

Welcome to Pick Up and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorders.

I step off the train and deliver an episode to you while I walk home.

I'm Brendan Riley.

Well, good afternoon listeners.

It's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago.

It's pretty breezy and a little cloudy, but generally it's very comfortable.

So it's a reasonably good April day.

You could be raining and it's not raining, so I'm happy.

In my board games and literature class today, my students played some games that were focused on storytelling, so I thought it would be interesting to talk a little bit about games focused on storytelling.

I thought it'd start with my experience in role-playing games, tabletop role-playing games, and then talk a little bit about the storytelling games that I have played and what I think of them.

So start with, I've been playing role-playing games often on since I was in 10th grade.

In 10th grade, a buddy of mine, his cousin moved to our town and his cousin brought role-playing game books with him and invited us to play them with him, and that's how I started playing Dungeons and Dragons.

In that group, we played Dungeons and Dragons pretty regularly for several years.

And then in college, I not only did I play Dungeons and Dragons, but I also played the Star Wars role-playing game, and it was after that that I started into other role-playing games as well.

Since then, I haven't played very many in-person role-playing games since college.

I played a couple here in there in grad school, but no regular groups.

But I do have one friend who is a very established and committed game master, and he has several times invited me to join him in online sort of Zoom-based games, meeting weekly or bi-weekly.

And so over the years, I have played in three relatively long campaigns with him, or two relatively long ones, and one that was slightly shorter.

The first long one was a game of continuum.

Continuum is a time-travel role-playing game that's really good.

There's some really complex sort of crunchy stuff in it, but very entertaining game about being a time traveler.

And then for a short while, that game went for a while, but then it sort of dissolved.

Then for a short while, we were playing a game of gum shoe using Star Wars dice and the Warhammer 40,000 setting.

It was a very complicated homebrew that was pretty fun, but that game only lasted about a year, I think, maybe a little less than a year.

The continuum game went maybe three or four years.

And then most recently, with that same group I've been participating in a game of amber, the Diceless Role-Playing Game, based on the Rogers and the Las Vegas novels.

And we've been playing that game for three years or so.

And that one is interesting, I'm playing it with my GM, I'm his name is Rolfe, and a couple of his friends that live in the Seattle area.

And then one friend who lives, I believe in Florida and me, I live in Chicago.

So we've got three different time zones represented in the game.

We usually start about nine o'clock central time, and I log off about midnight, but they usually

play at least one or two hours beyond when I play.

So that's kind of the arc of my role-playing experience.

I've also played a little bit of paranoia as well.

So those are the games that I've played as tabletop role-playing games.

So other than the online play in Zoom or before that Skype, previous to that, I would,

I have, or alongside that, I have played some short form role-playing games in a couple different forms.

So I wanted to talk about those four different role-playing games or storytelling focus games that I've played, actually five, and what they're like.

I'm going to start with the most gamified ones and work my way toward the least gamified ones.

So I would say the most gamified one is that I've played is once upon a time.

Once upon a time is a storytelling card game in which you are telling a story collaboratively, but you're trying to work in in a germane way the elements of your cards that you have.

So in the game you have a bunch of cards, and those cards have different fairy tale elements on them.

And when it's your turn, you add to the story that's being told in a way that blends the elements you have on your cards into the story.

And you score those cards when you blend them into the story.

And the goal is to use up all your cards.

That's kind of it.

I played this game a few times.

I remember thinking it was fine, but ultimately I think the game element, the ability to

wander the way that you win, got in the way of the storytelling that the desire to get your cards in made sense, but also drove you to tell your story quickly in a way that fit the rules, but also got your hands, cards out of your hands.

So like ultimately I played it a few times, but I haven't played it in a long time.

And part because I don't like the mechanism that drives the storytelling.

The next one that is maybe a more effective way of gamifying the different pieces that you might have is death machine, which is a storytelling game of creative assassination.

This is a game I played a few times when it came out.

It has since left my collection some time ago, but the premise is that we live in a world where everyone can use this machine that's relatively easy to access and it will tell you how you're going to die.

I think as it doesn't tell you when and it tells you sort of the way that the oracle of delifier would tell you things.

It sometimes is straightforward, but usually it's a skew in a way that's misleading.

For example, one of the examples they give in the rules booklet is for example you might get a card that says boating accident as the way that you die and then you end up dying when a car towing a boat, the boat comes off the trailer and crashes into your car and kills you.

So that's the sort of thing that the machine could do.

And the premise is that we are hitmen who have been hired to kill someone and we know what the machine said about how that person will die and so we have to come up with an assassination that will make their card come true because if you try to kill someone and you disregard what the card says, you will just fail to kill them.

It won't work.

The destiny of the universe will get in the way.

So that is a sort of storytelling game that I've played and I thought it was fun, but

I don't know, almost nobody else did.

So again, that went, that left my collection some time ago.

