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## МАГИЧЕСКИЙ КРУГ ИГР И ИХ УТОПИЧЕСКАЯ ЭПИСТЕМОЛОГИЯ

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматривается парадоксальный статус исторических и современных настольных игр как одновременно просто забавного развлечения, так и серьезного идеологического занятия. Используя метафору Йохана Хёйзинги об игре как «магическом круге», в статье рассматривается вопрос о том, как настольные игры преследуют противоречивые цели – пытаются и просто развлечь, и нейтрально и точно изобразить мир через правила и системы, и пронести некую идеологическую критику или педагогическую концепцию. В статье показано, что игры как вид искусства содержат и историческую, и формальную тенденцию к утопическим дискурсам. Педагогические и социальные амбиции игр, имплицитно содержащиеся в них, несут эти утопические дискурсы в себе. Пренебрежение этими структурно-содержательными аспектами игр является опасной ошибкой.

*Ключевые слова:* процедурная риторика, утопия, настольные игры, утопический дискурс, эпистемология игр.

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## THE MAGIC CIRCLE OF GAMES AND THEIR UTOPIAN EPISTEMOLOGY

**Abstract.** The article examines the paradoxical representation and self-representation of historical and contemporary games as both just entertaining fun, and also serious ideological business. Using Johan Huizinga's metaphor of the game as a "magic circle", the article looks at how games pursue the contradictory aims of entertainingly – but also neutrally, fairly and accurately – representing the world through rules and systems, while also delivering ideological critiques and pedagogical values? The article shows that games are intrinsically a utopian medium, historically designed with pedagogical and social ambitions ranging from the insidious to the subversive, arguing that neglecting these structural aspects of games is a dangerous mistake.

*Keywords:* procedural rhetoric, utopia, board games, utopian discourse, epistemology of games.

Games have become a significant contemporary medium in the unsailable and paradoxical position of being both seen as irrelevant entertainment, and as meaningful representations of reality. Consider the symbolic value of the recurring battles between human and artificial intelligences – why are these, by default, conducted through games, whether Chess, or Go or more recently, contemporary video games (as in the cases of Garry Kasparov vs. Deep Blue’s chess contest of 1996-1997, the Go games played by Ke Jie vs. Google’s DeepMind Alpha Go in 2017, or the much publicized defeat of 2018 *DotA 2* championship winners, team OG, by the OpenAI)? Why do we implicitly trust chess (or any game) as a valid measure of competition between a computer and a human? When a computer is worse than a human at telling a bird from a banana, or better than a human at diagnosing cancer, better at sorting data, or worse at comforting a child, both failure and success are measured in concrete, interpretable achievements, but what is concretely achieved when a computer is proven the better or worse at a game?

Mid-20<sup>th</sup> century game theorist Johan Huizinga claimed that games operate through the principle of a magic or ritual circle, consecrating an area of the world into a separate world-within-the-world, thus subordinating it to an order radically different from that normally governing the world beyond the circle:

Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots, isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart. Inside the play-ground an absolute and peculiar order reigns.”  
[Huizinga 1949: 10]

However, already before Huizinga’s time, games pursued the other major purpose of the “magic circle” elided by Huizinga – power. What the magician does within the circle is indeed within a temporary world, but also always involves a will to change the world outside the circle carried out through a microcosmic representation of it – as for instance, in Western ceremonial magic, where the circle itself is a representation of the entire cosmos, which the magician designates by naming four points in the circle as cardinal directions encompassing the whole of reality (c.f. Regardie’s *The Golden Dawn*, 1982 or Crowley’s *Magick: Liber ABA*, 1997). Similarly, when an AI beats a human, or when the local small-town sports team defeats their big city rival, it isn’t just about the joy of victory. With the ludic microcosm – the magic cir-

cle – there is always an expansive synecdoche at work, implicating the entire world beyond it, working to change it through representation alone.

Huizinga treats this representational will to power as arrested by the frivolous nature of all games – game conflict isn't serious, game consequences aren't real. That is what the rules of games are for: they protect everything within the magic circle from serious consequences like enmity and violence. However, the will to change the world outside the circle through the game or the ritual is utterly serious. When the fans of the small-town team cheer for their victory, they don't really want the other team to die or suffer injury, but they do want their team's victory to mean something, to represent a valid source of hope or possibility. When the magician damages an effigy of their nemesis within a magic circle, it is not because the circle's protection allows such a violent action, but in the hope that their nemesis will suffer actual harm outside the circle's boundary. One pretends that what happens in the circle doesn't matter (just a game, just an effigy), but also intensely desires and hopes that whatever happens in the circle, will then also happen in the whole world, where it *will* matter.

