Welcome to Pick Up and Deliver, the podcast where I pick up my audio recorder as I step

out of the store and deliver an episode to you while I walk home.

I'm Brendan Riley.

Well, good afternoon listeners.

It's a cloudy day here in suburban Chicago.

I've just finished running some errands.

I'm on my way home.

And I thought I would talk to you about some board game stuff.

I was playing a game of fantasy realms recently and it became evident that one of the challenges

of that game is having a sense of the scope of the cards.

That the more you've played it, the more you have a sense of like which cards can come

up how often, where they can go, and how likely you are to find say a pairing to go with

one of the cards that you have.

Like if you're fishing for a combo, how likely are you to get that combo?

It got me to thinking about something that happens that I am often concerned about when I am

showing people a game that they haven't played before.

And that's what in baseball they call the home field advantage.

I guess they call that in most sports that are played on fields.

And I think the idea of home field advantage is

that you might have a sense of how to play in your specific venue that there might

be a spot where the grass is a little squishier or where the sun shines at a certain time

of day or there might be aspects of the physical playing on the field or you have an advantage

if you're on your home field.

Similarly, generally in a professional sports capacity, you also have your fans in the

stadium.

In the field of mobile home field, we know human beings, we are emotional creatures that share

our emotions with one another.

We're communal in that way.

And so the shared emotion of cheering for a group or booing a group or whatever rubs off

on the players, I think.

So there is home field advantage.

So I got to thinking about what does that mean in board games?

What are the different ways that board games have home field advantage?

Have experience that they privilege experience?

Obviously, the first way would be understanding the systems of the game.

Just generally, that on your first play of a game, you don't understand how all the systems

interact.

You have a theoretical view of it.

You've been taught the rules.

Maybe you've watched a video.

You have a sense of how they're supposed to work.

But you haven't actually seen them in action.

You haven't wrestled with the challenge of manipulating the components or moving your

piece or doing whatever it is you need to do in order to make the systems work and work

them well.

You have an idea of how it works, but you don't have the practicality.

That is just the advantage of experience.

I'm not sure you're necessarily talking about that per se, but rather which games are more attuned to that kind of privilege in which games are less attuned to it or have more room for inexperienced players to do well.

Of course, one of the main ways that this happens or doesn't happen is in luck.

The more luck a game has, the more the more chance an inexperienced player has to keep up with an inexperienced player.

So I would say that's one part of it.

I would also say the easier a system is to grasp and grasp fully the better chance that a player has, a new player has to keep up with an inexperienced player.

Along those lines, I would say push your luck games with relatively simple mechanisms, something like flip seven or skull.

skull is a bluffing game, not a push your luck game, but still.

Those games you should be able to be playing them very well your first play.

I wouldn't point to those games as ones where an inexperienced player has a dramatic skill benefit over a new player.

But there are plenty of games where different aspects of the game mean that having played at a bunch gives you an outsized advantage beyond just the you're familiar with the game.

Or maybe the kind of familiarity you build with the game from playing it far out ways, the kind of familiarity somebody is going to get from going through a normal teach of a game.

I'm setting aside somebody who looks through all the cards and watches some playthroughs and kind of vicariously develops some experience with the game.

I'm thinking of somebody who sits down at the table with you to play the game, maybe they've heard of it, but they don't know anything about it.

You teach them how to play, maybe they watch your rules video, maybe both, and then they play.

So, I thought of three different ways that home field advantage emerges in games like that.

The first one I'm just going to call cards index.

And this is a metonymy for a larger issue of understanding all the things the game has and the way those pieces interact mean that you have an advantage over somebody who is new and just hasn't seen things come out.

The game that I think I feel strongest about this happening in is London.

London is a game from Martin Wallace.

I really like it.

It's a very interesting game where you are giving cards and using those cards to interact with the board and so on.

But each card has a slightly different power in it.

So when you go to play it, if you are playing carefully, you have to read every card that comes out to think about what's going to happen.

That means new players, there's a lot of information overload and a lot to deal with.

On top of that, you have to constantly be discarding cards.

Every time you play a card in London, you also have to discard a card of the same color.

So you're taking in twice as many cards as you're going to play.

Meaning that you're reading all these cards and then you're going to have to decide which of them you're not going to use.

It's a delicious tension, but it really bogs the game down in terms of how long it's

going to go, how quick it's going to be, and how hard it is or not is.

To hold info in your head.

And then on top of that, there are some cards that just have value if you play them in a

certain way, but the value they have isn't immediate or easy to understand.

I think you could find the same experience with race for the galaxy.

People who've played race for the galaxy a lot really understand the nuances of how the

cards interact and they know what to look for if they have a particular card or a particular

combo.

Being able to interact with those cards and anticipate what's coming really goes a long

way toward finding yourself winning the game versus if you don't know what's there, it's

much harder to do.

Another game that I would put in that category is Everdell.

Everdell again has a big stack of cards.

If you have all the expansions, the stack of cards is bigger and bigger.

There's a bunch of different villagers that all do different kinds of things because

the game has a hard hand limit of eight.

You're not allowed to draw cards if you have eight so you can't go over and discard down.

