Meeples Together

How and Why Cooperative Board Games Work

**Christopher Allen
& Shannon Appelcline**

Foreword by Matt Leacock,
designer of *Pandemic*

PRAISE FOR *MEEPLES TOGETHER*

If you like cooperative game and game design, this is the book you absolutely need to read. It includes an incredible exhaustive and detailed work analyzing the history of cooperative games, and tries to answer these two essential questions: how it works, and why it works.

— Bruno Cathala, co-designer of *Shadows over Camelot*

Meeples Together provides an in-depth look at the history of cooperative gaming as it explores the mechanics and theories of the designers that brought cooperative gaming to mainstream hobby gaming. *Meeples Together* is a must read for any emerging game designer, and an interesting read for all hobby gamers.

— Richard Launius, designer of *Arkham Horror*

Required reading for game designers of any kind, bursting at the seams with knowledge and notions. I'll be stealing ideas from this for years.

— Matt Forbeck, award-winning game designer and
New York Times bestselling author

If something I did is not in Shannon and Christopher's book, I'm not sure I did it.

— Mike Selinker, co-designer of the *Pathfinder Adventure Card Game*,
Thornwatch, and *Betrayal at House on the Hill*

This book is a fascinating read for any student of game design. Whether you want to design games or just enjoy the analysis of games, *Meeples Together* will deepen your understanding of cooperative game mechanics and dynamics, as well as keep you entertained.

— Eric B. Vogel, designer of *The Dresden Files Cooperative Card Game*

Everything you always wanted to know about cooperative games but were afraid to ask… and more! Absolutely [a book] to read!

— Serge Laget, co-designer of *Shadows over Camelot*

MEEPLES TOGETHER

How and Why Cooperative Board Games Work

by Christopher Allen & Shannon Appelcline

with illustrations by Keith Curtis

This PDF edition of Meeples Together *has been adapted from the print edition for best function and appearance on tablet devices. Pagination differs between editions.*

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HOW TO READ THIS BOOK

This book is designed to be read cover to cover, from Chapter 1 to Chapter 14. The five appendices at the end of the book can be read at any time; they support the main chapters by giving you more insight into various topics without impacting the flow of the book.

Appendix I: The Basics of Game Design surveys building blocks of game design, from structure to planning.

Appendix II: Game Design Dilemmas describes problems of game design, from analysis paralysis to team ups.

Appendix III: Game Design Types lists categories of game design, from action point games to zero-sum games.

Appendix IV: Game Design & Social Theories details philosophical conundrums that can be brought into gaming, from the Abilene paradox to the tyranny of small decisions.

Appendix V: Cooperative & Teamwork Game Synopses & Mini-Reviews overviews the mechanics of a variety of cooperative games. Since this book focuses on examples to highlight game design, this appendix is where you should go if you're not familiar with a game under discussion. Each entry also briefly reviews the game, which is less important, but may help determine which games deserve more attention.

If you choose to read this book sequentially, you should jump to the appropriate appendix when you want additional information on a topic that's being discussed. Appendix III and Appendix V are the most useful for describing individual categories of games and specific games, respectively.

Instead of reading straight through, you might want to get to the guts. In this case, you can choose to skip the initial chapters, which detail where cooperative games fit into the tabletop board game industry as a whole. If so, go immediately to Part Two and Part Three of the book. Together Chapters 5-12 contain the main description of how to design cooperative games, first from the mechanical point of view, then from the theoretical point of view.

Alternatively, you might choose some other method for reading, such as pairing up the related sections of Parts Two and Three. Ultimately, you should read *Meeples Together* in whatever order best supports your interest and enthusiasm.

A NOTE ON GAME EDITIONS

This book draws its examples from the ever-growing corpus of published co-op games. This was occasionally challenging when a game existed in multiple, very different editions. Though this book does touch upon different editions, it tends to favor the editions with the most complex mechanics — not because it's necessarily the best design, but

because it offers the best examples. This includes: *Arkham Horror* 2e, *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* 1e, *Fury of Dracula* 2e, and *Mansions of Madness* 1e.

