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Civil War: A Board Game as Pedagogy and Critique

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Abstract. This paper describes the use of a board game, *Civil War*, as a learning experience in the context of a course on critical theory. *Civil War* was created by the Educational Games Company of Lebanon and is set during the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war. The game functions both as a pedagogical instrument, in that players learn about the situation in Lebanon while playing the game, but also as a form of critique, in that its makers are clearly using it as a means of articulating their lived experiences and challenging the dominant narratives around the conflict. We suggest that the game is a rare example of one that is counter ideological in nature, as rather than perpetuating stereotyped views of Middle East conflicts that are constructed and imposed from outside, it instead directly presents the experience of those who are inside. A case study of using the game in the context of a class on postcolonialism is presented and responses by students are analysed. We argue that the active experience of playing a board game is an effective way of engaging students with a topic, and in this case in particular, an effective way of connecting them with the lived experiences of others.

Keywords. Pedagogy, civil war, board games, Lebanon, postcolonialism, critical theory, ideology, critical pedagogy.

1. Introduction

The use of games as pedagogical tools is now a well established field of educational practice and research [1]. Particular attention has been paid in recent years to the development of so-called serious games: bespoke custom-created games designed to facilitate instruction on specific topics [2][3]. Serious games are generally understood to be both digital and interactive in nature and therefore potentially provide an engaging and compelling experience for learners. The problem though is that they are hampered by high production costs [4], meaning that their deployment in education has not become anywhere near as widespread as was hoped for in the early days of their development.

However, games don't have to be digital to deliver engrossing gameplay, and traditional analog board games such as *Monopoly*, *Cluedo* and *Risk* have always provided enthralling gaming experiences, with the added benefit that these experiences are communal and collaborative in nature. For this reason many educational researchers and practitioners have turned to the use of the board game as a learning tool. Much initial success was reported with the use of board games for improving numeracy in young school children (see for example [5]) and many recent researchers have now extended

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this to second and third level teaching and incorporated the use of such games into curricula across a wide variety of subject areas [6][7][8][9][10].

In some cases these researchers are using existing games as learning experiences (games which may or may not have been designed for educational purposes in the first place) and in other cases they are designing new board games aimed at achieving specific pedagogical goals. Our interest in this work is in the use of a pre-existing board game, *Civil War*, as a hook around which to explore the topic of postcolonialism and in particular the dynamics of representation in a postcolonial context. We start by introducing the historical and social milieu within which the game was produced before moving on to describe the game itself. We then outline the educational and theoretical context: specifically how we see the game as both a form of pedagogy and a form of critique. We draw on the concept of ideology in order to argue that the game functions as a rare example of one that seeks to resist dominant narratives and speak from the other side of the postcolonial divide. We then present our experience of using the game in the context of a course on critical theory that addresses the topic of postcolonialism and analyse student responses in order to draw some tentative conclusions as to its effectiveness.

2. The Civil War Board Game

The *Civil War* board game was created by Naji Tueini during the 1975-1990 Lebanese civil war (Figure 1). Tueini, who has described the game as his “revenge on reality” [11], uses it as a means of articulating the lived experiences of the citizens of Beirut².

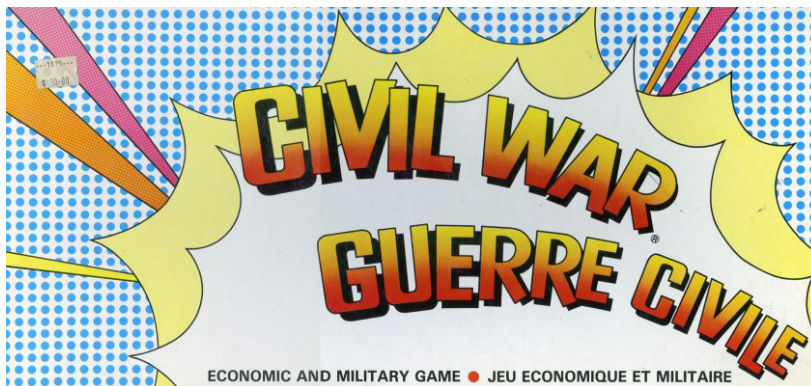


Figure 1. The *Civil War* board game.

