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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

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Wir sind das Volk! Agitprop between East and West Germany

Anton Oehmsen-Clark

Abstract

Wir sind das Volk! (2014) gamifies the conflict between East and West Germany by having players compete to undermine the real or perceived living standards of their respective opponents. The possibility of an Eastern Bloc extending well beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall is a very real possibility in this game world. The recognition of this historical contingency allows Wir sind das Volk! to forward a model of gameplay that sees the player encounter how democracies, like Soviet republics, rely on a complex network of agitprop symbolism. Wir sind das Volk! mixes many of board gaming's traditional gameplay conventions, and in doing so asks the player to participate in making alternative chronologies of the Cold War.

Keywords: Wir sind das Volk!, Cold War, Historiographical Games, Useful Games, Eurogame, Wargame, gamevironments

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From 1945 up until the collapse of the Berlin Wall in 1989, Germany became one of the central battlegrounds for a Cold War that would decide the ideological leanings of more than half the world's population. *Wir sind das Volk!* (2014) gamifies this conflict by having players compete to undermine the real or perceived living standards of their respective opponents. The possibility of an Eastern Bloc extending well beyond the fall of the Berlin Wall is a very real possibility in this game world. The recognition of this historical contingency allows *Wir sind das Volk!* to forward a model of gameplay that sees the player encounter how democracies, as well as Soviet republics, rely on a complex network of agitprop symbolism. This framing invites

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players to ask what kind of propaganda, which articles of faith, will function best to undermine or uphold the promises of a given ideology.

While historical theming in board games is relatively commonplace, an exploration of the creation of history itself is decidedly less so. Games, when framed intelligently, can make explicit the idea that history is fundamentally contingent. The way that we tell stories to each other, either in academic discourse or in common parlance, changes based on how we interpret the facts associated with a given narrative. While there is no way to undo past actions, there are many divergent ways of explaining the causes, effects, and meanings of those past actions. *Historiography*, or the study of history itself, is the process by which we go back to the future, often daring to ask, what if it was otherwise? Does A necessarily lead to B? Or can we imagine alternative directions, headings, or chronologies for the past? How does the way the way that we tell stories to each other effect the way that we orient ourselves in the world?

Rather than reflecting on the process and creation of history itself, board games have typically used history as a staging ground for an entertaining gaming experience. *Wir sind das Volk!* points out a path forward for games interested in representing historiographical themes. It does this by reappropriating elements from wargames (Perla, 1990) and eurogames (Woods, 2012).

The Eurogame/Wargame Dichotomy

In the book *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Board Games* (2012), Stewart Woods suggests that the Allies, through a variety of post-war denazification policies, steered many of West Germany's cultural industries towards cultural pacifism (Woods 2012, 57). While American board game titles like *Risk* (1957)



focused on direct forms of player-to-player competition, German-style board games were developed to focus on more indirect forms of conflict. Rather than fighting an opponent, *eurogames* were designed around the idea of an individual player's ability to maximize efficiency. If post-war American board game titles were focused on war and conflict, German-styled board games were focused on the simulation of peaceful barter, trade, and exchange (Woods, 2012).

Eurogames can, in this context, be classified by a set of common features. When compared to American-style board games, eurogames contain little to no hidden gameplay information (every player is aware of what moves you can and cannot make), involve very little luck, and typically do not eliminate players from the game. Peace games, rather than American wargames, were to be identifiable by their dedication to a representation of succinct economic efficiency (Woods, 2012).

For all of their mechanical virtues, eurogames have, particularly in recent years, been heavily criticized for casting history as a backdrop to gameplay (e.g., Robinson 2014, Foasberg 2016). Many eurogames, set in the time of European colonialism, have either explicitly or indirectly erased the history of European chattel slavery. Slaves and Indigenous peoples have been rendered invisible in the context of a genre that emphasizes the fun of economic trade and exchange. While this criticism may not be true for every entry in the eurogaming genre (e.g., *Spirit Island* 2017), eurogames, as a whole, tend to use history as a form of staging rather than critically engaging with how history itself has been produced.

Wargames, though generally exempt from charges of historical erasure, can similarly be accused of sacrificing historical tact in the name of popular entertainment. The kind of history that wargames are concerned with documenting primarily relates to



the facts associated with what did and what did not happen at a particular battleground. The geopolitical, social, and ideological intricacies that surround a given battle, particularly as these features apply to a larger examination of how we remember war and conflict, are sidelined in the name of simulating the fun of player-to-player conflict. There are, of course, notable exceptions to this rule: for example, titles like *Labyrinth: The War on Terror* (2001). However, in general, both eurogames and wargames have not emphasized historiographical themes.