A NOTE ON ICONS

When you read through this book, you'll see two icons: ▭ refers to an *aside*, which provides some tangential discussion of the topic at hand, while (♀) notes an *idea* that hasn't been widely used in the cooperative gaming field.

FOREWORD

If you're interested in understanding or designing cooperative games — or games of any kind for that matter — reading this book is a great place to start. Cooperative games are hot! From humble beginnings, the category has seen incredible growth. From 1973 to 2007, the percentage of games listed on BoardGameGeek with a "cooperative play" mechanism hovered consistently around 2 to 3 percent. After 2009, the scene suddenly changed, with steady upward growth in the genre. Fully 12 percent of the games introduced in 2017 had a cooperative play element (400% growth over 2009) and the trend appears to be growing at a faster and faster rate.

There are good reasons for this sudden uptick. The year 2008 saw some important breakthroughs in the genre. *Pandemic*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Space Alert*, and *Ghost Stories* were all released that year. These games helped define the genre and prove that it was viable given the popularity of the titles. Once the category was proven, more designers and publishers threw their hats into the ring.

Timing and popularity aside, cooperative games are worth your attention for other reasons. I decided to try my hand at cooperative games after playing Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (2000). My partner Donna and I found that we enjoyed the game tremendously regardless of whether we won or lost. We relished the drama and found the fact that we were facing it together to be the most compelling part of the experience. I set out to create *Pandemic* hoping I could design a game that offered a similar feeling of togetherness.

I've heard incredible stories from the players of my cooperative games. One person told me that *Pandemic* saved his marriage. Several people have used *Pandemic Legacy* to propose to their spouses. Another found exchanging *Pandemic Legacy* stories with his wife at the hospital helped him through a terrible time while his father was in a coma. A doctor shared stories with me of how they use *Pandemic* at the University of Leicester Medical School to teach medical students — not about pathogens or pandemics — but how to communicate better as a team in order to reduce the number of casualties in the operating theater due cooperation and communication failures. Sure, cooperative games are fun, but they also have characteristics that draw people together in a more fundamental way.

Cooperative games also serve as one of the best gateways for players who are new to modern tabletop games. This is because many of the obstacles facing new players are reduced: there's less rules anxiety because the other players are incentivized to share the rules at the best pace for the new player to learn. And differences in skill levels matter less since everyone has the same goal. The tension around a master player "destroying" a novice in a game goes away. (Although new problems can emerge where experienced players become over-enthusiastic about directing novices' play....)

If you've gone beyond just playing cooperative games to think about — or to actually try — creating one, you already know that designing a cooperative game can be daunting. In addition to all the considerations involved in a competitive game, you need to design an *antagonist*. You can't count on the other players to provide the "brains" behind the opposition. You also have to ensure that the players have a sense of autonomy, need to present interesting tasks and goals that require cooperation, and must grapple with the interpersonal dynamics that groups, teams, and perhaps even *traitors* present.

If you're a designer, Allen and Applecline have done a lot of the legwork for you. You'll find a section devoted to challenge systems that explains the considerations to which your well-functioning antagonist must adhere. In addition to challenge systems, you'll find other mechanisms, theories, and frontiers laid out for you to explore.

For fans and designers both, the authors have not only played the vast majority of the foundational cooperative games, they've dissected them, analyzed them, and like good taxonomists, spread them across the table and labeled all of their parts. They've made the case that it's not possible to simply cobble together a handful of parts and expect to get a game that's worth playing. This line of exploration in particular serves as both an explanation for fans as to why some designs fall flat as well as a cautionary tale for designers about how *not* to craft their next game. As a gamer, you'll better understand what you like and what you don't. As a designer, you can move beyond (re)discovering existing solutions, and instead use this material as a starting point for your own discoveries, or react to them and see if you can find another, better way.

