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**An Interview with Francisco Ortega, Creator of *Crossing the Bridge*, *Observance: The Board Game*, and *H1-B: The Board Game***

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## **Reconstruction Vol. 12, No. 2**

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### **An Interview with Francisco Ortega, Creator of *Crossing the Bridge*, *Observance: The Board Game*, and *H1-B: The Board Game* / Marc Ouellette and Jason Thompson**

Q: Thanks for agreeing to this interview. I remember meeting you at the 2010 Southwest Texas PCA/ACA conference. I was one of the first people to win at your board game (the final last chance roll went my way) during the evening of play at the Flying Star, in Albuquerque. When Jason and I thought about possible contributors to this issue, your game and your project came to mind. So, we would like to invite you to share anything materials you are able to in this forum, but also we would like to interview you about the game, the project, and its outcomes.

A: Of course I remember you—you were very excited to win! Great hearing from you and I really appreciate your offer—what do you say if we start with showing you the website related to the games I've designed? Here it is: <http://ludoztli.com/>

Q: Thanks. My first question is regarding Frasca's idea of simulation and whether or not games are a suitable venue for making a political point. He's a little bit pessimistic. What is your take?

A: Ohhhhh—ho ho ho—right to the point. I love this question. I feel that what Gonzalo Frasca is missing is the understanding that games ARE political and used as political tools...say, an indirect form of propaganda. They are, after all, intellectual opinions presented in a peculiar medium.

Let me give you an example. In the late 1800, there were a series of board games used as propaganda. There was the Schley at Santiago Bay and the famous Roosevelt at San Juan, both considered patriotic games that described recent activities in the Spanish-American War, and while educating, they glorified recent heroes. The games have a simple structure of "trivia" and they are basically "who gets there first" games, still, the reason for these games was to keep a consistent interest of affairs and a simplification of "facts" to show one side of the story, a convenient one.

Yes, I agree with Frasca that games are created with a specific weight towards an idea—I call these "this is what it feels like" games because you are exposed to a specific topic in a specific situation (usually the extreme aspect of an issue), and it is hard to give the audience an option, because the intention of the game is already described in the subject. I can remember many Internet games that were coming out with this dynamic while I was writing the dissertation, including one of his; I believe it was *September 12*. There is one in particular that grabbed my attention, *Darfur is Dying*, about this little girl trying to get water for her family while hiding from Janjaweed militiamen. I believe it was even sponsored by UNESCO. There was another one called the *McDonald Video Game* (<http://www.mcvideogame.com/>). What all these games had in common was that, no matter how much skill you might have or could develop, you were going to lose...it was part of the game, almost like a bad joke. A designer, somewhere, was laughing their lungs out because while you were trying to be a successful player, the design of the game was for you to lose..What was the point then? I might say: To be exposed to the topic. Period.

The games were biased, unilateral, morbid, and after a while it just falls from your radar because once the point is made, you do not return to it. Why do you want to be part of the same joke over and over again? You know you cannot win, so why bother? These games expressed a political view, but they lacked the flavor of what a game should be. They are ludic, of course, because of the "interactive element," but they lack that extra content that makes a game feel like a game. I mean, they were challenging, but there was no reward. The intention of the game turns it into a billboard, web-advertising, a declaration in the form of a game. At some point no different from the "shoot the duck and win an iPod" banner or the "click on the belly and reduce your weight" scheme. So these are the issues that Frasca is referring to, and I encountered all of them while in the process of research and development, but I reached an advantageous conclusion.

We could go back to the idea of the Spanish-American War propaganda games that I mentioned at the beginning. How much fun do you think those games were? How challenging? As I mentioned they were nothing more than trivia games, about how much you knew about the events, but not about your opinion. You could move from A to Z depending on your knowledge, but that had nothing to do with your perception about the way the war was going. The game did not change: it was a straight line, no different from Candy Land or The Game of the Goose. So, how to jump to the next level?

When we are presented with the challenge of making a political game two things come to the table: how much do we talk about the desired issues, and how much do we make it a game? It is a delicate balance that is not easily achieved. When I was working on my games I had a table of issues that needed to be addressed, and the constant struggle was to include all those details into a game format. I could have made an epic game that had insightful details, but it would require a complicated game structure that would not appeal to the common player. I also had to challenge what I knew about game mechanisms to create something beyond the "who gets there first" games that can change topics easily but do not offer any incentive to the player. At the same time, my game had to say what I needed to say.

When I presented my games in the International Board Game symposium in 2008, colleagues inquired about my game H1-B Visa: The Board Game by wondering why so many issues were excluded. People began talking about their own experiences with immigration and began to suggest details that I could include. Eventually I mentioned that, although there are many things that had been omitted, the core of the issue was present, and details beyond a specific point disrupted the game experience and its playability. They agreed. Still, something important happened: The talk about the game brought insightful situations from each of the members. They were discussing politics through the medium. The medium became the catalyst that triggered their personal experiences, and these in turn led the members to interrogate the game. In this case the game was successful.

