EP 46 - Managing Minutes Like Meeples

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Over the summer, I had a conversation with a close friend & fellow creative mind. He also happens to be a board gamer & designer, who was providing a kind ear for your host. I was feeling overwhelmed with the amount of stuff on my plate. My time was being stretched too thin, often by forces out of my control.

This friend made a comment about my life resembling a worker placement game, which resonated and stuck with me long after our conversation. This model of thought was interesting and helpful enough that I want to share it with the audience today.

For the non-gamers out there: A Worker Placement game is typically defined as a game where each player has a limited set of workers. Players place them in different ways to take actions, collect resources, impact other players, and/or score points.

One of the quintessential worker placement games is Carcassonne, a classic from 2000. Carcassonne is included in most lists of the best gateway games for introducing people into the world of modern strategy board games. It's also one of my all-time personal favorites. If you want to check it out, there are wonderful digital adaptations, and even better you can pick up a physical game at any FLGS (Friendly Local Game Store) or a big-box retailer like Target. **Shop small & local if you can!**

As one-half of the ownership team of former board game publisher Masquerade Games, I feel it's my duty to provide a brief digression for board game nerds. Other worker placement games I recommend, in order of increasing complexity:

- Alien Frontiers
- Stone Age
- Lords of Waterdeep
- Caylus
- Tzolk'in
- Copycat
- Agricola

Anyway, back to Carcassonne. In my basement I proudly showcase a runner-up trophy from the 2012 Boardgaming World Championships. I lost out on the championship title because of the third (made up) tie-breaker. Not that I'm bitter or anything . . . But I mention this because it's both nerdy as hell, and to establish that I'm really good at the game.

Which brings me back to my friend's point: As he knew me to be good at worker placement games, particularly Carcassonne, he felt the game was a helpful analogy for better allocating my limited resources and focus.

Or to put it in the simplest terms: Meeples = Minutes

In Carcassonne**,** each player starts with eight meeple tokens (Meeple is gamer talk for me-people), and they build out a representations of the medieval city of Carcassonne, France, which starts from a single starter tile.

Players take turns drawing a random tile, adding it to the growing city of Carcassonne, and then have the option to place one of their meeples, only on the tile just played.

The tile is randomly drawn from the supply, but from a known set.

> One of the keys to excelling at the game is memorizing the set of 72 tiles. This allows you to recognize what tiles are left to be pulled, and which scoring options are more likely to succeed.

I know that this [rules explanation](#) may seem a bit dry, but I'm about to tie it all back into this time management idea!

Meeples can be placed in only four possible ways. (I'm ignoring all the many expansions here)

> Those options may be limited depending on what's on the tile.

> A meeple must remain on the tile until the feature they are working on is completed and scored. At that point, they return to your stock and may be used again.

> So again: Meeple management = Time management.

I'm going to oversimplify here, but your fixed set of meeples can do one of four things:

1. **Knights:** Work on completing castles, which tend to be larger, more complex, highly strategic, and often require a commitment of multiple meeples to be successful.

2. **Thieves:** Work on completing roads, which are smaller and easier to complete. They score half as much as castles, but usually don't require large commitments. There's also less variability and risk with road segments, making them more reliable for quicker, in-game scoring.

3. **Monks:** Are placed on cloisters (or monasteries). Monks have to be completely surrounded by other tiles to score. It's impossible for others to steal or share a

monk's points, but a monk's placement and success often relies on what the other players are involved with around their cloister.

4. **Farmers:** These are permanent commitments. They stay on the board for the rest of the game, scoring only at the end. And their value is determined by the number of completed castles (regardless of who completed them). These are long-term, highly-strategic plays. Depending on the level of co-operation among the players, they have the potential to leap you far ahead on points at the end of the game.

Many of you are likely seeing some of the areas where we can draw parallels to life. I've decided to tackle these parallels in a series of questions a player can ask during a game of Carcassonne, paired with a parallel question we may ask in life.

How many players are involved in my game?

The Parallel - *How many projects and commitments are impacting my life?*

2: You get 36 turns

3: You get 24

4: 18

5: 14 or 15

The fewer turns you have in a game, the lower your "meeple ratio". Each meeple will have less opportunity to impact the game.

The severity of each commitment of these resources changes.

You don't need to ensure meeples come back regularly when more players are involved.

