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Modern Art Analysis

Overview

Modern art is an auction game which emphasizes player interaction. Players have cards which simulate auction items, and take turns in which players buy and sell art using limited resources provided in the form of poker chips. The game is designed by Dr. Reiner Knizia, who is a famous board game designer and has created many well regarded games.

Players

The game of Modern Art supports 3-5 players. The rules differ slightly when the number of players is adjusted. The number of cards dealt to each player is reduced as the number of players increases. Furthermore, when playing with three players, there is an optional variant. The three player variant alters the game by providing a face down mystery card which is flipped over at the end of a round to add value to the work of the artist represented on the mystery card.

The player experience is multilateral, as all players are in opposition at all times. The game encourages social interaction between players through a variety of different means. First, each card specifies a different kind of auction. Each kind of auction, selected from sealed, open, double, once around, and fixed price, provides a different social experience. In sealed auctions, players secretly put an amount of money in their hand and thrust their closed fist toward the center. The auctioneer counts down, and hands are turned over. This is an interactive procedure, and the other types of auction are similarly interactive. Secondly, the game encourages social interaction by creating a good atmosphere for judging people's personality types and attempting to divine information about their secret resources from their body language and game moves.

Objective

The objective of modern art is to, after four seasons of auctioning, have the most money of all the players. The objective is achieved by cleverly selling art for high prices, buying art for low prices, and analyzing the projected future worth of art pieces.

Procedures

There are a few main procedures involved in Modern Art: setup, turns, seasons and the end of the game.

Setup: The setup of the game is straightforward. There is a deck of cards, each of which has a reproduction of a painting from a selection of five artists. Each player is dealt a number of cards relational to the number of players. For five players, each player is dealt 8. For four players, each player is dealt 9, and for three players the number is 10. These cards are kept secret in the player's hand.

In addition to the cards, each player is given a several poker chips equaling an amount of \$100,000, and a cardboard screen that is placed in front of each player's resource pile to keep it secret.

A small board with each artist listed is placed in the center of the table and used to keep track of the evolving worth of each artist's paintings as the game progresses.

Turns: The game begins, according to its rules, with the youngest player going first. From there, the players take turns going clockwise around the game space. On each player's turn, he or she selects a work of art from his or her hand and offers it up for auction. There are several types of auction, and the artist's paintings evolve to have different monetary worth, so the choice of which card to auction is very strategic.

The types of auctions

Sealed Auction: In this type of auction, each player puts the money they're willing to pay for the work of art being auctioned in their closed fist and presents it at the center of the table. On the auctioneer's command, each player reveals the amount they placed in their hand to bid and the winner receives the piece of art. This type of auction challenges the bidders to think about the bids other players will make and alter their own actions in response to their assumptions.

Open Auction: The auction is open for all players to announce a bid or challenge an existing bid. Players bid back and forth until the bidding dies down and the auctioneer calls for the bidding to close, at which point the winner takes the art from the auction. This type of auction challenges players to negotiate a price and test others' commitment to a purchase. Several tactics can be employed. One tactic may be to recognize when someone else desperately wants to buy a piece of art, and challenge their bids to drive the price up even if there is no goal of purchase.

Once Around Auction: In this type of auction, the player whose turn is next has the opportunity to bid on the artwork. Each player, in turn, is given an opportunity to bid, with the auctioneer getting the last opportunity to bid. Players must bid tactically; a player who comes early in the rotation and wants to win the auction will have to bid high enough that no other players who come after will outbid.

Fixed Price Auction: In this type of auction, the auctioneer sets the price of the painting. The first player to offer to buy the painting at the set price receives the painting. This type of auction encourages the auctioneer to analyze the market made up by the other players and the game setting, and set an appropriate price that will be high, but not so high that the art won't sell. If the auctioneer's art fails to sell at the set price, the auctioneer is forced to buy the art at the set price. This creates the impetus for choosing a price carefully and typically encourages the auctioneer to underestimate the worth of the art.

Double Auction: The double auction is a powerful tool. It allows the auctioneer to select a second work from his or her hand by the same artist and offer it up alongside the double auction card. The type of auction is then determined by the second card. As the worth of each artist is determined by how many of their works are in play, and each round automatically ends when the number of works by an artist in play exceeds five, playing two cards at once in and of itself is a powerful tool. The double auction also provides an alternative strategy. A player can choose to play the double auction card by itself. In the event that this happens, players around the table have the opportunity to volunteer a card from their hand by the same artist and take ownership of the auction of both cards, splitting the profit evenly between them. In the event that no player offers a second card for the auction, the owner of the double auction card receives his or her artwork for free.

