IM-UH 2320
GAMES AND PLAY

Midterm Game Project (Non Digital)

Team members: Arianne, Buka, Fatima, Gunjan, Izah

Net ID: agv2037, be2143, fk2231, gg2713, is2587

Black Market Hustle

1. Project Description

1.1 Quick Introduction to the Game

The Black Market Hustle is a trading game where players become underground dealers, collecting wealth through making fake sales, participating in auctions, and exposing frauds as they navigate through the game board, which mimics an underground black market. The market is unpredictable, filled with lotteries, taxes, and even robberies. Each dealer has unique special abilities, some can uncover others, swap wealth, make fake sales without penalty, or even be undercover cops. The ultimate goal of the players is to become the richest dealer in the market.

1.2 Theme

The game is inspired by Coup, as it builds upon the theme of deception and hidden identities, but with a stronger focus on dynamic market interactions and unpredictable events. Our interpretation of the underground black market theme is that it represents a world of corruption for wealth accumulation. The dealers are making deals, whether it is a real sale or a fake sale, to accumulate wealth; therefore, the core idea of deceptions is closely related to the theme.

1.3 Game System & Design Choices

To bring this interpretation to our game, we designed a game system that mirrors the unpredictability and risk of an illicit marketplace. The key mechanics include:

1. Hidden identities: Each player has an identity that has special abilities. Players can claim different actions depending on their roles
2. Deception: Players can make fake sales in order to generate profit. If other players suspect a fake sale attempt, they can call the player out to check their sale.
3. Market Uncertainty: The game board resembles the market environment filled with different actions. The players start the game with randomly assigned different item cards. Throughout the game, they might be able to get richer by collecting more expensive items or losing their items to other players. This dynamic makes the game unpredictable.
4. Fake Sales and High-Risk Auctions: Fake sales are allowed. There are also auctions in which the item might be more expensive than the bid price or much cheaper.
5. Lottery, Tax, and Robberies: The Lottery amount is decided by rolling a die, which can be even 0. Only the player's luck decides it. Tax and robbery are real-life phenomena in which the player pays a tax to the other players if they come to their trading spot, while the player gets robbed by the market if they come to a certain board space.

We have designed the game components to be visually cohesive, such that the identity cards, game board, and currency design share a unified aesthetic. The item cards, on the other hand, resemble real-life objects.

2. Process and Implementation

2.1 Concept development

We began with a broad idea of creating a game that revolves around deception and bluffing, as we wanted to emphasize social dynamics and strategic interactions between players. Our initial brainstorming sessions revolved around different game formats, including purely card-based games. However, after further brainstorming, we realised that adding a structured board element would add a unique twist to our game and set it apart from other similar bluffing games.

During our earlier discussions, we explored several different themes that could fit the themes we had in mind and the idea of a Black Market emerged naturally as the perfect fit as it naturally aligns with bluffing, deception, and social manipulation. The Black Market theme also helped us further refine our game mechanics that felt intuitive such as players buying and selling items, having their items stolen and bluffing their way to victory.

2.2 Design choices for player actions

Once we finalised our theme, we shifted our focus to defining the core actions available to players. One goal we had in mind was to ensure that each of these actions:

1. Contributed to deception and strategy
2. Increased user engagement
3. Balanced risk and reward for the player.

Our key design principles include:

1. **Game board:** we designed a game board with different special spots that players could land on using a dice. These special spots are designed to force players to interact rather than allowing passive play. We included:
2. **Trading spots**: if a player lands on one of these, they must sell one of their item cards to another player or to the black market bank. Players must engage in negotiations or attempt to bluff to sell an item card.
3. **Secret auctions**: player landing on this spot gets a chance to bid on a hidden item from the item cards deck and the rest of the players can engage in this as well. This adds an element of risk and mystery, pushing players to make strategic choices based on limited information
4. **Robbery spots**: if a player lands here, they must give up one of their item cards. This introduced a direct competitive element, ensuring that players had to react dynamically to losses and adjust their strategies.

5. **Balancing risk and reward:** We wanted to ensure that the player's actions carry both potential gains and losses to ensure players make meaningful decisions.
    1. The “calling someone’s bluff” element, where players who suspect deception can challenge, was introduced to allow counterplay.
    2. There is a risk in wrongfully accusing someone as well: you will have to end up paying 200 to the bank.
6. **Role cards implementation**: We added various role cards to add depth to our game but to ensure we do not overcomplicate the game, we made these roles simple with powerful abilities.
7. **Economic System and Incentives**:
    1. We made sure every trade has incentives for both buyers and sellers—for example, forced trading spots ensure a continuous flow of item exchanges.
    2. The lottery space introduces a small amount of randomness, but the payout is controlled to not disrupt the game balance.
    3. By allowing trades with both the bank and players, we ensured that no player gets completely stuck without options.
8. **Balancing Randomness and Strategy**
    1. To introduce controlled randomness, we designed the lottery mechanic using a 0-9 sided die instead of a standard six-sided one.
    2. This creates more variation in payouts while keeping the game balanced and preventing excessive reliance on luck.
    3. Other mechanics, like bluffing and trade negotiations, ensure that skill remains the dominant factor in winning.

