# In praise of tabletop games:
## Part 2

By Philip Minchin

*To play **Hanabi**, you have to work to get inside the other players' heads, not in order to dominate them but to aid and collaborate with them, and to learn how to trust them to do the same for you. This is both an allegory for a good life and a concrete drill in some of its most important skills.*

### Biography

*As well as 17 years in libraries, Philip Minchin has worked as a historian, editor, publisher, film and theatre producer, and in international human rights campaigning and national NGO governance. He brought International Games Day (now Week) to Australia in 2011, and ran the global event in 2013 and 2014 before becoming a proud dad and refocusing on his breadwinner/playmate responsibilities (though he remains involved globally). His initiatives to systemically support the library sector to make the most of games and play include:*

- *highly rated training that offers strategic understanding plus hands-on experience and tools;*
- *working with international vendors to bring Windows and Android game e-lending to Australia; and*
- *sourcing tabletop games for libraries at a significant discount on retail.*

*Phil also works to help libraries better engage with the networked world, including crowdsourcing tools and information literacy.*

*You can read more at his site, philipminchin.com*

*Part 1 of this article, in Volume 32, Issue 1 of* ACCESS, *introduced the many opportunities tabletop games offer and explored four key 'literacies' that they foster: psychological literacy, social literacy, systems literacy, and the novel term procedural literacy. This second part provides some concrete examples of games you might use and ways in which you might use them.*

### Generic questions

Before we begin examining specific games, let's run through some standard questions that will guide learning from any game:

- What are the strategies for successful play? What strategies make for *fun* play? If these are different, how and why?
- When is the game fun for its players? Is it fun for different people at different times? When, how and why?
- What skills make you good at this game? To whom would this game appeal? Are those different and why?
- What are the parallels to our wider lives and what can playing this game teach us? Are those things true and/or useful?
- What are the psychological tricks the game employs? What techniques can players use to combat those tricks, accurately discern the options open to

them and the consequences of those choices, and make optimal decisions?

- What are the social contracts and systems this game creates? What group dynamics emerge from the interaction of individual psychologies and the rules, and are they helpful or otherwise?
- Watch the extraordinary discussion of social systems through the lens of Monopoly and musical chairs at Allan Johnson's website. Analyse this game as a social system in the same way. What values does this game embody and promote? What qualities does the game reward or punish? What kinds of relationships does it foster between its players?
- Are there tweaks to the rules, objects or quantities of the game that you could put in place to ease or heighten the challenge or otherwise modify the flow of play? How do those adjustments change the experience of playing?
- Is this game playable with a different number of players? With different relationships between players? (Free-for-all, everyone versus everyone, structured all versus all where each player has particular opponents, various team structures and so on.)
- What are the key points of leverage in the game? Where does advantage lie and are there particular 'inflection points' where some quality of the game dramatically shifts? Is that because of a change in the rules that apply or an emergent property

of those rules and how they unfold over time?

In the interests of space, the following examples will not systematically ask these specific questions of these games, but will list a few possible areas for exploration under the headings of the various literacies discussed in Part 1, then suggest some concrete uses for the game.

### Hanabi

The task of this game is incredibly simple: sort a shuffled pile of cards into five ascending coloured piles counting from one to five. The game is even cooperative, meaning everyone plays as a team, so the challenge should be minimal … except that players cannot see their own cards, and the way in which they share information with their teammates is tightly controlled. This transforms the experience into something as tense and psychological as high-stakes poker, but without the adversarial framework.

There is something about the combination of competition and hidden information that meshes extraordinarily well. My personal theory is that it is the 'lizard brain', the part of the brain which monitors and resents things that make us expend energy, meshing well with the primate brain's rewarding domination and asserting its status over others: our opponents make us work to intuit what they have planned and we enjoy 'punishing' them for the effort they make

us expend. (Naturally, there is a great deal more to the social contract of competitive play than this, but as a broad simplification I believe this stands up.)

*Hanabi*'s extraordinary elegance lies in the simple twist that puts these impulses at loggerheads with a successful game. That fierce frustration with others for not doing what we want or expect is a wasteful diversion of the cognitive resources needed to play well for the player themselves and — if it is expressed at all visibly — a distraction for their partners. To play *Hanabi*, you have to work to get inside the other players' heads, not in order to dominate them but to aid and collaborate with them, and to learn how to trust them to do the same for you. This is both an allegory for a good life and a concrete drill in some of its most important skills.