The Lebanese civil war was a complex conflict involving multiple actors, both state and non-state, and continually shifting allegiances³. Lebanon is multi-ethnic in nature, with a population comprising of significant communities of both Sunni and Shia Muslims, Christians, and Druze. Prior to the war, a government dominated by Maronite Christians

² The *Civil War* game was produced in very small quantities in the late 1980s and is no longer widely available. A copy was purchased by the author on a trip to Beirut in 2000.

³ For an accessible and riveting first-hand account of the Lebanese tragedy see Robert Fisk's book *Pity The Nation* [12].

and sympathetic to Western powers kept many internal tensions at bay, but the arrival of large amounts of displaced Palestinians following the 1967 conflict (in particular the use of Beirut as PLO headquarters), and the influence of Cold War politics, increased these pressures until violence between the Maronites and the Palestinians erupted in 1975. The war quickly escalated, drawing in numerous groups and factions, and its chaotic nature was exacerbated and accelerated by the involvement of foreign powers such as Syria, Iran, Israel and the United States. Rather than involving conventional armies, the war was mostly perpetrated by an amorphous network of militias, many of them funded and supported by outside interests.

From the beginning, the Lebanese civil war was marked by brutal and cynical practices that were shocking at the time but are now commonplace in the region: targeting of civilian populations; hostage taking; exploitation and racketeering. It is these practices that form the main focus of Tueini's game. *Civil War* is loosely based on *Monopoly*, but each player takes on the role of a militia commander, as opposed to a property mogul. Play proceeds by acquiring and exploiting various forms of assets - media outlets, transport infrastructure, aid shipments, petroleum, and hostages - and also acquiring military units (MUs) in order to increase and consolidate military power. The game is unflinching in its depiction of the cynicism and brutality of the combatants and from the start emphasises that this war does not adhere to conventional understandings of armed conflict. As the accompanying instruction booklet states:

“Civil war, has its own rules, which have nothing to do with the international conventions, with the military rules of conduct, or with what is commonly known as human rights. In fact, the rules of civil war are nothing but the absence of any rule ... SO, ENJOY YOURSELVES AND MAY THE BEST MAN WIN!” [13]

Play proceeds in the usual manner for a *Monopoly*-style board game: Players roll a dice in order to move around a board and if they land on squares representing assets they have the opportunity to purchase these assets and then extract money from other players who subsequently land on them. Players can also use their militias to engage in battles with other players, the outcome of which is determined by a combination of chance and the number of military units that the players possess.

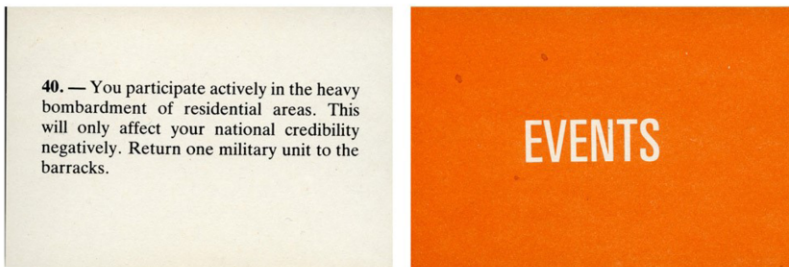


Figure 2. Event cards.

The real story of the game however is told by means of Event Cards (Figure 2) that are picked up by players when landing on designated areas of the board. Everything described on these cards is based on actual events in Lebanon and they lay bare the stark realities and cynical dynamics of the conflict. A typical example is:

“You participate actively in the heavy bombardment of residential areas. This will only effect your national credibility negatively. Return one military unit to the barracks”

Other Event Cards refer to exploitative economic activities attributed to militias (“You import a new brand of whiskey, which increases the volume of taxes you collect”); connections with foreign powers (“You offered the ambassador of a great power a favour. His country offers you compensation”); the day-to-day horror of life in Beirut (“A series of car explosions in your region obliges you to control more strictly the crossing points. Pay 25 M.P.”); and armed conflict (“A war of attrition drags on between your militia and a regional army present in the country”).

