(soft music)

Welcome to Pick Up and Deliver, the Podcast

where I pick up my audio recorder

as I step off the train and deliver an episode to you

while I walk home.

I'm Brendan Riley.

(upbeat music)

Well good afternoon listeners,

it's a lovely day here in suburban Chicago

and I am enjoying a casual walk home

as I seek to talk about board games a bit more with you today.

I was looking over my board games played

and thinking a little bit about how we learn games.

And I'm really interested in the learning hurdles

of asynchronous learning.

I'm thinking about this because I'm teaching

in asynchronous class this summer mystery and detective fiction,

which is of course I've taught many times

and I've taught several times asynchronously online

and the challenge with an asynchronous online class

is finding a way to make it feel dynamic and engaging

and active when you are in fact not online

at the same time.

So coming up with a variety of different kinds of activities

to engage with the genre,

engage with the spirit of the thing

but at the same time tackle the process of teaching

when not all the students are online together.

Online teaching has of course been something people

have been doing for a long time

so there are lots of resources to explore

but I thought for the purposes of our podcast here

I would talk a little bit about my experience

learning games online and thinking about that

in terms of learning games generally.

So to start with I wanna talk about how I learn a game

that I'm gonna play on the tabletop.

Now let's, there's two different,

okay we'll see there's three different categories

of game I can learn on the tabletop.

The first one is learning a game from someone else.

The most obvious or common way that this would happen

would be you go to a game night, you go to a game event

and somebody brings a game that you want to play

that you've never played before.

They say "hey you wanna play this?" and you say "yes"

and so they teach you how to play.

This is for a lot of people the main way

that they learn games are sometimes the only way

that they learn games.

So being able to teach a game well is crucial

if you have a game you want to bring out and show people.

Of course the more complex the game is,

the harder it is to teach it well

and the harder it is to learn it well.

It doesn't take very long before I think it's totally

reasonable to assert that a first play of a game

is a learning play and shouldn't "count" quote unquote.

One example of how this happens is the tradition

my family has of box topping a board game.

This is the phrase we use for,

I swapped it from blue peg pink peg podcast.

It's the phrase we use for recording the results

of a game play on the inside of the box cover.

So we'll play a game and then after the game's open

we write the winner and the scores,

the players and all their scores and indicate the winner

on the inside of the cover of the box of the game.

I think this is a really fun tradition

because it results in the sort of ongoing record

of what the game is and how much people have played it.

It's a fun little thing to do.

Also for 99% of games the inside of the box cover

is not like a treasured piece of a game

so somebody who is maybe acquiring a second hand later

usually won't have a big, won't have a huge problem

with the idea that there are scores

and results written inside of the game box.

So when I'm doing a teach,

when I'm teaching people a game for the first time,

one, if I can have a player aid available I will

something that they can follow along with.

Two, I give people stuff first.

Generally we'll set up the game before I start doing the teach

and while I'm setting up the game I will actively ask people

to do things.

Here, please shuffle these cards, deal these out.

Here you do this, you do this.

And I'll give people their pieces,

whatever their player components are.

I think it's nice to give people something to handle

while you're doing the teach,

something they can explore or fiddle with

because a lot of people, it's easier to pay attention

if you have a sort of distractor.

So that's the setup that's getting it ready.

Then the next thing that I'll do is I introduce the theme.

Who are we?

What are we doing?

For me, theme helps you enjoy a game

because you can understand a story that's being told

by the play of it, but it also helps you teach a game

because if the way that a game works makes thematic sense,

you'll remember it better.

Even if it doesn't make thematic sense

but it makes narrative sense, you could remember it better.

I've mentioned many times on this podcast,

the classic rules exceptions that

Vlaada Chvátil puts in your rule books

that are narratively explained

and thus they stick in your head.

For example, the narrative explanation

that dragons are messy so they can't eat

in the cafeteria in dungeon lords, for example,

or what happens to an animal that ages out

in the market in dungeon pets.

These are narratively explained

and they provide rules that you then remember

through that explanation.

I'm reminded of, I've read about a game called

Wilmot's Warehouse which is a shared,

it's a cooperative memory game

in which you're trying to put items into a warehouse

and then remember where those items are

when you are going to get things.

And the way that you play or the part

that makes the game interesting is that

when you're putting things in the warehouse,

you're supposed to use kind of a narrative explanation

to decide where you're putting them and when.

And it seems like for a lot of people

that narrative explanation ends up functioning

really well to hold the game together.

So I'm interested in this idea of narrative

as a teaching tool and that's why I introduced

the setting or the theme first.

Following that up and in the in person thing,

I then I use how to win as the next step.

What are you trying to do in order to accomplish

the goal of winning the game?

I think if you don't sort of set people up with that,

then often the teaching moment feels a little awkward

because you haven't really explained how to win.

Now with a lot of games, how to win

really ends up just being earned the most points,

which isn't that helpful because earned the most points

isn't a very functional or useful way

to engage with the question of how to win.

Win earned the most points, well how do you earn the most points?

Okay, well now we've reached some complexity.

Nonetheless, you could say earn the most points

by building houses, controlling land,

and gathering resources.

There you can kind of provide the paths

by which people earn the most points.

