Day 1 of the Board Game Studies 2009 Colloquium

The conference was allegedly scheduled to start at 9:00 with reception and signing in, and the first lecture to start at 9:45. Strangely, when I arrived at around 9:30, the introduction to the conference by Gadi Kfir had already taken place and the first lecture was underway. Until lunch break, all the sessions started and ended earlier than scheduled.

The Attendees

I will tell you about the people I know, or know of:

Gadi Kfir, the organizer of the conference, is an expert on Israeli board games in the early twentieth century.

Dr Irving Finkel is curator of ancient Mesopotamian clay tablets at the British Museum, and a leading expert on ancient board games such as Senet and UR. He has also written some books.

Dr Finkel is infamous for being quoted in Time Magazine last year as saying that the last momentous innovation in board game design was acquiring properties in Monopoly. I briefly asked him about this, and he says he's taken a whole lot of flak for it. In fact, that's not what he said; he was highly misquoted. He was talking about race games of a certain type, and he wasn't implying that he was speaking about all the way up to the present day. I could probably get this more clarified, if anybody wants.

David Parlett designer Hare and Tortoise and wrote some definitive compilation books on board, word, and card games, such as The Oxford Book of Board Games.

Piet Notebaert organizes a vast library of board games in Belgium and also wrote a book that I can't read that included quotes from me.

Gilad Yarnitsky is the organizer of the Modiin game group, has influenced many in Israel regarding Eurogames, and is trying to publish his first game Space Junk.

Helena Kling, director of the Educational Center for Games in Israel, with game activities and a large game library.

And around 15 other people that I didn't know from India, Portugal, Germany, Poland, Israel, and other countries.

The Sessions

1. Gadi Kfir, Opening Talk

It started early, and I came late, so I missed it.

2. Rafael Sirkis, Morphing Sudoku from Newspapers to Children Books to Wooden Playground Toy to Hand-held Product

I missed the earlier part of this session which was on the history of sudoku and similar games. The latter part was about various sudoku products that Rafael and his students have created. (See the wooden toy in the following image)

3. Alda Carvalho (and three other Portuguese researchers), Computer-Assisted Board Games

This was on how computers are useful in that they can automate some of the work in board games that people find repetitious or boring, as well as allow certain games with hidden or changing information easier to implement. It was basic, but even so still news to some of the attendees, I think. The Portuguese group appears to be very intelligent, but some of them struggle to make themselves understood in English.

4. Haim Shafir, Playing With Children

Haim Shafir, Israeli game designer and educator, creator of Taki and Halli GalliHaim talked about how children need adults to play with them honestly and without alternative motives. Since children are less able to separate the importance of winning a game from winning in life, they need games that they have an honest chance of winning; meanwhile, parents need games that won't bore them. He tries to fill this niche.

Then we all played Halli Galli.

5. Yehuda Berlinger, The Modern Eurogame Revolution

When I first suggested the topic, I understood that the attendees weren't too versed in Eurogames. Then I was told that some of them know Eurogames quite well. When I walked around in the morning, I understood that no, really the attendees are not too versed in Eurogames, with the exceptions of people like Piet who catalogs them (but doesn't play all of them) and David who helped invent them.

Out of nervousness, I spoke really quickly. Also, unlike any of the other presenters, I occasionally looked down to speak from my notes, during which some of the people in the back told me later that I spoke too softly. Other than that, I think the presentation went ok. Mine was also a pretty basic topic: what are Eurogames, why they are a movement: the concept that a new board game = new mechanics, what the new mechanics look like, and a bit of BGG statistics.

I fielded questions afterwards, and I'm happy to say I was able to answer them all.

A few people said I was informative. Some said I spoke alright. Piet said that it was nice to hear how an outsider to Europe sees the hobby. I'm pretty sure that what I said was hard to understand by some of the people. At least one still didn't understand what made a Eurogame different from any other board game after the session; I believe he was asking from a classification perspective. Some people indicated that Eurogames don't seem to be reaching or aimed for the masses, and I compared them to the wine industry, where good products trickle down to the lower markets eventually, as they are now doing in Hasbro and Mattel.

