

The Glorious Battle on the Road to Valhalla

Across the different games and platforms, resource management can often be found in some form. Be it different trade good from Settlers of Catan, cards from Uno, minerals from Starcraft or character health and items in Baldur's Gate, resources are game elements that can be used to accomplish certain goals. Resource management is a mechanic that forces the players to consider the value of these assets. The players has to choose their actions more carefully as there is not always an obvious superior choice. E.g. in Starcraft, it can prove to be a better choice save resource to upgrade units later than buy units sooner. It is not a trivial task, however, to implement such a system. The more resource elements there are, the more variables there is bound into the system, making balancing more difficult, and thereby also the design of games affordance for the intended play experience

To gain deeper insight in the design of resource management, we designed a resource management viking game through an iterative design process. A Viking game is defined as a game where the end condition is met when there is one and only one, loser. A typical viking game could be a racing game(last one to cross the line is the loser). The goal of the game is gather gold through plundering England or stealing from other players, to buys axes to increase your plundering power. When you have enough axes you can go to the Land of Fire. In the land of fire you fight until you die gloriously in battle, and thereby not the loser. The entire game manual and a game session can be found through my portfolio, which describes the game in detail. A overview of the playing board can be seen on figure 1 & 2.

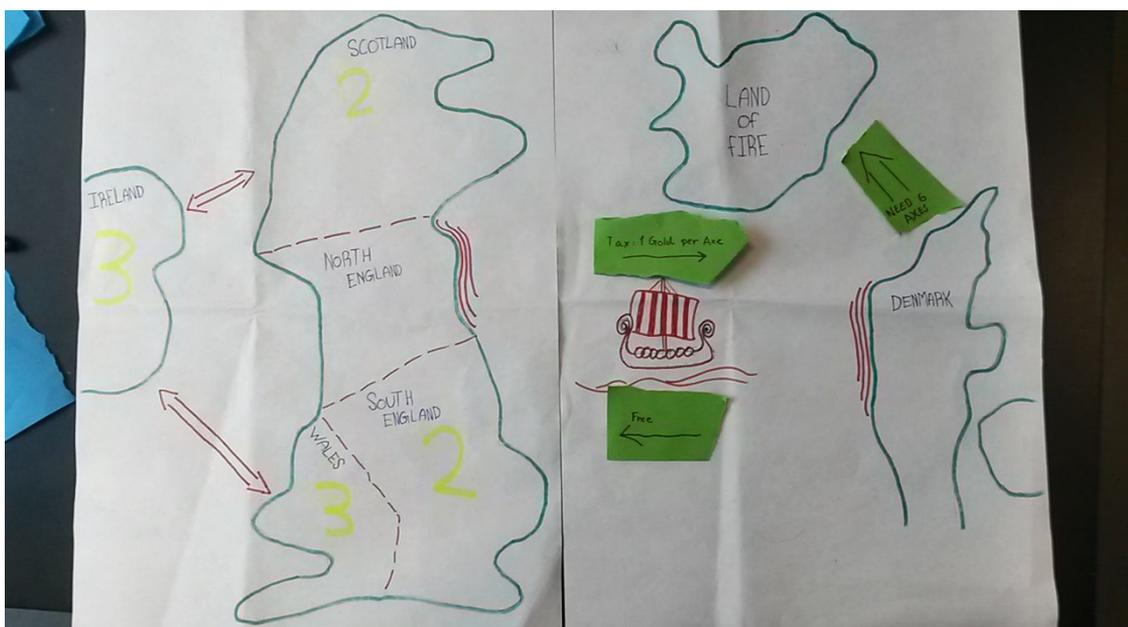


Figure 1: Clear game board.

