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Rentoy

Rentoy is a trick-taking card game from the as early as the late 16th century (I've listed the rules for both the original version recorded by Krasnopolsky and my version in the appendix.). Rentoy may have some modern variations in other Spain and its former colonies, but I was unable to find any information on modern variations of this game with exception of Rentoy's distant relative Truco. Due to the lack of information available I am assuming that modern variations of Rentoy are not commonly played.

Since I have no prior experience with Rentoy or any of its modern descendants, I feel the best way to describe this game is through its three core mechanics. These mechanics are the game's implementations of bidding, communicating, and strategizing. Each of these aspects alone would be enough to form a fully functional and entertaining game. The bidding aspect of the game is very similar to many poker variations including Texas Hold'em, with each card played revealing more and more about the likely outcome of the hand. The communicating aspect can involve passing secret signals to your partners without letting your opponents know the information you're sending. This style of play is exceedingly similar to the game of Kemps. Finally, the strategy portion of the game plays in a somewhat similar manner to most trick-taking games such as Spades.

I felt that each of these aspects created a different sense of fun. The bidding intensifies the play by adding an extra risk factor. In Caillois's terms, the bidding increases the *ilinx* since each raise brings tension as the amount of points at stake dramatically changes depending on the opponent's response. The practice of bluffing converts some of the random chance, or *alea*, normally in the game into *ilinx* since normally bad hands can become useful if a team takes the risk of raising and can convince the other team that they have a better hand.

Just as the bidding aspect adds an *ilinx* factor to the game, the communicating aspect adds the *mimicry* factor. Usually, all members on a team decide upon some predetermined set of signals. During gameplay, players usually try to correctly emulate these signals so that their teammates can interpret them but their opponents cannot. As part of the implicit rules, you can communicate in any public fashion you want, but you cannot, for instance, show your cards to your teammates or write them a message. This implicit rule adds a small amount of challenge, or *agôn*, to the game. Since both teams can see each other's signals, there is a danger that your message could be intercepted by the other team. Likewise, you want to see if it's possible to crack your opponent's code. This communication quickly becomes similar to pretending you are spies, a game that appeals to the action hero/math geek in all of us.

Finally, the strategy part adds the primary *agôn* factor in the game. Assuming that no one folds, the game still comes down to how you play your cards. While the three-card hand severely limits your choices and prevents the game from reaching the complexity of Bridge or other trick-taking games, the fact that you don't have to follow suit guarantees that you still have to make choices that can turn the tide of the outcome either way. The small hand size compared to the number of people typically playing makes more of the challenge based on coordinating your plays with your partners instead of deciding which play is the optimal play. The ability to sweep trump and play your trump at any time over the suit led does make the outcome of the game highly dependent

on your team's trump distribution. In this sense, the game is much more chance based than Bridge and other trick-taking games.

After observing all of these aspects I realized that this game is one of the most balanced games I've seen in terms of Caillois's categories of ludic activities. Additionally, it balances the ludus and paida with strict rules on bidding balanced by the free form of communication. Since this game had all aspects of play in the original form, I felt the best way to modify it would be try accentuating each of these effects to see if I could heighten the enjoyment received from each of these forms.

Since I'm a bridge player, the first thing I felt I could do to make the game more interesting is to improve the trick-taking component of the gameplay. During my playtesting with the original game, I realized that far too many games ended with a fold since the team knew that they were hopelessly outmatched. To fix this, I changed the hands from being three cards to being five cards. This made it much more important how you play your cards since you needed three tricks out of five instead of two out of three. I had felt in the three cards version that there were only two things you could do to win: draw trumps, or not draw trumps. There was no way to get transportation between hands since you most likely couldn't afford using an extra trick. Since the strategy used in the final play had such a little effect on the game, I felt little discernability for my actions. In the five card version the trick-taking component became much more interesting and it felt less like random chance and more dependent on the players' decisions (Salen & Zimmerman).

When I playtested the new version with my friends, those who had played the previous version liked this better. In fact one of them even recommended going up to seven cards. However, I feel that adding more cards doesn't just affect the trick-taking level. If we add too many cards, there will be fewer unknown cards left in the deck. Therefore, effective communication and intercepting the opposing team's communication give much more information. At some point, increasing the number of cards and thereby increasing the amount of information shared would make your trick-taking strategy less important since a more effective communication technique could tell you which of your gambits would be futile.

Also, additional information given would result in less risk in the bidding process. A frequent problem with the original game was that too many of the games ended in folds. Since there are five cards given, players know that bluffs are less likely to work if you have absolutely nothing. In the three card variant tricks a one-card swing due to uncertainty could decide everything. As a result the ilinx effect of bidding was reduced slightly and its agôn effect is increased as players make their decisions based on more information.

Since I was now dealing out more cards, I felt it was only natural to use a full 52 card deck. The only reason this game used a 40 card deck is because it was the standard deck at the time in Spain. Since we are in the modern day United States, it is far more natural to use the full standardized 52 card deck. In addition to convenience, this also offsets the information imbalance caused by increasing the number of cards dealt out.

