Deterritorializing Board Games:

Nationalist Worldviews in the Wargames *RISK* and *Ideology*

Jonathan Rey Lee

University of California, Riverside

Abstract

This paper examines how board wargames play with ideologies of and behind military conflict. In its two case studies—of *RISK: The Game of Global Domination* and *Ideology: The War of Ideas*—the spatial arrangements of the boards create performative visual and tactile spaces that literally materialize worldviews, paralleling a perspective Martin Heidegger calls the "world picture." *RISK* represents military expansionism by performing a nationalist map logic that divides the world into discrete, interchangeable, conquerable territories. *Ideology*, on the other hand, represents the more subtle ideological control of extending a simultaneous dispersed influence across the interconnected activities of everyday life. Together, these games open up critical play that productively dialogues with the critical discourse of theorists like Benedict Anderson, Louis Althusser, and Rey Chow, allowing players to engage the signifying logic of war.

The Game of War

Although war is deadly serious, it is often and increasingly the subject of *play*. Exemplifying the seemingly oxymoronic category of 'serious gaming,'[1] wargames,[2] which represent military conflict through competitive tactical gaming, span across the dissonance of trivial and serious. Yet, it is precisely in these moments of play, caught between the fun of gaming and the seriousness of war, that critical interventions are possible. In the play of the mind, whether strategic gameplay or critical analysis, thought and reality collide in conceptual forays that demonstrate how provisional, imaginative, and playful contexts are closely intertwined with lived reality. This paper thus aims to show how serious games can perform logics of war otherwise enacted in social life and articulated in social and political theories. The following case studies focus on the representational apparatuses of two games at once wargame and board game—*RISK: The Game of Global Domination* and *Ideology: The War of Ideas*[3]—treating them as performative textual representations of geopolitical conflict which render the spatial logic of war tangible and interactive.

Although not least of the many reasons to play at war is play as *paideia*—using play to hone personally or socially-advantageous skills (Kaiser, 2012, p. 30)—in our recreationally-inclined consumer culture, wargames are not exclusively or primarily part of the practical

---

[1] Although many contemporary institutions and thinkers use the term "serious gaming" to refer to gaming aimed towards social ends (education, therapy, training, etc.), I also use it to mean the fundamental interrelationship between the seriousness of a game's integration into cultural practices and the non-seriousness suspension of the world in the play-sphere (see Huizinga, 1950, p. 5).

[2] I shall follow a convention of referring to military exercises as "war games" and recreational games as "wargames" although these categories are about as fluid as their names.

[3] For *RISK*, I refer to the classic game of world domination, not its many variants and spinoffs. For *Ideology*, I refer to the Second Edition.

apparatus of military training. Our cultural fascination with war is such that many wargamers[4] relish playing at war for the sake of the gaming experience with all that entails: challenge, historical modeling, fantasizing war or command, social interaction, etc. In this study, therefore, this practical connection between wargaming and the mechanics of actual war is of much less concern than how wargames play at nationalist logics of war, materializing cultural worldviews and attitudes.

As performative signifying systems, games materialize the experience and logic of war through the overlapping aspects of *theme*, *gameplay*, and *representation*, which we shall briefly define before entering the case studies. Most modern wargames thematically materialize war by portraying their gameplay, the formal relations that determine the unfolding of a game system, *as* the conflict between two competing armies, creating a fictional narrative context that interprets moves in gameplay as moves in an unfolding story. War is a particularly compelling theme for games in that all games have intrinsically warlike elements insofar as they are contests, as Johan Huizinga (1950) notes, "Ever since words existed for fighting and playing, men have been wont to call war a game" (p. 89). Thus, even less thematically-inflected classics like *Go*, *Chess*, and *Checkers* can materialize the logic of war through a generally warlike gameplay that involves the clash of opposing groups of capturable pieces on and over territory. Because theme and gameplay are abstractions, however, they must be doubly materialized through the event of play and what I call a game's *representational apparatus* or *material text*—boards, pieces, cards, etc.[5] By making the elements of the game look and feel in a certain way, its representational elements, which combine aesthetics, signification, and physical constraints, create a meaningful and affective experience that simulates and stimulates particular attitudes. While in some games—

---

[4] The race and gender imbalances in gaming culture, nationalist identity politics, and the logic of war are certainly interconnected in highly significant ways, but unfortunately fall outside the scope of this particularly textual analysis.
[5] These are the analog features corresponding to the *interface* of digital games.

the two-player card game *War*,[6] for example—theme, gameplay, and representation are wholly

separable, in most modern wargames these elements require and reinforce one another. Because

play reflects and refracts real-world concerns, these three ways of tying the gaming experience to

the logic and experience of war are crucial components in the creation of performative game

meaning.

