Lapping Up Racing Board Games

Some time ago I was at Distant Worlds Cafe in Seattle in Ravenna off Roosevelt and 65th, right across from Rain City Burger. It is a great cafe with a nerdy theme and lots of sci-fi memorabilia around. It is not uncommon to see people hanging out doing a D&D session. I flicked through their bookshelf and found a cool looking board game. Something called Stretch Run. A horse racing board game. How the heck do you do racing in a board game? Well, since seeing this game I've been hooked on "Racing" as my favorite board game genre. Let me tell you a bit about how different games implement racing mechanics and what I like about each. Vroom vroom!

Candy Land and Children's Games (a beginning)

If we're going to talk about racing board games then we first need to get one game out of the way because I have a real bone to pick with Candy Land. It is not a game! This is the part of this piece where I rip on a game that says it is designed for preschoolers aged 3 years and up and literally says "no reading required to play." Still, ripping on this child's game provides a good foundation for discussing the rest of these racing games.

I say Candy Land is not a game because there are zero choices. Candy Land is an activity, not a game. Players are racing from Start to the finish at Candy Castle. Players move by drawing cards. Each card has a color on it and the player moves forward to the next space with that color. Some cards move a player further to the second spot of the color, and some spots on the board act as shortcuts, skipping a player ahead, and other spots keep a player stuck in place until they draw a card matching a certain color. Finally, some cards in the deck teleport players directly to different locations. My bone to pick in Candy Line is players make zero

choices. Everything is determined by the shuffle of the deck. Everything is pre-destined. Candy Land is not so much a game as it is a terrifying metaphor for the lack of real control we have in our lives as we candy dance through a capitalist sugar-coated hellscape to serve some unknown King Kandy who's name must be Kris and is certainly a thinly veiled reference to the KKK and white supremacy. This game is for three-year-olds? Really?

OK I'm obviously kidding and having some fun spinning tales of conspiracy and paranoia. But I stand on the point that the game is determined by the order of the cards in the deck. That's a fact. If you want to save yourself some time then assign each player an even distribution of colors and just draw the first card from the deck and say that player instantly wins. You can instantly rip through several games. Or, if you like moving the pieces around, designate one player to deal and move the pieces while everyone else sips their cocktails. Or send the dealer player to the basement, have them play several games out down there and report back wins via text as they happen.