Though speculative, the reason for this lack of emphasis may be due to the complexities associated with tracing counterfactual narratives. Historiography, which often contemplates what if questions, is typically produced in written form. While games, on various platforms, have entertained alternative histories, they have typically entertained this type of contingency only insofar as it provides a platform for an entertaining gaming experience. One can submit that the enormous complexity associated with tactfully addressing historical what if questions has steered many game publishers away from the topic. While Wir sind das Volk! may not represent a catch-all solution to this problem, or even a perfect example of historiographical research in game form, it does provide a unique roadmap for publishers interested attempting to strike a balance between historical complexity, accuracy, and accessibility. The primary way it achieves this balance is by remixing popular gameplay markers from both the eurogame and wargame.

Wir sind das Volk! A Balance between East and West

At the start of the game, players are greeted to *Wir sind das Volk!*'s game board, a top-down view of East and West Germany. Each Federal State of Germany (or Bundesländer in the German version of the game) is in total disarray. Having just lost



the war, the German state is effectively non-existent. Wir sind das Volk!, though complicated, has a relatively simple premise. East and West Germany will compete to build Germany from the ashes. Players, who select action cards at the beginning of each round, represented as half-decades from 1949 until the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1989, try to improve their sides' respective living standards. Over the course of each half-decade, players compare their respective living standards. If, at the end of each half-decade, there is a difference in living standards (either between players or within a player's area of control) a player's states will accumulate unrest tokens. When there are four unrest tokens in a state, a mass protest will erupt. A state will collapse (and immediately lose the game) when it has four mass protest markers at the end of a half-decade.

A player's ability to increase their respective living standard is tallied by three independent but related tracks. Prestige, socialists, and Western currency tick up and down depending on the cards that were played in each round. For example, if East Germany plays the card "Joining the Warsaw Pact" (Wir sind das Volk! 2014), it moves the prestige track up by one. Prestige effects who will go first at the beginning of a new round. If East Germany were to end a decade with the highest level of prestige, it would then begin the next decade of the game. The player who had the lesser prestige starts the second half of every decade. When starting a new half-decade East and West Germany are presented with similar gameplay options. Both East and West Germany choose "1 card from the card display or 1 card from his hand and performs 1 action" (Wir sind das Volk! rulebook, 2014, 3). However, if East Germany begins the decade (having the most prestige), they may choose an additional "special action card" (Wir sind das Volk! 2014), which is unique to East Germany. As stated in the



game's rulebook "when East chooses the special card, it has to either discard a hand card, or let [the] West pick the top card from the draw deck as an additional hand card" (*Wir sind das Volk!* rulebook, 2014, 3).

While Wir sind das Volk! does not attempt to strike a perfect strategic balance between East and West Germany, the game does attempt to put each party on an equal, if not perfectly exact, playing field. Wir sind das Volk! is careful to detail the economic and socio-political disparities that existed between East and West Germany but chooses to strategically balance gameplay with the intent of empowering player choice. Wir sind das Volk! seems to be concerned with historical accuracy while simultaneously being concerned with allowing players to trace new chronologies of the Cold War. This balance is important because it allows the player to encounter the facts associated with a given history, while also entertaining alternative headings for that history.

Wir sind das Volk!'s rulebook stands as a good example of the game's commitment to a factual retelling of the East-West Germany divide. In the introduction to the game's Western currency mechanic, Wir sind das Volk!'s rulebook states that

"East Germany continually suffered from a lack of Western currency. This was needed to import goods like bananas and coffee, but also industrial resources. Simultaneously, there was almost no investment into its economy, which was run on attrition. Such problems did not affect West Germany, which had the Deutschmark – a very tradeable currency." (Wir sind das Volk! rulebook 2014, 7)

Wir sind das Volk!'s mechanics are designed to account for East Germany's historically disadvantageous position. Though East Germany did attempt to break its reliance on Western currencies by breaking its reliance on West German imports, it never, at least historically, was able to do so. East Germany's attempts to diversity its economy by



importing steel and specialized chemicals from other markets only partially led East Germany to economic independence (Central Intelligence Agency 1968). East Germany remained tethered to Western markets throughout its history. Wir sind das Volk! accounts for this disparity by including a mechanic that measures East Germany's reliance on Western currency. In order for East Germany to improve its living standard, it must accumulate Western currency, which is achieved by matching or exceeding the export capacity associated with West Germany's worst export factory. While it is beyond the scope of this review to comprehensively explain Wir sind das Volk!'s factory mechanic, the basic premise is that factories can be leveled up from one to three. An export factory is defined as the factory with the highest numerical value in any given Federal state. As stated in the game's rulebook "each East export factory whose value is at least equal to the worst West export factory gives East 1 Western Currency [on the Western currency track]" (Wir sind das Volk! rulebook 2014, 8).