　　　　RISK and *Ideology* materialize war in all these ways, which meet in the symbolic and

spatial logic of their game boards. Although one might think playing at war on bits of cardboard

oscillates between hopeless naïvete and demeaning trivialization, I suggest that the conceptual

reductionism practiced in gaming representations of geopolitical conflict creates an affective,

performative, speculative space within which to consider topics too large or terrifying to

comprehend in everyday life. Game boards literally provide a world view, creating a

representational microcosm of the world which players play upon from above in the always dual

position of participant and observer. In materializing worldviews, these games provide virtual

engagements with real world political scenarios, making these global significances both

intuitively and critically accessible. Play lets us directly experience—touch, see, feel—both

global, historical forces otherwise too large and abstract to fathom and subtle ideological and

cultural influences typically too small and ordinary to notice.

　　　　The saying "All is fair in love and war" implies *fair game*—up for grabs, morally

permissible despite transgressing normal moral constraints—rather than *fair play*—sporting

chance, playing within the purposes and constraints of friendly, balanced competition. That is,

the rhetoric of war, like that of wargames, licenses winning at all costs, deferring ethical

---

[6] The ostensible theme of war is unrelated to the gameplay—which consists entirely in the comparison of ranked numerical values—or the representational apparatus—which consists in suits, numbers, and face cards that are mostly abstract given a history that severs these images from their monarchic signification. One could sensibly rebrand *War* as *Monopoly*, maintaining the gameplay (which is based on total acquisition) and naming the cards after Atlantic City streets.

questions for future historians in the hopes that history will naturally authorize the winning side.

Just as the critically astute and morally courageous historian challenges the victor's assumptions

while explaining the outcome, I wish to challenge the worldviews provisionally occupied while

playing these two games to demonstrate how games more generally participate in systems of

ideological significance that run far beyond gaming contexts. By unpacking the embodied

worldviews of these games, which portray two distinct models of nationalist power and control, I

hope to show how games elucidate performatively some of the critical perspectives social

theorists have pursued in words. While the political consequences of this approach are likely too

negligible to show up on the radar of geopolitical history, gaming operates through the little way,

the accumulation of small, unnoticed influences enacted through the repetition of an immersive

cognitive experience. I believe, therefore, that seeking parallels between gaming experience and

critical discourse can benefit game designers, theorists, and players alike.

RISK: The Game of Global Domination

In an episode of *Seinfeld* (1995), two characters are playing *RISK* on the subway.

Taunting his opponent, the winning player claims "Ukraine is weak," prompting a (Ukrainian)

passenger to angrily interrupt. Brushing off this interruption with "we're playing a game here,

pal" only shifts the placement of the anger: "Ukraine is game to you!" In the spirit of serious

gaming, this interaction is intended as comical but makes a cogent point—games perform

consequential worldviews and their triviality is therefore at best a half-truth. In this way, the

intuitive representational apparatus of the *RISK* board-as-map immerses the player in a

nationalist worldview and can thereby be seen as a performative foray into the nationalist

mentality of seeing world as map and map as battlefield.

Of the countless available wargames, few encompass the nationalist logic of war with the simplicity and clarity of *RISK*. More complex wargames, including many early games which featured lookup tables and thousands of squares and counters, have so many strategic variables that they emphasize the mechanics over the attitude of war; more historically-oriented wargames, such as *Axis and Allies*, add an additional layer of mediation which plays more directly with particular historical worldviews than the generalizing logics of war-as-game and game-as-war. Initially developed by French filmmaker Albert Lamorisse as *La Conquête du Monde* (Hasbro, 1999, p. 1), *RISK* is one of the rare games to maintain popularity and name-recognition for over half a century, partially because its simple yet highly intuitive gameplay effectively portrays its central theme while also allowing for the strategic nuances that make a game playable and replayable.

The *RISK* board represents a world of connected territories, over which players vie for control in an attempt to spread their reach across the globe. Players alternate taking turns which consist of the following actions: (1) deploying armies on their territories, (2) using these armies to attack adjacent territories, and (3) moving armies to solidify their strategic position. Eliminate all other players and win. Be eliminated and lose. While there are additional intricacies to the gameplay, the overall thrust of the game, exemplified by the idiom 'nothing ventured, nothing gained,' is crystal clear: attack, defeat, expand. The central tension of the game is, therefore, *risk*—the strategic balance between offensive and defensive action in the ultimate service of territorial expansion, as expressed in the game's introduction (1999), which states, "To win, you must launch daring attacks, defend yourself on all fronts, and sweep across vast continents with boldness and cunning" (p. 2).

A *worldview* is a perspective on the world, a way of seeing and understanding through which the world as we find it takes shape and meaning. The representational apparatus of wargames literally materialize worldviews by creating a material, visual view of the world in microcosm. Despite the irrepressible tangibility of board games, the board is more signifying text than object, is more worldview than world. Play therefore takes place in the virtual space signified by spatial arrangements of the board and pieces, making board games conceptually akin to the worldviews we use every day. One critique of this representational character of board games is that they tend to be reductive, to literally 'flatten out' the complexities of what they represent. Yet, it is precisely this flattening that makes board games ideally poised to represent worldviews, themselves simplifications of a world that always transcends what we know of it. In particular, I argue that typical board wargames, especially *RISK*, are resonant with *map logic*, the worldview that sees the world as consisting of discrete and fundamentally different geopolitical regions, aligning identity with nationality. Furthermore, this materialized map logic is infused with a warlike teleology, demonstrating how the world picture becomes a "world target" when map logic is tied to battleground tactics.