The point is Candy Land is a bad racing game because there are no choices, everything is random and pre-determined. Now let's see how Stretch Run, the horse racing game, makes racing a bit better.
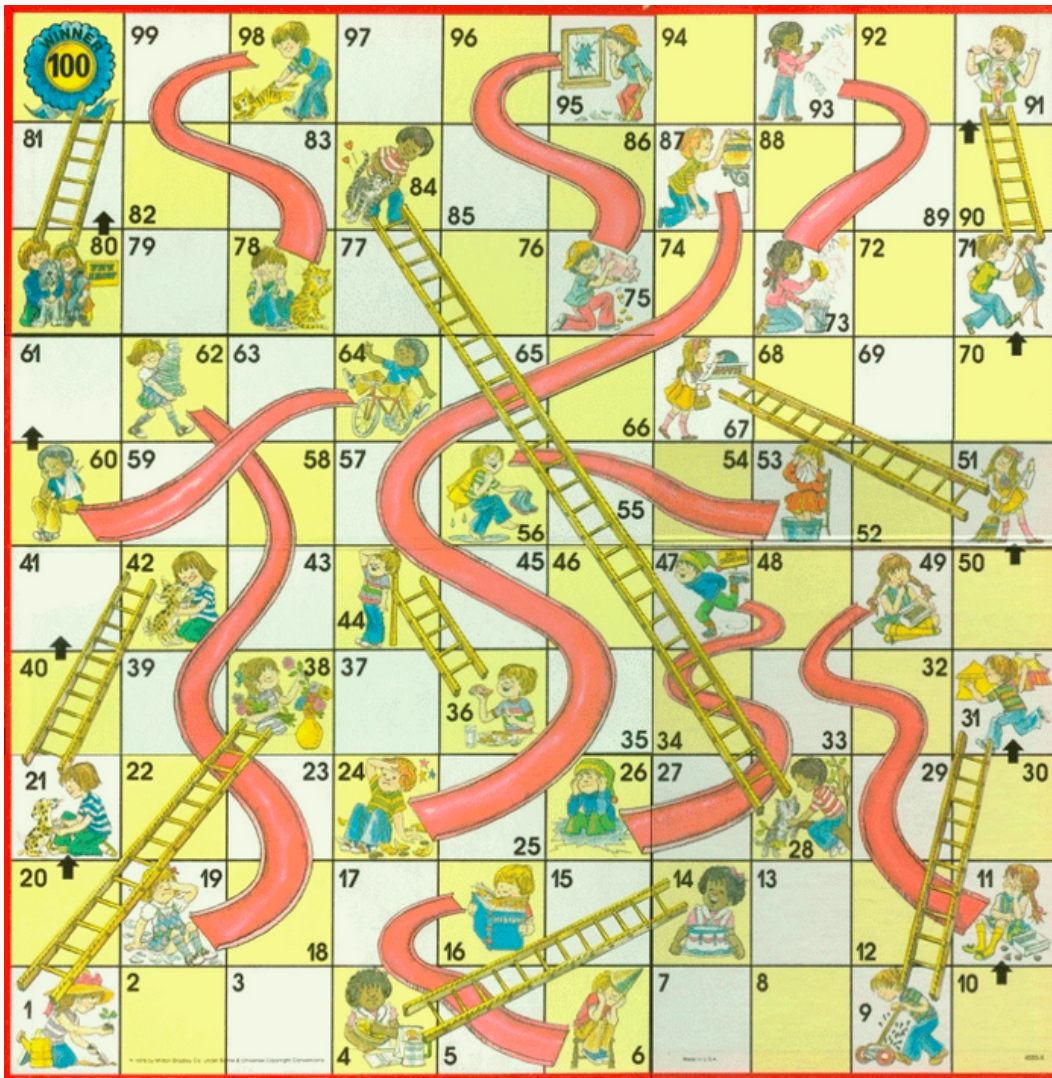

Airplane Racing

But first, I just remember this other good racing game called Take Off!. It is a plane racing game. The age requirement is 6 years and up, twice that of Candy Land, so it must be slightly better.

In Take Off! each player controls a squad of four airplanes. Players are racing to fly their airplanes completely around the world. The race starts and ends in Hawaii. The first player to get all four of their airplanes around the world wins. Cities are connected somewhat randomly with various colored lines. Each turn players roll two dice to see what color edges they may move their planes along. The dice are eight-sided and have six colors (blue, green, yellow, red, purple, orange) and a wild-card die face where players can move along any color, and a die face that says Take Off! which means the player must draw a card from a deck, the card has a

country capital on it and the player must move one of their planes to that capital. A Take Off! card can either be very good or very bad, sending you immediately very far around the world, or sending you very far back toward the start. Really this game is a geography game tricking us into learning more about our world. That's sneaky. I'd rather a game trick me into learning about horse racing.

But, before we talk about the horse racing game we have to talk about another classic children's racing game: Chutes and Ladders. Mostly I'm bringing up Chutes and Ladders because I have this cool visualization I made some years ago. The visualization is from a project I did imagining what it might be like to have multiple mouse cursors on a computer. I made a program that's like a little multiple-cursors playground. You can click and drag to record a path that a cursor spawns on and moves on over and over forever. The cursors do a "click and hold" action at the start of the path and do a "release" at the end of their path. I added a folder icon that all the cursors pick up and drag around. It is a goofy little nonsense project, but I found out I could use it to model actual processes like Chutes and Ladders, or a Plinko board, or just something more art-y like a scene of cursors walking across a busy Tokyo intersection like ants.

