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Pokermon

Pokermon is a game designed out of an interest in combining the mechanics of a trading card game with the accessibility of a standard poker deck. As such, the game is built around a combination of trick taking mechanics with mechanics taken from trading card games. In particular, the game Magic: The Gathering (hereafter Magic) was used as an inspiration. The key design goals underlying Pokermon were merging the trading card game mechanics with a game playable with a standard poker deck, and maintaining a simple set of rules to make it easy to play.

The Rules

Pokermon is a game for two players, and is playable with only a standard poker deck with jokers removed. The initial setup requires splitting the deck into two halves, with each player taking one complete red suit (either diamonds or hearts) and one complete black suit (either clubs or spades). The pairing of suits is unimportant, only the color is key. In this way, each player has an equivalent 26 card deck, consisting of 13 red cards, and 13 black cards. Each player then shuffles their own deck, and draws a 7 card hand. The player to play first can be chosen in a random fashion, such as by coin flip or dice roll.

At the beginning of each turn, the player first draws a card from their deck, if they have cards remaining. They then are required to play one card onto the table. Cards played are placed face up, and form the cards in play. After a card is played, a player can then choose to take one or more tricks from the cards on the table. The rules for trick taking are as follows:

1. A trick must be formed from one card from each player.

2. The card used to take the trick cannot have been played on the current player's turn.

3. The card used to take the trick must satisfy at least one of the following conditions:

    1. Be higher number than the card being taken

    2. Be the same number, but opposite color of the card being taken

    3. Be a two, if the card being taken is an ace

Play proceeds in this fashion until one of the following conditions is met:.

1. One player has taken an insurmountable majority of tricks

2. All of the cards have been played and taken as tricks

    1. The game can end with two cards of the same number and color on the table

An insurmountable majority is defined as being a number large enough that the other player, were they to win all of the remaining tricks would not be able to take a larger number of tricks. This would be 14 tricks in a normal case, but may be 13 in the case of the sub clause of the second condition being activated by an untakeable trick. The winner is declared to be the player who has taken the larger number of tricks. In the case that the game ends in a tie, it is declared a draw.

Design Analysis

The driving principle behind the design of Pokermon was using mechanics from established games, while simplifying them to be easily explainable and playable in a short period of time. It was also an attempt to merge trading card game mechanics into a game played using a standard poker deck. The design appears to be relatively novel, with few comparable games.

One key design element that was dropped early in the design phase, even prior to play testing was the idea behind requirements to play a particular card. One initial design involved the use of a full deck of cards for each player, with the different suits having different behaviors as types of cards. This was abandoned due to the added complexity, and requirement of multiple decks to play a two player game. Another potential design element which was abandoned was the use of poker chips as a way to gate the play of cards. The idea was that poker chips would be required for playing cards into the game. The winner of the game would then collect the chips at the end. This was abandoned as well for

simplicity, allowing the game to be played with the minimum amount of materials, requiring only a single standard poker deck.

The most similar type of games played with a standard poker deck are trick taking and card collecting games. War is one example of a card collecting game with a somewhat similar mechanic. However, one key distinction is that War relies entirely on randomness, in that the initial apportionment of the deck decides the game, with no real player choice involved.

Pokermon allows for meaningful player choices in two key ways. Meaningful player choice is allowing the player to make a choice that has a significant effect on the outcome of the game (Salen 61). The first is in the play of cards. Because they are not usable on the turn they are played, they must be played with a plan in mind, since the other player will take a turn prior to your ability to use the card. The second way that meaningful choice is incorporated is in allowing the player to choose when to use a card to take a trick. It is not required, and may not be possible for a player to take a trick on a given turn, but even if it is possible, it may not be desirable. One example would be when a player has an Ace of Spades out, and the opposing player has a 3 of hearts. While it would be possible to take the trick, it would not be strategically sound, since the ace is a very powerful card, while a 3 is a much weaker card.

Pokermon, like most card games, is a game of imperfect information (Salen 204). The information known to all players includes the composition of both decks, the results of all of the tricks taken, and the cards that are currently in play. The information known only to one player includes the cards in each player's hand. The information known only to the game includes the order of the remaining cards in each deck, and the arrangement of each deck is randomly determined prior to the start of the game through the shuffling, along with which player will go first.

Pokermon is a game driven by competition, and is a zero sum game (Salen 255). Each trick taken is one less trick that can be taken by the other player. Both players are competing to take a majority of the twenty-six tricks available in the game. The optimal strategy in the game would be to

take each card with the same number in the opposite suit. However, the playing mechanic, of not allowing a card to take a trick until the turn after it is played makes this an unlikely occurrence, since a player would not want to play a card that they know they would lose on the next player's turn. It then forces a player to consider the best possible way to play their cards to take tricks with the minimum loss while forcing the other player to take the maximal loss.

Play Testing Results

The rules defined above are the final revision of the rules of Pokermon, arrived at after extensive play testing. The initial rules were similar, but flaws revealed in the play testing necessitated several modifications.

The first key modification made during play testing was to the card drawing rule. In the initial design, the first player to go would not draw a card on their first turn. This turned out to be simply an unnecessary complexity, and removing it simplified the game flow. It had no real influence on the balance of the game, since both players were still using the same set of cards, and it would affect at most a single card played by the first player.

The second key modification, and one with much larger repercussions for the game balance was the change to make aces vulnerable to being taken by twos as well. A recurring problem in early play testing was the dominance of aces, since the only way they could be taken was by the ace of the opposite color. This lead to the first player to play an ace having an extremely strong position, since they were guaranteed to have the strongest card on the board, with the other player having no way to remove it. This in turn meant that the player who had played the ace was generally controlling which tricks were taken, and how the game would proceed.

By making the weakest cards in the game, the twos, able to take the strongest card in the game, the ace, both cards had new dimensions added. Twos were no longer nearly useless cards that would be tossed out as soon as possible to have the other player waste a higher card on them, but they were now something useful to use as a way to threaten an ace. However, since they were such weak cards and

could not be used on the same turn, it was still strategically important to ensure that the two could not be taken by any other card which the other player might have available on their next turn. It also deepened the strategic complexity of playing an ace. They were no longer invincible cards to be played right away, they could not sit on the board indefinitely anymore, with more ways for them to be taken.

A final rule modification was the addition of the requirement to play a card each turn. This is necessary to prevent the similar degenerate strategies of either refusing to play any cards, or refusing to play a card until you could be sure of victory (Salen 271).

Conclusion

The genesis of Pokermon is an evolution from a game based heavily in trading card game mechanics to a much simpler game, based around trick taking mechanics, with a dose of trading card game mechanics. The game is similar in nature to games such as War, which is a card collecting game. However, Pokermon is significantly different in that it incorporates a strong element of player choice, rather than being a game determined entirely by the random assortment of the cards. Pokermon also uses several very simplified mechanics from trading card games, in particular the idea of having to have a card in play for a minimum of one turn to be able to use it. This adds to the pool of shared information in an imperfect information game. Pokermon successfully meets both of the key design criteria, being playable with only a single standard poker deck, with a straightforward set of rules, yet maintaining some of the complexity of a trading card game.

Works Cited

Salen, Katie, and Eric Zimmerman. Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals. Cambridge: The MIT

Press, 2004.