In *RISK*, the gameplay is literally centered and enacted on a world map, tying the representational apparatus fundamentally to a history and practice of understanding territory through map logic. Although the *RISK* map is admittedly not completely representational, it is immediately recognizable as our contemporary world inscribed with a rough approximation of our contemporary geopolitical boundaries.[7] This map logic is particularly nationalist—whereas, for example, a topographical map would have important connotations for actual military maneuvers, the *RISK* board flattens the world into a single system of distinctions—that of

---

[7] The map is divided into forty-two territories distributed across six continents (sans Antarctica). In an attempt to produce more geographical equivalency between the size of regions, some countries are divided (for example, Canada) and others combined (for example, Western Europe).

nations. This is emphasized both by the breakdown of the world into discrete bordered territories

and the color-coding assigned to these territories. This is reminiscent of Benedict Anderson's

(2000) description of "the practice of the imperial states of coloring their colonies on maps with

an imperial dye" of which he observes "As this 'jigsaw' effect became normal, each 'piece'

could be wholly detached from its geographic context" (p. 175). In an era where geography and

nationality are alike conceived through maps and aerial photography, countries can be easily

color coded according to their national affiliation, rendering a geographical distinction as

political (and identity-constitutive).

One important consequence of this nationalist map logic is that territories are perceived

entirely according to borders which create a visible separation between adjacent countries, a

separation that consists *entirely in* their adjacency. *RISK* exemplifies and exaggerates this

mentality by depriving individual territories of any content except adjacency relations. In *RISK*,

Russia has no winter and the Middle East no oil. Waging war across oceans is no different from

warring with one's neighbors. Thus, whereas in a genuine war the land matters a great deal

because of terrain, weather, natural resources, etc., in *RISK*, as in Martin Heidegger's (1977)

notion of a world picture, "Every place is equal to every other" (p. 119). This conceptual

flattening not only simplifies the gameplay, but also embodies a worldview that looks at

territories through a paradoxical blend of sameness and differences—all territories are alike in

every way except strategic location, all equally viable for conquest and population. Yet while all

territories are alike in being equally capable of being part of one's nation, some *are* and some *are*

not; the distinction between nation, ally, and enemy reigns absolute.

While this mentality may seem innocuous in tabletop gaming, it is neither exclusive to

the gaming context nor isolated from political reality as the same mentality played out on the

scope of nations becomes, as characterized by Heidegger in his essay of the same name, "The

Age of the World Picture:"

> The fundamental event of the modern age is the conquest of the world as picture. The word "picture" [*Bild*] now means the structured image [*Gebild*] that is the creature of man's producing which represents and sets before. In such producing, man contends for the position in which he can be that particular being who gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is. (p. 134)

More than a mere mapping, Heidegger considers this "the fundamental event of the modern age"

because it deeply structures individual and social agency. In the worldwide identity crisis

precipitated by the increasingly mechanized World Wars, to which Heidegger's voice is one of

countless responses, nationalism (and its link to military expansionism) became irrevocably part

of our worldview. This map logic is therefore not merely a tool for war or any other practical

purpose. For Heidegger, this picture logic expresses the whole of modernity's attempt to explain

itself to itself, to conquer the unknown by the imposition of a system of conceptual picturing that

"gives the measure and draws up the guidelines for everything that is." Thus, when this map

logic flattens the unique characteristics of individual territories it does two things: first, it

overlooks (looks over) the infinite wash of differences that make simple absolute categorizations

impossible and, second, it imposes a system of categorization that is specific to nationalist,

modernist, human-centric logic. Just as the *RISK* board is not just any map, the world picture is

not just any picture—it signifies the world as consisting of a spatially-aligned set of discrete

geopolitical entities.

With the world thus divided, another aspect of this map logic comes into play, namely the

identification of self with these geopolitical entities. That is, nationalist logic produces

nationalist subjects, individuals whose identity is to some extent tied to the identity of their

nation state. In a study that traces the development of this form of identification, which did not

have power through much of history, Anderson (2000) explores the ways in which *national identity*—how individuals are defined by membership in a community determined by virtue of shared national borders—is a cultural construct or "imagined community." To conceive of one's identity in terms of geopolitical borders requires two primary identifications: first, that personal identity is inextricably connected to social, cultural, and political climates and second, as we have seen, that such climates have clear and distinct geographical boundaries. When identity is thus invested in membership in one of several distinct imagined communities, people easily come to be defined according to a simple us/them binary. Here, we touch upon a host of political and ethical issues tied to national and identity politics. For now, however, let us return how *RISK* materializes this binary logic through the following instances of exclusivity: (1) every player controls a single distinct color, (2) every territory can have only one player's color occupying it, and (3) only one player wins the game. Through the striking visuals of the game, these practical exclusions lead players to identify as colored nations unto themselves. The world view of the board is therefore optimized to portray how one's territory (us) is arrayed with respect to each other player's territory (them), providing a very visceral confirmation of this binary antagonism—when one player expands, another necessarily loses ground.