Given the incredible growth in the hobby and in the genre, it can sometimes seem impossible to keep up. There are just too many games being released each year to play them all. Even setting aside the insights that form the bulk of *Meeples Together*, the case studies and appendices in this book will help you sort through the mountain of titles released to date so you can find the ones that are most relevant to your tastes, and worthy of your valuable time at the table.

Cooperative games are increasingly popular. They bring people together in new and fundamental ways. They're hard to design. Picking up this book was a great first step in surveying, learning about, designing, or just having more fun with cooperative games. Good luck on your journey!

— Matt Leacock • Sunnyvale, California • September, 2018

CHAPTER 1: THE BASICS OF COOPERATION

This is a book about the design of tabletop cooperative games. It's about games like *Pandemic, Robinson Crusoe, Hanabi, Battlestar Galactica*, and *Mysterium*, where most or all of the players work together in order to achieve the common goal of victory.

It examines tabletop cooperative games by taking them apart piece-by-piece. It's meant to aid designers who want to create their own cooperative games and to provide insight to players who want to know more about how their favorite cooperative games work.

This book maintains a narrow focus. It concentrates on games: those enjoyable and structured cooperative activities that are played in-person and that focus on achieving some objective.[1] It just barely touches upon cooperative play (which is more freeform and less victory-focused) and computer cooperative games (which are typically played online, not face-to-face). Each of those topics could form the basis of its own book.

> *The line between cooperative game and cooperative play is hard to define. For example, escape card games such as* Exit: The Game *and* Unlock! *have very few mechanics other than their cooperative puzzle solving. However, they have some structure and a victory condition, which suggests that they are "game," not "play."*

Nonetheless, many of the ideas in this volume are widely applicable to cooperative activities of all sort — and in fact tabletop games might offer ideas that aren't currently being considered by other cooperative genres.

GAMES OF NOTE

Arkham Horror† • The Fury of Dracula • HeroQuest • Lord of the Rings • Pandemic† • Scotland Yard • Shadows over Camelot† • Werewolf

These games are extensively featured in this chapter. For more information read Appendix V. Games marked with a dagger (†) are also the subject of a case study in this book.

WHAT IS A COOPERATIVE GAME?

Cooperative design begins with **cooperation**. In other words, people working together. The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines cooperation as "common effort" or "association of persons for common benefit."[2]

It's notable that there's nothing in there about a common goal. People can cooperate for the common benefit in order to fulfill a variety of entirely selfish goals. For example, three people could rent a car together, one because they're fleeing the law, one because they want to pick up groceries, and one because they think there's a good aftermarket for car rentals. However, the more far-removed the individuals' goals are, the less efficient their cooperation is likely to be.

Whether there's a common goal or just a common benefit defines the style of cooperation:

Cooperative strategy occurs when players cooperate in order to achieve individual goals. They may be working together as partners, they may be temporarily allying to achieve individual success, or they may be cooperating just to survive. The cooperation is ultimately secondary to some sort of individual achievement. In the world of board and card games, cooperative strategy usually occurs within a predominantly competitive game that allows players to temporarily team up in some way to achieve improved success. Chapters 2 and 3 pay a lot of attention to this sort of gameplay.

Figure 1-1: Cooperative strategy for common benefit

Cooperative games instead focus upon players who are cooperating in order to achieve a joint goal — usually survival or victory over a "challenge" system. There can be individual goals (though they're relatively rare), but they will always be secondary to the cooperative goals of the game. In other words, a game might say who cooperated the best, but it's sort of an after-thought to the question of whether the group won or lost. The rest of the book tends to focus on this sort of gameplay.
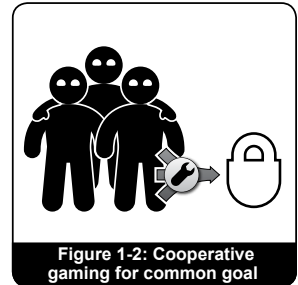
Figure 1-2: Cooperative gaming for common goal

A SPECTRUM OF COOPERATION

The difference between cooperative strategy and cooperative games can be fuzzy. These categories can be broken down even further into a spectrum of gameplay that goes from fully competitive to fully cooperative…and the games that fall toward the middle can be hard to define. For example, Bruno Faidutti's *Terra* is classified herein primarily as a competitive game, but the gameplay is heavily cooperative until you crown the winners.