Irving said that someone else had lectured twice about Settlers of Catan (only) at previous colloquia; I looked, but didn't see a record of this anywhere. Apparently not all talks make it into the records. The guy from Poland said that he knew about them, but they were way too expensive to buy in Poland. T&E cost 60 EUR, which was half a month salary, and Amazon and eBay don't ship to Poland.

6. Jorge Nuno Silva, Games and Moral

This was the first session that was pretty much what I thought all the sessions would be like: a deep look at a medieval game using notes from manuscripts and a reconstruction of what the game would be like (a game about virtues and vices with a triple headed spinner).

7. Piotr Adamczyk, Board Games in Museum and Education

Piotr is probably the lone academic in Poland devoted to board game studies. He only recently started trying to organize a collection and interview elderly about their childhood games. He works in a museum, dressed as a Viking, and organizing classic and ancient game activities for kids and their parents in the museum and at other events around Poland.

He is doing some groundbreaking work, all alone right now. Impressive.

8. Prof Aviezeri Fraenkel, NIM Games to Chess

Prof Aviezeri Fraenkel is a world expert on game combinatorics such as NIM games. He demonstrated simple NIM games, how they are solved using binary numbers, and progressively worked his way up to complicated capture games. I understood it, but I think it went over a lot of people's heads.

We then played a capture game on a board similar to Checkers, but with cyclical and acyclical moving patterns.

Three more days to go, although I won't be able to attend the last 1.5 days.

Day 2 of the Board Game Studies 2009 Colloquium

The Sessions

1. Uri Globus, Communication in Board Games

Uri plays Igowin on my laptop, vastly increasing my Go rating in a few minutes.

Uri is the founder of the Israeli Go institute, and a computer game researcher. Unfortunately, I missed all but the last five minutes of this lecture; it sounded very interesting.

Essentially, he said, drawing on his experience from the game of Go, that how a person plays in a game communicates something about the person. There was dissension from the audience: Uri thought that play brings out the real you, while the audience proposed that play allows people to play in ways that they wouldn't in real life. I think that they're both right.

Uri told me he would send me a summary of his lecture.

2. Ute Retteberg, The Game of Chaupad in India

Chaupad, aka Pachisi. Known by many different names around the world. With 64 squares around the outside, in the classic game you start at center, move down your home path, circle around the board counter-clockwise, and return back home.

Chaupad is not considered a children's game; it plays an important part in the marriage ceremonies and culture of Rajput families. Played on festivals. A new board is woven for the bride before the marriage, and the game is played by and among women, or by women with their spouse or brother. Stories about proper behavior with gods and so on playing the game are told before the marriage ceremony.

Apparently, there are complex variations to the game that can make a game last for 2-3 months. It is associated with sports like wrestling and hunting.

3. Irving Finkel, The Lewis Chessmen

The Lewis Chessmen were found on the Isle of Lewis in 1831, in circumstances unknown and subject to myth. They are carved walrus ivory and contain at least four complete sets of pieces. All the pieces are white, but some were originally stained a deep maroon (such as the white vs red chess in Indian). Faraday (the guy who invented electricity) might have been consulted in how to "clean" the pieces, resulting in their loss of color. Dr Finkel was much peeved at Faraday for this.

Additional pieces for other games were also found with the Chess pieces. For more on the topic, see the Wikipedia entry.

Irving is dynamic, passionate, sarcastic, and humorous in turn.