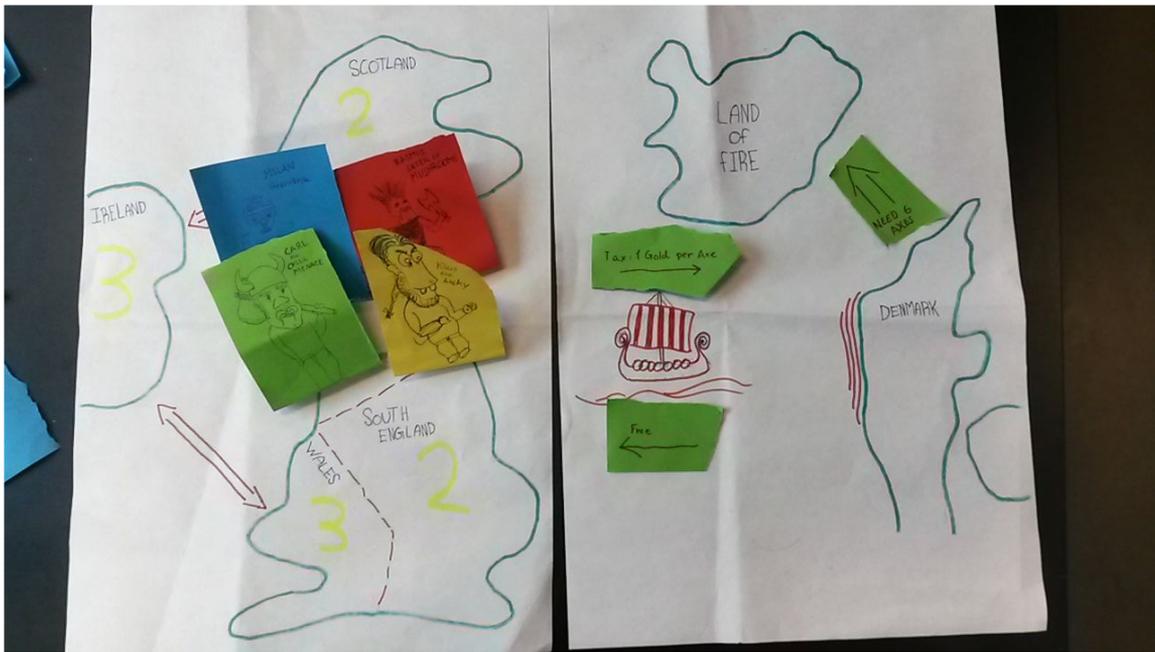


Figure 2: the game board with the Vikings starting in North England

The entire process of balancing the resource system was a tedious, but effective way of design the system. For each iteration we tweaked only one variable to see the effect. Small changes in variables, such as the amount of gold required for an axe changed, had huge effects on the play experience, as new strategies formed. By continuously testing, we always knew what worked and did not work. Seen how much work this required with only two resources, adding more resources was only considered short. It would require much more testing, add a lot of additional variables, as well as it would increase the difficulty of the game, and thereby advancing the play experience toward a more experienced target group. More rules, mechanics and thereby challenges would not afford the play experience designed for this game as a rather quick and chaotic resource management game.

As for the resource system, we chose to split up the acquisition mechanic of each resources, and the transition to the most important resource (axes) to cost. This is to blur the power between each choices, making it a choice of personal expression. You can choose to be greedy, stay in England and plunder until you have enough gold for axes to go directly to the Land of Fire. This can lead to punishment from the other players if you are stolen from. Or you can go the more safer way, and only buy one axe at the time, but thereby use a lot of resource to travel back and forth. This, in addition to the choices in between, increases the choices possible, the weight they carry.

The one thing about Viking games end condition unlike other games, is that it declare one as loser, and thereby worse than the others, while other games declare a winner which is thereby better than the others. This can potentially provide the losing player with a negative play experience. To try counteracting this, we build the context and the narrative around the last player's character being alive would lose. Thereby we are creating a winning situation for the losing player through the narrative. While his fellow players are still superior to him in the game, he can be content with his character being king and alive. The effect of this was

never tested, and might as well be redundant, but the idea of trying to design a viking game where everyone is some sort of winner was interesting.

While the economy of the resource management system was balanced and well tested, there were a couple of issues that were not touched. One of these were the lack of player versus player interaction. We wanted to design a play experience filled with chaotic stealing and fighting each other to push the others down while getting closer to the goal yourself. However, the winners of the games were often those you simply plundered England constantly. In my opinion it is due to plundering being too safe, while the player interactions not being rewarding enough. This removes the chaotic play experience as it makes the game afford the safest route to Valhalla rather than the interaction.

Another issue is the end game. In essence the first player that enters the Land of Fire is removed from the playful activity and from interaction with the other players. While he/she was fight the other players before, he is simply fighting the dices he is rolling. It basically removes the winning player from the game before he is rewarded with a seat among the winners.

From what I observed in testing, this made the winning part of the game unpleasurable and thereby not something you would want to achieve. A way to fight this could be to introduce a mechanic for the players in the Land of Fire to interact with the players in England/Denmark without chance of retribution. To win you would have to stay in the Land of Fire for a certain amount of rounds, but there can be only one in the Land of Fire at the time. This supports the chaotic play experience and the player interaction, as the players would want to make sure the other players are as far below them as possible and stay there.

The prototype has made some solid foundation for further development of the game, as well as opened my mind for creative thinking concerning the winning conditions. Giving more room and reward for player interaction would likely lead to a more pleasurable play experience. The iterative design process provides a strong framework for the small tweaks that is required for this game to meet the requirements for the designed play experience.