My final attempt to improve the game was with regard to its bidding system. I decided to leave the communication system open, since I felt that extra rules would ruin the paida natural to that system. I decided to change to bidding to allow raises of up to three points instead of the fixed value raises. This addition allows players to better bluff

their opponents out of the contract and will also allow smaller raises to encourage more hands valued above the initial one point. Also, since there are more options available in bidding, this would more often be decided by skill. Once again, more *agôn* is added to the game.

I had originally had a blind double system implemented where each team had the option to double the total points awarded for this hand before seeing the trump to increase the *ilinx* of the game. However in playtesting people rarely used it since the trump suit had such a huge effect on which team had the better hand. Also, since there is a greater opportunity to raise, I increased the goal score from 12 to 15. The score increase was somewhat arbitrary, but I was concerned that games might go by too fast between teams with aggressive bidders. Games ending too quickly would make players less attached to the outcome of this game and want to quickly get to the next game.

After analyzing my revisions and playtesting more thoroughly, I can see many areas that could have been improved. First of all, my playtesting audience was largely people I play cards with. More specifically, all but one of my playtesters have played bridge with me before on a regular basis. Therefore, it makes sense that my feedback would bias me towards making the game have more of an *agôn* aspect to it. From my one non-bridge player that tested my game, I found that the communication component was the most fun. So perhaps, this game could have gone in several different directions depending on the target audience with one version for bridge players, one version for casual card game players, and another version for poker players. I feel that there is a good chance that the reason why the blind double system was not used often is because my playtesters were playing like bridge and not like poker. Most raises were called only when the team had a reasonable chance of winning from their perspective and usually were called near the end of the hand. If I had tested this game with poker players instead, I'm sure that the final game would have been a lot different.

I believe the reason why this game isn't played today is because people who enjoy one aspect of a game's play would probably better enjoy playing this game with others who enjoy that same aspect. While many people will like all the aspects of the game, invariably players will prefer one aspect over the others. These players will probably modify it themselves and create their own set of implicit house rules. For instance, a bridge player might get annoyed with a poker player that keeps trying to buy out the hand instead of actually playing it. Similarly a poker player would rather have less information passed so the opponents cannot read the bluff, while a signaler will come up with some elaborate communication scheme. As a result, the players preferred playing games which had only their favorite aspect of the game so they would not have to be frustrated with other players who are not playing by their implicit rules (Salen & Zimmerman). While each of these parts has meaningful play by themselves, players integrate these elements with different priorities (Salen & Zimmerman).

Appendix

Original Rentoy Rules (based on Krasnopolsky's webpage):

Players: any even number from 2 to (potentially) 16, though usually played with 4 or 6

Deck: 1 standard Spanish 40-card deck

Card Rankings: Highest is 2 of trump, followed by the three figures (King, Knight, and Valet) and the Ace, 7, 6, 5, 4, and 3 of trump. All other suits have 2 as the lowest card instead of the highest with the rest of the cards going in the same order from the King down to the 3.

Goal: Players are divided into two teams and play hands to win points for their team. The objective is to be the first team to reach 12 points.

Gameplay: After the players are divided evenly into two teams, each is dealt out 3 cards. Then the next card is flipped over and its suit becomes the trump suit. Afterwards three tricks are taken and whichever team wins 2 out of the 3 tricks wins the hand. The trick is awarded to whichever team played the highest trump card, or if no trump card is played, to the highest card in the suit led. One rule that makes this game different from most other trick-taking games is that you do not have to follow the suit led. For instance, if someone leads a club, and you don't want to play a club, you can either discard a card from some other suit or play a trump to take the trick even if you have other hearts in your hand. The exception to this rule is when trump is led. In this case all players must play a trump if they have one and can only discard another suit if they have no trump cards left. There is also one additional aspect to play involving how many points a hand is worth. The default value of a hand is 1 point, but it can be raised by either team to 3 points when it is their turn to play a card. In response to this, the opposing team can either stay in and accept the hand at a value of 3 points or fold and forfeit the 1 point to the team that raised. If the opposing team decides to stay, they have the option to reraise to 6 giving the other team a similar option to stay or forfeit the previous bid of 3 points. Likewise, each team can counter-raise up to 9 and 12 points, which is worth the entire game. One other aspect that is different from typical trick-taking games is that players on a team have virtually unlimited open communication including all gestures and speech.

Modified Version:

Players: any even number from 2 to (potentially) 10, though should play with 4 or 6

Deck: 1 Standard French 52 card deck

Card Rankings: Same, except the order for the non-twos are now 3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,J,Q,K,A from lowest to highest.

Goal: Each team now goes for 15 points.

Gameplay: The rules are largely the same, but now each player is dealt 5 cards instead of 3 and each team needs 3 out of the 5 to win the hand. Also, for raising, we now allow any raise up to 3 above the previous bid instead of fixed raising levels.

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