P. Harrigan, M.G. Kirschenbaum (eds.), Zones of Control. Perspectives on Wargaming [The MIT Press, 2016]

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Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum (eds.), *Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2016.

A wargame is a game that "realistically" simulates a military conflict of any size and length, from a one afternoon fighting between infantry platoons in an area of a few square miles to a global war lasting several years such as the First or Second World War. The majority of wargames simulate real conflicts, from Alexander the Great's campaigns to the present war in Afghanistan, but some of them depict "future" wars, such as the games imagining a clash between NATO and the Warsaw Pact that were quite popular in the seventies and eighties (after the fall of the Berlin Wall these games became largely outmoded). A wargame can even simulate a conflict with no specific time and space context, like *Tactics II* (1958), one of the very first recreational wargames ever released, which depicts the struggle between two non-historical twenty century-style armies called Red and Blue. As I said, in order to label a game as a wargame, what counts is realism, the fact that the game portrays war in a detailed and plausible way – different kinds of units (infantry, artillery, tanks, paratroopers, partisans, etc.) with different capabilities, moving on a map with a specific geography (mountains, woods, swamps, rivers) that has an impact both on movement and fighting. Games such as *Risk* (1959), *Diplomacy* (1959), or *Stratego* (1961), albeit they played a role in the birth of the wargame industry, are not considered wargames because their simulation of war is too abstract, too chess-like. The majority of wargames have a mapboard where units – counters of different colors representing the opposing armies – move on a hexagon grid (*Tactics II* had a mapboard divided into squares, like a chessboard; the very first commercial game having an hexagon map was *Gettysburg*, 1961). In many wargames, units – or at least some of them – exert a so-called Zone of Control (ZOC) on the six hexagons surrounding the hexagon the unit is occupying. For example, units must stop when entering an enemy ZOC. Or, ZOCs cut enemy supply lines. So, for the title of their huge collection of essays (the volume counts 806 pages), editors Pat Harrigan and Matthew G. Kirschenbaum chose a real key concept in wargaming, something that is at the very core of this ludic universe. But at the same time, a title such as *Zones of Control*

evokes the image of moving boundaries, of contesting domains. And this is precisely what this huge book deals with.

Zones of Control: Perspectives on Wargaming – clearly bound for becoming an indispensable reference book in the field – is divided into nine sections, each one addressing a specific topic. The authors are both game designers and scholars from a variety of academic fields, raging military history to visual culture. Every section has an opening essay which broadly addresses the issue, followed by shorter essays focusing on specific questions. Inevitably, the first section of the book is devoted to history – where and when wargame was born and how it evolved. The following eight sections address various problems, from game design to wargame as an academic instrument, to wargames in literature. So, reading (or skipping through) the book, we go from essays on the problem of space scale and map designing to an essay on Roberto Bolaño's posthumous novel *The Third Reich*, inspired by one of the most successful wargames ever published, *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich* (1974) – the essay is written by the very designer of the game, John Prados. As I said, the various sections address various questions but they are not insulated from one another. Going from one section to the other, we find a series of recurring dialectical tensions.

First of all, there is the opposition between recreational and "serious" wargames. The industry of commercial wargames was born, in the United States, between the late fifties and the early sixties, thanks to the initiative of Avalon Hill, a company based in Baltimore, which published all the above mentioned wargames and dominated the market till the nineties. The heyday of wargames were the seventies and eighties, and Avalon Hill's main competitor was New York based SPI, which went bankrupt in 1982. But wargame was born well before Avalon Hills' *Tactics II* and *Gettysburg*. The idea of "realistically" simulating war on paper was developed by Prussian officers in the early nineteenth century. The so-called *Kriegsspiel* was not a recreational game, but a conceptual tool used by the Prussian – and then German – general staff to study past campaigns and prepare the next one. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, many other militaries around the world use wargames to train their officers and devise their plans. Also some think tanks used wargames to study military and political conflicts. RAND Corporation, an American think tank connected to the US armed forces, played a

key role in planning the Vietnam war, and several of its suggestions were inspired by its wargames, which probably used an hexagon grid before Avalon Hill's games. Considering the disastrous outcome of the Vietnam war for the United States, this is not exactly something in favor of wargame for military planning.

