Let's Roll:
Comparative Representations of Empire in Board Games

William Robinson
The Center for Technoculture, Art and Games
Concordia University
Hexagram EV 11-655
1515 St. Catherine St. West,
Montréal, Québec. H3G 2W1
william.robinson@concordia.ca

ABSTRACT

Game scholar Stewart Woods, in his monograph Eurogames, explains that in the Western world, there currently exist two major sub-categories of hobbyist board games, Anglo-American and European. While these terms are geographical, they now refer to different styles of design. Woods' historical quantitative analysis stops short of cultural critique, but his discourse mirrors the online board game community's pride in Eurogames for their ability to design non-violent representation. While Anglo-American games are said to be formally constructed to depict belligerence and little more, it will be argued that they are capable of doing so with nuance. In contrast, Eurogames have developed new forms of play which abstract or excise violence from violent histories, re-writing and whitewashing the past events, and consequently producing problematic depictions.

Categories and Subject Descriptors

K.8.0 **[Gaming]**

General Terms

Human Factors

Keywords

Game studies, Eurogames, abstraction, violence, Empire

1. INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the 20th century, two distinct and notable western hobbyist traditions of board game design emerge, each with their own cultural and medium biases: European and Anglo-American. Game scholar Stuart Woods, in his monograph *Eurogames,* writes that in post-war Europe the highest-selling games are American properties owned by Hasbro and Parker Brothers, such as *Clue* and *Monopoly*. In 1978, Ravensburger, a major German toy publisher, begins to invest value in local game design prizes in the hopes of building a successful line of national games to compete against the American market. The most notable of these prizes is, and remains to this day, the Spiel Des Jahres. It prompted a creative surge among German game designers who produced increasingly polished and innovative play. The aesthetic end result is succinctly described by one of Germany's most decorated designers, Wolfgang Kramer: "Players act constructive in order to improve their own results. They do not act destructive and destroy the playing of their opponents. In my games a player damages another player only then, when he makes a good move for himself [sic]" (Woods 58). Despite this process of peaceful game design, I will argue that these games go unrecognized as colonialist games, which do violence by abstracting and eliding the bloodshed in the histories these games depict.

German historian Geoff Eley writes, "Guilty remembrance of terrible hardships conjoins with an unevenly-grounded recognition of social responsibility to produce the present breadth of German aversion against war" (175). As such, it is no real surprise to discover that most German-made games avoid standard battle-scenes such as those found in *Risk* and *Axis and Allies*. Contrastingly, in the same era, American hobbyist games returned focus to increasingly detailed war simulators. These often presented entire books of rules on everything from supply lines to firing rates, whereas even the more advanced Eurogame rule-sets take up under 10 image-laden pages. Eurogames work towards a more socially "appropriate" mode by: reducing play times, avoiding the elimination of players, and even constraining leading players in order to keep all participants competitive throughout. In the wake of all these innovations, some hobbyists have assigned the derisive label 'Ameritrash' to classic Anglo-American games. While these games draw from the European tradition, they are still distinguishable on a thematic level. Whereas Eurogames are said to be about the "mechanics," Anglo-American games are about the theme. Game designer Reiner Knizia ventures a guess as to why this is the case when he suggests that American buyers do not understand games as systems of rules, but as fictional worlds (Woods 118). If that is the case, it is no wonder they are so different.

Game studies scholar Gonzalo Frasca explains that games are representational simulations. He remarks that scientists have used simulations for their explanatory and predictive powers. In order to understand how games communicate through their rules and goals, Frasca argues that we need to understand simulations. He offers an early stab at a definition of simulation for our benefit: "'to simulate is to model a (source) system through a different

system which maintains (for somebody) some of the behaviors of the original system.' … Simulation does not simply retain the—generally audiovisual—characteristics of the object but it also includes a model of its behaviors" (Frasca 233). Through close analysis of its simulations, we can come to know how a game frames the power dynamics of its subject matter. These representational power dynamics are the result of ideologies which do more harm than good.

