# Board Game Analysis – Secret Hitler          Trent Euman

*"Students will be assessed on how well they have applied this model to the analysis of their chosen game with a view to using this knowledge in the development and production of their own game design"*

*Goat Wolf & Cabbage's* social deduction game *'Secret Hitler'* ingeniously applies Jesse Schell's Elemental Tetrad[1] into its design. It does so by effectively integrating each element into the play experience, with some being more present than others (particularly aesthetics). In this essay, we'll be analysing how the blending of aesthetics and story, alongside the mixture of mechanics and technology make *'Secret Hitler'* a successful "problem solving activity, [that's] approached with a playful attitude" (Schell, 2008, p. 37).

To start with, let us analyse the link between aesthetics and story. By setting the game in 1930's Germany (just before World War II), it provides a unique but realistic storyline that unfolds to the player while playing it. Where fascists aim to initiate Hitler into power, and liberals try and stop them from succeeding. This 'String of Pearls' storyline [2] allows players to "enjoy [the] finely crafted story, punctuated with periods of interactivity and challenge" (Schell 2008, p. 265), consequently allowing for a delicate balance between storytelling and gameplay. The aesthetics reinforce the story, to help establish the intended experience of fellowship, a social framework as described in the MDA[3] ('*Mechanics, Dynamics, Aesthetics'*) theory (Hunicke, R, LeBlanc, M, & Zubek, R, 2004). The roles derive from governmental positions/beliefs (Fascists, Chancellor, President, etc.), and the artwork feels ripped straight out of minimalist German propaganda, providing a sense of authenticity. By implementing the historical theme, *'Secret Hitler'* completely immerses the player into the experience, drawing them to carry out indirect controls without realising it. Without aesthetics, the player cannot be immersed in the story, thus damaging the whole experience. As a result, the aesthetics heavily complement the story and help to provide a unique experience to players.

The other implementation of Schell's elements is the combination of the game's mechanics and technology. The mechanics are essentially the game's rules (voting, election policies), goals (assassinating Hitler), and other procedures like hidden information. The hidden information allows for the structure of a traitor game, where players receive hidden identities[4]. Whether they become a fascist, liberal, or even Hitler himself, players will embrace their persona within the game's magic circle[5], creating a low sense of trust[6] between each other, even when teams are involved. For instance, a liberal might pass fascist policies (either willingly or uncontrollably), which promote major uncertainties[7] between players. These actions can create negative social consequences and recreate unpleasant political/social

[1] Schell, J, (2008), *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses,* Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, USA, Viewed August 20, 2020.

[2] Schell, J, (2008), *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses,* Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, USA, Viewed August 20, 2020.

[3] Hunicke, R, LeBlanc, M, & Zubek, R, (2004), *MDA: A formal approach to game design and game research. In Proceedings of the AAAI Workshop on Challenges in Game AI,* Online, Viewed August 20, 2020.

[4] Engelstein, G, & Shalev, I. (2020). *Building Blocks of Tabletop Game Design: An Encyclopedia of Mechanisms*. CRC Press, Viewed August 22, 2020.

[5] Huizinga, J, (1949). Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, Viewed August 21, 2020.

[6] Koster, R, (2018), *The Trust Spectrum,* Raph Koster's Website www.raphkoster.com/2018/03/16/the-trust-spectrum, Online, Viewed August 23, 2020.

[7] Costikyan, G, (2013). *Uncertainty in games*. MIT Press, Viewed August 22, 2020.

scenarios like betrayal. As a result, the smart infusion of mechanics helps to complement the gameplay and *'Secret Hitler's'* design. In regards to technology, '*Secret Hitler'* utilises a gameboard and cards, materials which make the game possible. In the context of this essay, there is also a computer/monitor involved. While the intended experience is the same, the change in gameplay (using a mouse to interact) can become quite annoying to deal with and can damage the player experience. The foundational technology[8] (cards/gameboard) allows for specific mechanics to occur, such as voting, hidden roles, and assassinations. Without the provided technology, the mechanics cannot operate, symbolising their importance towards not just the mechanics, but the overall game design.

In summary, '*Secret Hitler'* elegantly integrates Schell's four elements into its design. Its combination of aesthetics and story, along with a fusion of mechanics and technology show excellent design principles while providing a unique game experience to its players.

[8] Schell, J, (2008), *The Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses,* Morgan Kaufmann Publishers, USA, Viewed August 20, 2020.

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