

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

I step out of the post office and deliver an episode to you while I walk home.

I'm Brendan Riley.

While greeting listeners, it's a gloomy day here in suburban Chicago.

We've got a light drizzle going.

My glasses are getting some water on them.

But not so bad that I can't do an episode of the podcast for you.

So let's jump into it.

So my family has made significant progress in playing Frosthaven.

We are about 65 plays in.

We have covered most of the three main storylines and we're running into a problem where we don't have enough to do.

So I've been looking around online and we've discovered some places where we could or should have been doing other things than we did.

Our things got revealed in a different way than we would have liked them too.

And it leads me to this episode which I'm calling The Perils of Freeform Storytelling, a Frosthaven lament.

Now I want to be clear first, I think Frosthaven is an incredible achievement.

I think it's a remarkably good game.

I've been really enjoying it, but the pathing system for giving scenarios is much less satisfying than I would like it to be.

So I wanted to talk a little bit about the structure of the way the game is designed and where I think the choices that are made to enable freeform storytelling or enable

storytelling that feels like it has a lot of agency make it difficult for players or make it difficult to ensure that the overall narrative experience is a positive one.

So to start with, I want to be clear, I think Frosthaven is a really interesting, fun, exciting game.

I've loved my time with it and I'm looking forward to playing it a lot more.

I love that it has a very wide open play space.

The idea of being able to explore things in a variety of different ways is really compelling.

That's great.

I love that there is a depth of possibility in the non-dungeons spaces.

There's a lot of potential there for really interesting things.

You have this town where you can build these buildings and you defend the town from monsters and different stuff happens.

That's the, there's interesting possibilities there, potential for compelling experience.

And there is a huge variety and mastery possibilities in the different types of characters.

This too has been really compelling and I think leads to a lot of possibility in the experience of the game.

The overall flow of Frosthaven is remarkable.

I think that the skill that available in the characters is incredible.

The design space that has been created with a variety of different characters is works really well.

So broadly speaking, those are the things I like about Frosthaven.

However, what I'm going to talk about for the rest of the episode are the places where

I think that the choices they made which were designed to create open storytelling experiences.

In fact, hamper our ability to enjoy those storytelling experiences by undermining them.

Okay?

But I'm, that's what I'm talking about here.

I guess last warning, we haven't played the entirety of Frosthaven but we've played a lot of it and my plan here is to talk about the game without boundaries about spoilers.

In order for me to talk in a freeform way without very careful planning, I'm just going to talk about the points that I've noted down and if I spoil something, well, I apologize for that.

So if you are playing Frosthaven or you think you're going to anytime soon or you're concerned about having elements of it spoiled, maybe now is the time to search out another episode of Pickup and Deliver.

There are 730 some episodes to choose from, but this one I am going to be talking about Frosthaven in detail.

So start with, I want to pause it a question about what kind of storytelling Frosthaven wants to do.

The genre that it explores and the kinds of things that the game's choices seem to aspire toward.

It would best be described as role-playing game.

Gloomhaven and Frosthaven feel like an adaptation of a Dungeons & Dragons style role-playing game where you have adventures that have skills, their skills get better over time, they gain equipment and they use that equipment to go do missions and gain experience and loot.

You could get a long way describing Gloomhaven before people realized it was not a tabletop role-playing game but as in fact a Euro style puzzle game or it is a puzzle game anyway.

It's fun and adventurous and everything but it is a puzzle game.

It's about how to solve the puzzle of defeating the monsters, maximizing the efficiency of your characters and accomplishing some of your goals along the way.

I think this desire, the narrative desire to create a role-playing experience and the desire to create a mechanically interesting algorithmic experience in the Dungeons call part of the game are inherently at odds with one another.

Alright so I'm going to start with agency for players.

In tabletop role-playing games, agency for players is always a tricky element because it is the core of what games like that are about.

The idea is players have agency to decide or to explore what is going on in the world around them.

The Dungeons Master or Storyteller or whatever title you have for them is providing a series of encounters for them and hopefully they feel engaged or enthusiastic about tackling those encounters.