What allows games to claim to be both irrelevant virtual entertainment and true epistemologies of authentic reality, without running into the apparent problem in doing (or claiming to do) both at the same time? I believe that the answer lies in the form of epistemology intrinsic to games. Games describe the world through putting discrete rules together into cohesive systems, defining limits to possibility in order to accurately describe the boundaries of reality, whether breaking them or not. A game might allow you to fly, but for that flight to matter, the game also has to institute and enforce gravity. However, this descriptive effort becomes prescriptive when the resulting system is played with. In their game design textbook *Rules of Play*, Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman define play as “the free space of movement within a more rigid structure” [Salen and Zimmerman 2007: 7]. Play demands rigid limits which must be meticulously kept by the consent of all involved parties (even apparently unstructured and spontaneous children's games like “tag” or “hide-and-go-seek” rely on strict rules – e.g. you must acknowledge it when you've been tagged, and behave accordingly).

A game can be coherent measure for comparing a human against an AI, but only insofar as it can be imagined to as an organized synecdoche of the entire world. This imagining relies on first setting up an exact representation of the whole world (at least as far as a given game is concerned) and then allowing the entropic intervention of the human actor to disturb this representation. For example, chess acts as a universal synecdoche of war. Purified of all imbalance and chaos, the sides equal, it is an orderly microcosm of all human conflict. That is what allows us to imagine chess as an

appropriate arena to test an AI against a human, to evaluate the AI and the human as sovereign actors.

The tacit evidence of either actor's success or failure within the game offers strategies of success or failure outside it too, performing what games scholar Ian Bogost calls "procedural rhetoric" – the claims about the world made by games through rule mechanics and iterative processes alone: "procedural rhetoric for the practice of using processes persuasively, just as verbal rhetoric is the practice of using oratory persuasively and visual rhetoric is the practice of using images persuasively" [Bogost 2008: 125]. Bogost discusses procedural rhetoric as both an effective pedagogical tool and a dangerous ideological imposition – both purposeful and accidental. Such is the case with chess: to subvert the above example, chess is not actually an arena of equal and balanced sides (white has a measurable advantage by virtue of going first), and the verisimilitude of its representation of war is lacking. There is a glaring contradiction between how inadequately game rules and mechanics represent the world, or establish universality and authenticity, and the depth of conviction that their claims nevertheless provoke. Through procedural rhetoric, games make equally compelling and baseless assertions about reality, using their own representations as though they were evidence for exterior truths – the effigy in the magic circle, substituting for the real thing.

Huizinga sees games as intrinsically not serious, necessarily disconnected from any material interest, and certainly not aspiring to make actual changes in the world, or claims about reality:

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious", but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. [Huizinga 1949: 13]

At the same time, he notes the oddly conspiratorial character of gamers "It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means" [Huizinga 1949: 13]. Even though games can have no "material interest", gamers act as though they did, as though gaming achievements represented actual social or material capital. Huizinga goes on to characterize all games as either "a contest for something or a representation of something. These two functions can unite in such a way that the game 'represents' a contest, or else becomes a contest for the best representation of something" [Huizinga 1949: 13].

It is this part of Huizinga's assessment that most strongly resonates with Bogost's notion of procedural rhetoric, because in Huizinga's account, in the process of making a representation of the world, games introduce conflict and competition into the representation, even if it is not inherent or necessary to the system represented. For instance, a game trying to teach the location of international landmarks might introduce extraneous conflict by having those landmarks stolen and asking the players to adventure around the globe to find them and return them to their proper place – as in the plot of the iconic edugame *Where in the World is Carmen Sandiego?* (1985). Since certain strategies in any conflict that is modeled through rules are necessarily going to be optimal within those rules, the representation tilts from making what even the designer might imagine is a neutral description of the world, to an invested, loaded claim about it. This claim may be entirely unplanned, incredibly problematic or shocking, even to the designer.

For a key example, consider the much-publicized story of Lycerius, an individual who posted on a forum about his experience of playing a single game of *Sid Meier's Civilization II* for ten real years, and several thousand years past the games' internal end date of 2050. The story went viral, appearing in several major news outlets. Since *Civilization* games represent the progress of humanity from the stone age to the present moment, the player's choice to play several thousand years past the present moment, meant that game content, and specifically new technologies, had entirely run out. In *Civilization II*, each technology, from the Alphabet to Gunpowder to Nuclear Fission, comes with a short historical text and several pragmatic boons – for instance the ability to build libraries, or rifles, or nukes. The final limits of human discovery are represented by a few technologies – space flight, the cure for cancer etc. – and once those are researched, there are no more – just “Future Tech” which marginally inflates your in-game score without providing anything pragmatically useful. For Lycerius, as for the AIs in his game, there was nothing left to research, and nothing to build except weapons. Thus the world was in a constant state of war, with a yearly exchange of nuclear missiles and catastrophic climate change – and three world empires, in the middle of a two-millennia-long war – two of them were Fundamentalist theocracies, the remaining one (and the one controlled by Lycerius) was Communist [Frum 2012].

Obviously, when *Civilization II* designers made their game, they were not intending to tell their players that the inevitable future of humanity is endless warfare in a theocratic fundamentalist dystopia – but this conclusion, and Lycerius' game, is the inevitable result of their procedural rhetoric. *Civilization* games always model the horizontal progress of empire. To succeed, a player must necessarily leverage technological and economic superiority into military might, subjugating all other civilizations, until they

rule the world and win – through force or culture, or alternatively, become so technologically advanced that they conquer the stars. It is colonialism or bust, and the logical outcome of this colonialism is endless wars, because all involved parties must colonize each other to succeed.