I have two other games that come in boxes that have a kind of gamified element.

One of them I believe I talked about here on the podcast some time ago.

This is Alice is missing.

Alice is missing is a storytelling game, which is about a bunch of high schoolers who have discovered that their friend Alice is missing.

The weird part or interesting part about this game is when you play it, you play it silently.

So everybody has each other's phones and you play by texting one another from your phones and that's the way that you communicate for the game.

So the idea is that you are telling things about what's happening, you're sharing information about what's going on.

In the game, you each have information about Alice, some things that are well known, some things that you suspect, some things that are hidden and over the course of the game you're going to reveal some of those to other players and you're going to converse with other players about them and so on and so on.

This game is pretty interesting, it's a little weird and I played it once but I don't think I need to play it again.

I don't really like the texting angle of it because you really don't spend that much time actually talking to each other instead you spend your time trying to text, which

just doesn't feel the same.

There also was like sort of at the climax, there was this weird ding-monger where it felt like we wanted to make stuff happen and the game doesn't really have an engine to do that very well and so the end of the game was for us, not great.

But that's Alice is missing a game that comes in a box and doesn't have a GM.

A better storytelling game, one that's come out in two different editions now is Fiasco.

Fiasco originally was a game that came in a book and then you could download these or buy these play sets that had information and rolling tables and then the more recent edition of Fiasco uses cards to manage everything and the play sets come in little decks of cards.

The nice thing about the play sets in the new edition is that they're a little bit more carefully managed.

The downside is it's harder to share your own play sets because they're cards and you have to figure out, you have to actually make the cards, either make them or print them or buy them.

So the form factor is a little harder to do home-brew stuff with.

It's a little less of a role-playing game and more of a tabletop storytelling game.

If you haven't played Fiasco, the premise is that you are telling a story similar to Fiasco movies.

A Fiasco movie is something like Fargo is probably the best example of it.

It's like a bunch of well-meaning dimwits who maybe make some bad choices but then they have also bad luck and the bad choices plus the bad luck lead to terrible outcomes for everybody.

The way that Fiasco works, I really like the setup system where you use these cards to establish relationships between the different players without even having established the

characters yet.

Your characters emerge out of the relationships with the other players.

Works really well and provides for a great element of interactivity that makes for good storytelling.

The game also has a really good system of nudging the story.

I like the way that everybody works together to tell the tale and the tales are interactive in that on your turn you get to tell part of the story and you can either set up the scene that you're going to tell in which case the other players get to collaborate and decide does the scene end good for your character or badly for your character or you can say I want the scene between these two characters and the other players set up what the scene is and then you get to decide whether it ends well or ends badly for your character.

So you get some guidance but not or some control but not 100% control.

I like that mix of different elements that makes for the story in Fiasco.

Fiasco is great.

And then so Fiasco and once upon a time the storytelling game and death machine are all games where the cards sort of drive the storytelling elements.

I did want to talk about analysis missing.

I did want to talk about two more games that are more role-playing, centric.

They do have some mechanism system but it's very much about telling stories.

This is a quiet year and microscope.

A quiet year and microscope are both indie RPGs and you acquire them by purchasing a PDF.

I mean they do have printed books as well but I've always just had the I bought the PDFs and what you get or what you do in these games is there's a system that interacts and a mechanism that the players collaborate around that results in storytelling opportunities.

In microscope you're working together to establish some ideas about a place and then you are telling stories about that place at varying degrees of zoomed in or zoomed out of focus so it might be the story of a town and at some points you're telling a story about the geological evolution of the ground under the town for the 100,000 years.

In other points you might be telling the story of an afternoon between two people in the town.

The idea is that over time you have come up with a series of summaries of what's going on in the town and you sort of play out, you fill in different gaps between these elements as you play.

It's a collaborative storytelling game because no player has individual ownership of particular characters or particular plot points.

Instead you're all working together to tell the story.

It's very collaborative.

The other story, the other game that has a similar feel to that is a quiet year.

In a quiet year you're all collaborating on a map and the map includes time-based elements and you're telling stories about what's going on in your community over the course of a year and the premise is it's supposed to apocalypse a community where there has been some terrible times.

You've reached a point of relative peace and prosperity but in a year something bad is coming again.

So what you're doing is you're telling the story of the year in between one calamity and another.

It's a really interesting game while worth trying.



So I don't play these games as much as I would like to.

I introduce them to students but myself I don't get to play them but I wish I would.

So maybe I'm going to make some effort in the next year to play some more storytelling focused games.

I think that would be a lot of fun and I would like to do that.

So long those lines.

What storytelling games do you like?

Head over to Board Game Geek, Guild 3269 and share the games that you like to play over there.

I'd love to hear what they are.

In the meantime thanks for joining me on my walk today.

I hope your next walk.

is as pleasant as mine was.

Bye bye.

[Music]

Brought to you by Rattlebox Games.

[Music]

(gentle music)