Given that borders are often fluid and often define the strength and identity of nations, it's easy to see how nationalist map logic can subtly promote military expansion. As Anderson indicates when he writes, "Triangulation by triangulation, war by war, treaty by treaty, the alignment of map and power proceeded" (p. 173), the practices of mapping and expansionism arose together and are now inextricable. That national power is literally circumscribed by and inscribed within borders is only part of the picture; "the alignment of map and power" is itself a worldview—one embodied by *RISK*—in which the imperatives of survival and growth that

influence any organism become for the nation fundamentally conceived through map logic. This

is not to suggest the absurdity that map use or wargame play necessarily entails warlike behavior.

Maps and games can be positive, practical tools for peace. Yet, the worldview of the nationalist

RISK map *emphasizes* what matters most for war, such as adjacency, borders, and control, to the

exclusion of all else, such as economics, culture, and people. Furthermore, to play *RISK*, one

must act out a teleology of military expansionism that complements the materialized map logic.

Thus, the game demands one not only see the *RISK* world through the nationalist logic of

competing player/nations, it demands the player employ this perspective to strategically perform

an expansionist agenda.

　　　　While games that play at such logics are not trivial in one sense, they do often *trivialize*

in that, as representations, games deviate in important ways from the fullness of what they

represent. In acting out such expansionist tactics and fantasies, *RISK* markedly oversteps and

misrepresents the mentality of the nationalist world picture by seeking *total* contiguity between

nation and world. Described in the rulebook as "to conquer the world by occupying every

territory on the board, thus eliminating all your opponents" (p. 3), this goal undermines the

fundamental us/them relationship upon which imagined communities are founded. Thus,

although Anderson points out that "great nations were global conquerors" (p. 98), he considers

the boundedness of a nation part of the definition of an imagined community:

> The nation is imagined as *limited* because even the largest of them, encompassing
> perhaps a billion living human beings, has finite, if elastic boundaries, beyond
> which lie other nations. No nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind.
> The most messianic nationalists do not dream of a day when all the members of
> the human race will join their nation in the way that it was possible, in certain
> epochs, for, say Christians to dream of a wholly Christian planet. (p. 7)

In this, the game is more fantasy than reality, or perhaps more psychopathic than sane, in that it

bypasses the total impracticality and self-destructiveness of absolute world conquest with the

blithe, distorted vision of true megalomaniacs. The fantasies of perfect control, pure strategy, and global expansionism make the game operate in a thoroughly idealized realm, a playing with the subconscious impulses of power stripped of its limiting realities. It is important that this *feeling* of unlimited power, the ability to completely dominate the world by manipulating pieces absolutely under one's control, is itself dependent entirely upon the limitations or constraints of the game. It is only because the game space is a fictional, rule-governed system that such agency can seem unbounded. *RISK* therefore engenders feelings of freedom and power that are largely illusory or fictional. Because it works in the game, these illusions—and even the materialized worldview itself—may pass unnoticed within the game experience, making it difficult to see or control the consequences of performing the materialized map logic.

When one sits over the game board, capturing it fully within gaze and reach, one plays with the world as picture and immerses oneself in this us/them worldview. With a feeling of incredible power, albeit only with a game world, the player presides over a world that is easily categorized, viewed, and manipulated according to his or her own purposes within the game. This world is genuinely constructed for the player; it really does revolve around him or her. Again, this is not to say that playing wargames necessarily promote self-centeredness, but rather that the representational apparatus is literally centered on the self, in human scale, designed for human purposes. Thus, the movement of entering the microcosmic, controllable world of the game closely parallels the subjective turn of modern philosophy, which Heidegger describes as the centering of all knowledge on man: "Man becomes that being upon which all that is, is grounded as regards the manner of its Being and its truth. Man becomes the relational center of that which is as such" (p. 128). Likewise, *RISK* centers play on the individual players who realizes the game. In this sense, *RISK* represents global conquest not as an accurate portrayal of

historical or military truths, but as a re-presentation to and for the self in accordance with

Heidegger's notion of world picture, in which "to represent [*vor-stellen*] means to bring what is

present at hand [*das Vorhandene*] before oneself as something standing over against, to relate it

to oneself, to the one representing it, and to force it back into this relationship to oneself as the

normative realm" (p. 131). Thus, despite the objectivity suggested by the third-person

perspective of maps and game boards, the *use* of such textual devices is in fact a first-person

(usually plural for national subjects and singular for gamers), self-reflexive moment in which the

subject inscribes his or her identity into the occupation of a territory that simultaneously

inscribes the subject.