Furthermore, as players of the game know (and as the forum advised the original poster) Fundamentalism is optimal within this procedural rhetoric too – because it exchanges scientific development for military and economic power, and at that point in the game there are no more discoveries left to research, so scientific development is useless. Games like *Civilization II* might pretend to only offer cathartic pleasure through representations of the world which are not meant to make serious epistemological or ontological claims about reality, and yet these claims still get made, and with vivid procedural rhetoric. Moreover, the oracular or predictive function of the game as a simulation is a powerfully persuasive force. Why else would major news outlets carry the story of one person’s video game experience, if not because the prophesized inevitability of ecological devastation under endless imperial war between odious ideologies seems like a highly plausible future? The game’s rhetoric seems deceptively neutral and therefore trustworthy. It directly shows the persuasive power of games to make informed and invested epistemological claims while simultaneously self-representing as neutral sources of unideological entertainment.

Huizinga is less interested in this persuasive power, and yet in the decades of Huizinga’s youth and in the preceding century, the most significant games, both in terms of influence and contemporary survival were specifically motivated by a prescriptive, or predictive, or critical, rather than cathartic desire. Children’s games in modernity used the ludic magic circle for both its protective function as a safe or unpretentious medium (“it only has to be fun!”), and as a covert site for pedagogy and insidiously teaching children good moral behavior.

The most significant games of modernity were associated with war gaming or kriegsspiel. Such war games developed within the Austro-Hungarian empire in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century as a new system for training military officers. These included seminal games by Hellwig of Brunswick (1780-1803) whose version used chess as a material source, and the Reiszwitz family, whose version involved a modular topographical gaming table, and became the basis for officer training in the Prussian army [Peterson 2012, Chapter 3] Such war games simulated a battlefield with two abstract sides and distinct forces separated into infantry, cavalry and artillery, and deployed across various terrain. Kriegsspiel modeled some things with an earnest effort at precision, including such aspects of reality disparities in mobility between cavalry and infantry, but neglecting factors like individual soldier psychology. The success of the kriegsspiel over more than forty

years as a training device in the Prussian army, whether real or only rumored in its efficacy, was consolidated in the public imaginary after the surprising string of military conquests carried out by Prussia in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The result was that war games were adopted by virtually every single Western army, as a basic part of officer training. After the 1870 triumph of the kriegsspiel-trained Prussian army over the French, war games took a ludic activity associated with childhood – playing with toy soldiers – and re-imagined it into a functional and effective pedagogy for a military machine.

In parallel to the adult seriousness of the kriegsspiel, a large class of boardgames for children appeared in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and proliferated throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, typically building on the archaic form of the race-track game, but contributing a moralizing supplement. Race-track games are the oldest form of games known to man, starting with *Senet* (c. 3100 BCE) and the *Royal Game of Ur* (c. 2600-2400 BCE). All such games involve moving representative pieces around a spaced track following a random number generator – usually dice. As early as in *Some Thought Concerning Education* (1693) John Locke proposed using games as pedagogical devices, writing “that Learning might be made a Play and Recreation to Children” [Locke 1989: 2008]. Several projects took up Locke’s proposal throughout the following century, notably John Wallis’ and Elizabeth Newbery’s *The New Game of Human Life* (1790), which still remains popular in a greatly altered form as the contemporary *Life* from the Milton Bradley corporation, showing off the resilience of the boardgame as a powerful vector for pedagogy.

*The New Game of Human Life* (1790) follows a race-track structure from infancy to old age, setting up exemplars of personal achievement and greatness – for instance the last square, representing “immortal age” is, in the original, represented with an image of Sir Isaac Newton. The apparent flaws of the *New Game of Human Life* as a pedagogical work are quite telling – the game is completely patriarchally fixated, including no apparent path for women (not even patriarchal markers of success like childbirth), even though presumably girls were as much an audience for the sort of moralizing entertainment promised by the game as boys. The entire teleology of the game is limited to male achievements in accordance with enlightenment values. These values are communicated through both the forward vector proposed by the race-track form, and through illustrations, typically showing, as in the above example, portraits of “great men of history” slotted as points in the player’s journey, and as explications of what they ought to aspire to achieve. In this regard, *The New Game of Human Life* has strong parallels to history painting, even a variant of it – displaying representations of idealized male exemplars in order to influence the audience and propose an overall shape to history, inviting players to enter it through the game. Its

flaws are telling of its ambitions – history painting was the highest form of painting precisely because it had ideological and pedagogical aspirations, and the game represented a uniquely distributable rhetorical vector throughout Enlightenment modernity – doing just what a history painting does, but through a form which is unabashedly popular and which tries to lure in and engage through base interest in the amusing.