In this visualization cursors pick up the folder in one square and place it in the next square. There are cursors set up for the chutes and the ladders as well. Those cursors either pick up the folder and move it up along the path of the ladder, or down along the path of the slide. The folder will either move along one step ahead from one square to the next or be dragged up a ladder or down a chute just randomly depending on what cursor happens to "click" and drag the folder away first. It is fun creating the whole board in this cursor playground because all you have to do is place a background image and then trace each chute, each ladder and drag a step between each square to have those cursors drag the folder along. It is actually an efficient tool to create these weird things. I like playing with it to see what else I can represent. I've considered making some game of it like a tug-of-war where two players compete to drag and keep the folder on the left or right half of the screen. Players would be limited by a certain "length" of cursor trails. Once you exceed that length previously drawn cursors would disappear as you draw new cursor paths.

Here's a link to the cursor playground. You'll probably need to visit it on a laptop. I doubt it is set up for phones.

https://5tephen.com/cursors/

Thanks for hearing me out about my old multiple cursors project. Back to talking about racing board games!

Chutes and Ladders is a bit better than Candy Land because it is not so "pre-determined." Instead of having the deck of cards Chutes and Ladders at least has a spinner that simulated rolling a dice to see how far forward you move. Yes, I realize this point is essentially splitting hairs. Oh well.

Here's where we're at so far:

- Candy Land is terrible because there are no choices and the deck dictates the game.
- Chutes and Ladders is barely better. It still has zero choices, but you're rolling a die (really you're spinning a spinner) instead of drawing a card.
- Take Off! is significantly better. There's actual choices! Players get to choose which one of their four planes to move, and players get to choose how to route all their planes through the course. Routing in racing games will become an important distinction later.

Horse Racing

Stretch Run is a beautifully made game. It comes in a heavy wooden container and the horses are built out of heavy thick metal. The game feels very sturdy and satisfying when you move things around.

This is the game that got me into the Racing genre in board games. Yes, I played those children's games growing up but I wasn't as keenly into modern board games back then.

Stretch Run features players each controlling one horse and racing one lap around the track. Oh, by the way, in horse racing a "stretch runner" is a horse that runs their fastest in the straight stretch to the finish line at the end of the race. Take that fact to the race course and make some money off it!

This game relies on rolling a die and moving a horse 1-6 places forward. So far that is just like Chutes and Ladders, but the game adds several more good mechanics to make it an even better racing game.

The game has some fun mechanics about horses jockeying for position. For one: horses can't move through each other. If there's a horse in front of you you must go around it, you can't just count your movement counting spaces right through another player's horse. Horses aren't ghosts, until they've broken a leg. It pays to have a horse in the lead. In this game it is easier to keep a horse in the lead while it already has the lead.

The board has two "muddy" areas too. They appear as two smudgy areas in the back stretch. If a horse is in a muddy area it can't change into another lane. It must travel in a straight line so it doesn't slip. This means some horses can get especially stuck behind another horse if they're stuck going through a muddy area unable to side step around each other to make a pass. A player performing cunning stunts may intentionally move their horse in front of another player in a muddy area and box them in so they can't move.

Each player has "whip cards" too. These mimic whipping your horse. Isn't horse racing wholesome? When you play a whip card you get to take another turn and roll the dice again. This is a great mechanic that adds a lot to the race. Players must choose when is the best time to whip their horse. Should they do it early and get an initial lead? Or should they save it and see if it helps them navigate out of a sticky situation? Who knows! Now we're racing baybe!!

Additionally Stretch Run grants each horse a "racing style" card. These cards give horses different advantages. And they are certainly not fairly balanced. They actually have a point-value attached to each perk to clue players in about how relatively powerful each perk is.

Some perks:

- (2pts) Stretch Runner - Add 6 to one roll on the homestretch.
- (4pts) First Out of the Gate - Add 6 to your first roll.
- (5pts) Front Runner - Add 2 to your roll each time your horse begins in the lead or gains the lead.
- (6pts) Pace Horse - Add 1 to every roll during the race.