2.3 Finalizing the game space

Throughout development, we redesigned the board multiple times to optimize player interaction and game balance. Our key design goals for the board were:

1. **Maximizing Player Engagement:**
    1.1. Every board space needed to have a meaningful impact on the game, keeping downtime minimal.
    1.2. We avoided empty, passive spaces—instead, every move should push the player toward an action.
2. **Strategic Layout of special spots:**
    2.1. We tested different layouts to ensure that special spaces were distributed evenly, avoiding repetitive or predictable patterns.
    2.2. The positioning of trade spaces, auctions, and robbery spots was fine-tuned

3. Playtest Assessment

Our game underwent multiple playtesting sessions, beginning with an in-class trial before the official playtesting. Initially, our team played it to assess its functionality. During this first

session, we realized that the starting money was insufficient to purchase assets, so we decided to increase it. Additionally, we noticed that the circular game board limited movement, so we redesigned it with a more irregular, squiggly path. This adjustment allowed for more spots and made each round last longer.

During the official playtesting session, we received several key pieces of feedback. One major issue was the lack of action spots. In one session, an observer noted that during the first half of the game, no one landed on an action spot, reducing interactivity. To address this, we more than doubled the number of action spots in the final version. Another observation was that players often landed on the same spot without any consequence, leading to stagnant gameplay. To increase engagement, we introduced a rule: if a player lands on an occupied spot, they must pay the original occupant a fee of 100.

Additional feedback highlighted the need for a clearer rulebook. Players also suggested implementing a rule for declaring victory. In response, we established that a player could only call themselves the richest after everyone had completed at least one full round, and they could only make this declaration on their turn.

Moreover, someone also raised a concern regarding item cards: Repeated gameplay could lead to players memorizing the cards, making it easier to detect lies. To counter this, we introduced a rule allowing players to lie about the object on their card, just as they could about the amount. Additionally, we printed multiple copies of each item to prevent players from tracking specific quantities, making deception more viable.

Lastly, we addressed an issue with trading. Initially, players could swap their selected item card for another from their deck before finalizing the trade. To prevent this, we introduced a rule requiring players to place their chosen item card face down on the ground once selected, ensuring they could not switch it afterward. These playtesting insights were crucial in refining our game mechanics and enhancing the overall gameplay in Black Market Hustle.

Images 1 and 2: Playtesting Session

How could teaching the game be improved?

(What could have been explained better? Or earlier?)

The game was explained perfectly. Maybe a bit more clarification in terms of the goals and what the action spots do

(circle the method used)

(Demo) / Read Rules / Blind Test

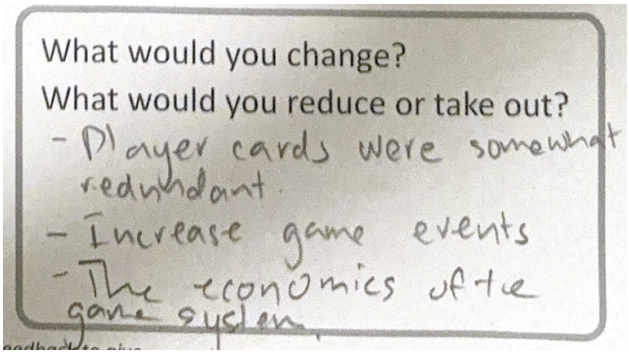
How could teaching the game be improved?

(What could have been explained better? Or earlier?)

Adding a rules book or a rule card which explains all the different aspects of the game like role cards, item cards etc with examples of different user actions

(circle the method used)

Demo / Read Rules / Blind Test



Playtesting Feedback

4. Reflection/Evaluation

Going into this project, our main goal was to create a game that was not only engaging and strategic but also fostered an environment where deception and negotiation were key mechanics. We wanted players to feel immersed in the unpredictability of an underground black market, where every move could either lead to wealth or downfall. Looking back at the development process and the playtesting sessions, we believe we successfully met many of our initial goals, though there were some unexpected challenges along the way that forced us to adapt our approach.

One of our biggest achievements was how well the core mechanics of deception and bluffing worked in gameplay. In our original concept, we envisioned a dynamic system where players would constantly second-guess each other, and that aspect translated well into the final version. Players were genuinely hesitant to trust each other, and the risk-reward balance of calling someone out added tension to the game. Seeing players develop unique strategies—some being overly aggressive with challenges, others taking a slow and careful approach—proved that our mechanics encouraged diverse playstyles, which was one of our early design aspirations.

However, while our overall game system aligned with our vision, certain mechanics required significant adjustments after playtesting. For example, our initial game board layout was too simple, limiting movement and making certain mechanics, like action spaces, feel too sparse. This was a major issue because it led to periods of inactivity, where players simply moved without meaningful interaction. Adjusting the board layout and increasing the number of action spaces greatly improved the pacing and ensured that each turn had strategic weight.