4. David Parlett, Hyde and seek

[Forgot to take a picture]

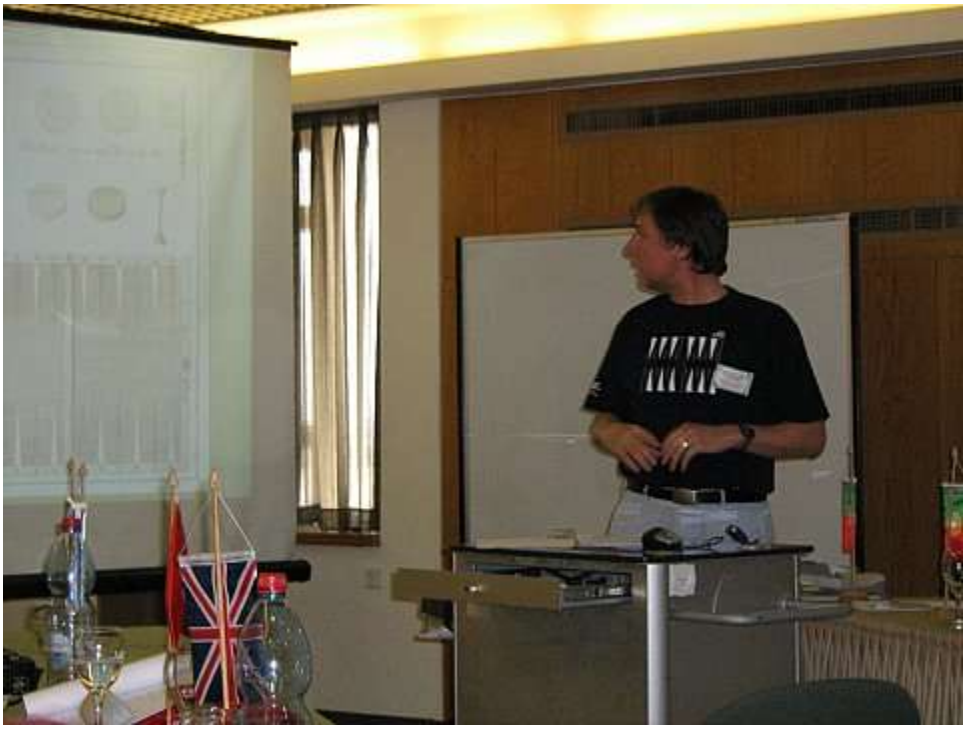
David's lecture in the previous colloquia was about Francis Willoughby, a game researcher from the 1600s. This lecture was about Thomas Hyde (1636-1703 who wrote The History of Chess (1689) (including Xiang-qi). In 1694 he wrote a history of other games, including backgammon, go, mandarin promotion game, dice, dice towers, knucklebones, checkers, nine-men's morris types (merels), mancala, and many others (Arabs, Persian, Indians, Chinese), civil and war games, Chinese backgammon, chaupar, and so on. Then he combined both books into one. He was also preparing a book on playing cards, but no notes exist.

These are obvious precursors to Murray's fantastic books on the same topics.

Hyde's books include quotes from poems about Chess written by the Ibn Ezra, a famous Jewish Rabbi. Victor Keats translated the poems into English and has written a few books on the topic of Chess in Jewish sources from the Talmud on.

David was also a good speaker. Later in the day, he also complimented me on my talk from the previous day, which was an unexpected thrill.

5. Ulrich Schaedler, Tric-Trac to Backgammon



Around early 1800s, Tric-Trac declined in France, and backgammon replaced it.

We're not sure when or where Tric-Trac originated. The object is not to bear pieces off the board, but to make points, which are scored with cribbage-like holes on the side of the board. Pieces not removed from the board. Points are scored if you "could" land on certain points with your dice throws, though you don't actually land on them, you just note them and score - these are conventions of gentility. Your opponent can score any points you forget to mark, like cut-throat cribbage.

Tric-Trac was criticized (compared to other games) as being embarrassing to players when they are not attentive. Also there is a long opening phase without any conflict, since all the pieces start bunched up on the far ends. Also, the French thought that Backgammon was too fast and not complicated enough for a "real" game.

