Fiasco and Failure: Uncovering Hidden Rules in a Story Game

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

Why tabletop games?

In recent years, the field of games and learning has made significant inroads into understanding the connections between play activities and learning practices. As a games and learning researcher, I have personally focused on the forms of digitally-mediated learning that have, to date, been largely the focus of contemporary games and learning research (c.f., work such as Simkins', 2011, analysis of ethical reasoning in live action role-playing games). *Well-Played* has followed a similar trajectory — of the previous 19 papers published in *Well-Played* since its transition from a book series to a journal, one might argue that Stein's (2012) discussion of his personal engagement with baseball represents the journal's first attempt to wrestle with "well play" in contexts that were not primarily mediated by a screen.

Both the game studies and games and learning fields have inordinately focused on *digital* games — of the papers presented at the Games+Learning+Society conferences (the conference for which this paper was originally drafted), 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. Though the rhetoric of contemporary digital game studies is one in which research on digital game play is often put into context with many other forms of play (e.g., Salen & Zimmerman, 2004), it's time for these communities to spend effort investigating more than the structures and mechanics of these games, but also the experiences that they afford which may not be easily captured in digital formats.

In this paper, I attempt to broaden the focus of gaming experiences analyzed in *Well-Played* as well as start us on the path of developing understandings of the meaning of narrative, collaborative games. Toward this end, I have focused on a story-based, 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 implicit conceptions of failure that have been argued as being central to understanding games (Juul, 2013).

At the same time, *Fiasco*'s rule structures (and, occasionally, lack thereof) provide challenges for us to make sense of from the perspective of game studies. As we think more deeply about the forms of play that are imbedded within such games, and the ways that an understanding of *Fiasco*'s game mechanics may only be part of the story. Is *Fiasco* best understood as a game or as some other kind of play experience? What hidden rules

and forms of interaction are needed to make a *Fiasco* session to go from just "played" to "well played"?

Please note: Throughout this paper, I will reference examples from a satirical *Fiasco* Playset created specifically for the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Games+Learning+Society 9.0 conference ("Games+Learning+Impropriety") which was illustrated by members of the audience during the session.[1]

Story Games

Tabletop role-playing games have been extensively studied for decades, since shortly after their genesis out of Dave Arneson and Gary Gygax's wargaming group in the early 1970s (see Peterson's, 2012, exhaustive history of the early days of role-playng games). Now-classic studies of performance and role-play within early games such as *Dungeons & Dragons (D&D;* see Fine's, 1983, classic sociological study of these games) have continued through to the present day, with investigations of many of the popular successors to the early reign of *D&D*, such as White Wolf's "World of Darkness" games, including *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Mage: The Ascension* (Bowman, 2010). While the popularity of tabletop role-playing games (RPGs) and their cultural cachet have changed over the past four decades, recently the forms of games played by role-playing communities have exploded beyond traditional tabletop systems into a wide variety of performance-based and story-creation games.

Within the past decade, the appellation of "story game" has become increasingly used for a particular kind of role-playing game experience. The term "story game" has been applied to any number of games that foster a story-building or narrative creation focus, such as the card game *Once Upon a Time*, or to a form of play with commercial role-playing tabletop games in which gamemasters and players focus on the creation of interesting, fun stories rather than the adherence to large sets of system rules. Perhaps as a reaction to the past decade's emphasis of miniature gaming

as a key element of many fantasy role-playing experiences — *Dungeons & Dragons* versions 3.5 and 4.0, as well as Paizo Publishing's now-dominant *Pathfinder* franchise — or perhaps due to the widening understanding of Nordic live-action role play experimentation (e.g., Jeepform described at Jeepen.org, 2013; see Stark's, 2012, overview of larp), a panoply of new, narrative-based games have arisen within the past decade. Players of and proponents of these games often connect with one another through traditional face-to-face spaces for role-playing games (e.g., gaming conventions such as GenCon and Origins), but also in online affinity spaces (Gee, 2005; Hayes & Duncan, 2012; for example, the community at http://story-games.com and an active Google+ story games community).