> *Remember that games are briefly synopsized in <u>Appendix V</u>, so refer to that if you want more information on a game that's being discussed. Some games are also more extensively explored in individual case studies. For example, you can find out more about* Terra *in <u>its case study in Chapter 2</u>.*

Ultimately, making sure that a game ends up in the right bucket isn't as important as understanding the entire competitive-cooperative spectrum of gameplay.

Non-competitive games are a real rarity. *The Ungame* is one of those rare examples: players move around a board and ask personal questions of each other. Non-competitive games fall entirely outside of the spectrum of gameplay described here.

> *Game theorists frequently make a distinction between two topics: "games" (which are structured) and "play" (which is not);* The Ungame *is structured, but its lack of real goals is why it differs from standard gaming.*

Competitive games are the most common sort of game. They generally have a goal that all the players are trying to accomplish, and whoever reaches that goal first or best wins (though there are many variations on this, such as individual goals, automatic losing conditions, and more). Most games you've played, from *Monopoly* to *Scrabble*, were competitive games, and they were probably purely competitive.

Competitive games start to move up the spectrum toward cooperative games when they adopt *cooperative strategy* elements. This can be as simple as teaming up with another player to take out a third foe in *Risk*. Modern games like Klaus-Jürgen Wrede's *Carcassonne* are more likely to include specific scoring or gameplay mechanics that actively encourage cooperation.

Chapter 2 gives better details on games of this sort and discusses the ways that competitive games can incorporate cooperative strategy.

Team games support two or more groups of roughly equal size competing against each other. Contract bridge is perhaps the best-known team game, though there are plenty of other examples in the field of card games. Some team games such as *Dune* and *Mü* have dynamic partnerships rather than static partnerships, while others have hidden partnerships or partial partnerships.

Team games fit into the middle of the competitive-cooperative spectrum because they partake of both sorts of gameplay in equal parts. They tend to be totally cooperative within a group (where everyone has the same goal: winning as a team) and totally competitive among the groups. A team game *could* move toward one side of the spectrum or the other depending on its precise mechanics. For example, dynamic and partial partnerships tend to be more competitive because the individual teams are more fluid and so teammates are less loyal to each other.

Because they fit into the middle of the spectrum, team games are discussed in Chapter 3, after competitive games. In turn, they lead to cooperative games, as team play provides the first hints of the game design challenges that cooperation creates.

Cooperative games lie at the other end of the spectrum from competitive games. Here, the players have a common goal. Though they're not as common as competitive games, cooperative games have grown quite popular in recent years. The three foundational cooperative games are *Arkham Horror, Lord of the Rings*, and *Pandemic. Pandemic* probably remains the most popular, but other bestsellers include *Battlestar Galactica, Betrayal at House on the Hill, Forbidden Island, Hanabi*, and *Robinson Crusoe*.

Cooperative games start to move down the spectrum toward competitive games when not everyone is cooperating. This typically means players take on the role of adversaries working against the common good. These opponents might even be hidden — secretly

seeding destruction while pretending to cooperate. This eventually collides with team play on the spectrum.

Alternatively, players can be primarily cooperative, but still crown a winner; this can sometimes influence the cooperative strategy (and can even turn a cooperative game into a competitive game, depending on the emphasis placed on cooperation vs. competition in the rules).