What is particularly fascinating about *Wir sind das Volk!* is that while *Wir sind das Volk!*'s gameplay may be historically asymmetrical (in that the game accounts for the disparity between East and West), its historical asymmetries do not, at least entirely, determine winners and losers. While many historically themed wargames heavily favor certain gameplay outcomes, *Wir sind das Volk!* does not. *Wir sind das Volk!*, by introducing the "special action card" (*Wir sind das Volk!* 2014) mechanic, bolsters East Germany's chances at winning the game. This bolstering, while historically counterfactual is designed not to uncritically entertain alternative histories, but rather to allow players to reflect on the legacy of the East-West Germany divide. To take an example: one of the games special card actions allows East Germany to build the Berlin Wall. As the game's rulebook describes



"for East Germany, the massive exodus of its people (especially professionals and scientists) was a severe problem, almost causing its economy to collapse. Closing the border in 1952 did not help, because West Berlin was too easy to reach and refugees were welcomed with West German citizenship and passports. Only by building the Berlin Wall did the East halt the exodus. However, the Wall had costs for the East – both to build and police it, and in loss of international prestige." (Wir sind das Volk! rulebook 2014, 7)

By initiating the building of the Berlin Wall, East Germany stops the game's flight counter, which measures the number of refugees migrating from East to West. If East Germany chooses not to build the Berlin Wall, then East Germany must contend with the consequences of a mass intellectual and professional exodus. These consequences are measurable and effect the ability of East Germany to maintain its economic and industrial base. Wir sind das Volk!'s playing cards often contain both boons and banes, and while East Germany may increase its living standard by playing one card, it may also, inadvertently, add a point to the games flight track. If, for example, at the end of a round East Germany has accrued four flight markers, then it must dismantle four elements of its established infrastructure (factories, roads, etc...). The choice of whether or not to build the Berlin Wall has historical consequences, and players must contend with these consequences if they choose to trace an alternative heading of East Germany. Wir sind das Volk! allows players to entertain counterfactual narratives, but only if these counterfactual narratives are, somewhat ironically, grounded in the facts of history. This framing invites players to ask larger questions about the memory of the East-West Germany divide. Is the fact that East Germany was tethered to Western markets a kind of historical death sentence? Alternatively, could East Germany have won its propaganda war with the West by other means? What would these other means have looked like? Would they have been historically feasible?



Though historically asymmetrical, *Wir sind das Volk!*'s asymmetry does not determine who will win the game. This unusual for a wargame. While *Wir sind das Volk!* involves very little luck, the game presents a factually grounded retelling of the East-West Germany divide. This emphasis is highly unusual for a eurogame. *Wir sind das Volk!* subverts many elements from both eurogames and wargames, and in so doing, forwards a model of historical gameplay that asks players to imagine factually grounded contingences of the East-West Germany divide. While it is beyond the scope of this review to provide a comparison between *Wir sind das Volk!* and its contemporary *Twilight Struggle* (2005), it's worth noting that, when comparing the two games, *Twilight Struggle* would typically be classified as a wargame. *Wir sind das Volk!*, which more closely resembles a eurogame, contains almost no randomness. One of *Twilight Struggle*'s fundamental mechanics revolves around the rolling and modification of dice rolls. The game also, when compared to *Wir sind das Volk!*, contains an abundance of hidden gameplay information. This distinction, though by no means complete, does fundamentally differentiate the two games.

Conclusion

Wir sind das Volk!, with its heavy emphasis on individual-player agency, removes randomness from gameplay with the intent of empowering player choice. This is significant for a board game focused on re-enacting events from the Cold War. If we can play history, then the way that we play matters. Rather than asking why or how, games focused on historical themes are increasingly asking whither. Though popular board games like Spirit Island (2017) have taken positive steps to subvert board gaming's problematic relationship with colonial theming, this type of game has yet to explicitly focus on the theme of colonialism. Wir sind das Volk!, with its explicit emphasis on factually grounded contingencies of Cold War, asks players to reconsider

how we remember both the Soviet Union and the Western Bloc. This is important for a period whose popular imagination has so heavily favored a virtuous picture of the United States and its ally-ship. Though *Wir sind das Volk!* does not paint a rosy picture of the USSR (quite to the contrary in fact) it does ask the player to consider what the Cold War was: A battle for the ideological heart of East or West. What *Wir sind das Volk!* does is provide a novel map for games interested in representing historical themes. If a game wants to revise or argue for another model of history, it can, and should, defy hardline genre conventions. *Wir sind das Volk!* mixes many of board gaming's traditional gameplay conventions, and in doing so asks the player to participate in making alternative chronologies of the Cold War.

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