They should feel like they have some choice or some ability to explore those encounters but often the real heart of the magic in a tabletop role-playing game is the feeling that you decided what you're going to do and then you discovered this amazing story.

There is a two way street here, right?

Collaborative storytelling like Dungeons and Dragons often requires that players remember the rule at the heart of improv, yes and, the idea that I am going to hear what you're saying and I'm going to build upon it rather than reject it.

Now in Dungeons and Dragons often the way that could happen is that the DM or GM will offer a couple different story hooks in the players will pick one of them to follow.

The rejection part would be the GM offers a couple story hooks and the players instead choose to start building a farm or they just do something completely different from the rest of the story that had been planned.

This is a common joke among GMs that you can make all these plans and your players will find the one detail that you will just throw in for flavor and they'll hone in on that and off they'll go into a completely different story and you'll have to roll with it.

So the agency that allows for that kind of experience and the frustration GMs feel when they put a lot of planning into a story and then they don't get to use that story because players have decided to do something else is at the heart of this collaborative storytelling process that is Dungeons and Dragons.

And when a tabletop game tries to replicate that experience there are some fundamental flaws.

For one, the stories in this game in Gloomhaven or Frosthaven are all planned out already.

There is no not doing the stories.

For instance in Frosthaven in order to play the game you have to do a scenario.

The scenarios are generated by the game and you have a variety of them available to you at any given time.

You pick one and you go do it.

I think the game makes the most sense if you stick to a storyline so you pick multiple games in a storyline and you follow that so that you can kind of keep track of what's going on.

But the game does allow you to pursue multiple lines of inquiry at once.

So the game has some openness to following different plot hooks but it isn't really open.

You only can do the plot hooks that are available to you.

Where Frosthaven feels like it's trying to offer an open world, it is not in fact offering one.

And this is one of the challenges we have faced.

As we've gotten to the point where we have finished two of the three storylines, it sort of looks like we're on the verge of finishing the third one.

And there's a whole bunch of content we haven't accessed yet.

And this leads to the element that comes out of a role playing game which is that as the GM you could nudge your players back onto the path.

In some context people might call this "rail-roading" it's described as bad being a bad GM because you're forcing players to follow a story that they didn't want to follow.

They say we're going to leave town and you say the gates to the town are closed you can't leave.

But there's a party happening at the pub, right?

Like you come up with a narrative reason they have to do the one thing you prepot you plant.

I would say a good GM plan would be okay you leave, they go on to the road in the woods as they're going through the woods they encounter a troop of travelers who are having a party and you just move the party in the pub that you'd planned to be in this clearing in the woods.

You don't have to tell the players that that's what you did.

But if you have a story you want them to encounter you can shift it around try to be nimble in your storytelling.

Frost haven't really have that.

But in making it appear that it does I think we actually lose narrative coherence.

One of the challenges we had because we would shift around from story to story because the game kind of said you could you can pick any of the open stories.

We didn't really follow the story lines as close as you should and often we forgot what was going on.

So sometimes we'd have to go back and read stuff from previous adventures or we'd have to remind ourselves or we just play and the narrative wouldn't make as much sense as it should.

Now I think this is entirely Frost haven's fault certainly is ours for not proceeding in a logical manner.

But one of the things I'm feeling now is that given how far we've gotten and it's clear we missed some things. There's this puzzle book that you need to kind of solve in a timely fashion in order to produce, proceed things.

And then there are these challenges which feel optional in our in fact optional but they unlock a ton of content.

And because we didn't do these challenges we were finding ourselves behind the gun in terms of finishing other kinds of content.

So those are two of the gameplay elements in Frost haven that feel as though the game would have worked better, had it been a little more strict about okay here's your next adventure.

Had the adventures been much more in a straight line or like once we start down a narrative path you have to do this whole narrative path.

The other challenge is that the game is built up around retirement.

The main thing that you get when you retire a character is access to more buildings and the buildings often have links to other adventures or they open up other narrative story possibilities.

Well we had trouble at one point in our game where we were having trouble retiring a character.