After auctioning, the auctioneer collects the money from the auction and the next player in the rotation has a turn.

Seasons: Once five cards from any single artist have been played, the season ends. The artists in play

are ranked by how many cards are on the table. The art of the three top artists have a monetary value applied to them, which is cumulative with their worth in later seasons. All the art which has been auctioned is automatically discarded or “sold” to the bank, and the players receive an amount of poker chips equaling the monetary value of the card determined by its artist's rank. Each player is then dealt more cards, depending on the amount of players in the game, 3/4/6 cards for 5/4/3 players respectively. The game has four seasons. For the final season, players are not dealt any additional cards.

End of the Game: At the end of the game, each player adds up their total amount of money and reveals the amount to the other players. The winner is determined as the person with the most money.

Rules

The rules for Modern Art are not incredibly restraining. Once a player knows how to play the game in general, the rules follow common sense and many exist purely to patch up specific situations.

The auctioneer of any auction is eligible to buy his or her own painting that is up for auction.

The final card played in a season is considered owned by the bank and does not reward any player directly.

If a double auction is played to end a season, no player owns either card.

Artists accumulate value, but any round in which they fail to rank, they are worth nothing even if they have accumulated worth.

Players cannot bid with money they don't have.

If any player runs out of cards by playing several double auctions, they have to wait until cards are issued at the end of the season to auction again.

Resources

There are three main resources in modern. First, there are cards with art represented on them. Second, there are poker chips which are representational of money. Finally, there is a resource players develop over the course of the game: information.

The set of cards is divided into 5 different artists: Lite Metal, Yoko, Christin P., Karl Gitter, and Krypto. The amount of cards appropriated to each artist in the deck differs between artists. There are 12 Lite Metal Cards in the deck, 13 Yoko cards, 14 Christin P cards, 15 Karl Gitter cards and 16 Krypto cards. These amounts are inversely related to each artist's priority in the case of a tie. Although Lite Metal has fewer cards and thus less opportunity to be played for his value to increase, his art has the highest priority in the case of a tie at the end of a season.

Money is the second primary resource. Chips are provided initially, valuing \$100,000. Over the course of the game, art prices rise. If a player is doing poorly, there is a risk of going bankrupt, as well as a risk of art prices exceeding their bidding funds. There is also a consideration players must make when making big purchases as to whether the next few players will play something that might be more worth the commitment of money.

Information is built as the game progresses. Each game is dynamic, and information about a specific play experience in the game is required to be utilized as a resource. The information must be collected, and attempts to collect information alter the actions of each player. The cards which have been played are one example of information which is important to collect. Additionally, players may alter their bids to try to determine what cards other players may have, or what artists they seem eager to push.

Strategies

Modern Art is a game of strategy. The main areas of the game that encourage strategic thinking are the areas of buying and selling the art.

In buying the art, a player has to make a prediction about the future worth of the painting. Additionally, the player needs to make determinations about their own price cap and expected profits, as well as analyze the interest of other buyers.

Players determine the value of the art by looking at the display in the center of the game space. The first ranked artist each round is worth \$30,000, second rank \$20,000 and third rank \$10,000. This amount accumulates over the four seasons of the game. The maximum price a piece of art could be worth is \$120,000 by the end of the game. Because of this pricing arrangement, players have some guidance in how to predict the future worth of each painting.

As key strategy for buying art is to try to always achieve a profit. In the beginning seasons, the worth of the artists at the end of the season will feel relatively clear, and any player will know not to buy someone who will likely end up ranked three at the end of the round for more than \$10,000. By the end of the game, the possibility for game changing moves rises, so predictions are riskier. A main reason for this is that the resources in people's hands becomes more limited, the prices are much higher, and the likelihood your investment won't reap the maximum reward, or any reward, increases.

In selling the art, the auctioneer needs to analyze the situation of art already purchased. For example, if Lite Metal, an artist, has several cards in play, and the auctioneer has a vested interest in seeing the round continue might find it appropriate to play a different card. An auctioneer should also anticipate the future moves of other players.

Much of the strategy for modern art takes place in attempting to analyze other player's motivations, secret resources and possible moves.

Because the number of cards in each suit are small and the deck never gets reshuffled during the game, card counting becomes very possible. The advantage of doing so is worth it, but limited; toward the end of the game, the final round can be affected by the limited resources remaining in players' hands. In that position, it is advantageous to know what resources are still available to be played as some moves, like pushing Lite Metal, might appear advantageous but in actually be ineffective because Lite Metal has run out of cards.