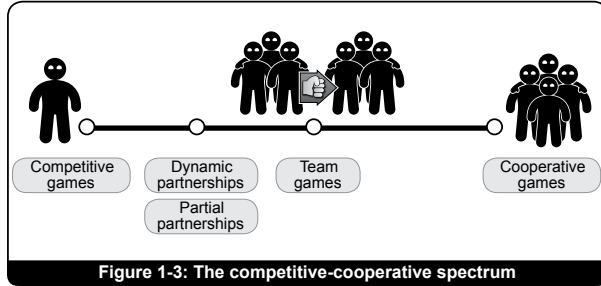Chapter 4 extensively discusses these variants for cooperative games.

Figure 1-3: The competitive-cooperative spectrum

THE MASTERS SPEAK

Two of the foundational cooperative designers, Richard Launius and Reiner Knizia, have offered their own definitions of cooperative games.

Launius says "pure cooperative games rely on the players working for a common goal against a board and game system that will shift each game." He also believes that theme is very important to a cooperative game;[3] this is an element of "adventure gaming," an important secondary element in cooperative games.

Knizia focuses more on the challenges and threats that underlie most cooperative games, saying, "In the *Lord of the Rings* [game], the players are given a common task that they must achieve, and they realize very quickly that they are doomed. The players realize that the task [is] essentially insurmountable, so competition and selfishness is replaced by a true spirit of togetherness against the common evil."[4]

A BRIEF HISTORY OF COOPERATIVE GAMING

The next chapter digs into the competitive-cooperative spectrum in more depth. However, it's important to first examine the industry's history, as a foundation for understanding the games that are the basis for this book's discussion of design.

THE ROLEPLAYING PRELUDE: 1974-1982

The late '60s and early '70s were a time of notable social change in the United States, and that was reflected in the gaming industry by the appearance of new sorts of games that didn't match the competitive ideas of earlier generations. This probably led to the creation of *The Ungame* (1975), a "game" of wandering around a board and asking other players questions without any actual goal. However, what Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson

did in Lake Geneva, Wisconsin and in the Twin Cities of Minnesota was much more notable.

Arneson and Gygax were the creators of *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), a unique game where players together take on the roles of fantasy characters who explore dungeons, ruins, and other places of adventure. *D&D* grew out of the miniatures wargaming community, which was entirely competitive, and this was reflected in its original design. The gamemaster (who organized and ran the game) was directly opposed to the other players, and the players often fought among themselves: thief characters stole from their own party members, paladin characters confronted them, cleric characters argued for peace, and fighter characters fought for war. However, as the '70s trended into the '80s, other roleplaying games appeared that were more about cooperative storytelling and less about adversarial competition.[5] Roleplaying games like *D&D* largely fall outside the scope of this book because they're not exactly board games, but they laid the building blocks of cooperative gaming!

Enter a second gaming category: the adventure game. Adventure games are board games that use the general themes of roleplaying games (which at the time meant individual adventurers exploring dungeons). The first adventure game was David Megarry's *Dungeon!* (1975). In it, players wander through a dungeon, fight monsters, and collect treasures. The ultimate objective is to earn more treasure than the other players and to escape the dungeon. As should be obvious, *Dungeon!* wasn't a cooperative game. Neither were two other early adventure games: Richard Hamblen's *Magic Realm* (1979) and Robert Harris' *Talisman* (1983). However, much like those early roleplaying games, these early adventure games were creating a foundation that cooperative games could build upon. In fact, they provided such a strong foundation that *most* cooperative games include elements borrowed from adventure games, including: strong theming; frequent use of the fantasy, science fiction, and horror genres; individual characters; and character improvement.

Much as with those early roleplaying games, it'd be the '80s before a branch of adventure games took on a more cooperative tone.

THE PRIMORDIAL ERA: 1983-1999

The majority of the cooperative styles of play appeared in the '80s and '90s.[6] Cooperative gaming wasn't very big in this era, and the games were almost entirely restricted to the hobbyist/roleplaying market in the US and the UK. Still, designers were creating and expanding upon new gaming styles.