So the game prevents card cycling in pretty important ways.

You also have a limit to how many cards you can play so every card you play is an important

choice.

There are ways to get rid of cards, but if you haven't played before, it's not clear to

you how important that is or not.

And as you think about your strategy, you may or not understand why you should be thinking about getting rid of cards from your tableau.

For example.

So all of that means that the nuances of what to do with the cards are somewhat obscured by the complexity and the volume of different cards that can come out.

A couple other games that have similar things.

Fantasy Realms is another one where every card has a power on it so every card might be useful to you.

Meaning every card that comes out in the market has to be read.

Elysium, the Dunston and Gilbert game, which I really, really like and haven't played for a very long time.

That one also has this problem of every card does something so everybody has to look at every card that does something.

That one also has the challenge of having a huge market of cards that everybody has to look at and then you're all drafting those cards.

So the need to understand what the cards are is a real challenge.

And then I will point to Res Arcana and Villagers as two more games where understanding what cards are available and how they can be used really gives players with experience and advantage over new players.

The second way that Home Field Advantage or Experience in a game emerges I think.

This one's probably closest to, well if you've played the game a lot you'll understand.

But I think I'm thinking of it in specific ways.

And this is mastering complex systems.

So if three games here, Dunston and Point 2, through the ages, Arc Nova and Terraforming

Mars.

Each of these games has a whole bunch of different systems which have generally different weight

in terms of how important they are for winning the game.

Often the mix of systems allows you to win the game in different ways.

So there is an element of choosing your path that works best tactically as well as strategically.

But there is also an element of just understanding the way that resources move where points come

from.

All this can be explained in the abstract and often is, but Experience players come to

understand the interaction of the systems just in a lot more depth than people who are

new to the game.

And so the likelihood of somebody who is new to the game outpacing an Experience Player is

pretty low because there's just so many different nuances to understand.

And you come to understand those nuances by mastering the complexity of the system.

Through the ages, I've talked about playing that literally hundreds of times now.

And that game is very challenging because there are a whole bunch of different currencies

to keep track of.

And as you compete with other players, if you get behind or ahead in some of those currencies,

you can dramatically affect your ability to do well as you interact with those other players.

You can affect your ability to score cards.

The interactivity of the military, for instance, if you let yourself get behind in that, that

can be game-roaning.

At the same time, if you spend too much energy on the military, military is generally not

giving you a ton of points.

It can, if you get way ahead, but it won't always.

The end game movement is really interesting as well.

Kind of understanding how to build a robust base on which to move toward that end game

is a big challenge.

And I think it comes with time, even if you've had it explained to you.

Arcanova has similar considerations than I would say so to terraforming Mars.

All three of these games, plus there was one more that I named, which I have now forgotten.

All of these games, I think, really benefit from repeated plays, of course, but also just

very specifically the home field advantage of understanding where the complexity lies

and the hidden implications of that complexity is really important and it's something that

you only get through practice.

And thus, experienced players are going to win against new players much more often than

in games that don't have that same facet.

All right, the third way I would suggest that games have this home field advantage is in

the nature of efficiency.

Now y'all know, I love myself a good Euro game.

Most of my top games are, in fact, Euro games.

If I were going to pick a short phrase to describe most Euro games or what makes them Euro

games, I would say, efficiency puzzles.

Euro games are about finding and maximizing efficiency in order to accomplish things.

Some games, that efficiency is razor tight, something like Tricarion or a Gricola.

These are games where if you haven't maximized your efficiency going into play and you're

playing against someone who is, they are going to roll you because the game is so tight

that a misstep can make you fall behind.

Anyway, that's very hard to catch up.

And again, like the Mastering Complexity piece, understanding where the efficiencies of

these games lie and how to maximize them really becomes a home field advantage because while

you can in the abstract acquire this knowledge, I think most of the time with games like Tricarion

or Gricola.

And to some degree of session, although obsession is heavily luck driven or there is a significant

luck component to it.

As you play these games, I think they are really compelling in how they reward the home

player advantage.

The last game under efficiency that I wanted to talk about is a slightly different one.

This is Century.

Century is an interesting example for me because I think it does not have a ton of home

field advantage.

It has some because the first time you play it, you might not really see the nuances of

how pieces go together.

But I have discovered that new players, if taught well, can really have a significantly

strong chance at succeeding at century.

Because I would say the way the economy works in that game is visible in its entirety.

Unlike other games that have a more obscure economy or have enough complexity that it becomes

very hard to understand where the different pieces go and where they come from.

In century, it is a narrow enough window of things that you really do have the opportunity

to succeed in gaining the most efficiency.

So those are my three thoughts about kinds of games or ways that games provide home field advantage.

I'm curious, what other things do you have to suggest?

Does experience, is this really just a way of saying experience?

Having experience playing the game gives you an advantage.

What are the other ways that having played the game a bunch of times gives you dramatic advantage beyond just experience with the game or ways that you can characterize the experiences of the game to capitalize on them?

Share those thoughts over on board game geek and guild 3269.

I hope to see you there.

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

I hope you're next one.

This is Palsies Mindless.

Bye bye.

♪ I know, I know, I know ♪