A Critique of Paradise,
a Roll-and-Move Board Game
by Noah

written by John Kirk
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Noah's constraint in his game design was to create an interesting game using a roll-and-move mechanic. When I originally read through the final project assignment for those in the black diamond course, I recognized the difficulty of the job. I certainly didn't think of anything myself for that mechanic that I would call interesting, and so I was glad I didn't have this particular constraint on my final project. However, I was delighted to see others take on the task so that I could learn from their example.

Noah does an admirable job of taking the roll-and-move mechanic and doing something engaging with it in Paradise. He manages to do so with rules that are both simple and elegant. His board is set up as a simple 7x7 grid. Two opposite corners act as "home squares", and are marked with that player's color (black or white). The diagonal not including the two home squares is marked with a different color, and represents "neutral territory". All of the squares lying on the same side of the neutral territory as a player's home square count as that player's territory. Those squares on the opposite side of the neutral territory represent the opposition's territory. I have to say that it did annoy me slightly that Noah did not provide an example game board for play-testers to download and print out. After all, this is supposed to be the course's final project and some effort there would have been appropriate. But, Paradise is a very simple game and it took me all of ten minutes to create my own board, so this wasn't a big hurdle. For those interested, my version of Noah's game board appears after this critique.

In Paradise, each player has 24 game tokens. One player's tokens are black while the other player's are white. The basic idea is for each player to take turns rolling a "Pair-o-dice", and, for each die rolled, introduce a new token on the board starting at the player's home square and moving that piece a number of spaces equal to the number on the die. Pieces can only move parallel to the sides of the board; they cannot move diagonally. If a token lands on top of another token of the same color, a die is rolled again and the piece is moved again from that point. This process continues until the piece lands on a legal space.

A token cannot land on an opponent's token if it lies within the opponent's territory. However, it can land on an opposing token if it is outside the opponent's territory. If that happens, the token is "captured", is removed from the board, and adds to the capturing player's final score. In the end, a player's uncaptured tokens lying within the opponent's territory are added to the tokens captured from the other player to determine a final score. The higher scorer is the winner.

In the limited play-tests that I performed, there ended up being few real decisions made by the players, and most of those seemed fairly obvious. Some interesting real choices did arise now and then, however. When I played, the basic strategy seemed to be to keep as many pieces within your own territory so that the opposition would not have an opportunity to capture them. Then, when choices could be made, capture any available opposing piece your opponent was forced to put in your own territory, if possible. If a piece was available to capture but your die roll was not the correct value to

actually perform a capture, the optimal strategy seemed to be to move your token in such a fashion that you would be able to land on another of your own tokens. That way, you would be allowed a re-roll of the die, which would give you another chance at capturing a piece. These decision points did arise from time-to-time, but they were fairly rare, making the game play seem somewhat slow at times.

If I were to make a single change, I would somehow increase the number of real decisions players make. This might be accomplished by allowing a player to decide for each die whether he is going to introduce a new token on the board or move a token already on the board. This would give a player more choice not only in which direction to move a piece, but also in how many tokens are introduced each turn, which token(s) to move, and how to arrange tokens on the board to optimize his chances of winning. Of course, making such a rule change can have a significant impact on how well the other rules work together, so some other changes would have to be made to accommodate this modification. The following alterations are a possible means of re-balancing play, but I'm sure it could be done in other ways as well:

1) Only allow a player to move his tokens away from his home square, not toward it.
2) Do not allow a player to land on any other piece unless he can capture it. This includes not allowing a player to "re-roll" a die if he lands on his own piece.
3) For every roll, force a player to select one move from among all of the possible legal moves for a given roll and make it. Only allow a die re-roll if there is no legal move (which should be extremely rare).

In play-testing the game with these changes, players did actually seem to have real choices more often and I believe the game is enhanced by their introduction. However, I must re-iterate that I am highly impressed with Noah's creation of the basic game concept. I believe he accomplished his goal of creating an intriguing and original game within the difficult constraint of using a roll-and-move mechanic.