I played a character all the way up to level 9 because I couldn't retire it.

The retirement goal that I got was just really excessive and for me to get it I basically would have had to be a much more selfish player than I am.

So for me to make progress on my personal goal I would have had to have less fun.

I've talked about the challenge of Dead of Winter for me is that in order to create cover for the potential trader in the game each player gets a personal goal that they're not allowed to talk about so they can't collaborate with other players on it and that in order to accomplish it they have to play selfishly.

I would say Gloomhaven also has this problem.

You have a lifetime goal that you're not supposed to talk about with the other players and it allows you it encourages you to play selfishly.

Well Gloomhaven is a game of cooperation.

You're supposed to be a team and I get like narratively somewhere at the core there are the ideas you are these selfish mercenaries who are working together for your own purposes.

Which is kind of the style of Dungeons and Dragons but the play counters that.

The way that Gloomhaven or Frosthaven are fun for us is to work together to talk about

I think I'm going to be able to go early.

I can help you with this.

I can boost that.

I can move him there.



I'll go here.

Are you going to where are you going to go?

The planning of the attack is part of what's fun about the game.

And so to create circumstances where to progress the game you have to play in a way that's counter to the fun of the game feels like a problem for me.

And then finally the third thing I guess I wanted to bring up about the Frosthaven experience is the Overland map more and more just feels like a bookkeeping.

It doesn't feel like an engaging development of story.

The story is happening in the prelude and the conclusion to the adventures.

But the stuff in the village itself really just isn't as compelling.

And I think that the overall experience of it is harmed because we are finding ourselves getting the point where it doesn't feel like there's much left to do narratively, but we have a ton left to do from a character perspective.

We all are only on our third characters I think.

And there are three or four different characters that we haven't played at all.

That doesn't feel fun to get to the end of the game and have a bunch of content you just haven't even touched.

There are also a whole bunch of scenarios that we haven't played or can't play because of narrative choices, right?

So there's a couple of scenarios where you choose A or B. And when you choose A, you have these six scenarios and when you choose B, you have those six.

So now we have six scenarios out of like the hundred that we aren't going to get to play.

And there's a couple different places like that in the game.

Again, when you're running on a stuff to play, that part doesn't feel fun.

We are also running into the problem of like the game feels like we should be advancing the town more than we actually are.

And again, all of these things feel like they come from the goal of making this feel like an open world in contrast to the narrative requirements of having a story that moves along at a reasonable pace in which the players can understand how to move it forward.

And I think that's the place where we are running into a lot of trouble is that a lot of what happens in the game is randomized.

There are these encounter cards that can give you things, but you don't get to pick which encounter cards you encounter and the game isn't on a timeline in the same way that we would like it to be.

So I think overall the gameplay of Frosthaven has been incredible, but the elements that were added to make the game feel more like a role-playing game have in fact hampered the experience for us.

But I think had the game been closer to Gloomhaven in its approach and its style in the kinds of things that it did, we probably would have enjoyed it more.

Or we wouldn't be frustrated now, we would just be continuing to play adventures.

Of course I acknowledge that any game like this is a mix of different choices and goals and sometimes it's about choosing to privilege one kind of play over another.

That's part of game design and sure.

But for us the kinds of game play that they privileged don't work, we would enjoy them if they worked, but they don't work or they're not foolproof and we are the fools.

There is my lament about Frosthaven.

I do want to point out that the Haven games are near the top of my top 50, I don't remember exactly where, but I think they're in the top 10.

I really like them a lot and I've enjoyed playing them hours and hours and hours and hours and we're still playing almost once a week, not quite once a week, but almost.

So I've not given up on Frosthaven yet, but I wish that it were a little smoother.

So that is my take on Frosthaven and the nature of its open story time.

What do you think?

Have you played Frosthaven?

What do you think about the way that it construct stories?

Head over to boardgamegeek guild 3269 and share your thoughts there.

Love to hear them.

In the meantime, thanks for joining me in my walk.

I hope your next walk is supposed to be my noise.

Bye bye.

Brought to you by Rattlebox Games.

[MUSIC]