Each horse gets a random perk at the start of each race.

Why are these perks unfairly balanced? Well, that's because this game falls into a common trap of Racing board games. The trap is that the game is really a Betting game built on top of a lightly-designed racing game. Players have in-game monies and are supposed to bet on each race. Players look at the perks each horse has Aand try to make money off all the races. This introduces one funny thing: it is perhaps possible for players to collude and manipulate and throw races. We're learning so much about the world with this game!

For another Racing game that is really a Betting game see Camel Up, a camel racing game. Beware Racing games that are really Betting games!

Stretch Run has one more cool racing mechanic. In addition to the whip cards and the racing style cards each player gets dealt three classic playing cards randomly from a deck. These cards play like bonus bursts of speed. They're split into three categories:

- Ace through 5
- 6 through 10
- Jack, Queen, King

Players can play these cards and move their horse that many bonus spaces forward. Ace is one, Jack/Queen/King move horses forward ten, and do I really need to spell out what happens with two, three, four, five and six?

There's a cool catch to using these cards! Those high-value cards would certainly move your horse forward a lot. The catch is you can only use the high value cards Jack/Queen/King if your horse is in last place. You can only use the low value cards, Ace through 5, if your horse is already in first place. Then there's those middle cards and, yup, you guessed it.

I like the mechanic of these cards corresponding to how far forward or back your horse is doing in the race. I don't think it would be fun for anyone to see the horse leading the race play a Queen and move forward ten spaces further. But, when your horse is stuck behind in last place and you suddenly play a face card to shoot forward ten spaces you can really get back in the race and it feels great!

Again, each player gets dealt these three cards, some whip cards, and their racing style cards all randomly. Players can see what racing style advantage each horse has, but players don't see the three bonus movement cards other players have. This factors in to the betting portion of the game. You may know that a horse has a low value racing style, but you may see that you're three cards are very good and you're going to race your horse into first place.

So that's horse racing. It is a fun good game, but it is really a Betting game. Playing Stretch Run clued me in that Racing could be a genre in board games. I begin looking around for more Racing games to see what else is out there.

I soon found a game which I consider the first proper Racing game I've ever seen. It is actually about Racing and doesn't rely on slapping Betting mechanics over a racing mini game.

Car Racing

Formula D! A car racing game. This game just looks good.

This game is basically a damage mitigation game. You want to drive your car as fast as possible around the track while making sure your car doesn't blow up before you cross the finish line. The primary way your car takes damage is going too fast through turns. The board marks sharp course corners with a red border and indicates with a number how many times a player must end their turn inside the corner to count as going through the corner safely without taking damage. Players can choose to ignore stopping in a corner and blow completely through a corner. The player takes one point of damage for each space their car overblew the turn. Players start the game with about 18 points of damage.

Players move around the board by rolling dice, but players also keep track of what gear they're in and roll different dice accordingly. Players may gear up once per turn and roll bigger dice that make them go faster and faster. When you get up to 6th gear you're really covering a lot of ground.

- 1st gear - 1 to 2
- 2nd gear - 2 to 4
- 3rd gear - 4 to 8
- 4th gear - 7 to 12
- 5th gear - 11 to 20
- 6th gear - 21 to 30

In this picture you can see the race course, the cute little player piece cars, a course corner with red around it a number 1 indicating players must stop in this corner once. You can see an individual player box that has a plastic stick shift keeping track of what gear a player is in, and a yellow rectangle with holes and a peg to keep track of how much damage the player has taken. There's another player box here with peg hole rows for different pieces of the car like brakes, transmission and so forth. Those rows are part of an advanced ruleset that I never play with. I have enough fun just keeping track of damage per car as a whole. Look at the size of the dice for sixth gear! And the weird pyramid dice is for first gear. It only rolls a 1 or a 2. You read the dice result by looking at the top number.