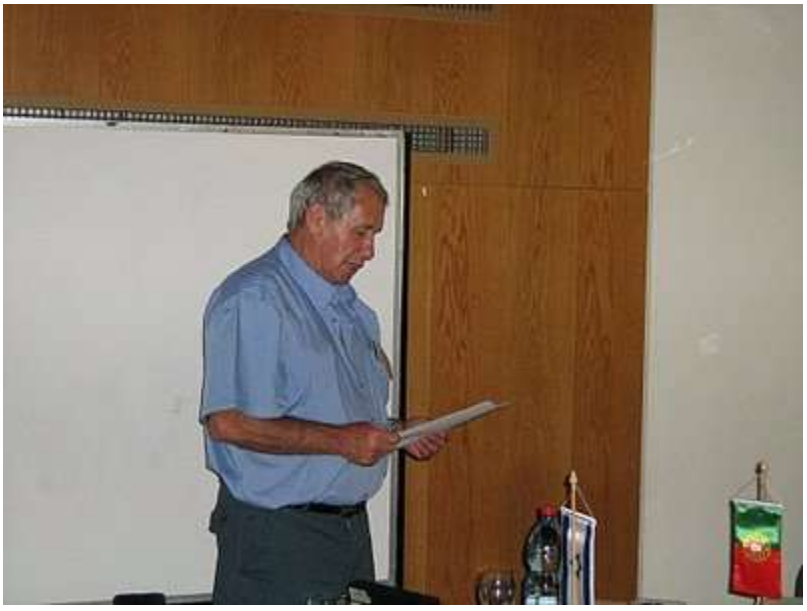
A solid presentation that went over time.

6. Simon Cohen, Anti-Semitic Games

Simon Cohen sitting, after his lecture

Simon presented derogatory, caricature, or propaganda games and pictures from his collection, from "The New Game of the Jew" circa 1790, through to "Kaboom! The Suicide Bombing Game" circa 2001.

7. Gadi Kfir, Jerusalem in Games



Gadi presented pictures of Go Fish and other games and toy figurines with pictures of Jerusalem landmarks, such as the Tower of David, specific and general Jerusalem characters.

Then we took a trip to the Israel Museum, where we saw (among other things):

Note the black stereotype image on the top left card game

8. Prof Israel (Bob) Aumann, Games where the first player can always win but no one knows how

Waiting outside the locked auditorium

Prof Aumann was the recent winner of the Nobel prize in Economy for his work on game theory.

He showed existence proofs: proofs that show that there is an answer, but don't say what the answer is.

There are two games that fit this: Asymmetric Gnim and Hex.

Symmetric Gnim is played on a checker board, with the lower left corner removed (63 squares). On your turn, you pick a square and eliminate the square, as well as all squares above or to the right of the square. Turns alternate. The player to make the last move wins.

This game is a win for the first player, and the method is shown: First player chooses square 2,7 - that is, 2nd from the left, 2nd from the bottom. After his play, two equal length lines remain: a vertical line of 7 squares and a horizontal line of 7 squares. From this point on, the first player mirrors whatever the second player does on the other line, until he has removed the last square.

This method will not work in Asymmetric Gnim, which is the same game as Symmetric Gnim, but with an additional column of squares (lower left square of an 8x9 grid of squares is removed). We can prove that the first player can win, but we can't prove how. The first player takes 1,9, the top right corner. Now if the second player can force a win, he now takes the square that initiates his moving sequence. Whatever this move is, we restart the game and the first player now takes this winning move as his starting move, instead of the second player, thus proving that the first player can force the win.

He didn't go into proving how to prove a first player win for Hex.

Additional Notes

They say that an academic convention is about the connections, not the sessions. I sold a copy of my game to Piet to take back to his Belgium museum, and I will also be selling another one tomorrow. I will also be teaching the game to Gadi and Piet, so they can teach others how to play tomorrow night.

I've had brief conversations with a number of the other attendees, some of whom I have admired for years, and some of whom implied that they would like to see me make it to next year's colloquium (at least, I think so), which will be in Paris. I've had requests for my email and blog info from many of them, and for further information on Eurogames.