But less impact on the game = more need for cooperation. And there's more opportunities to cooperate.

How much risk am I comfortable with?

There's a risk of incomplete castles reducing the impact of knights and farmers (and to a lesser extent a monk or two)

If you're in a later stage of the game, you have to assess your score, the meeples you have remaining . . . Where does your focus need to be?

Should you focus more on quick, short term opportunities with less risk - or large battles for dominance over larger, riskier, higher-scoring features?

With whom should I cooperate or compete with?

You may have multiple partnerships going at the same time

Which partnerships are with players doing better or worse than you?

If you always share with players scoring higher than you, there's little chance you'll catch up to them.

But it you avoid partnering with higher-scoring players at particular times, you're likely not going to win.

The parallel - *What kinds of people do you need to partner with for success on your various projects?*

There's risks of over-committing resources:

Are other players encroaching on your feature, sharing or stealing points?

How likely is it a player can place a tile in a position that will prevent a castle from being completed? (Cutting it's score in half)

What is the level of acceptable risk to the other players trying to enter into a partnership or confrontation with you?

If their ability to take risks exceeds yours (especially if they're in the lead), you need to consider abandoning the feature.

The parallel here is a common term from Poker, where someone has to avoid the trap of feeling "pot committed".

Just because you made a poor choice with a past meeple, doesn't mean you have to keep paying into that mistake to try and justify it.

What tiles are left in the supply?
The Parallel - *What kinds of opportunities are likely going to occur in the future that could improve my current projects, or open up new chances at success?*

Can you discern a pattern to what's come before?

The more you play the game, the more likely you'll be able to predict when a certain feature is unlikely to be successful, or is more likely to be lost to another player.

Avoiding the pitfalls of experience can give you more insight into avoiding bad expenditures of time later - i.e.: learning from your mistakes

It's impossible to predict exactly what's going to come, but you'll likely be able to discern a rough pattern to the possibilities, giving yourself a few scenarios when your resources, and the stakes of your game/project are at their highest.

Should I commit this last meeple?
The Parallel - *What energy do I need to leave in the tank?*

If you play your meeples too quickly earlier in the game, you'll have few available to take advantage of future opportunities.

As in the last question, the ability to adapt to future plays is critical. Especially if you've got some capacity to understand how things could evolve.

The fewer players in a game, the more pronounced this becomes, as you have more control over the final outcome. The meeples you expend have the potential to score you greater individual rewards over the other players, because they tend to be played more times during the game.

But when does a situation dictate the risk of playing your last meeple?

Can you strand other players' meeples in incompletable features, therefore preventing them from scoring until the end of the game (not returning to their supply)?

The caveat is you don't want to end the game with meeples unused in your supply, as they have no value if they're not in play. Even placed on a single road, they're worth more than if you didn't utilize them at all.

You gotta put yourself out there!

Why does the game feel so much different with two players rather than five?

I'll close with some light commentary about how the more parties involved in a game, the more co-operation that's needed for success.

There's a clear parallel to politics here - a bi-partisan, two-player game has no natural co-operation to it. I need to focus on scoring points at your expense. Sharing points does nothing to advancing one player over another.

But with more players, there is more out of your control. The more things are going to change before you can have a direct impact (take a turn). The less impact you feel each of your meeples (efforts) has on the overall result

And here's the thing few people realize playing Carcassonne (and I suppose life): There's no rule that says you can't talk:

> Negotiate
>
> Make recommendations
>
> Point out flaws in placements
>
> Highlight unexpected or overlooked placement opportunities
>
> Forge alliances
>
> Or break them and do something underhanded
>
> Point out to newer or inexperienced players how they're being manipulated for other's gains
>
> Or manipulate them for your own gain

All of these examples open up as soon as a third player joins in the game. And they get increasingly complex (and vital) with four or five players.

Carcassonne can be a great model not just for our own time management. It's been used in classes teaching urban planning, co-operation to kids and adults, language learning . . . And it's just a downright blast to play.

Here's hoping Klaus-Jürgen Wrede's masterpiece graces your table or device soon!

💬 **Episode 46 Quote:**

Here's a fun quote about the city of Caracassonne, from **A Dreamer's Tales** (1910) *by Edward Plunkett:*

> *This city is the fairest of the wonders of Morning; the sun shouts when he beholdeth it; for Carcassonne Evening weepeth when Evening passeth away.*