Another dichotomy that runs through the entire book is that between analog and computer wargames, in connection with the dialectics between recreational and "serious" wargames, because the military immediately started to use computers for its simulations. The decline of popularity of wargames in the eighties and more acutely in the nineties is largely linked to the competition with other kinds of games. The first strong competitor, fantasy role-playing, was a spin-off of wargame itself. The very first role-playing, *Dungeons & Dragons* (1974), was the evolution of a Medieval miniature wargame rulebook, *Chainmail* (1971), which included rules about sorcery and magic[1]. While becoming more and more accurate in their simulation of war, wargames became less and less playable. *Rise and Decline of the Third Reich* is a wonderful game, but its rules – a 55 page booklet – are complicated. Mastering them is like passing an exam at Law School. And it is time-consuming. To play the entire war, you need a couple of days. The game include shorter scenarios, but playing the entire conflict, from the invasion of Poland to the battle of Berlin, is much more fascinating. In my teens and early twenties I was an avid wargamer, but I had to stop playing when I got to the university. As a Ph.D. student forced to publish or perish, I could not afford to "waste" so much time (after a twenty year pause, being an associate professor with quite a long bibliography, I am happily going back to the hobby – once a wargamer always a wargamer). It is self evident that role-playing, which is relatively "light" as rules are concerned, as well as videogames posed a serious threat to wargames. If this hobby is still alive it is largely thanks to card-driven wargames, introduced in the mid nineties, the first card-driven wargame being *We the People*, designed by Mark Herman and published by Avalon Hill in 1994, exactly when I was dropping out of wargaming. From this point of view, this book, which as a whole I consider really excellent, was a little bit disappointing to me, because there is not a chapter specifically devoted to the relationship between "traditional" and card-driven wargames, but maybe it is my fault. As I said, I am a "born again wargamer", and I am trying to catch up with this thrilling novelty of card-driven

wargame, that for all the others is not a novelty at all. In card-driven wargames, players can move their units and fight according to the cards they have. The cards – visually and conceptually similar to those used in card games like *Magic* (1993) – have absorbed part of the rules. Card-driven wargames' rulebooks are usually shorter than those of "traditional" wargames. These games are not just less complex (even though mastering the cards is still a difficult task), but they are also less time-consuming. It is no accident that one of the most popular card-driven wargames, *Twilight Struggle* (2005) – more correctly, a war and political game –, allows you to play the entire Cold War, from 1945 to 1989, in just three hours.

But beside the recent fortune of card-driven wargames, it is self evident that in the digital age, board wargames represent a tiny niche. War simulation immediately passed to videogames. First person shooter games have been clearly inspired by tactical wargames, such as SPI's *Sniper!* (1973) or Avalon Hill's *Squad Leader* (1977). At the same time, board wargames were "literary translated" onto computer screens, with hexagons and counters. So, the question is, did computers changed the design and play mechanics of wargames? One of the most interesting essays of the book, tellingly titled *The Unfulfilled Promise of Digital Wargames*, by Greg Costikyan, is adamant in saying no. According to Costikyan, who started as a board game designer at SPI and then switched to computer games, digital wargames could have solved some of the main problems of analog wargames. For example, one of the great flaws of wargames as "realistic simulations" is the players' omniscience. Sitting before the map, the player has a totally precise knowledge of enemy forces' location and strength. It is something that no general ever experienced on the battlefield, not even in the age of aerial reconnaissance and satellites. It is what military scholars call "the fog of war". There have been attempts to simulate the fog of war on mapboards. In the so-called block wargame, units are not cardboard two-dimensional counters but cubes, where the information – unit's size and strength – are on the face hidden to the other player (it is a concept clearly derived from *Stratego*), so you can spot the enemy unit on the map, but you can't say if it is a battalion of untrained conscripts or a division of experienced and well armed professional soldiers. But of course computers could simulate the fog of war in much more complex and efficient ways. And we can say the same thing about other key elements of wargames,

such as space and movement on the map. According to Costikyan software houses refused to even address these problems. They did not want to invest in novel game styles, and were satisfied with cartoonish FPS games and real-time strategy games much less sophisticated and realistic than analog wargames.

Another question that systematically surfaces in the different sections of the book is that of the "political" – in the broader meaning of the word – connotation of wargaming. In the introduction, the editors openly address the problem: "Much can and should be written on race and nationality in wargaming, but the weight of the hobby's Anglo-American heritage has so far greatly limited this" (page XXIII). The editors do not mention it, but it is self evident that a third key concept is at stake here: gender. Wargaming used to be, and still largely is, a predominantly male hobby, both as players and designers are concerned. Even sci-fi novelist and utopian socialist Herbert George Wells, who was a strong supporter of women's suffrage, in his *Little Wars* (1913), one of the very first rulebooks for miniature wargame ever published, is quite suspicious toward women players. In the opening page, Wells writes that the game he devised is meant for «boys from twelve years of age to one hundred and fifty and for that more intelligent sort of girls who like boys' games and books». For today's standard, this is a very politically incorrect sentence. Moreover, as we have seen, wargaming has always been strongly connected to the military establishment. So, wargame is an activity mainly for white men, some of them in uniform. From this perspective, there is some kind of a political problem with this hobby, unless you belong to the Illinois Nazi Party, or at least support Donald Trump.