Richard Launius' *Arkham Horror* (1987) is a strong choice for the originator of the co-op form. It was the first **true co-op**, where the players are forced to work together against a challenge system. It also appears to be the first game purposefully built around carefully considered cooperative gameplay and was definitely the first adventure game to embrace cooperation — though it's based on a horror roleplaying game named *Call of Cthulhu* (1981) instead of *Dungeons & Dragons*.

In *Arkham Horror*, each player takes on the role of an investigator who moves around the New England town of Arkham, having encounters at various locales. Sometimes these

encounters give the investigator items, spells, or other resources that will help them in the game. Meanwhile, arcane gates to strange dimensions are opening across Arkham, spewing out monsters and distorting the fabric of reality.

The cooperation of *Arkham Horror* occurs through the killing of monsters and the closing of gates, both of which are spawned by a challenge system. The required degree of cooperation is quite high, as all the gates must be closed simultaneously for the game to be won (which is quite tricky to pull off!).

However, every gaming innovation has precursors. For the co-op field, two earlier games were of particular note: *Scotland Yard* and Werewolf.

Scotland Yard (1983) offered a variant of co-op play and was the only major release from outside the hobbyist industry. It's an early example of **hunter** gameplay, where one player tries to flee the rest.

Here, one player takes on the role of Mr. X, who is trying to escape Scotland Yard detectives. They secretly record their moves as they traverse a map of London, while detectives openly move to try and capture them. The catch is that Mr. X must reveal themself at certain times, giving their opponents the opportunity to zero in on their position.

The actual cooperation is limited to multiple detectives coordinating to try and corral Mr. X. A few years later, Stephen Hand's thematically similar *The Fury of Dracula* (1987) would increase the cooperation of this sort of game, as players not only tracked Dracula across Europe, but also collectively fought him.

These hunter games are somewhat outside of the cooperative field because they don't tend to include challenge systems, which is why they're noted as precursors, not the seed of the modern co-op genre.

Figure 1-4: Games of note

(timeline shown: 2008 Pandemic; 2005 Shadows over Camelot; 2000 Lord of the Rings; 1989 HeroQuest; 1987 The Fury of Dracula; 1987 Arkham Horror; 1986 Mafia; 1983 Scotland Yard; 1974 Dungeons & Dragons)

The other precursor, Mafia (1986), is even less a cooperative game than *Scotland Yard* or *The Fury of Dracula*. In this game, a large group of players are all given secret roles. Two or more players are mobsters, while the rest are innocents. The game takes place over the course of several "days" and "nights." During the day the players talk about who they think the mobsters are, then agree to eliminate a player. At night, the mobsters kill someone. The goal is for the innocents to kill the mobsters before it's too late. Werewolf (1997) is a thematic adaption of the same gameplay with werewolves and villagers instead of mobsters and innocents.

Though a forerunner to the "traitor" style of co-op play that would appear in 2005, Werewolf isn't actually a co-op because it's about voting, not collaboration. There's also not a lot of tactical choice or mechanical support, and so not a lot of game — except in modern versions like Ted Alspach and Akihisa Okui's *One Night Ultimate Werewolf* (2014).
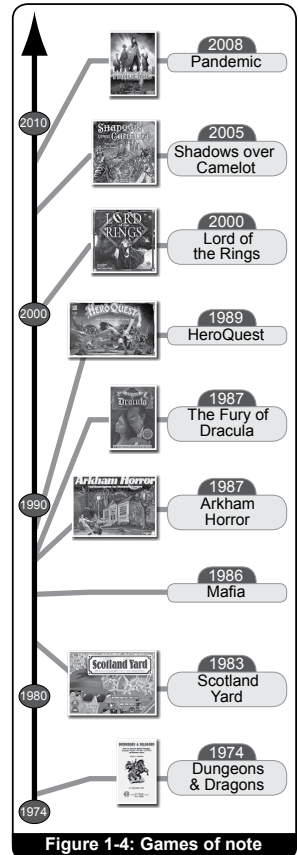
Following the release of *Arkham Horror*, the genre expanded to fantasy adventure games with Stephen Baker's *HeroQuest* (1989). *HeroQuest* is a game of dungeon delving — but with most of the players working together, unlike in *Dungeon!*. However, one of the players takes on the role of a gamemaster-like **overlord**, who places monsters, furniture, and treasure in rooms as players enter them. The rest of the players then have to figure out how to tactically support each other in order to survive.