Another example of that would be like with revive,

you might say earn the most points

by building out your technology tree,

accomplishing things related to your scoring goals

and collecting the artifacts to multiply those scoring goals.

That would be a way to explain how to win for revive.

So after you've introduced this theme or setting

and explain how to win, then you go into

what you actually do in the game, how it works,

and that varies game to game, what makes the most sense.

And then generally you hit what our group calls

the Aldrich line, named after our friend Brennan Aldrich,

who when he teaches you a complex game,

he usually gets to a point where it's,

"well, I could keep explaining things

"or we could just start playing and you can learn as we go."

And generally the idea is there,

the more complex the game is,

the more stuff you're verbally and overtly going to leave out

of the teaching moment.

And instead, people will learn on the fly, you acknowledge,

this is a learning game, I haven't told you everything,

I'll tell you other things as they come up.

But if I teach you everything,

you're gonna lose stuff before we get to do it.

So I think this is a really useful way

to think about teaching in an online space.

But the other experience I have as I think about this

is the experience of learning an online game asynchronously.

So the challenge of an asynchronous online game

is that if you don't know the rules already,

it's very hard to pick up the rules

when you go to make your take your turns

because the rules set is often very slippery

until you've got it set in with narrative.

That like when I learn a complex game,

I will learn it and then play it

and the playing of it

cement the rules in my head to a degree.

Now, if I wait a year to play it again,

I probably lose a lot of that, but generally that's how it works.

But when I play online, if it's a new game

I've never played before, sometimes we just start playing

and I don't really have time to absorb the rules.

Other times I have to read the rules on my own,

maybe I'll take the time to watch a video

about how to play or whatever.

But the challenge is I do all of that

and then we start the game.

And if I'm playing asynchronously, I make one move

and then I don't make another,

I mean, maybe I make two moves a day or one move

and then I don't go again for 24 hours or whatever.

And without having had the experience of the narrative

setting in and the shared experience of the rules

that first time, it's very hard to get those rules

to settle in to my brain in future.

Probably what I need to do for complex games

that I wanna play online is watch a playthrough.

I probably need to vicariously put myself

in the situation of the players

and watch them play a whole game of it

because then I'll be able to understand

what they were doing and why.

And then when it's my turn, I can hold some of those ideas

more strongly because I've seen them play out.

That might have to be it.

I know some people who just don't learn,

they don't play online games until they play

them in real life and I can understand that as well.

So how does that connect to my asynchronous online teaching?

Well, the first challenge is thinking about

how to make the individual moments in the online teaching

have that little bit of teaching reminder

so that we're staying fresh.

The idea that when we read an assignment

we would then remember the previous assignments

that we were offered is a little sketchy, right?

We're not in person to share these explorations

of the rules so maybe think about how to find

that nuance a little more carefully.

I think there's also the question of

what kinds of engagement are interesting.

Games where I have an amore elaborate turn,

I think are easier to learn the rules from

in the online space.

For example, both revive and through the ages,

have fairly elaborate online turns

that you get to take without other people

doing anything in between.

The Vladimír Suchý games I think are pretty good

for online play for the same reason

that when you play underwater cities

or when you play a Praga Caput Regni in those games,

when you take your turn, you're sometimes

at the relatively simple turn.

But other times you're doing several things

on your turn before you pass play.

The more stuff you do, the longer moments

of engagement you have to connect.

I think by contrast something like innovation

might be harder to learn because on some turns,

very little happens.

And so you have to kind of hold in your head

a bunch of different things as you play.

I have been playing Gaia Project and Age of Innovation

a bit and those games are, I have done okay learning them.

The thing is the way that I learned them

is that I have played a lot of Terra Mystica online.

And then having played a lot of Terra Mystica,

I understand the basic process, but it's still,

I played a lot of Gaia Project

that I never got very good at it because I think,

because I never really found the through line,

the narrative through line that makes all the different

pieces of what you're doing in that game come together for me.

And I feel like the same thing will probably happen

with Age of Innovation.

One trick would probably be to play it online synchronously

sometime when I have some time,

find a synchronous game of it and have that going

while I'm doing other things.

And then once my turn I can take a turn,

but I'm engaged with it for an hour or so

as I play with other people.

That seems like one key approach that I could take.

So that does suggest for the mystery class,

the online asynchronous mystery class,

building activities where I'm asking people to engage

in a sustained effort for a while.

I want you to do this thing, it's gonna take an hour,

here's what you're doing.

Rather than something that they'll do piecemeal

or in small parts over time,

because that sustained engagement is probably where we get

learning moments, hopefully learning moments

without too much distraction from other things.

This is often what makes in-class experiences work really well.

It has sustained in-person, focused kinds of engagements.

Well, I started out with this trying to talk

about asynchronous online learning

and I don't feel like I did that very much,

but hopefully this was a thoughtful conversation

about teaching and learning games.

I would love to hear your thinking

about how to best teach and learn games.

Share your thoughts on that over on BoardGameGeek

in Guild 3269.

I would love to hear from you about that

if you want to share your thoughts directly.

You can email me, brendan@rattleboxgames.com

or send me an BoardGameGeek message to Wombat929,

which is my username over there.

Thanks for joining me on my walk today.

I hope your next walk is as pleasant as mine was.

Bye-bye.

(upbeat music)

Brought to you by Rattlebox Games

[MUSIC]