This game is a great racing game. It plays fast. It looks pretty. There's similar rules like Stretch Run where cars have to drive around each other, not through each other. There's a good rule about "slipstreaming" where if your car ends its turn directly behind another car it catches a slipstream and moves an extra three spaces forward. When you play a game with lots of people you can catch several slipstreams in a row and really move up in the pack.

Cars have brakes too. If you're going too fast you can press the brakes and spend one point of damage per space you don't want to move forward. Touching the brakes can be a nice way to make sure you line yourself up well to land your car inside the proper area when you're trying to round a turn.

Players take a lot of damage in this game. Taking damage has a 1:1 correspondence with movement. Remember each car can take about 18 points of damage. Here's another way to look at that: each player starts with 18 points of free movement. Players must balance taking damage with moving ahead, and making sure they haven't used up all of their damage so their car doesn't blow up before it crosses the finish line. It is not uncommon at all for player's cars to risk it all and blow up on the final few corners of the race. I've definitely played at least one game where no racers made it to the finish line.

Formula D is a fantastic racing game. I like the damage system. I like the free movement with the slipstream system. I espeically love the gear system. Truly this game has all sorts of proper racing mechanics. It is a little random since players are rolling dice, but I find the randomness is fairly balanced with player's ability to choose to take damage and select which gear they're in.

There's one last bad feature of this game that Formula D shares in common with Candy Land. The race track is still one-dimensional. There's no ambiguity or freedom to how players route themselves through the course. There's only one essentially straight piece of track where players wiggle back and forth between only three lanes around the whole course.

Formula D has expansions with lots of other courses too. Some have fun features like jumping cars over a canyon. Racing on these other boards is great and gives the game more variety. Still, each board always constricts the players to that one-dimensional track.

I guess the one-dimensional course makes sense and is consistent with the theme of car racing. The next game we'll see gives players way more freedom in how they choose to route themselves.

Boat Racing

Ahh. Out on the open water. So calm. So peaceful. VROOOM. Was that a powerboat?

Welcome to Powerboats, the best game on Earth.

What seperates Powerboats from Formula D is the course setup. Instead of having one long always-forward car race track Powerboats has a wide empty board with bits of land, a start/finish line, and buoys that boats must loop around. Whereas in Formula D cars go on the narrow track and gamble about how fast to blow through turns this game Powerboats puts lots of emphasis on giving boats the freedom to choose how they want to drive through the whole course. Boats can build up lots of speed and take wide arcing turns around buoys, or boats can stay in close and try to make more precise turns with less speed, or boats can just get real clever and find ways to poke through the course between islands and make it work in a way other people just never saw. Finding a good route and nailing the execution is exhilerating.

The dice in Powerboats are a bit weird. Each dice just has the numbers one through three. Instead of changing gears and having massive dice like in car racing this boat game depends on players banking their die results and building up speed and momentum by rolling in a new dice and keeping the value for many turns. A player can roll a three, then a two and a two over three turns (adding one die each turn) and then have a total speed of seven for the next several turns. Then, when they want to slow down they can choose to drop any one of the three die.

Boats have to travel in straight lines. Since these are boats running on water there's no such thing as brakes. Players slow down by removing up to one die per turn. If players go too fast and hit a piece of land they take one damage per space they couldn't move past the land. Think of damage from land being counted up as how hard you hit the land.

Players start with a die bank with five empty slots. Players can add one die to each slot, but can only add one die at a time per turn. When a player takes damage they place a damage indicator over one of their die banks to indicate it can't hold a die any longer. In Formula D damage doesn't really matter until you take your last damage point and your car just immediately explodes. In Powerboats taking damage restricts how many die you can hold. Players can usually race well using three die. The first two points

of damage don't usually hurt much. When players get down to only having two or one die it severaly limits how fast you're able to race.