The most notable feature of the game is that the objective is not really to win the war but, like *Monopoly*, to accumulate the most profit. In fact, an end to the war is not in the interests of most of the actors, as this would remove the conditions that facilitate the profit-making activities that they are all engaged in⁴. Also of note is the fact that the ethnic and religious groupings around which the militias coalesce are of little significance: these seem to act simply as flags of convenience to attract funding and support. In short, Tueni’s game presents a horrifying vision of war as a business enterprise.

3. Theoretical Considerations

We now briefly present some theoretical considerations that motivate our argument that the *Civil War* board game functions as both a form of pedagogy and a form of critique. Its pedagogical intentions are clear enough in that, as previously noted, all events in the game are based on actual events occurring during the period in question⁵. Its effectiveness as a form of pedagogy is another question and one that we will address in the final closing part of this paper. In this section though we will explain our notion of how the game functions as critique. We do so by drawing upon the concept of *ideology* and in particular how this operates in a postcolonial context.

Ideology has a widely understood vernacular meaning (unwavering beliefs about the world held by specific groups) but also a more subtle one that is used within critical theory. It arises originally from Marx’s idea of false consciousness [15], where a view of the world that aligns with the interests of the dominant classes prevails, and prevents those who are dominated from fully appreciating the reality of their domination. This concept was later refined by (among others) Louis Althusser [16], who provided an elaborate analysis of how cultural practices and social rituals, not just official organs of the state, were complicit in the promulgation of these particular views. Ideology then, refers to sets of beliefs and attitudes that are widely held and unquestioned, regarded as being ‘simply common sense’, and therefore immune to any form of challenge or critique. Crucially, for ideology to be operating effectively, it must deny or even be oblivious to its own existence, while simultaneously dismissing any competing world-views as

⁴ In the author’s experience, while winning the game by winning the war is feasible within the rules, in practice it is impossible, and play tends to continue until all players simply decide that it is time to stop.

⁵ The game does not actually make explicit reference to Lebanon but rather utilises a thinly-veiled version of the country: the fictional territory of “Mabil”. Since “Mabil” is “Liban” spelt backwards and “Liban” is the French word for Lebanon, it is clear enough what country and what conflict is being referenced here.

themselves being ideological in nature⁶. For Marxist critics like Althusser, ideology always operates in the interests of the powerful against the powerless, and ultimately acts as a form of social control that serves to keep the existing order of things intact. When it is operating smoothly, we have the situation that Althusser called *hegemony*.

The concept of ideology is also central to much postcolonial thought. Postcolonial studies, as formulated by authors such as Said [19], Spivak [20] and Bhaba [21], is concerned with destabilising ideological representations of the colonised, and providing a means by which those that have historically been marginalised and ignored can articulate their own experiences and control their own representations. For example, Said's classic work *Orientalism* [19], recounts how the concept of the Orient was essentially a Western construct, and its associated racist stereotypes about Asian people provided ideological cover for continuing practices of colonial domination.

The role of media in the propagation of ideological beliefs has long been recognised and at the time of the original seminal works on postcolonialism much attention was paid to how media representations of what came to be known as 'the Other' contributed to the prevalence of colonial and neo-colonial ideology⁷. The forms of media under discussion here would be traditional forms of media such as news coverage, film and television, however other authors have more recently started to examine digital media, and more specifically computer games, though the same lens [23] [24] [25]. For example Mukharjee [24] looks at video games and suggests that racist stereotyping is rampant within this world, citing instances such as *Streetfighter 2* (1991), and *Age Of Empires 3* (2005), both of which perpetuate numerous damaging stereotypes pertaining to Indian characters.

It is not hard to recognise that board games have, and have always had, similar issues. A common trope within board games is that of colonial conquest, with many games such as *Risk* and *Civilisation* having as their goal the domination and control of foreign people and territories⁸. These games put the player in the position of the coloniser, leave no room for any articulation of the experiences of the colonised, and therefore serve to normalise and legitimise colonial practices. As Alexander Galloway points out in his critique of *Civilisation*, the game "erases any number of peoples existing throughout history" and "conflates a civilisation with a specific national or tribal identity" [26].