This retrospective character has an ambivalent ethical character. The megalomania of

Nietzschean philosophy or many historical conquerors is no more necessitated by wargaming

than the critical perspectives I advocate. Yet, it would be naïve to assume that the immersion of

a player in the self-centered world of a game employing nationalist map logic is inconsequential

or benign. It is undoubtedly part of the carnivalesque[8] appeal of this game in the post-World

War II era that it plays with, literally makes fun of, one of the world's greatest terrors. It allows

players to indulge an all too human competitive drive within the safety of a socially accepted and

even socially beneficial collaborative exercise. In the odd in-between space of play, *RISK*

neither fully advocates nor is fully insulated from the psychopathy of conquest. Instead, in

simulating this worldview, it allows players to engage in a real yet provisional, felt yet

constrained experience not unlike the performed conceptual play of literature or philosophy. In

so doing, *RISK* expresses—reflects and informs—our concepts of nationalism and global

---

[8] This term is borrowed from the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, who examines various social practices that suspend the everyday in an absurd, critical play. A more complete comparison between his primary examples, including various cultural rituals and dialogic fictions, could be made, but alas, not here.

expansionism, both of which themselves operate in the strange in-between space of ideology, to which we now turn.

Ideology: The War of Ideas

While nationalist worldviews explicitly underwrite and influence the logic of military conflict, they are also tied to more subtle forms of control that reach further and deeper than arms. Whereas *RISK* explicitly portrays war and implicitly performs nationalist map logic, *Ideology* explicitly represents and performs the nuances of ideological control. A niche wargame for a more specialized gaming subculture, *Ideology* both responds to and supplements familiar aspects of mainstream wargames with the explicit intention of analyzing postmodern systems of power, as described in an introductory note from designer Andrew Parks (2009):

> In recent years, world events have prompted us to understand how the conflict of ideas can shape the destiny of an entire planet. This game is not intended to condemn or to glorify any political idea, but rather to understand the ideologies of our day and how they interact with one another. It is first and foremost a game, but also an exercise in understanding. (p. 2)

Released some fifty years after *RISK*, which emerged out of the cultures of post-war Europe and Cold War America, *Ideology* arises out of a period of global capitalism in which international conflicts typically play out paramilitary if not nonmilitary arenas. This period of post-Empire Empire is focused less on borders and military control than on various forms of ideological and economic influence and therefore demands an altered critical vocabulary. As we shall see, *Ideology* fractures the spatiality of nationalist map logic and complicates military control by adding economic and cultural influence in order to better represent modern power relations, modeling the nom-material nature of ideology, its performative spread through interpellated populations, and its logic of perpetual war. This game 'exercises our understanding' of global

influence extended at a distance without proceeding linearly from a single fixed origin. For the

social theorist in the postmodern age, therefore, *Ideology* does an excellent job of showing how

power lies in dispersed, discursive systems of meaning.

Too complex to fully describe here, with each turn consisting of eight phases played

sometimes simultaneously and sometimes according to a shifting turn order, *Ideology* nuances

the idea of global domination by having players strive to amass the highest 'Global Influence'

for their ideology (either Capitalism, Communism, Fascism, Imperialism, or Islamic

Fundamentalism). This is accomplished by extending and vying for influence over individual

regions such that the ideology with majority influence in a region controls all its Global

Influence. Depicting the multifaceted nature of ideological power, influence is divided into three

distinct areas: military, economic, and cultural. With this dispersal of power, even a complete

military grip on every region alone would yield no Global Influence. Additionally incorporating

mechanisms representing trade (exchanging one type of influence for another), development

(advancing a region's Global Influence value), conflict (vying for influence in a given region),

diplomacy (constructing treaties and declaring war), and advancement (in military technology,

economic production, or social control), *Ideology* aptly portrays how control permeates every

aspect of a society.

That power relies upon intangible forms of social control is a now commonplace notion

for theorists, largely due to Louis Althusser (1971), who popularized the term *ideology* to mean

"the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social

group" (p. 158). These systems structure thought and behavior when internalized by individuals

as "*all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects,* by the

functioning of the category of the subject" (p. 173). All power struggles, including military

expansionism, therefore involve ideology in that power is an extension of control, which

necessarily requires some level of internalized submission on the part of the controlled.[9] This

idea of influence is at the heart of *Ideology* in how it models the interpellation and ideological

spread through its representational apparatus and gameplay.

Players familiar with the paradigmatic map logic of wargames will immediately be struck

by *Ideology's* deconstruction of the classic world-map game board, which replaces a single

board[10] with a deck of tiles. Tile-based maps are nothing new, as two popular European board

games—*Carcassonne*'s meandering, expanding board and the *Settlers of Catan*'s reconfigurable

hexagonal landscape—employ this mechanism. Yet unlike these games, *Ideology*'s tiles do not

form a single playing surface, refusing to use spatial contiguity to structure the tiles. Instead, the

world remains permanently fractured as controlled regions are placed immediately before the

controlling player, as yet uncontrolled regions float disconnected in the center of the table, and

unrevealed regions are relegated to an innocuous face-down stack.[11] While there are practical

reasons for this fracturing, in that it allows cards to be played in constellations around each tile,

there is a deeper significance to deconstructing the standard world map. The game rejects the

notion of control offered by *RISK* in its appropriation of colonial mapping practices—that the

influence of empires can be mapped in geographic space.[12] In allowing all players to access all

regions, *Ideology* represents advancements in global communication and transportation,

---

[9] An explicitly Marxist theorist, Althusser is particularly concerned with how ideological control supports existing economic power imbalances. Yet, the core idea operates in a wide variety of social contexts beyond the economic. Thus, in the game, capitalism and communism are *particular* ideologies, not constitutive of ideology itself.