2. CASE STUDY: *Vasco da Gama*

Paolo Mori's *Vasco da Gama* is a representation of the 15th century Portuguese empire. The rulebook begins with the following blurb,

> The Search for a viable route to India was, since the mid-15th Century, the main goal of almost all expeditions made by the Portuguese Kingdom. … In 1498 … Vasco da Gama accomplished something exceptional, granting Portugal the possibility to achieve a monopoly on the spice trade between India and Europe. (Mori 1)

Thematically, the board indicates to the players that their abstracted actions are meant to represent the process of buying ships, equipping them with sailors, and sending them off to Africa and that the best equipped might make it to India. Without going into detail I will say that the game offers interesting optimization problems regarding resource accumulation and redistribution. Despite these, *Vasco da Gama* tells us very little about anything to do with being a Portuguese expedition manager. We come to know that sailors went up the coast of Africa and across the Indian Ocean without visiting the Middle East, but this is not indicated to us via the rules, but by the routes depicted on the map. We know that missionaries were sent on these merchant voyages, but not what they did or who they met. Even in this instance, the rules tell us nothing; again, it is only in the naming that we come to understand that there was religious work involved. Perhaps the most salient rule-based rhetoric stems from the reward system of the game. Short voyages to the southern parts of Africa are profitable if they can continue up along the coast. Long voyages are prestigious, but return no capital, but we are never told why. In fact, we are likely to disbelieve anything explained to us, knowing that Eurogames avoid positive feedback loops and probably added these strange rules to make the game more enjoyable to play. If anything, *Vasco da Gama* communicates despite itself through what it omits: violence.

Cultural Anthropologist and Islamic scholar Enseng Ho writes,

> The advent of the Portuguese in 1498 to the end of World War II in 1945 and Indian independence, has been called "the Vasco da Gama epoch" by the Malabar-born Indian diplomat and historian K. N. Pannikar (1993). What made this period distinctive was the new importance of state violence to markets ... The marriage of cannon to trading ship was the crucial, iconic innovation. (Ho 218)

For Mori to insert the thematic of Portuguese trade in the design model of Eurogames, he must, in keeping with short rule sets and war intolerance, abstract violence out. So while he receives critical acclaim, with his game being one of the highest-ranked in 2009, he is whitewashing history. Ho continues his castigation of da Gama, writing,

> "In addition to plunder and murder, the Portuguese reserved for themselves trade in profitable items like pepper and ginger, thus seeking to ruin the Muslims in all departments… In short, Portuguese colonial and imperial actions were destroying the multi-religious, cosmopolitan societies of trading ports in Malabar, and the diasporic Muslim networks across the Indian Ocean which articulated with them." (Ho 224)

Of course Mori does not mention that Calicut is a Portuguese trading port by virtue of belligerent merchants with bigger guns. His revisionist history describes his players as "rich shipowners who, under [da Gama's] patronage, aim to achieve prestige and riches" (Mori 1). While religion is alluded to with the figure of Francisco Alvares (The Priest) providing the player with missionaries, the only reference to violence in the game is indicated by Bortolomeu Dias's holding his sword. Even then, the weapon is largely concealed and seemingly decorative. In any case, activating him only grants the player first turn in the following round, in addition to a few abstract victory points. There is no mention of an "other" who might receive the hidden end of the sword.

None of this is unique to Mori's work. Woods explains that in Eurogames, "Direct conflict particularly is rarely called upon to motivate players as a thematic goal. Instead, the emphasis is typically upon individual achievement, with thematic goals such as building, development and the accumulation of wealth being prevalent" (110). What Woods seems to forget is that building and the accumulation of wealth is often at the expense of the other's wealth and land. Taking violent histories and turning them into resource management/ worker-placement games for family audiences serves to create a fairy tale. In this case, the legitimacy of the Portuguese empire is reproduced with each play.

Ho's work fits nicely in challenging this game and segueing into the next. In comparison to Vasco da Gama, Ho recounts the life of Muhammad al-Zahir, a man of the Hadrami family who traded and politically manoeuvred across the Indian Ocean. For Ho, al-Zahir represents the peaceful, productive and transnational behavior in the Muslim diaspora of the time (contrasting strongly with da Gama). To further his argument, Ho rushes forward in time to another tragic Hadrami lost in a diaspora produced by the arms of the west, Usama bin Laden. In contrast (and admittedly for poetic reasons), I will turn to an American representation of empire in board games, with *Labyrinth: The War on Terror 2001-?* (Runhke).

3. CASE STUDY: *LABYRINTH*

The two sides presented in this Anglo-American game are the Muslim Jihadists and the American Global War

on Terror. The back of the box explains, "One player takes the role of jihadists seeking to exploit world events and Islamic donations to spread fundamentalism. The other as the United States must neutralize terrorist cells while encouraging Muslim reform to cut off extremism at its roots" (*Labyrinth* 2011). To begin, it is important to note that while *Vasco da Gama* has 10 pages of rules written with lots of large pictures included, *Labyrinth* has two rulebooks with 16 and 24 pages, fewer and smaller pictures and much denser text. In addition, each of the 120 cards has its only unique rules, which are localized on the cards themselves. Given that it has at least five times the amount of explanatory text, it should be assumed that much of what I am going to say glosses over several rules which may be relevant, but would otherwise over-determine the argument. The following description should not be misunderstood as praise. The politics and ideologies in Runhke's work do not escape criticism (to say the least), but at least they do not elide or omit the matters of concern worth critiquing. For this reason, I will not offer the same kind of nuanced problematization found in the preceding case study, but offer *Labyrinth* as an alternative design approach to contrast *Vasco da Gama* against.