One of the explicit goals of *Zones of Control* is going beyond wargame as a white men's club. And the goal has been achieved. Some of the most complex and stimulating essays of the collection were written by people who do not belong to the club, such as Japanese game designer Tetsuya Nakamura and transgender game designer Rachel/Bowen Simmons. But still, the problem is there. No matter how many essays we can read and write on gender and wargame, or on un-militaristic, pacifist, "philosophical" games, such as the wargame designed by Guy Debord, on which *Zones of Control* offers a very articulated essay that elegantly mixes Marxism with Clausewitz's thinking[2], wargame remains an activity with "a dark side". Playing at war is like watching a war

movie. Even in anti-war movies there are scenes that inevitably thrill the audience. Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* is no doubt a film against the American intervention in Vietnam, but the helicopters' attack sequence, with Wagner's soundtrack, makes war look beautiful. It's the devil's beauty. But if war were not "beautiful", if it were not somehow fascinating, at least for some people, the history of the human race would have been very different. As I already said, in my teens I was an avid wargamer, but I was also a member of the youth organization of the Italian Communist Party, and I was fully aware of the contradiction between these two things. I rarely mentioned my hobby to my comrades. And at the same time, I never joined a wargame club, because those places were crowded with right-wingers. In *Little Wars*, Wells tries to soothe his socialist conscience saying that his game can help people to grasp the horrors of war. His message goes something like: "Do not make war but play it". It is more or less the same position expressed by Brian Train and Volko Ruhnke at the end of their essay *Chess, Go, and Vietnam: Gaming Modern Insurgency*. Train and Ruhnke are game designers specialized in counterinsurgency and asymmetric wars: conflicts where politics, economics and diplomacy are as much important as the fighting on the field. They are bright game designers and their essay is definitely very interesting, but when they bump into the "devil's beauty" question they cannot help playing the political correctness card. They complain about the fact that wargames on World War Two assemble "detailed and complete orders of battle for the Axis forces, including units of the Einsatzgruppen and lawless SS brigades and divisions" (page 515). First of all, at least to my knowledge, there is no game portraying the Einsatzgruppen, for the simple reason that these were not units meant for fighting on the frontlines. Their only goal was exterminating the Jewish population of the Soviet Union. As far as the SS brigades and divisions are concerned, Train and Ruhnke are referring to the Waffen-SS, i.e. the military branch of the SS. These were military units that fought alongside the regular German Army. Of course their behavior toward the Russian population and the Soviet prisoners was utterly brutal, but in that respect there was not much difference with the regular Army. Calling the SS "lawless" is ludicrous, because in the context of the Third Reich political and judicial system, the SS were the Law. Of course, the Third Reich was a rogue state, but the problem is not just the SS organization per se, but the entire body of the totalitarian state.

So, one either does not play wargames on World War Two, which as historical simulations need the presence of the Waffen-SS units, or tries to cope with the devil's beauty. It might be argued that the vast majority of wargamers, even liberal wargamers such as myself, prefer playing the Nazis invading Russia than playing the United Nations trying to stop world hunger. It is exactly what Roberto Bolaño's novel is about. Some political correctness make-up will not solve this contradiction.

Giaime Alonge

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[1] Miniature wargaming was born in late-Victorian England and is sort of a cousin of board wargaming. *Zones of Control* includes several references and a couple of chapters strictly devoted to miniature wargames.

[2] I found Alexander R. Galloway's essay *Debord's Nostalgic Algorithm* really disturbing. In the opening page, he talks about the kidnapping and killing of Aldo Moro, the Italian prime minister assassinated by the Red Brigades in 1978. Galloway writes: "During that time [i.e. his detention], Moro appealed to the Christian Democrats to acquiesce and negotiate with what both the newspapers and government officials alike called terrorists" (page 371). I suppose that prof. Galloway just does not know what he is writing about. The Red Brigades kidnapped, wounded and killed dozens of people. They used intimidation and assassination as tools to achieve a political goal. This sort of tactics is universally called "terrorism".