The game still suffers from randomness. Rolling dice is always random. It is no fun if you get several bad rolls and just have a dice bank with three or four 1's. Overall players can mitigate against random dice rolls by keeping a variety of dice in their dice bank (one 1, one 2, one 3 can be better than two 3's) so there's a greater range of values to drop when you want to slow down and need to get ride of a die. If you have a 1, 2 and a 3 you have three choices of how much you want to slow down as oppossed to having two 3's and only being able to slow down just 3.

Still another fun home-grown variant in Powerboats is playing with each player controlling two boats and racing to get both of them across the finish line first. This is a fun way to play with just two players, and it adds a great extra level of strategy to the game. When we play this way we have the two boats both share the same engine and the player is allowed to move either one of their two boats each turn. In this way you can send one boat far ahead while you're speeding up, then catch the other boat back up when you're back to speed. Or, if one boat is in a tricky position you can run the other boat around in more open areas until you get the exact speed you need for your boat to complete the tricky turn it is waiting for.

Powerboats is great! I like playing it with people that don't traditionally enjoy board games. It usually catches on quite well. The theme is exciting, the game is very pretty and the rules are relatively easy to understand.

I especially like that art in the game. It looks like it was made in the 1970s with the colors and simple drawings. Really the game was created in 2008. o

The creator came out with another game, Powerships, that has a lot of the same mechanics of Powerboats but it has a space theme instead. There are a few fun features where boats can hit something in space that rotates them while they're travelling in a straight line, or hit a hyperspace point and double their movement and fly through planets. Two friends and I had a great night once intentionally trying to hyperspace jump over the sun. The space version adds three meteors as well. The meteors are pieces that float around the game board and take up 1, 2 and 3 spaces. The meteors fly forward whenever someone rolls a 1, 2, or 3. It is fun to have some things in the game that move around and may get in your way.

Other Racing Games

There's a few more racing games I'm aware of. One more worth mentioning is a bike racing game called Flamme Rouge. It is a good little game that has tracks like Formula D in that they're long and narrow with turns. It emphasizes uphills and downhills instead of how fast players move through turns. It has similar slipstream mechanics where bikers move forward for free when they're one spot behind other players. The main movement mechanic in Flamme Rouge is players playing cards showing how fast the bikers move. When a biker is leading the front of the pack, or is far away from other bikers breaking their own wind the player draws exhausting cards which pollute their deck. This game is all about deciding when to lead, when to rest and making sure your biker doesn't get exhausted and forced to play slow cards! Or, you can be wise and play exhausting cards when you're rolling downhill where there's a minimum speed!

Flamme Rouge is good, but it still lacks the open world aspect of Powerboats which I have come to love the most.

Summary

So that's my journey through racing board games!

Here are the main takeaways with all the games together:

- Candy Land is terrible. It is not a game. Their are zero choices.
- Chutes and Ladders is just as bad, but it uses a spinner instead of a deck of pre-arranged cards, so I feel slightly less bad about it.
- Take Off! is a good fun, very light racing game with a lot of randomness. The game can take a while to finish playing.
- Stretch Run is a fun and especially well-made game. It introduces good race mechanics like giving horses different running perk abilities, letting players choose when to play a whip card to run ahead, and adding lane restrictions forcing players to stay in a straight line when going through mud as a way to let players jockey for position. Still, it is a betting game. The game is inherently not designed to create fair races.
- Formula D is an amazing racing game. Shifting gears to use more and more powerful dice feels fun. It is thrilling to blow through turns taking just enough damage to keep your car running across the finish line.
- Flamme Rouge is another proper racing game. Players must decide when to lead the pack and when to rest in the main pack. It feels great when you time the game perfectly so your rider is coasting downhill when you have nothing to play but slow-moving exhaustion cards.

- Powerboats is my absolute favorite racing game. It is a fair game, not lob-sided with different advantages to give players something obvious to bet on. Players bank dice to build up speed. Players have more control than just dice randomness every turn because players retain their previous dice rolls. The openness of the map is the best part. Unique to Powerboats, no other racing game I've seen lets player choose their own route around the course.

Play fast. Have fun. Don't overthink it.

Ready? Set. Go!