At the time of this paper's writing, story-games.com's subtitle is a wry "Writing Sad Things on Index Cards" (story-games.com, 2013), which reflects both a change in tone and material for the contemporary story game. Moving past traditional "heroic adventure" tropes, many story games address a wide range of narrative inspirations, from simulating a Shakespearean drama (e.g., Mark Diaz Truman's, *The Play's the Thing*) to simulating community-building and struggle in a post-apocalyptic community (e.g., Joe McDaldno's *The Quiet Year*) to embodying a specific historical moment (e.g., Frederik Jensen's *Montsegur 1244*). Additionally, utilizing a limited set of game materials compared to other, more complex role-playing games which now often require maps, miniatures, and several forms of polyhedral dice, many story games will rely entirely upon common six-sided dice, and involve players and gamemasters in creating new character information and maps on sheets of paper or index cards on the fly. Compared to the standard bearers of the tabletop role-playing game genre, story games experiment with both game pieces (poker chips or pennies, as in Paul Tevis's *A Penny For My Thoughts*), dice (often six-sided, but with occasional inclusion of other polyhedral dice, such as in Sage LaTorra and Adam Koebel's *Dungeon World*; LaTorra & Koebel), or unusual replacements for decision-making mechanics (such as Impossible Dream's appropriation of Leslie Scott's board game Jenga® in their

horror game *Dread*).

For the most part, story games seem to eschew complex dice calculations and miniature play for games that emphasize role-play and collaborative story development. Though still considered role-playing games by many, the "story game" has innovated through connection to traditions in improvisational theater, as well as international developments in live-action role-play. While it has been only four years since its publication, *Fiasco* is, by many measures, one of the most popular of these "story games," and is currently the #2 ranked role-playing game on RPGGeek (RPGGeek, 2013). But, most importantly, *Fiasco* represents an interesting attempt to create both a simulation of a particular kind of story, as well as a game experience that can constrain and facilitate that simulation.

How to Create a Fiasco

After many years of development, *Fiasco* was published by Bully Pulpit Games in 2009, an independent role-playing game company run by Morningstar and his frequent editor, Steve Segedy. 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. With a playful approach that takes improvisation quite seriously, and often involves settings drawn from historical moments (the aforementioned *The Grey Ranks* and *The Shab Al-Hiri Roach*, but also his *The Last Train Out of Warsaw*), Morningstar has developed games that seem to tread the lines between serious and whimsical, historical and innovative.

The theme of *Fiasco* is provocatively unusual for most tabletop role-playing games, which have historically been dominated by the fantasy, science fiction, and adventure genres (c.f. the aforementioned traditions in Nordic larp, which can range quite widely in theme). *Fiasco* is part of a thematic tradition in story games in which familiar television or film tropes

(e.g., Diaz Truman's *Our Last Best Hope*, which models heroic disaster movies) are modeled to some extent. In *Fiasco*, players collaboratively create new characters to enact a particular kind of story befitting many film noir films, or the chaotic (and often darkly humorous) situations found in many of the films of Joel and Ethan Coen.

In *Fiasco*, every game session begins with a character- and setting-creation exercise, initially based on the guidance of a minimalistic "Playset" consisting of 144 options, each of which represents a nugget that can be used to ground a part of the collaborative narrative. 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 at the beginning of a particular play session will likely yield very different stories. As a role-playing game, the emphasis is decidedly upon creating, playing, and developing characters on the fly through the course of play of a group-built narrative, and not on the play of a pre-set story and setting.

Fiasco's materials are quite minimalistic: The game does not require multiple types of polyhedral dice, miniatures, or graph paper. There are no "player classes," no statistics to keep track of, nor additional "levels" for players to attempt to achieve. 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"). Unlike later stages which focus on the color of the dice, The Setup involves using their rolled values: players first roll all of the dice, 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 seeds for the settings, relationships, objects, and character needs that will drive the rest of the game. Those

created by Morningstar, Segedy, 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. While there are no pre-set characters or storylines in *Fiasco*, note that Playsets often do include seeds of specific characters (e.g., "Jaymie Ludlow" in the present example) for players to interpret in whichever way fits the particular story that evolves through play.

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. After all, *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. This is a thematic element of *Fiasco* that evolves through play, and through the game's mechanics which can constrain character choices.

As stated earlier, the game has been described as a "Coen Brothers RPG," or as 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). While featuring much more freedom to shape the story than many traditional role-playing games, *Fiasco* 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 either "Establish," or describe a scene involving his or her character, naming other character(s) they wish to interact with, or to "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 confronted Professor Mary Jacobs about her knowledge of Jay-

mie 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.