There was a reporter from the Jerusalem Post who sat through all the lectures until we left for the Israel museum.

There was a guy named Claude exhibiting hand-crafted wooden games of his own design. I got to play all of them, and they were all pretty nice abstracts, worthy of being published by someone. He asked me not to describe the rules here until he finds a publisher.

Claude exhibiting one of his games

Some handcrafted games from Goa

Addendum

One more note about Fraenkel's lecture from yesterday: He mentioned an inverse relationship between board feel and solvability. In other words, NIM games, which are simple and possibly solvable, don't give a board game feel; you may be one or two moves away from winning or losing, and have no idea. On the other hand, complicated games like Chess and Go may be entirely unsolvable, yet they give a distinct impression that someone has a better or worse position, or that someone is winning or losing.

Day 3 of the Board Game Studies 2009 Colloquium

Friday I had to leave at 5:00 in order to get home before shabbat. So I missed whatever happened after 5:00, as well as all the events of the fourth day. Much of that time was spent by the attendees touring around Jerusalem, I believe.

Sessions

1. Science Museum

We went to the Bloomfield Science Museum. I'm not familiar with other science museums other than the Ontario Science Center, but this one seems like a very nice one for kids, comparable to the OSC, if perhaps smaller.

We first sat down around a table while a museum staff member showed us a number of puzzles: an arrangement of balls you have to stack to make a pyramid, a rope with which you must make a knot without letting go of the ends of the rope, and ropes looped around two people's wrists and interlocked out of which you must get unlocked.

The staff member had only before done this with kids, of whom she claimed 25% were able to solve the puzzles. We told her right off that she was sitting with the world's experts in board games, which impressed her, so naturally none of us were able to solve any of the puzzles (except for the first, and except for those who had already seen the puzzles).

We then went to a games exhibit, where a number of games were set up, each associated with a specific area of thinking. Some were word games.

This one should look familiar: it's Quarto, a game that I think should be a forced draw for either player. In any case, I have never lost, and I doubt I ever will.

This second game was filed under "anticipation". On your turn, you may move a single one of your balls one grid space sideways in either direction. Or, you can jump any number of contiguous pieces (yours or

your opponents) in any orthogonal direction. Like Chinese Checkers, the object is to get all your pieces into your opponent's home spaces.

However, there is a twist: on your turn you tilt the board toward you, so any single ball in a double grid slot slides back to your side.

Someone made a big mistake, and I'm fairly sure it's me; the above cannot be the correct rules. Without your opponent cooperating, it seems impossible to actually get your last ball in. When you tilt the board toward you, your last ball is always at least two grid spaces away from your opponent's corner, unless your opponent is kind enough to leave a ball there to prop it up. If anyone can solve this with the rules as given, let me know.

After some wandering around, we returned to Hebrew U.

2. Piet Notebart & Luc Blomme, A method to evaluate math games

Piet and Luc manage a vast collection of 10,000 games in Belgium. They are now organizing the games in various ways. One way it to evaluate the suitability of each game in the classroom setting.

They are first classifying games that can teach math concepts. They're classification categories are based on topics from the Belgium national, Catholic, and kindergarden math curricula. These curricula have 19 major math terms: number sense, quantities, early counting, operations, search strategies (Blokus, Ingenious), measuring (comparison, area, monetary, numerical), geometry, algebra, ... and so on.

Their method is to examine ten aspects of the game material and ten of the concept. Each aspect is evaluated on a scale of 1 to 5 for use in a classroom. All types of games evaluated (not only "math" games).

The material aspects: attractiveness (will kids want to look at the game), clarity of components, orientation issues (can children see the board if it's upside down to them), laguage independence, stability of components during play, durability and replayability of components, functionality (components actually work), clarity of storage solution (so as to quickly evaluate if all parts have been put away), space requirements, and setup requirements.