*Psychological literacy:* the ability to read the muted responses of others, and to recognise and master your own emotional reactions to others not playing as you would wish.
*Social literacy:* this is a terrific game with which to demonstrate important lessons, such as the individual's responsibility to society to monitor and regulate their own emotional reactions (even understandable ones), the difficulty of collaboration when 'bandwidth' for sharing information is insufficient, the benefits of common understandings and established protocols, and so on.
*Systems literacy:* despite the simplicity of the game, there is sufficient resource and information management to give some basic examples of systems thinking.
*Procedural literacy:* understanding the rules takes relatively little literacy, but (as above) the game offers some remarkable examples of the value of establishing procedure as an

efficient way to handle information flows and manage processes effectively.

Uses:

- Discuss teamwork and trust. Were there times during play that people didn't understand why another player did what they did? What role was played by misunderstanding the situation and what by miscommunication?

- Were there times when too much information was given?

- Discuss how it felt to depend on others to achieve your goals.

- Did people find it easier or harder to make decisions and act in this cooperative, but still somewhat isolated, context than they would in a similarly isolated competitive one? Why?

- How were people using the information given? Were they remembering only the information applicable to the cards they were told about, or were they also making use of the negative information about cards in hand? (For example, 'if these cards are my red cards, I now know that all these other cards are *non*-red'; over time these partial eliminations, especially combined with tracking eliminated cards, can accumulate into a positive identification.)

- What techniques were people using to track what they knew and what others knew? How did they decide what to tell others and when?

### Escape: The Curse of the Temple

This game casts its players as *Tomb Raider*-style adventurers caught in a ruined Mesoamerican temple which is collapsing around their ears. It is cooperative but turnless — all players freely roll and reroll

the dice to produce combinations of results that the group and individual members need to explore the temple, find the exit, unlock it, and get out, all while avoiding further traps which reduce the number of dice they can roll to achieve their tasks. Optional expansions can provide further complications and/or tools to aid the players, depending on what they choose to include.
The game plays over a strict 10-minute time frame, and highly-strung players usually find their first game overwhelming because of the time pressure, the difficulties of coordinating group action, the need to improvise strategies to deal with emerging situations, and (if you use the accompanying audio track as your timer) the atmospheric sounds and music.

hard to imagine a safer way of generating the feeling of coping with a high-stakes situation on the fly.

*Psychological literacy:* an opportunity to develop coping skills under pressure, learn what adrenaline rushes feel like and reflect on their own coping behaviours.
*Social literacy:* experience of functioning in a high-pressure group situation.
*Systems literacy:* the game's rules are fairly simple, and the strategies that improve odds of success emerge after fairly short reflection outside a game, but there is some benefit to having to practise systems thinking at speed.
*Procedural literacy:* again, the breakneck pace of the game is a key point, but here it's

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However, these highly-strung players are often the ones who come to love the game the most. I've had such people to whom I've introduced the game remark that it functions as a generic drill for emergency coping skills: you have to maintain situational awareness about the current state of play, your teammates' statuses and needs, and your own dice pool and goals; communicate and collaborate efficiently; shift fluidly between strategising and implementation; and remain centred through an intense period of sensory overload.

There is no comparable way to offer a chance to practise these skills through non-games media, though certain high-speed cooperative video games can offer something similar. At the same time, it is

not only about observing the formal rules of the game but about analysing how those rules create the stress that makes us prone to error and about developing the skills to rapidly formulate and adapt the informal conventions by which the group prioritises goals and makes decisions.

Uses:

- As above, use it to foster grace and teamwork under pressure. Play it multiple times in a single session, or for more sensitive groups, play it once, debrief, and then come back to it in a second session, which you could begin by explicitly developing strategies and procedures for dealing with both in-game problems and player emotions.