As the game evolves, so does the story, with consequential narrative choices made during each scene, tied to the allocation of dice. Each turn ends 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 the selection of complications ("The Tilt") that affect the second half of 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 describe what happens to their characters 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., Bully Pulpit's recent "American Disasters" Playsets), and the story has wrapped itself up.

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 loosely adapt Hunicke, LeBlanc, and Zubek's (2004) "mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics" or MDA approach toward 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. Of course, this is but one very rough approach to developing a "well played" account for a game — as I have previously argued (Duncan, 2013), multiple perspectives and multiple forms of interpretation are preferable for developing a nuanced account of a game's "well play." But, for starters, describing how the game's rules interact to model a particular narrative form may give us some insight into how *Fiasco* shapes and limits its players' experiences.

Mechanics

First off, it is surprising that such a compelling game experience can arise out of so *few* stated game mechanics. In comparison to most traditional tabletop role-playing games, the *Fiasco* rulebook is downright skimpy: It is only 130 pages long, and not split into "Gamemaster" versus "Player" sections or books. Like many story games, rules are seen somewhat as an encumbrance in *Fiasco*, and, as we'll see, the relatively few number of them are intended to shape, but not overly constrain the players' evolving narrative.

The most relevant of these mechanics for this paper are the game structures that embody *constraints* imposed upon players. For sake of developing a description of the interactions of these mechanics, I have labeled each below (using my own terminology, not Morningstar's), and have briefly described the role each mechanic takes through various stages of the game:

- *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 drive the majority of *Fiasco*'s play, and appear designed to cleverly drive elements of the game that drive *narrative* choices of the players: choices made during The Setup, the choice of who chooses the outcome of scenes, which player accumulates which color dice, and how rolls of these accumulated dice impact the story. With only a few mechanics at play to constrain player activity, other elements of the game's narrative are left to the players' imaginations. In the context of the Games+Learning+Impropriety Playset, this may be 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 had her eye on. The game's basic mechanics thus serve to drive a given story's development, but are not deterministic of any specific narrative, allowing players to insert their creative and performative interests into the evolving story.

Dynamics

One might wonder, then, how these few mechanics structure the activity

of the players so that a particular form of narrative is developed. 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? I argue that through the *interaction* of multiple base mechanics, we can see the development of a form of second-order dynamics that can 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 a limited resource for the entire group, used up through the course of deciding small-scale narrative choices (*Dice Transfers*). 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: If characters tend to get what they want 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. In practice, the game often banks on players getting their way near the beginning of a particular story, leaving a greater number of dark-colored dice for the end. Combined with incorporating story elements provided via the Tilt — or additional complications introduced halfway through the game — the end of the game often features plans falling apart in entertaining and disastrous fashion (for the characters).

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 sub-

sequent chance that consequential *Die Calculations* will be under their influence. This is most clearly seen at The Tilt. The "give a die away" rule in the first half of the game thus becomes a randomizer that is critical for creating balance and variety in Tilt options. If all players ended up with two dice (two light, two dark, or one of each), then the probabilities of who will get to pick the Tilt items would be relatively flat; there are only so many combinations of dice rolls with such a limited palette of dice distributions. But the *Die Transfer* that takes place in the first half of the game throws a random element in for The Tilt. Some players may end up with just one die, some with three or even four or even six dice. The *Die Transfer* is not strategically consequential as much as it boosts the variety of potential outcomes at The Tilt.

Regardless, as the dice pool slowly depletes, 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. Thus, 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 the amorphous and vexed term "fun." The aesthetic of "fun through failure" pervades *Fiasco*, supported by these game mechanics and the collaborative narrative dynamics laid out above. The GM-less nature of *Fiasco* feeds an interesting mixture of individual and collective goals — how does one fairly play a character one has invested in, while also maximizing the sense of "fun" for all? The goal of the game is, in essence, to "create an entertaining story" in which everything goes to hell. And, as such, success in the game is to create a narrative in which "failure" of a sort is not a negative experience.