Another major change was our approach to wealth accumulation. Initially, our economy was too restrictive, with players struggling to gain enough currency to make meaningful moves. We underestimated how difficult it would be for players to trade effectively in the early stages, which made some rounds feel slow and unbalanced. Increasing the starting money and tweaking the reward system for certain actions helped fix this issue, creating a much smoother progression throughout the game.

Perhaps the most unexpected insight came from how players interacted with the item cards. Originally, we designed them to be straightforward, assuming that players would naturally lie about the value. However, during playtesting, we found that players could sometimes track specific items across rounds, diminishing the effectiveness of deception. Introducing duplicate item cards and allowing players to lie about their object type, in addition to their value, significantly improved this aspect. This was a small but critical change that reinforced our core theme of deception.

In terms of engagement, our goal was to ensure that every turn felt meaningful, with players actively involved in decision-making rather than waiting passively. The addition of forced interactions, like mandatory trades and penalties for landing on occupied spaces, successfully addressed this concern. Playtesters commented on how they constantly felt engaged, which was exactly what we hoped for.

One of the most interactive elements we introduced was the lottery mechanic. Initially, the lottery amount was a fixed value across the board, but we realized this lacked engagement and unpredictability. To address this, we implemented a dice roll mechanic (0-9), where a player landing on the lottery spot would roll the dice and receive that many hundreds of dollars. This simple change transformed the lottery into an exciting, high-stakes moment in the game. We saw players actively hoping for opponents to roll a 0 while wishing for a 9 themselves, adding a fun layer of tension and anticipation that was missing before.

While we are proud of how the game evolved, there were still some aspects that could be improved further. For instance, balancing the role cards proved trickier than expected. Some roles felt significantly stronger than others, and while we tried to balance them by tweaking abilities, this is an area that could benefit from further refinement in future iterations. Additionally, while the rulebook became clearer with each revision, some players still found certain mechanics confusing at first. If we had more time, we would likely invest in more streamlined instructions and visual aids to ease the learning curve.

Overall, we think we successfully created a game that captures the essence of a chaotic, high-stakes underground market, where deception and strategy determine success. Watching playtesters fully immerse themselves—strategizing, bluffing, and sometimes even forming temporary alliances—was incredibly rewarding. The iterative process of refining mechanics based on feedback made a noticeable difference, and while there is always room for further improvement, we are satisfied with how well our final version aligned with our original concept.

This project was not just about game development but also about understanding how to create a system that is engaging, balanced, and fun. It reinforced the importance of playtesting and iteration—concepts that we now appreciate on a much deeper level. If we were to expand on this game, we would love to explore additional mechanics, such as more dynamic market

fluctuations or role upgrades, to add even more strategic depth. Regardless, this experience was both challenging and rewarding, and we are glad we were able to bring our vision to life.

5. Game as Meaningful Play

5.1 Intended Meaning & Core Metaphors

Black Market Hustle employs discernible outcomes and integrated consequences to reinforce its central theme of systemic corruption. The mechanics were designed to simulate economic and legal pressures, with emergent metaphors surfacing through playtesting.

1. Forced Trade Rule (Mandatory Sales & Fees): Acting as a metaphor for coercive economics, where players are pressured into transactions they may not want. Playtesters described this as evoking "extortion vibes" and forcing engagement in shady deals. This aligns with Zimmerman's discernibility (penalties are immediate and transparent) and integration (fees accumulate, restricting future choices).
2. Auction System & Market Manipulation: Originally intended to reflect risk-taking in trade, this mechanic evolved into a metaphor for economic corruption when players colluded to suppress bids. This prompted the introduction of duplicate cards to encourage plausible deception. Playtesters likened this to "oligarchic control", demonstrating how emergent behaviors can strengthen thematic depth
3. Role Cards & Systemic Inequality:
    3.1. Undercover Cop (granted robbery immunity post-feedback): Highlighted class disparities, with players remarking that "Cops felt above the law."
    3.2. Silencing mechanic: Initially meant as a strategic penalty, but playtesters observed it could be used to suppress opposition unfairly, mirroring real-world systemic bias.

5.2 Playtest Feedback & Refinements

Playtesting revealed unexpected interpretations of mechanics, leading to key refinements:

1. Board Design Change: Shifted from a circular path to a chaotic squiggly board, reinforcing the feeling of being "trapped in corruption" rather than progressing smoothly.
2. Delayed Victory Declarations: Simulated money laundering tactics, where wealth accumulation remains uncertain until the final moments.
3. Fake Sales Mechanic: Intended to create financial risk, but playtesters instead perceived it as a social trust test, saying, "Assuming everyone lies made the game feel authentically devious."

5.3 Player Subversion & Emergent Meaning

While the game initially focused on deception, player interactions introduced new thematic layers:

1. Crime Syndicates Forming: Unexpected alliances emerged, mirroring real-world collusion and monopolistic control.
2. Bluffing & Wealth Redistribution: Players manipulated game states through deception, reinforcing the notion that corrupt systems dictate economic mobility.

Through iterative design and player-driven reinterpretation, Black Market Hustle evolved into a lived critique of institutional decay, demonstrating that meaning in games is not only designed but also discovered through play.