The subversion of the kriegsspiel as a form begins in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as several radical projects adopt the war game as a vehicle for political critique, merging it with the children’s pedagogical board game, to teach insurrectionary strategies or revolutionary goals through the hybrid form that emerges. Elizabeth Magie’s *The Landlord’s game* (1903) is the most significant such subversive game. Magie took upon the race-track format of *The New Game of Human Life* (1790), and the numerous similar games published for children throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and reworked it putting a circle where there was traditionally a linear, if winding racetrack, and making the “finish line” instead the spot (called “Mother Earth” in the 1903 version) which renews the player’s monetary resources. She had an explicitly utopian goal – using the game to promote Henry George’s radical proposal of the Single Tax, advocated in *Progress and Poverty* (1879). The “Single Tax” called for the abolition of all existing taxes and their replacement with a single, but significant tax on land. Under the proposal, land near the city center or desirable areas would be taxed more, and all land ownership would be taxed extensively, but no income or business would be. The money raised by the tax was supposed to go towards the public good, and particularly the acquisition of the most desirable land (through the creation of public parks, universities, et al).

*The Landlord’s game* sought to model this principle, not only through its basic form, but through two variants published in her 1906 ruleset – one called “The Monarch of the World”, which began one player with all the territories already in their possession, while only the other players were allowed to build property and business on their land, splitting their profits with the Monopolist, and to collect money when passing the starting square [Magie 1903: 1]. The outcome to “Monarch” was by design inevitable – the monopolist won without ever being challenged by the other players, their every success and failure alike inevitably lining his pocket.

The second variant, “The Single Tax” was central to Magie’s utopian vision and was meant to be played after the players realized that “King of the World” was an unfair and unpleasant (and true to life) way to play. The “Single Tax” changed the rules, so that whenever players bought property, landed on a tax spot, or drew a card requiring them to pay a tax, they didn’t pay it back into the bank, but collected it in the center of the board, where it would be used to buy out the utilities, the railroads, turning the poor house



into a university (today “Free Parking”) and finally “Lord Blueblood’s estate” (in contemporary Monopoly boards called “Go to Jail”) into a public park. After being bought out all these squares became free and safe for the players, which had the effect of extending the game almost indefinitely, as players found large sections of the board comfortable to land on, even in late game, when a strip of spots with developments would otherwise deplete their resources quickly, thereby preventing either ruination or win states, as was Magie’s goal and agenda. The Single Tax rules could be implemented democratically – “by a vote of at least two of the players [...] to prove how the application of the Single Tax would benefit everybody by equalizing and opportunities and raising wages” [Magie 1906: 3]. Magie wanted the game to show that a society of equals, where no one would succeed by ruining another, could be achieved through the democratic implementation of the Single Tax, which her game sought to embody.

Paradoxical then, that when Charles Darrow copyrighted a variant of Magie’s game in 1933, passing it off as his own invention and publishing it, he did it under the version that not only excluded Magie’s utopian and dystopian (or rather normative-capitalist) variants, but explicitly represented the game as a celebration, rather than critique of capitalist land-ownership. Paradoxical too, that Magie’s variant has a perverse afterlife in a common house rule to *Monopoly*, which collects taxes and other fees in the center of the board, awarding them to the player who lands on the “free parking” spot – both continuing an aspect of Magie’s championing of socialist economic forms, and rewriting them as openly favoring individual vicissitude and every-man-for-himself libertarian consumerism – letting luck produce an arbitrary monopolist who then dominates all others, or occasionally rescuing a faltering businessman with a surprise cash infusion.

The central device for teaching revolutionary values in Magie’s game became a shadow of itself, reproduced unofficially and practiced as another every-man-for-himself signifier of capitalist competition encouraged by the marketed *Monopoly* game. Similarly, numerous modern games promise liberation, agency and a chance to either implement or re-evaluate the failing or failed utopian projects of modernism from the safety of their micro-cosmic representations within the ludic magic circle. Just the same, many undermine that goal and vision by repeatedly reproducing the very problems that doomed the represented modernist utopia in the first place.

The 1908 *Suffragetto*, by the Women’s Social and Political Union is a key example. *Suffragetto* represented a kriegsspiel targeted at training politically-minded young women for open conflict against the police. In *Suffragetto*, two players took the respective sides of the suffragettes and the police, the police attempting to stop the suffragettes from entering city hall by sending them to prison and storming Albert Hall, the suffragettes’ rallying

site, and the suffragettes attempting to storm city hall, and stop the police from taking over Albert Hall, by sending the cops to the hospital (using jiu-jitsu, as the rules specify) [WSPU 1917: 3].

*Suffragetto* represents the subversive synthesis of both the serious war game and pedagogical history game traditions – the game is simultaneously a safe pastime and a dangerous source of training, bracketed away from the domain of the politically precarious by the ludic lack of seriousness ascribed to games. *Suffragetto* explicitly relies on the irrelevance of games for the window of opportunity to teach tactics and instill a procedural rhetoric encouraging insurrection and violence against the authorities – it seems calculated to say and do and teach the things that a book could not, at least not without serious legal consequences for the writer.