I understand that in his comments, Frasca is thinking directly about the topic and the applications in the game's mechanisms and game's dynamic. Probably because of my background in graphic design, I see the potential of games from all angles, starting with the packaging, the presentation. I understand that this goes beyond simulation, but as I mentioned, the game to me is the whole package experience, not only the playability.

Q: Wow, what a great answer, Francisco. I wonder about the politics of your games and forcing participants to take sides. Of course, any FPS makes the player take sides immediately, but do you feel that a game with an obvious political position will be treated differently?

A: Let me give you another example. The views displayed by the media are political: What we read, the art we see, what we eat (Hail the all mighty hotdog and freedom fries!) and what we play. Heck, do you remember what the active war zone was during the last years of the cold war? The hockey arena! Defeating the USSR in hockey was all that mattered to triumph over communism. But apart from that, how culture evolves, and how things are viewed will be reflected in the games we play. I have a healthy collection of board games, and in the process of collecting I've noticed how the packages change over time. For example, I have a very old box of Operation. On the cover you see two white kids, two white doctors, over a white patient. There is even an older box, I am very sure of it, where one of the doctors is smoking on top of the patient. All those details form a structure of the game: who is the game for, what is expected of the player, who belongs in this arena, and who does not. I have a newer box of the same game, where you will see the inclusion of a black kid and for the

longest time the cigarette has been removed. Why? Because of the political implications this brings.

While working on the dissertation I was interviewed about games, and I mentioned to the reporter that, similar to any media, there is a short representation of "multiculturalism" in games, not only visual representation, but also cultural substance. I mean, I do not want a Tex-Mex version of Operation. I do not want a Pancho Lopez in the operating table, but rather, I want games that speak to my culture.

Marc, do you know there are NO games from Mexico—there are NO board games that we can call our own? All the games that we have are delegated to us, from the U.S. It is a political issue. There is a political influence that translates into a cultural influence. By influencing the basic expressions in culture you create an assimilation that depends on external forces, political forces. If you do not have anything that you can call your own, then you depend on others to tell you who you are. If that is not political, then I do not know what it is.

I want a game that talks about me. I do not want a game set in Atlanta that has to do with real estate domination...that does not speak to me. I play it because I was told to play it. I also want to see my culture in the game: my skin color, my customs, not a sinking naval boat the rest of my life. A political game can easily be a game about my city, my border, people that I know, not people who live in a mansion looking for a killer. Representation, a fair representation, is also politics.

Finally, I think that, although we can design a game with a political content expecting it will be used in a specific way, at the end the user, the player, is the one that needs to connect the dots... and they might not be the correct dots, or the dots we expected. The game is the medium that hopefully will take a life of its own through playability.

The intention of the political game is to talk about a saturated issue in another way to keep the topic on the table and not let it fade. I was aware of the saturation of immigration in the media, and because of that saturation people go blind. So, give them a little participation through the game and see what happens. If the game makes people talk once more, then it has been a success.

Q: I'm struck by the issue of stereotypical and bad translations of Anglo/American games. That's an issue for French Canadians, too: we're told that our culture is nonexistent or inauthentic because it's just a language. While this can be seen as the dark underbelly of translation, it strikes me that pedagogy might be seen as a bright side. Could you talk about the simulation as pedagogy and how it relates to your games?

A: Sometimes it is hard to come back to these ideas because I was never able to teach any of my findings. The structure in our program does not allow the development of new classes in this way, and much of my findings remained comments to students and observations from game sessions. But what I can tell you is that H1-B Visa: The Board Game created two reactions: the first was catharsis, the experience of being either an

illegal or being an authority, and this generated an explosion of comments. The second reaction concerned pedagogy in the sense of player exposure to a topic known but not experienced: pedagogy beyond sensationalist TV or media, pedagogy in the player delving into the game's design and representation. I got a lot of questions like: do people really smuggle electronics into Mexico? Do you really need to have those documents to get your legal papers? Are the stories from the characters true? And my favorite one: this game is getting so crowded with cars, you should change the rules to make it move faster. Does it get like this in real life? All of these questions are answered with YES. This is a culture that people do not know, unless they live in it. As a person that had to cross the border every day to go to school or work, I can tell you that it is frustrating to spend 2 to 3 hours waiting in line. You develop a lifestyle that most people would never have to experience. The only comparison that I can make is living in California where people have to commute long distances every day in very crowded freeways. Q: It strikes me that the games are embedded with many idiosyncrasies of border life that educate. They are not practical skills, but the games expose in a non-invasive format a culture that in many cases has been demonized by media. The games say: these people exist, they are real, and this is how they live.

