

Characteristics of Euro-style Games

What is it about “Euro-games” that makes so many gamers prefer them to the traditional favorites? First, quoting from Wikipedia, Euro-games...

“... generally have simple rules, short to medium playing times, indirect player interaction and abstract physical components. Such games emphasize strategy, downplay luck and conflict, lean towards economic rather than military themes, and usually keep all the players in the game until it ends.”

Here are some more detailed thoughts about the common elements:

Length. Many can be played in an hour or less, so we can play several games on the same night. Yes, some last two hours or longer, but few compare to Monopoly; do you remember playing that one for six hours, or all weekend?

Thought. On most turns, a player has several viable choices; we don’t simply “roll our dice and move our mice.” The mental challenge of weighing alternatives and evaluating trade-offs can be fascinating. There is a lot to think about and plan, even during other players’ turns. Several allow nearly-simultaneous action so there is very little down-time.

In most games, several different strategies can lead to victory. Rather than trying to use “the only strategy” better (and with more luck) than other players, we may need to change to a different strategy when the one we started with doesn’t go well.

Skill. In many Euro-games there is not much luck. Even in dice-based games, clever mechanics can turn an apparent bad roll into a good one. And remember how in the past one player would be lucky and get ahead, and was very hard to catch, yet it took a long time for the trailing players to be officially eliminated? Several modern games intentionally fight such Leader Break-away Syndrome and a come-from-behind win is normal. And in very few is any player eliminated.

Also, the mechanics of many of the games are so interesting that we don’t care much who wins or loses, and often do not even score. It’s just fun to analyze together what strategies worked and which didn’t, and how it might be different next time we play.

Cooperation. Several games are completely cooperative. We all play against the *game* and either win or lose together. If we win, there are ways to make the game a notch harder next time we play.

Also, in many of the games there is a cooperative element. For example, we may all operate parts of an integrated “economy” or work together on an overall project. If I help you now and you give me a break later, we’ll likely do better than less accommodating players.

Autonomy. Although some Euro-games are quite interactive, in many games players are “building their own machines,” usually to generate Victory Points. While they may compete for scarce resources or the opportunity to take certain actions, they largely manage their affairs on their own boards. Many gamers enjoy this less-confrontational “group solitaire” feeling.

Variability. Several modern games have boards made up of smaller rectangles or hexes that are rearranged for each play, so the board is always different. In some, the overall goals (ways to score victory points, for example) change from game to game. Players may have different abilities or starting situations. So playing repeatedly doesn’t feel like “the same old game” over again.

Quality. Are you old enough to remember wooden Risk armies and the wooden houses and hotels of the early Monopoly games, versus their modern plastic counterparts? In most Euro-games the playing pieces are still made of wood. And even if cardboard, they are thick and durable and easy to pick up. Large boards are made of 4 or 6 heavy sections that fold to fit into a relatively small box. Some of us enjoy the charm and beauty of the equipment; it is simply fun to handle.

Theme. In some games, the components and actions and artwork reflect the theme of the game. Would you like to build a railroad or a zoo or an electric supply grid, learn about Norse mythology or the Mayan calendar, work as a Chinese vegetable seller or a sailor discovering new lands, gather resources to build a medieval cathedral or a farm, search for relics in a pyramid or on a sinking island, save the world from disease or barbarians or global warming? You might really get into the spirit of the game’s theme while you try to solve the problems it presents.

Why “Euro”? The first generally-popular Euro-game, Settlers of Catan, was created in 1995. This, and many of the other hits from those “early” days a decade or more ago, were by German designers, and Europeans still dominate the field. (Don’t worry, though; most of the games we play have English-language editions, and many are language-independent). Today, designers from many countries have created popular games, and there are enthusiastic fans in nearly every country. The international community of gamers meets at conventions (which may attract more than 100,000 gamers), and connects on line to discuss rules and strategies and variants (see Board Game Geek for an example). The hobby is healthy and growing, and fun to be a part of.