The influence of the kriegsspiel is key as a formal feature here, as it is rare for a 19<sup>th</sup> century or early 20<sup>th</sup> century children's boardgame to completely reject the race-track. *Suffragetto* represents the space of the symbolic street between City Hall and Albert Hall and this space is gridded like in a traditional kriegsspiel to enable tactical maneuvering – making it possible to surround and flank the opposing forces, to move forward or back as needed. If pedagogical games like *Life* proposed a linear teleology of forward movement towards inevitable success, implicitly controlled by the vicissitude of fortune (as embodied in the dice), while the *Landlord's game* used the circular format of the board to represent cycles of social stability and instability caused by capitalist competition, *Suffragetto* made tactical and strategic choice the key to political victory. Presumably addressed to the younger generation, but likely played with by adult suffragettes as well, the game derails the alignment of the kriegsspiel with the official military war machine, re-routing the game into revolutionary struggle. Its rules use procedural rhetoric to make the players directly responsible for their own liberation, in a vivid departure from the linear, luck-based epistemologies of games like *Life*. At the same time, the format of the game is such that one of the players necessarily has to play the police, and the tactics learned are presumably just as useful for repression as for resistance. The rule set favors neither the suffragettes, nor the police, and doesn't persuade the player of either ideological position. The winner of *Suffragetto* doesn't win because their ideological position is valid, they win because dominated the board using violence properly, or lost the board using it poorly. Implicitly, despite its outward and intended message, *Suffragetto's* procedural rhetoric brings the authoritarian ideology of the kriegsspiel along with its rules and mechanics.

Less than a decade later, H.G. Wells' *Little Wars* (1913) claimed a similarly direct utopian goal – the cessation of all wars – and did so in a way that highlighted the problems of the utopian current in modernist games. Even in his introduction Wells represents the game as universal and

exclusionary at the same time: “Little Wars is the game of kings – for players in an inferior social position. It can be played by boys of every age from twelve to one hundred and fifty – and even later if the limbs remain sufficiently supple – by girls, of the better sort, and by a few rare and gifted women...” [Wells 1913: 3] The condescending extension of an invitation to the “girls of the better sort [and] a few rare and gifted women” is both remarkably offensive and surprisingly progressive, since the *kriegsspiel* was considered a masculine pastime, outside of outliers like *Suffragetto*. The progressive and transgressive tone is here matched by “the game of kings – for players in an inferior social position”, as though willfully expanding the normative association of the *kriegsspiel* with political and military power, to the disempowered player.

Wells again returns to the question of women later in the essay, when describing the invention of the game with several friends: “[we] set up a few obstacles on the floor, volumes of the *British Encyclopedia* and so forth, to make a Country, and moved these soldiers and guns about, one could have a rather good game, a kind of *kriegsspiel*... Primitive attempts to realize the dream were interrupted by a great rustle and chattering of lady visitors. They regarded the objects upon the floor with the empty disdain of their sex for all imaginative things” [Wells 1913: 7]. Wells’ tone is mostly ironic, drawing a hostile portrait of observing women in order to emphasize the comedy in grown men playing with their children’s toys: “It was an easy task for the head of the household to evict his offspring, annex [their toy collection] and set about planning a more realistic country. (I forget what became of the children)” [Wells 1913: 8]. Despite the irony, it reveals the problems within the modern postulation of games – games are simultaneously serious and not-serious, relying upon an allowance of a certain privilege which is also intrinsic to the genre. Games put you in a position of power within a fantasy that has a direct relation to reality – not only the one imagined as an utopian vision by Wells (a game for boys and girls to end war itself), but in its pragmatic realization (the men get to play, while the women get to work and mind the children). Wells’ main proposal – articulated in the conclusion after a prolonged account of the development of the game, its rules and a description of a battle fought using the rules – is quite ambitious, making the game the utopian culmination of the entire enlightenment project:

How much better is this amiable miniature than the Real Thing! Here is a homeopathic remedy for the imaginative strategist. Here is the premeditation, the thrill, the strain of accumulating victory or, disaster – and no smashed nor sanguinary bodies, no shattered fine buildings, nor devastated country sides, no petty cruelties, none of that awful universal boredom and embitterment, that tiresome delay

or stoppage or embarrassment of every gracious, bold, sweet, and charming thing, that we who are old enough to remember a real modern war know to be the reality of belligerence. This world is for ample living; we want security and freedom ; all of us in every country, except a few dull-witted, energetic bores, want to see the manhood of the world at something better than apeing the little lead toys our children buy in boxes. We want fine things made for mankind – splendid cities, open ways, more knowledge and power, and more and more and more, – and so I offer my game, for a particular as well as a general end ; and let us put this prancing monarch and that silly scare-monger, and these excitable "patriots," and those adventurers, and all the practitioners of Welt Politik, into one vast Temple of War, with cork carpets everywhere, and plenty of little trees and little houses to knock down, and cities and fortresses, and unlimited soldiers – tons, cellars-full, – and let them lead their own lives there away from us. My game is just as good as their game, and saner by reason of its size. Here is War, done down to rational proportions, and yet out of the way of mankind, even as our fathers turned human sacrifices into the eating of little images and symbolic mouthfuls [Wells 1913: 40]