The concept aspects: complete and clear rules, explainability, knowable time requirement (and not widely variable time length), possibilities of different levels of play for different levels of children, involvement and interaction, matches curriculum goals, the ability for the kids to play independent of teacher assistance, employable in schools (I forget what this is), fun, and originality.

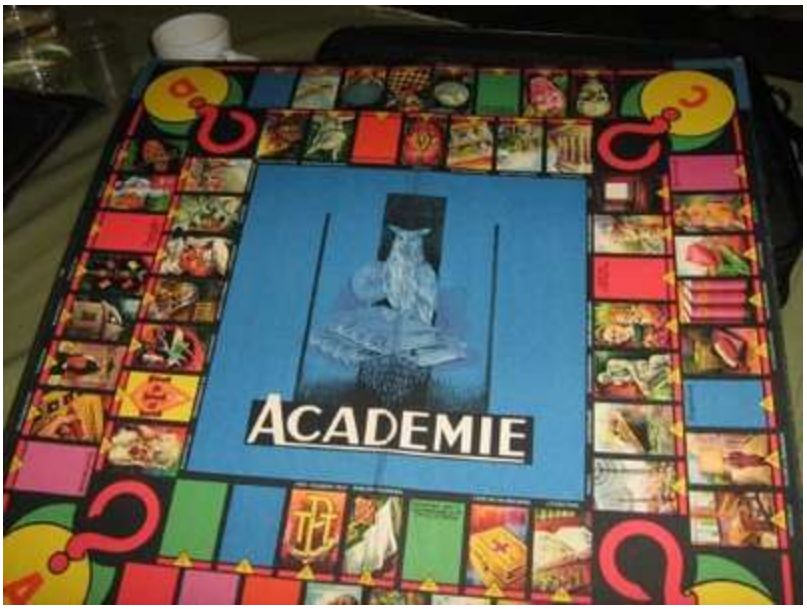
After establishing the categories, they sent questionnaires sent to teachers and also added their own evaluation. When available, they give suggestions to make games more suitable. If the game evaluated as very good (or can be made so), they would like to provide a logo for publishers to put on product. They also develop lesson plans for the games.

3. Yoav Ziv, Redesigning games

Yoav runs workshops where older teens and singles recreate old toys and yard games with new designs. These redesigns might change yard games into table games. Results of these workshops are games such as Ring-o Flamingo by Gamewright.

4. Fred Horn, The Game "Academie" of Mr Van der Gaag

Fred Horn is from Holland, organizes Chess clubs, and creates abstract games. He described his research on the history of game production in Holland, and specifically Mr Van der Gaag and his game "Academie".



5. Claude Hayat, Invention of Games as a Way of Expression

Gadi and Claude

Claude described his abstract games (see second day's notes), and followed with a little on a hard life.

And then I went home, leaving some of my games for them to play later in the evening. I may write some more thoughts about the conference in a followup post.

Thoughts and Analysis Regarding the Board Game Studies Colloquia

I thought I had done due diligence regarding the BGS conference, which lead me to think that the attendees only knew about older, classic games, and that they primarily spoke about the history and culture of various games as discovered through archaeology and manuscript research.

It turns out I was sort of right, but I missed the very important word "primarily" in there.

The list of topics at BGS Colloquia

I did a little more work and was able to discover the abstracts for years 2001 (colloquium IV) - 2009 (colloquium XII). I couldn't find any session information for 2007, or any years prior to 2001. For years 2003 and 2006 I could only discover the titles; no abstracts.

I have assigned 17 topics to the sessions. This is not rigorous study, but a ballpark assessment, especially for the sessions to which I only had the titles. I evaluated 190 sessions.

1. Books: game compendiums or other written sources for games

2. Children: children's particular role in games

3. Classification: classifying games

4. Classics: international classic abstract games: chess, checkers, mancala, pachisi, dominoes, backgammon, dice, etc.

5. Computers: the role of computers in games

6. Culture: games shaping culture, and vice versa

7. Design: the physical elements of games

8. Education: games used in education

9. History: historical facts about games

10. Math: mathematical analysis of a game

11. Mechanics: the play aspects of games

12. Medieval: any game not a classic, proprietary, or modern (until 1920s or so; this is a gross misuse of the word "medieval", but so there.)