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 (see Juul, 2013 or, in the context of games and learning, Ramirez, 2012)? While the predominant view of failure in digital game studies is as a challenge to overcome, master a new skills and strategies, and then re-attempt until success, this doesn't quite fit the bill for games such as *Fiasco*. Analyses of games often skew toward the mechanical, privileging the ludic elements of a game over the performative and narrative, an, it seems, that while an eye toward the mechanics of *Fiasco* can give us a sense of how the game's rules shape a particular kind of collaborative story-building, there is another key element of the game's "fun" that has not yet been discussed in detail.

Perhaps this is obvious to anyone invested in story games, but central to the "fun" of *Fiasco* is *role-play*, studied extensively in games from its earliest days (e.g., Fine, 1983) through recent digital forms (e.g., Simkins & Steinkuehler, 2008). Through the process of playing a character within a game of *Fiasco*, each player is faced with the 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 determined by the dice. The social, contextual, and ultimately collaborative nature of role-playing a "well played" game of *Fiasco* is 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. And 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.

Fiasco's Hidden Rules

However, an MDA approach focuses perhaps inordinately on game rules and mechanics as determinants of a game experience. While often very useful as a prescriptive tool for the design of games — a task that the MDA approach has been repeatedly and effectively applied toward — there is, as with all games, a set of social, cultural, and individual factors that influence the game experience. Are there elements of effective *Fiasco* play that aren't easily capturable with the MDA approach? How do *good* games of *Fiasco* develop? Can we begin to make sense of how the game might require certain experiences and dispositions of its players?

Morningstar developed an effective means to capture a particular kind of story through *Fiasco*'s character creation system and scene resolution systems. This does not speak to the quality of Playsets or their implementation in specific game sessions, however — *Fiasco* is as much a game *system* capable of supporting many different settings and characters as it is a game. Morningstar has stated that there is much variation in the quality of Playsets, much of which can be attributed to personal taste, as Playset quality is "quite subjective; what might be really fun for you might not be fun for me" (Figtree & Morningstar, 2013). But, beyond that, the implementation of a Playset often involves the previous experiences and

the dispositions of the players to help craft a "well played" *Fiasco* session; players' previous gaming experiences and attitudes toward participation in the collaborative construction of a common narrative play roles in successful games.

The GM-less nature of *Fiasco* can be liberating for many, but uncomfortable for some, who expect to be players working through someone else's story. Or, the weight of narrative creation can be uncomfortable for some, especially players for whom "role-playing game" has been synonymous with the tracking elements (hit points, experience points, levels) that Morningstar eschewed for *Fiasco*'s heavy relationship-oriented design. For some, the "story game" genre allows for deep, performative forms of play that allow players to inhabit characters and take them into new and unexpected narrative territory. However, for others more deeply invested with games as mechanical systems, the design of *Fiasco*'s mechanics — which are as vehicles to develop the narrative — may cause friction between players. From personal experience, players who enter into a *Fiasco* game attempting to "beat" other players often end up interfering with the play of the group, and can thwart the overall success of the collaborative narrative play that the game affords.

This then raises the issue of what a good *group* of *Fiasco* players is like, and how preparation before play of the game is a factor in a given game's success. To understand the "well played" *Fiasco* game, we have to think a bit about Morningstar's intent to distribute the traditional story-building role in tabletop role-playing games to all of the players, and turn our attention to the assumptions built into the game regarding player attitudes and dispositions. In an extensive interview with blogger Peter Dyring-Olsen for his site *Hete Molevitten*, Morningstar elaborated briefly on these issues:

> *Dyring-Olsen*: I notice that your three "Biggest" games – *The [Shab Al-Hiri] Roach, Grey Ranks* and *Fiasco* – all demand a certain social

> responsibility or maturity in order to run smoothly … *Fiasco* because the system doesn't really hold your hand in this matter. Do you agree with my assessment? What are your thoughts on it – and is it on purpose?
>
> *Morningstar*: I think that is accurate, and it is on purpose only to the extent that I design what I like to play. So I never consciously considered these points, but they emerge, I think, because I want to play that way, and am surrounded by smart people who are capable of it. I am drawn to games that dispense authority more equally (in aggregate) because I love the GM [gamemaster] role and want to share that with my friends, allow them to be broadly inventive, and to let them all surprise me. (Dyring-Olsen & Morningstar, 2010).