The conclusion is paradoxical – the very childishness embraced by the author with what is initially a gendered self-deprecation – stealing their children’s toys to the disapproval of their wives – changes course here, and attacks real-world militarism for taking too seriously that which should be treated ludically: “apeing the little lead toys our children buy in boxes” [Wells 1913: 40]. *Little Wars* lays bare the paradox of games in modernity – they are a supplement that fulfills the terrible desires that otherwise threaten society – substituting the need for “human sacrifices” into the consumption of “little images and symbolic mouthfuls” that both curbs and naturalizes these excesses of violent desire. The irrelevance of the game is a crucial factor in its advantage over war – in this game, no one dies, but the pleasure of the strategic killing remains – it is having your cake and eating it too, and it is proposed as a universal, utopian solution – one that fails, but one that is urgently necessary, given that Wells’ diagnosis comes three years before the First World War, and is thus confirmed – without a substitution, the demand for “human sacrifices” only escalates.

It should be noted, that the figures upon which Well’s *Little Wars* relied were created by the British children’s toy manufacturer W. Britain and specifically involved toys representing Britain’s colonial forces. Wells’ displace-

ment of war doesn't remove colonialism or the overall trappings of British militarism, or patriarchal gender oppression, rather it brackets them in the magic circle of the game, where they are safe, or can be safe (in the sense of not producing actual bodies). Wells doesn't consider that the normalization of either British colonialism or of militarism as a universal libidinal urge (or universal to men, anyway – as women both are and aren't invited to play) as problems – instead he represents these desires and structures as diverted into the magic circle and thereby neutralized – for him, men intrinsically enjoy violence, and the only way to sociably resolve these libidinal investments is by satisfying them virtually, rather than through actual warfare.

Wells's *Little Wars* was barely popular for a very short time – after WWI, its popularity disappeared, along with the utopianism implicit in his hope that games should replace warfare. Paradoxically, the period immediately after WW2, one conventionally associated with the disenchantment with modernist utopianism and the beginning of postmodernism is, in games, characterized by a reverse move. Instead of disillusionment with games as pedagogical devices or utopian vectors, the period after WW2 is characterized by an explosion in the production of games – especially war-games representing specific aspects of the real world – either historical, material, or ideological.

Both in England and in the US, several variants of kriegsspiel are published soon after the war – some of the most notable by Charles S. Roberts, who founded the seminal and enormously influential “Avalon Game Company” in 1952, soon renaming it to “Avalon Hill”. Avalon Hill's earliest games include *Tactics* (1953) and *Tactics 2* (1958), *D-Day* (1961) and *Afrika Korps* (1963-64), and others in the same vein. These war games advertised realistic models of modern warfare and a streamlined and popularly accessible rule set, but already with an odd contamination from ideology – after all traditional kriegsspiel and Avalon Hill's first hits like the 1953 *Tactics* were depoliticized and represented an abstract battlefield typically split into the red and blue armies, or similar schemes. Conversely, Avalon Hill's *D-Day* (1961) which represented the eponymous invasion, and *Afrika Korps*, which simulated the North African campaign of Hitler's armies, all demanded that players to take specific and personal charge over the Allied and Axis forces. This must have seemed particularly immediate when it was published. One might expect that American or British veterans would be reluctant to pick up a game for themselves or their children, where one of the players had to be Hitler, and yet such games were quite popular – enough so to create a hobbyist subculture around them. The audience that sought these games no longer wanted the detachment characteristic of traditional kriegsspiel, where blue and red armies clashed in de-politicized abstraction, they wanted relevant historical truth and ideology woven into the already questionable realism of the kriegsspiel.

It was this desire, along with the safety of the ludic magic circle, that gave players license to play as Hitler, even seek victory over the Allied powers as Hitler less than ten years after the war, when the Nazi state was freshly remembered and rightly demonized.

This fantasy of historical truth and realism in games is pervasive and some war games in the genre reach for absurd limits of simulation. For instance, Richard Berg's 1979 *The Campaign for North Africa* not only tracks individual water rations for troops across the whole front, but includes a rule specifying that an extra ration of water needs to be given to the Italian troops to boil pasta, as per a supposed historical decree. While the author of the game has said that the rule was meant to be a joke, *Campaign* takes ten players 1500 hours to complete on average, and consists of actual calculations of logistics, so it is not clear who the joke is on [Winkie 2018]. *The Campaign for North Africa* itself should not be seen as typical, as Richard Berg made many more accessible war games, but it can be understood as the attempt to give form to a desire for a true ludic epistemology, one taken to a hyperbolic level. This desire consists of conflicting and equally intense fantasies of a true and convincing representation of historical reality, and for authentic agency within that representation, even or especially if it threatens that representation's fidelity to reality. The player desires a world that is both temporally and internally consistent, that has measured and tested rules, patterns and motives, precisely to introduce crises, alternative histories, wild scenarios, and ideological inconsistencies into it, thus accentuating their own agency and choices within the system.