[10] The Second Edition of *Ideology* eliminates a board of the world map, which was primarily a supplemental reference in the First Edition, reducing the map to informational content on players' reference cards.

[11] In a strictly technical sense, *Ideology* should not be classified as a board game at all, and could be more accurately called a 'tabletop game' or 'tile game.' However, as taxonomic distinctions are not the focus of this paper, I shall use a looser, more colloquial sense of 'board game' to describe *Ideology*.

[12] Geographic adjacency is represented only through a 'distance penalty' paid when a player attempts to extend influence too far from his or her power base, but this penalty—a rule rather than an materialized element—is not part of the sensory, experienced worldview of the game.

encouraging a global worldview that considers all parts of the world as simultaneously available in wanton disregard of geographic distance. Furthermore, it speaks to the atemporal, nonlocal nature of ideological control which, as a discursive, conceptual apparatus, operates everywhere and anywhere it is received.

This makes the game's feel and strategy more about perception than location. Depicting a logic described by Rey Chow (2006), in a direct extension of Heidegger's view, as "The age of the world target," *Ideology* alters our form of perception in fracturing its world map. This parallels Chow's description of the changing perception of war:

> While battles formerly tended to be fought with a clear demarcation of battlefronts versus civilian spaces, the aerial bomb, by its positioning in the skies, its intrusion into spaces that used to be off-limits to soldiers, and its distance from the enemies (a distance which made it impossible for the enemies to fight back), destroyed once and for all those classic visual boundaries that used to define battle. Second, with the transformation of the skies into war zones from which to attack, war was no longer a matter simply of armament or of competing projectile weaponry; rather, it became redefined as a matter of the logistics of perception, with seeing as its foremost function, its foremost means of preemptive combat. (p. 32)

In the game, the *when* and *where* of military conflict supersedes the *how* in that there is no special skill or strategy to winning a conflict (simply spend more of that type of influence than one's opponent). Overall, the game materializes the feeling of dispersed ideology through the visual impression of a playing area that lacks an organizing structure to direct the gaze. Instead, like the aerial map logic of the world target, one's gaze flits back and forth across the 'board' searching for isolated opportunities to build a coherent strategy out of a network of interrelated micro-actions.

Truly disrupting the visual boundaries of battle, ideological conflict can be waged anywhere and everywhere. The gameplay of *Ideology* represents this discursive warfare through how each particular ideology determines the conditions of its own spread. In a blinding series of

simultaneous and alternating turns, players extend influence to independent regions, develop

influence on their own regions, and engage in influence conflicts on other regions. These

iterative moments create a fluid dynamic, a waxing and waning, of ideological control. As

competing patterns of spread interact across constantly proliferating tiles, the spread of each

represented ideology reveals its unique characteristics. For example, Fascism's aggressive

"Lightning Strike" makes its first Military Conflict each turn harder to deflect and its

"Intolerance" restriction adds an additional cost to extending Cultural Influence. The

competition between ideologies enacting their particular characters has the effect of splitting the

game experience into a simultaneously singular and differential experience—everyone plays the

singular worldview of global domination and, at the same time, the differential worldviews of the

five represented ideologies. This nicely captures the parallelism between genuine rivals, who

attempt to eliminate the other based on the perceived incommensurability of their differences and

thereby unite themselves by their shared, parallel acceptances of the struggle.

Thus, the central gameplay of *Ideology* lacks the feel of paradigmatic wargames which

typically feature the accumulation, positioning, and proximate attacking of military forces.

Instead, *Ideology* follows the strategic logic of a self-perpetuating cycle in which influence

begets influence, in that current levels of influence contribute both towards the long-term

winning conditions and the specific influence available each turn. The game is won, therefore,

by a carefully controlled snowball effect that simulates the almost viral spread of ideological

influence. According to Althusser, this self-propagating mechanism in which power exerts

influence in order to reproduce the conditions of power defines ideology. He writes, thinking

particularly of economic power, that "The ultimate condition of production is therefore the

reproduction of the conditions of production" (p. 127). Production begets production, influence

begets influence, and the war of ideas proceeds more like the maintenance of a self-propagating

flow than the manipulation of forces. Without a material body (although it has material

expression), the 'life' of an ideology is defined by the extent to which it perpetuates itself, an

expansionist desire both similar to and dissimilar from the military expansionism of *RISK*. Re-

production is both the ultimate goal and essential mechanism of *Ideology* the game just as it is

ideology proper.