And yet, as Dyring-Olsen implies, the "social responsibility" of players in *Fiasco* and other GM-less story games is heightened compared to, say, a game of 4th edition *Dungeons & Dragons*. Morningstar wished to leverage the "inventiveness" of all players, to "let them surprise" him and, presumably, the other players at the table. As with many story games, *Fiasco* players are empowered to take on the role of co-constructors of the game story, and are not simply consumers of a story created by only one of the players who has been given that role. Morningstar also acknowledges that he's "surrounded by smart people who are capable of it," and we should note that this implies a set of hidden social rules that may guide good *Fiasco* games.

As with all games in which players implement the rules of the game, *Fiasco* works best when they are implemented by players who are along for the ride. With expectations that players contribute to the development of the story, as well as concomitant expectations that players strike a similar tone as the other players, the negotiation of *how* a group will play *Fiasco* is thus a hidden element of the game. This is often encouraged to take place before a particular game session, but is not encapsulated within the

formal mechanics of the game — and thus not given much space in the *Fiasco* rule boo. Players are left to either experiment and find out what kind of play works best for each group, or alternately to read suggestions from Morningstar and Segedy (some of which is included in *The Fiasco Companion*; Morningstar & Segedy, 2011). *Fiasco* is a simple and accessible game for newcomers, but for players who have been weaned on games in which the GM is responsible for uncovering a story as the game progresses, previous RPG experiences and expectations can get in the way.

This is to say, then, that perhaps story games such as *Fiasco* help to problematize and reveal what game studies scholarship even means by the term "role-playing game." For a *Well-Played* audience which has focused quite a bit on digital games, *Fiasco* sheds many of the mechanics and genre elements that make "RPGs" (both tabletop and digital) recognizable as such, while arguably forwarding a much more powerful and egalitarian perspective on "role-play" in games. Therefore, a full conception of the "well play" of *Fiasco* necessitates some thought about these genre expectations, how they influence the participation of its players, the collaborative experience of GM-less performative games, and how a mechanics, dynamics, and aesthetics perspective may only get us so far.

Moving forward with story games

This paper is, ultimately, not a complete conception of the "well play" of *Fiasco*, but represents a first dip into the world of story games and the narrative-based role-playing experiences that evolve from them. As a relative novice to these games, I am aware that I have represented only a fraction of the kinds of games within this design space, as well as introduced *Fiasco* without a particularly thorough description of all of the potential antecedents which gave rise to it (from Nordic larp traditions to Morningstar's admitted love of Jensen's *Montsegur 1244* to the recent rise in "structured freeform" games, e.g., Walton, 2006). Story games demand a deeper and more thorough history and analysis, but for the purposes of this paper, *Fiasco* reveals that there are elements of these games that

provide interesting examples of games serving as creative constraints.

And yet, even this cursory look at *Fiasco* provides us with a number of intriguing possibilities for understanding the "well play" of new, story-based, tabletop role-playing experiences. First, the MDA approach allows us to see that such games, minimal as they are, belie a complexity that arises from the interaction of multiple, small game mechanics. The "shape" of the narrative prescribed by *Fiasco* evolves as an interaction between the multiple uses of dice, the turn-based nature of the game, and the choices to establish or resolve scenes. These drive the game toward a conclusion that mimics a particular form of story is one of the successes of *Fiasco*. That the game also requires hidden expectations and attitudes of its players is not exactly a fault of the game, but is reflective of the ways that *Fiasco* (and many other story games) presents sets of game experiences crafted for members of an existing community; investigating the stated rules of a story game are not enough to understand it.

Finally, in terms of games and learning more broadly construed (the original impetus for this paper), *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, mirrored by recent arguments regarding the nature of games (e.g., Juul, 2013). However, the hidden rules of *Fiasco* illustrate that there is much to be explored regarding failure not as an intermediary step on the path to learning with games, but as a narrative impetus for the game itself.

Failure is often 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 exam-

ple 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. To focus on the "well play" of a game like *Fiasco* is thus to focus on role-play, story creation, and performance — not as add-ons to supplement a mechanical and rules-driven experience, but as the core experience itself. While we often focus on game's formal elements as determinants of a gameplay experience, *Fiasco* reminds us that games are much more than networks of rules.

Endnotes

(1) The full "Games+Learning+Impropriety" Playset is available for download as a PDF at http://playfulculturelab.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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