- Discuss high-adrenaline decision-making, with reference to recent examples in the news or obvious stressful situations such as an emergency descent in a plane. Point out that solutions that might seem obvious in calmer circumstances can be missed by those caught up in the urgency of the moment, especially in complex real-life scenarios with multiple participants and agendas. (Be careful not to let leaders off the hook though — make these points in the context of the preparations, resources and support systems available in any news story you use.)
- Talk about the importance of training (including role play and simulations; the aviation industry is an excellent source of

evidence one can glean, which of the group are secretly members of a hidden conspiracy acting against the rest of the group — or, if you are one of the conspirators, to avoid being uncovered until your cabal forms the majority of the remaining players. The rules are extraordinarily simple, but play is as sophisticated as the group cares to make it; this is a game about one of the core dramas of sapient existence — knowing who to trust.

Best of all, the rules are free, and playing requires only some paper and a pen to assign the roles secretly and randomly at the start, plus possibly some scratch notes for the person running the game. If you are interested, I am happy to help you get started — my contact details are at the end of the article.

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examples), setting default expectations and other forms of preparedness in helping people make the right decision in fast-moving environments.
- Discuss how the game, which as an inanimate collection of cardboard tiles in a cardboard box is clearly less dangerous than the average guinea pig, can manage to produce such a feeling of stress. Are those factors or qualities present elsewhere in people's lives?

### Werewolf

Not strictly a tabletop game, *Werewolf* is a social deduction game also known as *Mafia* (its original title) or *Assassin*. The object of the game is to deduce, from whatever

*Psychological literacy:* this is an exercise in justified paranoia, in close attention to tics, tells and discrepancies between what people say and what they do.
*Social literacy:* this is a game about the corrosive effect of conspiracy and the importance of trust and routinely involves forming voting blocs and other coalitions.
*Systems literacy:* not hugely applicable; the systems in question are entirely social.
*Procedural literacy:* because it is effectively a folk game, you can tinker with it easily, especially to demonstrate the effects of different procedures for deciding who the village votes out — mini-trial with structured accusations and defence (or the other way around), or more mob-like accusations and majority vote?

Uses:
- As mentioned above, the game was originally flavoured as being about the Mafia, and it can also be applied to discussions of historical instances of mob justice such as the Salem witch trials, the French Revolution, McCarthyism, and various other political purges.
- It requires plausible dissembling and close analysis of behaviour, which makes it an amazing game for a drama class.
- It's terrific for demonstrating the ways in which social contracts can be radically altered: the game not only permits outright lying, it all but mandates it for the werewolf players.
- This, in turn, can be the basis for a fascinating discussion of the relationship between ethics, morals and social norms.
- Information theory and game theory also come into play, especially in light of the above questions. What can you do if you are someone who likes playing but doesn't want to outright lie in the games where you are a werewolf?
- There are numerous optional, specialised roles that you can add into the game. As you add more of these roles, the sequence in which you call on them in the 'night' phase begins to matter. Solving this problem is an exercise in both procedural and systems literacy.
- It's a great social activity for school camps and end-of-term afternoons.

### Conclusion and follow-up
These three examples are only some of the many innovative titles being published in

what is frankly a Golden Age of face-to-face tabletop games. If our readers would be interested, we would be willing to publish more of these in-depth reviews with guides to practical use — let your *ACCESS* editorial team know if you would like more.

If you are interested in making more of play and games in your library, please keep an eye on the International Games Week (IGW) web page (and its parent site, games.ala. org) and the local Australian Facebook page. IGW used to be International Games Day @ your library, but has expanded to a full week — 4–10 November this year — precisely in order to support school libraries. Registration is completely free of charge, and the event is so flexible that all it takes to be eligible is doing something relating to play in or around your library during or close to that week. Not only that, participating libraries in previous years have received donations of free games, so it's actually cheaper than free! Registration will open in June, so be sure to follow the blog for the news, as well as a series of articles and examples that will help you make the most of the event and of games and play in your library.

Finally, I offer professional development, training, collections advice, strategic consultation, and even (thanks to supportive retailers) discounted prices on purchasing these materials. I have recently run a showcase series of weekend sessions featuring a representative spread of key games for GLAM folks to try, and would be willing to do the same for Melbourne-based teachers if there was interest. And as above, I'm happy to give you materials to get started playing *Werewolf* for free! You can contact me about any of the above at philipminchin.com/contact.