In this pseudo-evolutionary conflict, in which adaptation is tactical rather than embodied,

the increased spread of one's almost genetic ideological code drives social interaction. In this

immanent view of power, control and controlled are inseparable. In the expansionist worldview

portrayed in *RISK*, on the other hand, the player/nation is presented as manipulating the game

from outside it—the armies and territories are *possessed* by the player, who remains aloof from,

literally above the action. If in *RISK*, players easily identify themselves as military commanders,

in *Ideology*, the player's position is a much more shadowy concatenation of plural individual and

institutional forces. In the ideological worldview, which controls from within rather than

without, the two senses of subject—agent and servant—become indistinguishable as both the

means and ends of reproduction. Following the ethical imperative of a parasite—to replicate

without killing its host—ideology enters into all realms of human activity and simultaneously

structures and supports the individuals it interpellates (draws into itself). Thus, Althusser

advances "two cojoint theses," namely "There is no practice except by and in an ideology" and

"There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects" (p. 170). By and for subjects,

ideology resides within material reality only by virtue of its employment in individuals and

institutions. In this way, ideology is itself a game, a system that structures the activity of its

players but only has existence in the playing.

The particular systems of power depicted in the game all depend upon the populations'

acceptance of their dominant ideology. Thus, capitalism and communism alike require the

wholehearted acceptance of their systematic worldview. The social ostracism of individuals with

no desire to work in a capitalist society, for example, owes to the fact that the system is

fundamentally threatened by nonparticipation. Thus, each of these embodied worldviews

engages in a 'war of ideas,' the stake of which are the sustained existence of the system of power.

This creates an environment of perpetual struggle where ideological warfare is inseparable from

the material conditions of the society. In their study on 'global capitalism and video games,'

Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (2009) connect this form of ideological warfare with

Hardt and Negri's notion of *Empire*, which they redefine as:

> The global capitalist ascendancy of the early twenty-first century, a system
> administered and policed by a consortium of competitively collaborative
> neoliberal states, among whom the United States still clings, by virtue of its
> military might, to an increasingly dubious preeminence. This is a regime of
> biopower based on corporate exploitation of myriad types of labor, paid and
> unpaid, for the continuous enrichment of a planetary plutocracy. (p. xxiii)

Following a Marxist tradition that includes Althusser, they suggest that the video game industry

is thoroughly entangled with the ideology of this global capitalist empire. While board games

are not quite the offspring of the American military-industrial complex, as Dyer-Witheford and

de Peuter argue digital games are, the history of board wargames does demonstrate a complex

interpenetration between play and warfare.[13] Furthermore, as materialized worldviews, designed,

marketed, and played within gaming subcultures and heavily influenced by the ideological

conditions of their production and use, these games are connected in incalculable ways with the

ideologies they represent. *RISK* and *Ideology*, therefore, not only play at the war of ideas, but,

like all representational and performative texts, participate in this state of perpetual warfare.

---

[13] Cf. Peter Perla's *The Art of Wargaming* (1990).

The feeling of innocence or triviality offered by games is thus a clear example of how war can seem pervasive to the point of numbness, a desensitization that Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter call "banalized war," in which "war becomes part of the culture of everyday life" (p. 100). Gaming culture is part of this rendering of the logic of war as acceptable and mainstream, reducing the extraordinary to the everyday. The war of ideas involves a particular attitude towards the profundity of ideas in which their very plurality desensitizes individuals, rendering them inattentive and therefore susceptible to ideological influence. Just as there is no clear cut correlation between moral desensitization and virtual game violence, however, becoming inured to worldviews does not necessitate any particular manner of ideological receptivity. Yet, in this postmodern epistemic culture, one becomes attuned the linked virtualities of power and representational media, a complementarity Michel Foucault calls "power/knowledge." Similarly, Chow notes that in the war of ideas, virtualization acts as a vector allowing the logic of war to permeate all aspects of society:

> With the preemptiveness of seeing-as-destruction and the normativization of technology-as-information, thus, comes the great epistemic shift, which has been gradually occurring with the onset of speed technologies and which finally *virtualizes* the world. As a condition that is no longer separable from civilian life, war is thoroughly absorbed into the fabric of our daily communications—our information channels, our entertainment media, our machinery for speech and expression. (p. 34)

All games, which are microcosmic and virtual, are part of this inseparability between war and society. In *RISK*, the world and combat are both redolent in perceived actuality, simulated by the materiality of the board its recognizable visible logic. In *Ideology*, on the other hand, the fractured, dispersed world creates a stronger feeling of virtuality, of a world that exists not as physical space but as an array of delocalized opportunities. Embodying the world target, every disconnected region appears as a node in an informational network, becoming a target and

staging area for ideological spread, the advancement of a power that is itself virtual, discursive.

Ideology reduces war to mere influence, but at the same time it treats all influence as war.

It can be easy to confuse the virtual with the immaterial, but the virtual or ideological

holds most sway when materialized. Games materialize virtualities, and therefore have real

effects. Likewise, the material culture of society reflects and mediates ideology. For Chow, this

virtualization of war is both enacted and symbolized through the atomic bomb, an object/effect

materialized both in history and *Ideology* as a "Weapon of Mass Destruction." Difficult to

acquire both in reality and in the game (it is *Ideology's* highest level advancement), the atomic

bomb functions not only through its use, or even its existence, but through the dual *possibilities*

or *threats* of use and existence (in the game, this advancement is at least as powerful when

unused). As a definitive move in an ideological—virtual—war, the power of "mutually assured

destruction," as Chow points out, is more about advertising than exerting power: "Warring in

virtuality meant competing with the enemy for the stockpiling, rather than actual use, of

preclusively horrifying weaponry. To terrorize the other, one specializes in representation, in the

means of display and exhibition" (p. 33). The essence of ideology is this representational terror,

the possibility of control through means of perception, power via worldview. Thus, through the

materialized worldviews of games, which take place entirely in the strategic play of signifiers—

the many tiles, cards, and markers that represent influence—the act of war becomes an act of

representation and the act of representation becomes an act of war.

