstar & Segedy, 2011), Morningstar and two teachers — MJ Harnish and Pete Figtree — took part in an extended conversation on the ways that the game has been used in classrooms, including the fostering of collaboration, listening skills, and creative writing.

And so, conclusions about *instruction* can be gleaned from Morningstar’s efforts to shift the role-playing game genre away from only those systems in which a single player (the game master) holds the keys to the group’s story. In an educational system that still over-emphasizes “sage on the stage” forms of direct instruction, *Fiasco* embodies a provocative model in which participants are guided by a common rule-based framework, but have the room to explore a wide range of settings, characters, and narrative possibilities. If Morningstar, Harnish, and Figtree’s examples have broader application to game-based learning environments, it may be in provoking the application of these empowering structures to a wider range of creative exercises. *Fiasco*’s players are equal participants in the development of any particular game session’s characters and world; through their actions, players bring a heightened degree of agency to the game experience not found in many other role-playing game systems

(tabletop or digital).

Finally, in terms of learning more broadly construed, *Fiasco* also presents a fascinating example of the ways that a minimal set of game mechanics can foster rich, collaborative dynamics, while providing productive a liberating sense of “fun” through failure. In most educational contexts, failure is clearly still seen as stigma. Progressive perspectives in the learning sciences (e.g., Kapur, 2008) have recently considered the potential of re-imagining failure as productive, but even in these cases, failure is still seen as a scaffold to foster some form of skill mastery, knowledge construction, or to serve as an impetus for future learning. I forward that *Fiasco* provides us a more subversive and provocative example of “productive failure,” where it serves not just as an impetus, but as a *liberating experience* — one that, simulated in the context of games, can give players a space to imagine characters and build worlds, all the while joyfully taking them apart.

Endnotes

(1) The full “Games+Learning+Impropriety” Playset is available for download as a PDF at <http://se4n.org/games/GLS-Fiasco-Playset.pdf>. This Playset is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License.

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