The United States player has multiple victory conditions which involve securing resources in the Middle East by instating pliant governments. Nearly all of the Middle Eastern and African countries represented contain a certain amount of resources (for instance, Saudi Arabia has three "Oil" and Turkey has two "Unspecified"). Each of these countries has a governance track, which can hold a marker that indicates whether the country is presently under Good Governance, Fair Governance, Poor Governance, or Islamist Rule. The game essentially asks the player to shift Poor and Fair governments upwards to Good, through the repeated use of dice rolls modified by the status of European nations. If you have positioned your government as "Hard" or "Soft" and the majority of the world holds the opposite view, it will make your die roll harder or impossible. Hard posture makes it possible to invade; soft posture makes it easier to keep prestige and global alignment up (thus granting an easier time to shift poor and fair governments up, but making it impossible to deal with Islamist Rule). If the country in question is receiving aid or is adjacent to a Good country, then the die roll will be easier. An important way to stop the U.S. from succeeding in its War of Ideas is for the Jihadist player to shift the alignments of European and Asian powers to the opposite of the U.S's, as well as to cut off aid to those countries. Finally, if the U.S. has high prestige, it is easier for them to wage their war of ideas, so the Jihadists take every opportunity to reduce that prestige by publicizing embarrassing events. To counteract this, the U.S. must actively stop terrorist cells and promote its own propaganda.

The Jihadist player wins by bringing six resources under Islamist Rule; by bringing U.S. prestige to 1 and having 15 countries at Poor or Islamist Rule; or, by detonating a nuclear weapon in the U.S. To bring countries to Poor governance, Jihadists must deploy their cells in countries and wage Minor Jihads. Once countries are at Poor governance, they may deploy five more cells than there are U.S. troops and wage a Major Jihad to bring countries to Islamist Rule. All of this requires funding, which they receive for successfully accomplishing plot actions through their cells in different countries. The funding received for plots is magnified by their distance from Muslim countries. For example, exploding a WMD in Iran will only increase funding by a modicum, but doing so in England will max it out.

In my experience playing Labyrinth, which is altogether too short to account for the hundreds of emergent instances and strategies made available by the system, two dynamics struck me. The first has to do with Hard and Soft positioning. The U.S. starts Hard, but wants to begin by waging wars of ideas. To do so, it is necessary to have European powers on your side (i.e. Hard) or for you to change the U.S.'s position to Soft. The problem is that, when testing a European power for its alignment (which occurs when it is under threat, or at the U.S.'s request), one must roll a die and on a 1-4 they are determined to be Soft, 5-6 and they are Hard. The simulation here makes an argument about the likelihood of a European power exerting military force. The alternative, changing U.S. alignment to Soft, is extremely costly in terms of resources. It is here then that the game makes what Ian Bogost calls a "procedural argument" (2). The game system is forwarding a position on how the world works by having players attempt to parse its constraints and affordances. One realizes that the U.S. must take advantage of its position as Hard (namely the ability to invade other nations) because of its starting resources and ideology of choice (the same is not the case in the variant "Call me Al" where an alternative history with Gore as president starts the U.S. as Soft). This double-edged sword becomes painfully clear to me when I play the Iraqi WMD card. Essentially, it allows me to break a rule and invade Iraq even though its government is not under Islamist Rule. In my mind, I will go in, force it to become an ally and a Poor government, and then spend a turn bringing it to Good governance so that I can go invade Pakistan, where my opponent is trying to acquire a nuclear arsenal. My opponent, with great savvy, instead of rejoining my assault with terrorist cells, simply involves European nations by performing minor plots in their areas. These nations show themselves as soft (remember 1-4 or 67% chance of them being soft when under threat). This means that I cannot force Iraq to change its government as quickly as I had hoped and end up staying there for the majority of the game, nearly forcing my loss.