Mukharjee [24] suggests though that these problems are not always necessarily the case and that there are examples of games which put the player in the position of, or attempt to articulate the experiences of, those at the receiving end of colonialism. *Bhagat Singh* (2000), for example, allows the player to play as an Indian freedom fighter whose enemies are the soldiers of the British Raj. An example which is closer territorially to our concerns here is *Under Siege* (2011): a game produced during the second Palestinian intifada which, while conforming to the somewhat hackneyed first person shooter genre, nevertheless represents an explicit attempt to articulate the experiences of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories - providing a framework within which they tell their own stories

⁶ A relatively recent example of this would be Francis Fukuyama's famous assertion that the triumph of liberal democracy throughout much of the Western world following the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989 represents the 'end of history' [17]: a situation where all ideological struggles are now obsolete. As Arthur Kroker points out, Fukuyama's thesis is "relentlessly ideological under the sign of the disavowal of ideology" [18].

⁷ See for example Said's work *Covering Islam* where he analyses biased and incorrect representations of Islam and Muslims in the US media [22].

⁸ A salient point to consider here is that the practice of colonialism itself was often referred to as 'The Great Game'.

through the medium of the game. Mukharjee points out that both of these are reactions against colonial hegemony and operate as “platforms of ideological protest” [24].

We suggest that the *Civil War* game functions in a similar way and this is what makes it a valuable tool for critical pedagogy. There are two principal reasons for this. The first is that since the game was produced in Lebanon, a country with a long history of colonialism, it represents an example of speaking from the other side of the colonial divide. While Lebanon has long cast off direct colonial rule, its affairs have still been largely controlled and influenced by outside powers by means of proxy armies and sponsored political movements, and consequently can be seen as a neo-colonial state. More crucially perhaps, the game was produced by residents of Beirut while the conflict was in progress and hence directly articulates a point of view and a lived experience that is not filtered through potentially ideologically loaded international media and communications channels. The second reason is that game explicitly sets out to engage in critique; resisting and contesting what it clearly sees as dominant narratives around the war. This is evident from the beginning with its previously quoted exhortation that the “rules” of *Civil War* have nothing to do with commonly understood codes of conduct for warfare. This critique continues by means of the events portrayed in the game, most of which revolve around the cynical profiteering of the militias. We claim that there are two narratives being resisted and contested here: one is that the war was driven by religious and sectarian divisions; the other is that the war was driven by geo-political interests. While there are clearly an elements of truth to both of these propositions, Tueni’s game, by zeroing in on the day-to-day travails of Beirut citizens living through it, seems to be claiming that neither of these were the most important factors. In *Civil War*, the most important factor is the profit motive. By not even naming the various protagonists, Teuni suggests that they are all interchangeable, all driven by the same impulse to accumulate wealth. The religious, sectarian and nationalist divisions that framed the outside view of the conflict bear less relevance to the lived experience of the Lebanese than the profiteering that the protagonists were constantly engaged in. Tueni’s game presents a vivid picture of war as a capitalist enterprise and perhaps a dire warning of what happens when postcolonial societies fall apart.

4. *Civil War* in Practice

We conclude this discussion by reporting on our experience of using the *Civil War* board game in actual teaching practice. The context for this is a final year module called Critical Theory which is part of a degree programme on Creative Digital Media. The purpose of the Critical Theory module is to explore various frameworks of thought in order to provide students with the means of analysing, critiquing, and responding to various forms of media. The module considers media forms such as film, television shows, games and artworks, and utilises different critical frameworks to examine them: for example psychoanalysis, marxism and feminism. One of these frameworks is postcolonialism and one week of the course (which comprises of a lecture and a seminar session) is devoted to this topic.

After introducing the students to the main concepts of postcolonialism in the lecture, the seminar session is then given over to the playing of the *Civil War* game, with little or no explanation or context for this from the tutor. Gameplay is conducted as is normally the case with board games, with all participants sitting around a large table, and with the tutor acting as banker. The seminar sessions on the Critical Theory course tend to have

in the region of 10-15 participants and since *Civil War* can accommodate at most 4 players at a time, the students are divided into teams.