13. Modern: modern American or European games, or similar (Monopoly or later)

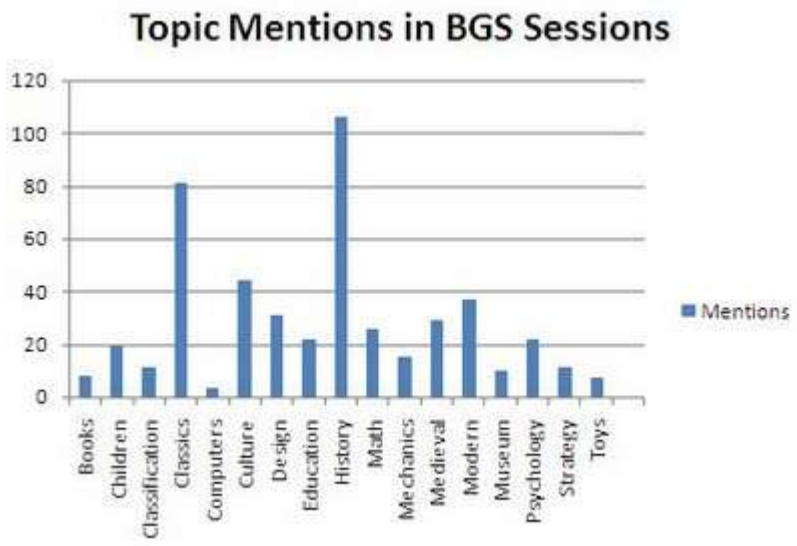
14. Museum: game collections, esp in museums

15. Psychology: games shaping minds, and vice versa

16. Strategy: how to win

17. Toys: non-game objects, such as toys and puzzles

Here is the number of times that each topic is covered. One session may cover multiple topics.



Yes, history, classics, medieval, design, and culture are highly represented, but modern games are also covered frequently: a tribute to Sid Sackson, AH war games, modern variations on abstracts, Settlers of Catan, Monopoly, the occasional mention of a Eurogame, and so on. In each colloquium, there are one or two sessions on the mathematical analysis of abstract games. Computers get almost no mentions.

There are, to my mind, some notably missing topics:

Theme: while a modern game may sometimes be covered, the concept of theme in games is almost never covered; the design elements might be. Actually, theme is covered once or twice, such as when talking about a game of "vice and virtue" and similar moral elements within the game.

Industry: there were a few talks about how to create games, but nothing on the business or financial side of games.

Elderly: kids are covered, but only one talk mentions the elderly, as far as I know.

Cheating: not addressed.

Gambling: dice and so on are mentioned, as is luck, but not the culture of gambling.

Trivia: the second most prevalent modern game mechanic gets no mention.

Dexterity: no mention about dexterity games, such as tiddly winks, jenga, or pick up sticks.

Collectability: while some of the presenters are collectors, there are no talks about acquiring or the collectability of games.

Societies: no mention about game clubs or groups.

About the Attendees

Many of the attendees have been coming to all of the colloquia, and the age level is up there. A few are younger attendees. There is always a flurry of younger attendees from the host country that wouldn't travel to the conference elsewhere (such as myself).

They are a nice group, though some have some personal quirks (like academics tend to have). If you can write cogently and present a few interesting and original points on any of the above topics, they're happy to hear about it; it doesn't have to be thorough research manuscript information, but you do have to have decent knowledge on what you're talking about.

I was not the only one with a blog, but I was the only "blogger", and so impressed them with my daily updates about the conference. There is a web site for the board game studies journal, but no central location for sessions and abstracts for each colloquium. That should be fixed.

Part of every conference is devoted to touring the conference location. That's mostly what I missed on Friday night and Saturday.