It is then that I learn the second thing that *Labyrinth* teaches by virtue of its system and biases. Once Europe had been made extremely Soft by my opponent, it is worth spending resources to change the U.S.'s alignment to match it. I leave Iraq in Poor governance (you are only allowed to withdraw from a Regime Change if you are Soft), bring all my troops home, and with the abundance of resources that act produces, I turn the Gulf States in my favour. With that toe-hold, I change my alignment once more AND those of the other European states in order to re-enter the Middle East (where my opponent has had the time to spread Islamist Regimes) once more and invaded Pakistan and Iraq. One turn later, the game ends, my opponent fails a major Jihad in Saudi Arabia and I win. These efficient plays act as an argument for policy change as an important and opportunistic way to succeed at global politics and warfare. This seems to be mirrored in Ho's explanation of America as empire,

In the eyes of its citizens, the U.S. state now has a legitimate right to use

its overwhelming force against terrorists anywhere in the world, to replace states supporting them, but not to annex countries. In such a view, military contact with other nations is both unequal and impermanent. This is domination, but it is not colonialism. (Ho 239)

As America, it is important that I work hard to change governments to support my interests, not govern other nations directly. Equally important was the maintenance of my ability to enter and leave countries with military force as needed.

Of course, the game's separation of governance into the categories of Good, Fair, Poor and Islamic Rule immediately shocks the player, for it assumes that the worst form of government is Religious. And despite the designer note, "'Jihadists'… refer to the violent Islamic extremist militants (as Westerners and the militants themselves commonly do) and not to the world's many millions of peaceful, devout Muslims" (*Labyrinth* Rules of Play 2), the game is exhibits Islamophobia. It is certainly possible to interpret this Islamophobia as a portrayal of the United States' own fear, but there is no designer note accounting for as much. That said, the game remains thoroughly cynical of the U.S. and its attempts to control the Middle East; it minces no words in indicating where the Oil and American interests lie. *Labyrinth* draws a similar picture to that of Tim Mitchell, in his work *Carbon Democracy*, "American corporations would manage the production and marketing of Arabian oil, in exchange for Washington's help in suppressing labour militancy and other populist threats to the oligarchs Britain had helped bring to power" (415). The player is made explicitly aware at all times that the U.S. does what it needs to, if it involves convincing or coercing its enemies or its allies to get what it needs (i.e. Middle Eastern Oil). This game's complexity is made possible by its desire to simulate in detail. Certainly it abstracts the majority of the international war on terror, but it never pretends to be innocent. In sum, while it may be fair to claim that Ameritrash games go too far in simulating violence, Eurogames instead elect to flatly ignore the violent past of the Empires they have chosen to depict.

4. CONCLUSION

Vasco da Gama is a well-made game insofar as it offers multiple emergent properties that force players to strategize carefully and act tactically. That said, it does not develop these emergent properties into an argument about colonialism in the ways that *Labyrinth* does. This is in large part due to the Eurogame form and genre which produces a problematic recounting of history that is not produced by games like *Labyrinth.* This is not to say that games should become more complex, but that they should take into consideration what it is that they are abstracting. Of course, *Labyrinth* is hardly innocent in its depictions, but these are altogether different from the whitewashings of Eurogames. The literary theorist, Edward Said writes that "The Orient was viewed as if framed by the classroom, the criminal court, the prison, the illustrated manual. Orientalism, then, is knowledge of the Orient that places things Oriental in class, court, prison, or manual for scrutiny, study, judgment, discipline, or governing" (Said 41). The argument here is that board games contribute to Orientalism, shaping what the Middle East is to the West. While it has not been the intent to argue for or against this practice, it has been shown that there are different politically charged ways of representing transnational history in play. What is more, it is dangerous to laud game design based on form and function alone. Woods writes that the four criteria for the judges of the Spiel des Jahres are "1. Game concept (originality, playability, game value) 2. Rule structure (composition, clearness, comprehensibility) 3. Layout (box, board, rules) 4. Design (functionality, workmanship)" (51). Nowhere do we see things such as political justice or fair representation. The entire practice of Eurogame design seems to want to be as apolitical as it can, and in so doing becomes dangerously charged.

5. WORKS CITED

[1] Eley, Geoff. "The Unease of History: Settling Accounts with the East German Past."*History Workshop Journal*. 57.1 (2004): 175-201.

[2] Frasca, Gonzalo. 2003. "Simulation versus Narrative". In: Wolf, Mark J. P. and Perron, Bernard. *The Video Game Theory Reader*. New York, Routledge, p. 221- 235

[3] Ho, Engseng. "Empire through diasporic eyes: a view from the other boat". Comparative Studies in Society and History : an International Quarterly. Vol. 46, No. 2, 2004. pp. 210-246

[4] Mori, Paolo. *Vasco da Gama.* Rio Grande Games. 2009.

[5] Mitchell, Timothy. *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil*. London: Verso, 2011. Print.

[6] Runhke, Volko. *Labyrinth: The War on Terror 2001 -?*. GMT Games. 2011.

[7] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient.* London: Penguin Books, 1995.

[8] Woods, Stewart. Eurogames the design, culture and play of modern European board games. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Co. 2012.