In other words, it is not enough to play Hitler, or defeat Hitler in the game, but both Allies' and Axis' exact military and economic circumstances need to be precisely modeled, and be as historically accurate as possible, but only so as to make an ahistorical outcome – e.g. Hitler's total victory over the Allies – equally possible and thus making either resulting narrative and historical continuity all the more meaningful to the involved players. A game where Hitler inevitably loses is as dull as a game where Hitler inevitably wins – such games exist to produce resistance to the player's interest in living out history as it happened, or changing it. History in such games is always constructed as a potential divergence from historicity within the microcosm encircled by the game. It is this illusion of historicity and authenticity produced through friction between the player's will and the game's limits, that forms the basis of the conviction in the historical epistemologies produced by games.

The history shaped by game epistemologies feels real because it both is and is not in your control, just like real history. The verisimilitude of war and immersed investment here, is not achieved in a literary or cinematic fashion – e.g. by creating a compelling and identifiable protagonist, having them strug-

gle or suffer interestingly, provoking empathy. Instead war is represented by the total replacement of individual heroism with a detached obligation to track rations and logistics in spreadsheets, until the better logistician and manager wins. The game's implicit mission seems to be verisimilitude so intense, that it overcomes the obligations towards narrative interest altogether. The outcome approximates the actual boredom and stress of real-world military operations, thus successfully simulating the desired epistemological totality – the magic circle successfully surrounding the world itself.

Curiously, this tendency is not only not avant-garde or marginal to games in this genre, but appears to be a dominant and key formal development in other genres, as is especially apparent in contemporary Massive Multiplayer Games like *Eve Online*, where many players quite literally maintain the economic and industrial networks which other players rely upon for exciting space battles. It is the boring, and not the exciting, that is the most significant formal device through which games instill a sense of epistemological accuracy and authenticity. If a critical literary estrangement of war would directly confront the myth of war as a heroic enterprise through personal tragedies expressed by relatable individuals, the ludic estrangement of war instead challenges the myth of war as a heroic enterprise through administrative and dull routine. Strategy games make war into an exercise in resource management, and dehumanizing procedural logics – and the player is invited to fully master these dull and dehumanizing processes for a genuinely authentic experience of warfare.

This same formal strength extends beyond the war game: for instance, in Magie's game, the operative principle is not only the estrangement which removes the player from themselves and into the defamiliarized vantage point of a capitalist landowner and investor, as might a work of literature like F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Instead *The Landlord's Game* forces players to actually perform the rote profiteering operations of investment and loss, calculating, saving and investing, perhaps forcing financial ruin on their friends and loved ones, all to experience the full consequences of capitalism – at least in Magie's version.

Darrow's version reveals the flaw in this approach. Darrow's willful embrace of monopoly capitalism and land-speculation readily turns the game from a critique of the status quo, to its enthusiastic endorsement, through the mere elimination or change in a few mechanics. Games naturalize the systems they impose as a procedural training, they convince you that the optimal strategy in their simulation is the earnest truth of the world – this is the same issue that plagues *Suffragetto* – the tactical training it provides is as useful to the oppressors as to those fighting for freedom, and brings an authoritarian logic which substitutes the social complexity of political struggle with the simplicity of tactical violence.

The precision and accuracy that war games relied upon for appeal, became totally separate methods for representing history and ideology than conventional historical inquiry. Game epistemologies fixate on some elements over others, wrestling with this fixation, and supplementing it endlessly with unnecessary material as though in a futile effort to create that perfect representation of reality within which reality's greatest questions – always embodied in the struggle between world powers and ideologies in the various historical wargames – could be finally resolved, but inevitably on the battlefield, as opposed to anywhere else or in any other fashion.

The most glaring examples of games wrestling with this increasingly contradictory ideological position come from the Games Workshop's *Warhammer Fantasy* (1983) and *Warhammer 40,000* (1987) franchises. Originally launched as a means of selling miniatures for a fantasy kriegsspiel, and expanding to a much more popular and lucrative sci-fi version of the franchise, Warhammer is absolutely singular in its focus on representations of warfare (the tagline of *Warhammer 40K* is "In the grim darkness of the far future, there is only war!") – down to the removal of traditional kriegsspiel elements like logistics and supply lines, reducing the game to a pure military confrontation. Despite this raw focus, and despite the tagline promise of "...only war!" Warhammer and Warhammer 40k are historically characteristic for their immensely overwrought and overwritten universe.

Individual characters have multi-page-long descriptions of their personal history, which get renewed and developed in various releases. The geography of *Warhammer Fantasy* is well-defined and vaguely links up with earth. Race is intact both as a basic construct for organizing the armies, and in other peculiar ways – the Europeans are human (the game is made in England), Americans are evil elves, South Americans are Aztec dinosaur people, but good guys, etc. This epistemology directly reproduces highly racist colonial hierarchies but in a peculiar way that by design attempt equity, as the game cannot favor anyone – e.g. if European armies had a technological or military advantage over the South American dinosaurs, no one would play the dinosaur armies, or any other suboptimal armies, and that would be ruinous for the company selling them.