Based on their experience of playing the game for two hours the students are asked to reflect upon this experience and provide a written 500 word response to the following question:

We spent some time yesterday playing the board game *Civil War*, produced by Educational Games Lebanon. The suggestion is that this game functions as a means of articulating a particular form of postcolonial experience. Can games function in this way? Does this one?

We base our analysis of the effectiveness of the exercise on the student responses to this question. Perhaps unsurprisingly, most students agreed with the basic proposition embedded in the question, and confirmed that the game did function as a way of articulating the postcolonial experience. One respondent provided some insight into why games, in particular, might work as a way of doing this:

They want to immerse you in the game's environment, which normally isn't what you are used to and get a feel for what it is like for those characters that the game is based on. That's why a lot of people like playing games. It gives them an experience that they would never or more than likely (never) be able to experience themselves in real life.

Other students suggested that it was the “engaging” nature of the game that was the key factor and that presenting a depiction of events in this fashion was “fun and easier for all ages to understand”. One student however was of the view that games cannot “give an accurate representation from an educational point of view”. Their objections seem to be rooted in the possible unreliability and unverifiability of the information presented - presumably assuming that textbooks and other such sources are more authoritative. Interestingly the same student suggested that for their generation board games are now “obsolete” and that a “better simulation and understanding of the postcolonial would be (achieved) through Video Games”.

While the responses to the exercise were overwhelmingly positive it is less clear to what extent the students' understanding of the concept of postcolonialism was enhanced (or not) by the playing of the game. Some responses demonstrated a good understanding of what was at stake (“I believe the alternative outlook from the side of the oppressed, allows us to de-glamourise the idea of glory and pride surrounded by taking over a land, one that challenges and questions what it really means to boast a large colonial reach”) whereas others provided confused responses which conflated postcolonialism with the civil war itself (“It does to some extent articulate a form of postcolonial experience. There are the usual money making schemes such as owning restaurants, petroleum factories and the water supply”). One student however did make the connection between the events depicted and the postcolonial conditions that facilitated them:

Civil War is about postcolonial Lebanon and it does articulate a message of a country at war within itself ... when you think of it, these people didn't have any power over their own country until the French left ... so there was no surprise that there would be a power struggle between different groups in the state for who should rule.

Other notable aspects of the responses were the frequency with which students introduced and discussed other games as examples (perhaps indicating the extent to which games have become the dominant form of recreational media among this group

and also hopefully demonstrating their ability to turn a critical eye towards them) and also the frequency with which the issue of whether the game could be construed as “offensive” was raised. There seemed to be a general concern that using these tragic events as the basis for something as supposedly trivial as a game would be shocking or insensitive to the feelings of those who lived through it. This was largely offset however by the notion that the game was “factually accurate” and that players are well capable of enjoying playing a game while at the same time being appreciative of the seriousness of the events that it is based on.

5. Conclusion

We have reported on an exercise in the use of the *Civil War* board game as a pedagogical instrument in the context of a class on postcolonialism within a critical theory module for students of Creative Digital Media. We have argued that this game functions as both pedagogy and critique in that it both teaches players about the Lebanese civil war but also works as a platform for the game’s creator to challenge preconceived notions regarding both this conflict and other conflicts of this nature. Student responses to this exercise were extremely positive and while it is unclear, based on this short study, the extent to which it succeeds in terms of deepening the student’s understanding of the issues at hand, it nevertheless succeeded in provoking discussion and reflection. From the point of view of the author/tutor one final remark is worth including. Apart from the obvious benefits of an active learning approach and apart from the obvious benefits of ‘doing something different in class’, there is much to be gained in terms of improving class dynamics by playing a board game with students. Board games are by their nature communal and collaborative in nature, with all participants sitting around a table together on an equal footing. There is surely no better way of positively challenging the power dynamic between teacher and student and perhaps by doing so bringing into focus some of wider concerns at stake in a course on critical theory.

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