New Section

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I hesitate to refer to Galcon as my favorite iPhone game. While it is my favorite iPhone game, and is perfectly suited to the iPhone, and many of its greatest qualities are directly related to the constraints and affordances of this platform, calling it an "iPhone game" implies a diminished scope entirely out of scale with my devotion to the game, to the amount of time and thought I have invested in it and the amount of time and thought it has given me in return. There are only a handful of games I have applied myself to with this amount of dedication – games like Poker and Go. Galcon is a game like these, it just happens to be on the iPhone.

And while I enthusiastically tell everyone who'll listen that I love it and think it's brilliant I'm slightly uncomfortable recommending it to people. The qualities that make Galcon lovable and brilliant are not easily seen. As with any deep competitive game, whether it's Chess or Counterstrike or Tennis, these qualities reveal themselves over time and under certain conditions that require a lot of effort and dedication. If you are looking for pleasant distraction and entertainment (which, by the way, is an entirely reasonable thing to look for in a game) Galcon is probably not for you. But if you are looking for a new hobby, one that will reward hard work, deep thought, and patience, then Galcon is a stirring reminder of how videogames have the capacity to transcend pleasant distraction and entertainment and achieve something altogether more complex and wonderful.

So, having sufficiently raised and lowered your expectations, let me attempt to describe the game itself. Galcon is a strategy game in which players compete for control over a small map using fleets of units that move from location to location in real time. The game is lightly themed as galactic conquest, the locations are "planets" and the units are "ships", but it is in fact almost entirely abstract. Planets are circles whose color indicates the current owner and ships are tiny colored triangles. When a match begins, each player has one starting planet containing 100 ships and the rest of the map is a handful of grey planets, each containing a random number of neutral ships.

You can select a planet you control and send ships from it to another planet. When one player's ships arrive at another player's planet, or a

neutral planet, the attacking ships cancel out the ships on the planet one for one, so if the fleet you send is larger than the number of ships already on the planet you will reduce the defending force to zero and then capture the planet with your remaining ships. Planets perpetually generate ships for their current owner, the larger the planet the faster it generates ships, so at its core the game is a race to capture planets and hold them in order to outproduce and ultimately overwhelm your opponents.

As you can see, Galcon is a highly simplified and miniaturized version of a familiar gameplay paradigm whose roots are in the classic genre of 4X computer games. In these games players explore a vast territory, expand their empire, exploit the resources they control to create combat units which they use to exterminate their opponents. And what I want to suggest is that it is precisely this process of simplification and miniaturization that is Galcon's greatest contribution. For in minimizing the size of the map, the complexity of the ruleset, and most importantly the length of a match, Galcon achieves something spectacular that lifts it up into the realm of greatness.

I have a lot to say about Galcon, but that's my main point - its greatness is almost entirely due to its small size. In an age of bloated videogame expressionism, in which each generation seeks to become ever more grandiose and baroque, Galcon demonstrates the enduring power of simplicity.

Watching a game of Galcon unfold is a striking visual experience. It is not a pretty game by any means – Eufloria, a similar game that emerged on the indie scene around the same time as Galcon is far more visually sophisticated. Galcon's graphics are pragmatic – they are there to illustrate the state of the game to the players and little else. As it turns out, that's more than enough. Flocks of colored triangles erupt onto the screen, swarming between numbered circles which swallow them up and spit them out again. Attacking fleets explode in tiny flares against the surface of an opponent's planet, sometimes they engulf it, painting it from red to yellow or green to purple as the planet changes hands from one owner to another and back again. It's a gaudy inferno, a disco Armageddon. This is the way videogames should look – dense, inscrutable, alien, like teenage art from the future.

But the most beautiful thing about the visuals of a game of Galcon in action is the purity of its abstraction. The paper-thin theme of planets and ships disappears almost instantly and the game reveals itself for what it is – a real-time abstract strategy game. There are no brawny fighters throwing punches or stoic space marines lasering aliens, Galcon is

pure pattern, a diagram of itself, an unfolding illustration of the particles and waves of the decisions-becoming-actions of its players. Its colored circles and overlapping flows resemble a Turing machine coming to life and devouring itself in a suicidal frenzy.

But the experience of playing Galcon is not about watching, it's about seeing, about processing this dense visual information into decisions and actions. Swept up in this process, the player becomes both hyper-aware and oblivious. In the heat of battle you are operating at the limits of conscious awareness, suspended between actions, drinking in more data than you can swallow, assessing, modeling, predicting. Both your fight-or-flight lizard brain and your higher executive functions have their cognitive throttles open so wide there is no room for anything else, no room for you in your own head.

It is a process of calculation, of calculus, of plotting numbers across distances and time. But it doesn't feel like math. It feels like physics - like juggling, or fencing, or fighting. The types of calculations you make when playing Galcon are so dense and happen so rapidly that they blur into a stream of consciousness that feels haptic, tactile, physical, rather than analytical.

I have never participated in a Sumo wrestling match, but that's what Galcon feels like to me. Massive force pivots around a cascade of split-second actions, grappling, seeking a foothold. Weight shifting, over-stepping, and slam! A momentary advantage explodes with exponential force to send your opponent out of the ring.

This alchemical transposition, of number into weight and force, of discrete quantities into physical flows, is a striking feature of Galcon, but it is not unique to Galcon. It is a key feature of many games, possibly most games. Throwing a baseball is action, pure and simple. But under the hood of that throw is a ribbon of micro-decisions, some we are aware of, some operating just below the surface of conscious thought, and some buried deep in the machine code of our nervous system. Decision or action? Games are built out of these ingredients, and mostly treat them as distinct, opposing categories, just as common sense does. But games can also, through compression, acceleration, and magnification, show us the point at which these opposing categories meet and blur together – thought and action, discrete and continuous, particle and wave, not in the world beyond our eyes, but in the one behind them.