A: I wish I could make a game that educates on "dodging a bullet while waiting on the tortilla line," "avoid getting kidnapped," or "how to evade torture": those skills could be better served.

Q: Your answer makes me wonder: is the fact that you made your project in and through games an act of resistance or a commentary in and of itself?

A: They are commentaries. I made the first game, *Crossing the Bridge*, as a way of showing people how frustrating it is to wait in line for hours while life just passes by. My first players gave up pretty quickly. I eventually added features to make it more playable. But originally it was a joke on my part. I wanted to see people suffer, the same way I was suffering every day, trying to cross the bridge. I came up with the idea soon after 9/11 when the crossing lines increased overnight from 45 minutes to 3 hours or more. A lot of people lost their cars those first years because cars could not take the abuse of being there day after day—summers were terrible.

Q: Of course making the game tactile (more so than a dual shock controller if you ask me) and social (or anti-social, as the case may be) makes a difference, too.

A: Back then I was a student of Rafael Fajardo. In retrospect I understand that he, not native to the region, but a bicultural individual himself, and smart, had an interesting perspective on the border phenomenon. He talked about the border in ways I never heard before; he applied his ideas on visual projects in unique ways. It is around this time that he came up with the video games *Crosser* and *La Migra*.

As much influence those games had in me, I still felt that the screen/monitor was a division that alienated the issues from the person.

In other words, when we see disaster on the news, we do not associate it—completely—with reality...because it may not be happening to us, because it may show people that we do not know, because it may happen far away. My answer to that was to create a more tangible way of representation: board games. Why board games? Because it is in front of you, because there is interaction with the object and with other people (helping you or hindering you), because the topic generates conversation in-situ, and because it is a "happening," where things will not be repeated. New outcomes will generate new questions.

Q: Your security people, though, as NPCs are pretty much mindless, numb automatons. Does that characterize the government for you—there are rules, we must mindlessly follow them because there are rules?

A: Yes, the use of authoritative characters moving consistently and limited by their path, represent the protocol infused by law, work standards, and institutionalization. A lot of people are able to penetrate the border because you have two forces that play with different sets of rules. On one side you have the immigration officers limited by law, human rights, job schedules, salaries, etc. On the other you have a group that has no defined rules, no schedule, and no defined ethics or techniques. (It's strange to say, but this is exactly how the US won its independence: the British army had so many protocols that it was not equipped to fight the continental armies and deliberately ignored protocols to gain advantage—that, and those red uniforms were a pretty easy target...ha!) But, as in any game, there is a balancing point: group one has comfort, technology, resources, knows the terrain, and has training. Group two lacks all these but is large in numbers. Acknowledging and considering all these points (basically doing your homework and knowing the culture) reveals how these two teams are perfect for a board game—simplifying the most characteristic components and representing them in the most basic form.

Later, I acknowledge that, in some way, by having the automaton element (the officers), I was reacting to the influence that ATARI games inflicted on me. In some strange way I am making real what once was digital. I am using simple mathematics to mimic complicated logarithms and have additional characters in play without having additional players to take care of them—a very neat result.

Q: There's something of a rationale and an outcome simultaneously at work, isn't there? Here, I'm clearly seeing Foucault in your work. Am I imposing?

A: I think that when we touch on issues of power and control, there is an association to Foucault. If we take it a little bit further, there is a strong battle of sexes at play, a discourse of genders, if you like. A feminine force that feels weak and victimized, and a male force taking control. I think there is a weakness in this approach. Because there is much to think about in relation to whom is the victim in these games. Is there a victim? If the rationale is "poor immigrants, they just want an opportunity" and the outcome is "they succeeded" (talking about the game), then the game is only weighted toward one end.

What if we say, "Poor Mexico is being invaded by smuggled merchandise from the United states," is that a valid expression? Would players see it that way? The rationale comes from the baggage that the player brings and the outcome might or might not gratify them. Because there is a conclusion in the games and an exposure to options that might or not happen, the victim can change positions very quickly. Is the player the victim? Is the territory the victim? Are the characters the victims? Or is time the antagonist? The dice? Luck?

To me, the idea in the games—the "WHY" I created the games—is the exposure; I really do not care about either side winning. But if the outcome of the game makes people acknowledge what it really means, what would be the real implications of the actions that just take place in real life...what if we capture all immigrants? What if we transform drug smuggling into a valid merchandise exchange technique? If the player takes any additional understanding of border-life with them, then I've done my part.

Q: Brilliant! Just, brilliant. I want to ask more questions, but I think I'll stop myself now. I hope you enjoyed the process so far. Thanks so much for your generosity, Francisco.

A: Thank you—you are very kind!