Cooperative fantasy adventure games have often been less cooperative than the rest of the co-op genre, and *HeroQuest* shows why: its cooperation focuses almost entirely on tactical combat. Some game elements also trend toward competition, as individual characters might be able to accrue their own gold, weapons, other treasures, or experience points.

Unfortunately, *HeroQuest* was also the final major release in the brief expansion of the cooperative category in the '80s.

A NEW BEGINNING: 2000

Cooperative games fizzled out in the '90s, following the release of several *HeroQuest* expansions, but returned at the turn of the century with Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (2000).

Like *Arkham Horror*, *Lord of the Rings* is a true co-op that's purposefully built around the idea of players working together to beat a challenge system. Unlike *Arkham Horror*, it's a member of the Eurogame movement, which means that it has much more carefully considered mechanics and a shorter playtime, cutting *Arkham Horror*'s game length of several hours down to just one or two. It's also notable for its use of adventure game elements — a very strong theme, an actual plot, and individual characters with individual powers.

In *Lord of the Rings*, players each take on the role of a hobbit trying to transport the One Ring to Mordor so that it can be destroyed. Events at the start of each turn introduce random good or bad effects (mostly bad!) and then players move forward along various tracks to collect resources that they'll need to survive. There's a constant drumbeat of bad stuff happening. Players have to make choices about how to use their resources to ward off these disasters, not knowing what the future will bring, thanks to the semi-random nature of those events.

 Lord of the Rings kicked off a new wave of cooperative games — a wave that was much larger than that seen in the '80s and one that continues to the present day. Many of these more recent games have adopted the innovative elements from *Lord of the Rings*, including its individual characters, its resource management play, and its strong theming.

THE MODERN ERA: 2001-PRESENT

It took a few years after the publication of *Lord of the Rings* for the new co-op wave to get going, but the years since have seen numerous publications.

Cooperative adventure games were resurrected primarily thanks to Fantasy Flight Games (FFG), who produced *Doom: The Boardgame* (2004), then the fantasy-themed *Descent: Journeys in the Dark* (2005, 2012), both designed by Kevin Wilson. These games

We are in this together.

You are on an epic mission to combat global plague. Or you are seeking out werewolves in an isolated village. Houses are on fire, islands are sinking, and enemy androids have infiltrated the fleet. You can't succeed alone — and victory requires more than understanding your teammates. You need to know the game.

Join experts Christopher Allen and Shannon Appelcline as they examine not only how cooperative board games work, but *why*. With more than 150 enlightening images showing principles and mechanisms of play in action, this book helps you see your favorite cooperative board games in new ways. Together, we look deep into the machinery of great games to reveal how they work — and how we play.

Whether you want to play cooperative games better, discover your next favorite game, or design the world's next favorite, *Meeples Together* is for you.

"*Meeples Together* is a must read for any emerging game designer, and an interesting read for all hobby gamers."
— Richard Launius, designer of *Arkham Horror*

"*Meeples Together* will deepen your understanding of cooperative game mechanics and dynamics, as well as keep you entertained."
— Eric B. Vogel, designer of *The Dresden Files Cooperative Card Game*

"If something I did is not in Shannon and Christopher's book, I'm not sure I did it."
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Illustrations by Keith Curtis