The experiential quality I have described above, the empty fullness of a brain engulfed in Galcon, is different from the experience of a brain learning to play Galcon. And, like any serious competitive game, if you

want to attempt to play at an expert level you must always be learning. Learning involves losing, over and over again, first to the AI, then to other players online. And here again Galcon's small size pays tremendous dividends. Many matches are over in a minute or less, and because there is no hidden information in Galcon, every second of that minute is packed with information you can use to improve your play.

The learning player begins with conscious calculation, devising plans that feel like plans and techniques that feel like techniques. The plans and techniques that work become heuristics, rules-of-thumb, applied deliberately at first, and then, slowly, assembled together into bundles that become second nature. Now the mind pulls back to consider larger issues as the techniques that used to occupy it become effortless. At this stage larger patterns become visible: the difference between playing fast (reckless, aggressive) and playing slow (cautious, defensive) and the appropriate time for each, the direction of play, the importance of geography, and other high-level strategic concepts.

This is the process of learning Galcon or any great game - ideas are first developed consciously and applied deliberately and then bundled together into cognitive chunks which then become the building blocks of new ideas at a higher level and so on, and so on. And the experience of moving up this ladder from calculation to intuition is a special kind of magic that only games can provide. It is thinking as an artform, an opportunity to contemplate and admire the operation of our own minds, the stuff out of which contemplation and admiration are constructed. It is thought made visible to itself.

But how have I gotten this far without talking about the curious case of 3-player Galcon? Basically, everything I've mentioned up to now is prelude, or footnote,
to this.

Galcon's slogan is Strategy, Diplomacy, Destruction. We've covered the strategy and destruction, but how can a game this small, silent, and abstract contain enough room for diplomacy?

To understand the highly-charged social interactions of multiplayer Galcon we must begin by considering the kingmaker problem. Kingmaker is a situation that can arise in any multiplayer strategy game in which one player can determine, through his actions, which of his opponents will win.

There are 2 modes of free-for-all multiplayer Galcon: 4-player and 3--player, and 3-player Galcon is pure kingmaker. With few exceptions, if player A attacks player B then player C will end up winning. Everybody

knows it. Moreover, everybody knows that everybody knows it, and this social fact colors every aspect of the game. As a result, most 3-player Galcon matches turn into stubborn stand-offs, interminable endurance contests in which every player refuses to attack first. In fact, it is probably correct to say that 3-player Galcon is hopelessly broken.

So why not avoid 3-player matches entirely and only play 4-player? Good idea, but even 4-player matches are fought under the specter of kingmaker, because at some point during the chaos of battle every 4-player match eventually becomes a 3-player match as one of the combatants is eliminated.

As a result, every game of free-for-all multiplayer Galcon is highly charged with social emotions. While the underlying mechanics are numerical and geometrical, the actual play experience is filled with threats and feints, shows of bravado, suicidal aggression, angry reprisals, fake surrenders, diplomatic gambits and counter-gambits, spiteful vengeance, offers of alliance, temporary cooperation, and cold-hearted betrayal. The strong prey mercilessly on the weak, and the weak gang up together against the strong.

Many games of Galcon end in anger and recriminations, cries of unfair! and how could he do that to me! But, to be honest, the messy, frustrating unpredictability of the social metagame is the secret ingredient that makes Galcon so compulsively addictive.

Not only does the emotional heat catalyze the game's cool calculation, but the chaos introduced by other players' behavior provides a compelling layer of randomness to the mix – every loss can be blamed on another player's foolish mistake, and every new match holds the promise that you might benefit from another player's blunder. The same effect can be seen in Poker which has a similar mix of analytical precision and social messiness. Moreover, like Poker, Galcon's metagame gives the expert player yet another layer of gameplay to master. Learning to predict and manipulate your opponents' social and emotional behavior is a challenging and rewarding exercise in Machiavellian dynamics.

And the miraculous thing is that all of this tumultuous socio-political discourse is expressed through nothing but the flight of tiny triangles moving from circle to circle. There are no avatars, no expressions, no chat. The utterly minimalist palette of Galcon's game actions must carry all the force of the players' diplomatic communications.

Like everything else about Galcon, it is the game's small size and limited features that make it work. Chat would ruin the tension by making collusion explicit and allowing simmering resentment to boil over into

abusive language. Most importantly, the tiny playfield and short match length help overcome the "flaw" of the kingmaker dynamic. No player would tolerate a half-hour strategy game that ended in arbitrary personal whim. But losing after just 30 seconds of hard work is no big deal. Moreover, a series of short Galcon matches becomes a game of iterated kingmaking. Choices I make this game reverberate through the next, punishment for betrayal can be doled out across multiple games, grudges carry forward, tendencies become pronounced, and what started out as totally unpredictable psycho-social dynamics begins to reveal subtle patterns. And patterns can be analyzed and calculated…

If strategy games can teach us about war, then Galcon is a masterclass that covers the full spectrum, from the primal addictions of aggression and danger through the cold-war dilemmas of mutually-assured destruction to the hallucinatory, computer-assisted hyper-awareness of the drone pilot's cognitive loops, and finally to the endless feedback of vengeance and reprisal whose waves never stop drowning us in oceans of madness and horror.

As video games seek to expand their scope, increase the breadth of their expressive power, and address important issues of morality, ethics, and the nature of the human soul, they would do well to study this small thing, Galcon. It is a permanent war I cannot escape, a war I can put in my pocket but cannot put out of my mind. But it is also the mind of war made visible to itself. It is a wonderful demonstration of the true power of games.