The Age of the World Game

As games become more and more integrated into everyday society, ideology will become

increasingly at and in play. In this age of the world game, awareness of the stakes, performance,

and ethics of play is vital. Like the world picture, games represent and thereby flatten, condensing complex issues into comprehensible and playable performative spaces. Despite the fictionality of simulating reality as a gameplay experience, games present rich, affective experiences that genuinely engage in ideological conditions that permeate life. Materializing war and ideology, games render the intangible tangible—able to be seen, manipulated, understood, performed, and critiqued. This conceptual reductionism is a highly ambivalent feature of games that can equally promote a false sense of conceptual mastery or effectively model (play with) otherwise unfathomable complexities. The possibility of critical play, an especial concern for the ideologically-laden category of wargames, requires careful and reflective navigation of the inseparable poles of the gameplay experience—the pleasure of uncritical, immersive play and the insight of critical, reflective play. The oxymoronic categories of 'wargame' or 'serious play' embrace the paradox of the irreconcilable yet complementary interplay between these game modes, providing an intellectual and ethical challenge for game designers, theorists, and players alike.

In settings permeated by the power/knowledge of ideology, critical thought is in a double bind in that thought is the medium of simultaneously propagation of and resistance to power. This complex, necessarily fraught interaction is a problem space to be navigated, not solved. Thus, it is something like the games that reflect and refract this duality through their conceptual reductions in representational play. This double bind of intellectual mastery is closely identified with the double bind of the world picture. By translating the world into an imagined conceptual system that enables it to be understood, identified, and mapped, the world picture allows the subject to intellectually master the world. While some mastery is implicit in all agential interactions, this intellectual mastery runs the linked risks of not recognizing or not caring about

the complications that transcend the conceptual system, a particularly frightening attitude when those 'complications' are other people. Heidegger writes that "Value is the objectification of needs as goals, wrought by a representing self-establishing within the world as picture" (p. 142), showing how the narrow focus on *winning*, present in both war and games, objectifies the activity by focusing on the result to the expense of looking at the practice. Likewise, the culture of the 'trivial' game of 'pure strategy' reduces the (ethical) consequences of war to a conceptual exercise, producing an atmosphere of moral suspension, of life on pause that distances the player from the complexities of war. Yet, this conceptual reductiveness can expose large and terrifying ideas to play, which is a necessary condition of critical reflection. Gaming's fundamental suspension of the everyday and creation of an imagined, self-contained, representational system is therefore equally suited to uncritical and critical play, providing a performative perspective on complex issues that both belies and questions their complexities.

In the age of the world game, we can play at war and war at play. This slippage is part of gaming's ambivalent status. These may be matters of semantics, but not of *mere* semantics, in that our conceptual awareness and attitude structures how we experience games and their implicit worldviews. The line between play and reality can be trod productively, but is also easy to overstep, as soldiers can more easily inflict violence when they think of war as a game and gamers can inflict violence when they think of games as war. As performative texts, games materialize and employ symbolic structures from the world as an act of play. Necessarily reductive, games can both conceal and reveal what they represent. Yet, in either case, the gaming experience matters because, as representational media, games always materialize perspectives and, as vehicles for play, always transcend those perspectives.

References

Althusser, Louis. (1971). Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses. In *Lenin and philosophy and other essays* (pp. 127-186). (Ben Brewster, Trans.). New York, NY: Monthly Review Press.

Anderson, Benedict. (2000). *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* New York, NY: Verso.

Berg, Alec and Jeff Schaffer (writers), & Ackerman, Andy (director). (1995). The label maker [Television series episode]. In Larry David and Jerry Seinfeld (creators), *Seinfeld.* Los Angeles, CA: Castle Rock Entertainment.

Chow, Rey. (2006). *The age of the world target: Self-referentiality in war, theory, and comparative work*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Dyer-Witheford, Nick and Greig de Peuter. (2009). *Games of empire: Global capitalism and video games*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Hasbro (1999) *RISK: The game of global domination.* 40th anniversary collector's edition. [Rulebook], Pawtucket, RI: Hasbro.

Heidegger, Martin. (1977) The age of the world picture. In *The question concerning technology and other essays* (pp. 115-154). (William Lovitt, Trans.). New York, NY: Harper Torchbooks.

Huizinga, Johan. (1950) *Homo Ludens: A study in the play element of culture.* Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Kaiser, Matthew. (2012). *The world in play: Portraits of a Victorian concept*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Parks, Andrew. (2009). *Ideology: The war of ideas.* Second edition. [Rulebook], Mahopac, NY:

Z-Man Games.