In direct echo of Wells' peculiar tone on gender, *Warhammer's* issues with women are even stranger – female models are virtually absent, wear chain-mail bikinis when they do appear, and the game lore takes great pains to variously exclude women from participating in warfare and thus history (in a world where there is "only war!" non-combatants might as well not exist at all). This is especially glaring with the various non-human races – for instance the aforementioned Aztec dinosaurs, or "Lizardmen" do not lay eggs as one might expect, but are rather born fully grown and all-man from "spawning pools". What is at stake in such problematic imaginings? What



do they contribute to a game that is otherwise and primarily a kriegsspiel, with flanking attacks, artillery strikes and the like? Why do players need to know for certain that none of their tiny ratmen or dinosaur-men are female? Nothing in the world makes this necessary, but it reveals that the kriegsspiel is a cup which only desires to hold one kind of libidinal energy – the violent kind – and yet repeatedly overflows with other kinds of desire – sexual, social, revolutionary, reactionary.

*Warhammer* sustains the modernist desire for a total representation – a whole world or whole of a particular problem encompassed by a game, juggling it with an equally modernist desire for experimental fidelity. Magie didn't only want to represent the entire economic system contemporary to her, she wanted playing *Landlord's Game* to let players experiment with alternative economic models, supplementing or even changing their understanding of their actual economic situation to eventually prompt them into political action. The ludic is just a lure for her – a way to intrigue the potential recruit into engaging with the utopian vector. Conversely, in *Warhammer* the ludic is instead utilized as an all-encompassing defense against looking too closely or critically at the representation that the game produces.

*Warhammer's* most problematic representations – its perverse exclusion of women from the world, its naturalization of colonial racial hierarchies through varying degrees of anthropomorphism directly aligning with proximity to fantasy-Europe – all fall under the protection of it being just a fantasy and “just a game”. This is a complete reversal: for Magie, the game mechanics are primary because they exist to force players take an inflected and structured look at the world around them, for *Warhammer*, the game mechanics are primary and thus justify and naturalize ignoring the recognizably offensive ideological forms of our world, even as they actively normalize them.

*Warhammer* reveals a crisis that drives all contemporary games – a conflicting impulse to flee into a zone of apolitical safety, and to bring into that zone of apolitical safety various unsafe ideological discourses, either in order to examine them with ironic detachment or due to earnest investment. This was most apparent during “Gamergate”, the violent expansion of the culture wars into gaming, that first drew mainstream notice to the power and prevalence of far-right online communities in 2014, a few years before these same communities produced a crop of politicians in both the US and Europe. The central premise of the far-right argument during Gamergate, advocated on numerous anonymous forums, but especially on the reddit forum “KotakuinAction”, (111,000+ subscribers as of 6/1/2019) was that “true gamers” just wanted to be left alone, but “Social Justice Warriors” like Anita Sarkeesian, or Zoe Quinn, or other women in gaming who drew attention to problematic, sexist, racist, totalitarian and violent aspects of gaming

culture (as in Sarkeesian's case) or simply had the audacity to exist and make conceptual games as a woman (as in Quinn's case), kept destroying their space of ludic safety. In effect, the "Gamergaters" justified the death and rape threats sent to the women they targeted, as a defense of their safe space of ludic pleasure. Their magic circle had no room for intruding political critiques or questions from the left. Simultaneously, Gamergaters completely refused to acknowledge that their own defense of patriarchal, sexist and racist norms was in itself a political choice aligned with far-right ideology. Their politics was apolitical and naturally belonged in gaming, all criticism of their politics was too political and thus didn't belong in the space of gaming.

The sheer fact that games themselves became such a significant site of cultural warfare is notable, but it is more notable that the defense articulated within Gamers Gate is identical to the ideological position of *Warhammer* – insisting that their games are apolitical and therefore safe ludic spaces, and therefore cannot be criticized for their explicit politicization in favor of oppressive discourses, which by design exclude some people from their safety. It is a nonsensical position, and yet an endemic one, key to the popularity of the medium and to its most significant and radical prospects, as well as in its most reactionary and problematic forms, but it needs to be confronted.

The enormous explosion in gaming that began soon after the Second World War and radically expanded in the 21<sup>st</sup> century highlights that many games continue this modernist legacy. Games simultaneously evoke the magic circle to ward themselves from any moral or ethical liability for actions taking place within them, and purposefully perform critical experiments with empathy, morality, ethics and compromised utopian projects and ideologies, typically by realizing them in their most dystopian or horrifying expression. Games in modernity have explicitly pursued pedagogical projects aimed ultimately at instilling utopia, and that the collapse of utopian thinking associated with postmodernity, only encouraged the gamification of utopian discourse, precisely because games have a historical mandate to simultaneously make descriptive and prescriptive claims on reality, even as they insist upon their own irrelevance – the ideological magic circle of the "just a game" and the safety it promises, represses the negative associations utopianism evokes in postmodernity, while still retaining and harnessing the immense untapped potential of both radical and reactionary forces.

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