The Impact of Kickstarter on Board Game Design

Gordon Calleja
Institute of Digital Games
University of Malta
gordon.calleja@um.edu.mt

Keywords

ABSTRACT

Kickstarter has had a profound impact on the growing board game world radically changing the way board games are designed, produced, marketed and distributed. In many ways it has changed the board games industry in ways that seem all but irreversible. As Aaron Trammell (2019) and Jamey Stegmaier (2015) have noted, by connecting players, and their buying power, to designers and publishers Kickstarter made possible the creation of games that had otherwise been considered unpublishable by traditional publishers either because these games were not deemed to have a market, or because they were too expensive to make, or simply, they were unappealing. The crowdfunding platform revealed blind spots in traditional publishers' view of what makes a successful board game product, as well as enabling a whole new way of creating, producing and distributing board games. In these ways, Kickstarter has disrupted the way in which games reach an international market, subverting the power of traditional gatekeepers such as publishers, distribution partners, and, to some degree, reviewers.

Another area in which Kickstarter has had an impact on the board game landscape is their material and visual design. As both Margaret Rogerson points out in a paper on the materiality of board games (Rogerson, 2020) and echoed by the director of games at Kickstarter, Luke Crane, during an interview, Kickstarter has raised the bar of the visual aesthetics and component quality as well as generally expanding the horizons of board games' product design. Both these elements impact considerably the design of board games from the very first stages of creation. Considerations of aesthetics and product design have, as several of the designers interviewed noted, changed the way designers think of and organize the design process.

This paper is based on two main sources of knowledge: a series of semi-structured, long interviews with 35 leading, veteran board game designers and critics that I conducted between 2016 and 2020 for a larger project on board game design and experience; and my own experience designing, developing and publishing games using Kickstarter as my primary platform. In order to gain a holistic and in-depth understanding of the creation of board games I decided to design my own games and then attempt to publish them myself, using Kickstarter as a platform to enable self-publication. Between 2015 and today I have designed and published six board games along with several expansions for each. Each of these raised between USD 100K and USD 350K and all but the first one went on to be translated into four to eight languages and distributed in substantial quantities around the world. For the first projects I took care of the game design, world building and narrative writing, art direction, marketing,

production, logistics and sales to distributors as well as designing and running the Kickstarter campaigns. These two sources of data will form the basis for the observations in this paper. The aims of this paper are twofold: the first is to give a clear understanding of the process of creating games for Kickstarter with the hope of inspiring other academics interested in making their own games to do so while providing some guidelines for designing games on the platform; secondly the paper aims to give an analysis of the impact crowdfunding platforms have on the game design process for academic purposes.

This paper thus explores the relationship between crowdfunding platforms like Kickstarter and Gamefound on the creation of contemporary board games. The first section gives an overview of how board game crowdfunding campaigns run and considers the impact these platforms, particularly Kickstarter, have had on the traditional, three-tier, model of distribution. I then home in on the impact Kickstarter has had on the game design process, ranging from the shift the platform has had on the selection of types of games designed, their ideation and early design phases and through to the ways in which designers factor the structure of a crowdfunding campaign and the expectations of their backers into various aspects of the design process. Following this the paper considers how the considerable impact of crowdfunding campaigns on visual aesthetics and component materiality both limits and opens up a game's design space; both in terms of mechanics and fiction. Finally, the paper collects the input of the designers and critics interviewed and gives a perspective on the potential future developments in the board game industry and the role crowdfunding platforms play in this future.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Brown, D. and MacCallum-Stewart, E. (2020). "Introduction." In *Rerolling Boardgames: Essays on Themes, Systems, Experiences and Ideologies*, edited by D. Brown and E. MacCallum-Stewart. McFarland.

Rogerson, M. Gibbs, & M. Smith, W. (2020) "Collaborative Games Redux." In *Rerolling Boardgames: Essays on Themes, Systems, Experiences and Ideologies*, edited by D. Brown and E. MacCallum-Stewart. McFarland.

Stegmaier, J. (2015). A Crowdfunder's Strategy Guide: Build a Better Business by Building Community, Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Trammell, A. (2019) Analog Games and the Digital Economy. *Analog Game Studies*. http://analoggamestudies.org/2019/03/analog-games-and-the-digitaleconomy/