

Can Conflict be Fun? Issues in Creating an Accurate and Playable Representation of History

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Games have the potential to be effective historical representations. A game can allow for interaction between players within a historically specific context, which can broaden the players' understanding of context and reaction within that framework. Through this interaction, players can get a sense of how decisions are made and how these decisions can shape the course of history. The multivalent nature of history can also be recreated through games, as the player navigates through the myriad factors that influence history and decision making, which is not easily accessible in a traditional narrative. Although games based on history usually maintain some chronological anchors, such as a beginning and end date, games can also unmoor historical events from the narrative timeline of history. This structure challenges the idea of inevitability often associated with traditional narrative, as well as allowing players to construct their own narratives.¹ Although largely unused in the field of professional history, games provide a place for post-structural analysis of history that could potentially add to historiographic debates.²

¹ William Uricchio. "Simulation, History, and Computer Games." *Handbook of computer game studies* (pp. 327–338), ed. J. Raessens & J. Goldstein. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 327.

² Niall Ferguson, a well-known "counterfactual" historian, uses games to test his counterfactual theories. See Clive Thompson. "Why a Famous Counterfactual Historian Loves Making History With Games." *Wired*, 21 May 2007. (http://www.wired.com/gaming/virtualworlds/commentary/games/2007/05/gamefrontiers_0521)

Game designers are aware of the historical possibilities presented by games. As Sid Meier, creator of the popular *Civilization* series, says, “We’re not trying to duplicate history. We’re trying to provide you with the tools, the elements of history, and let you see how it would work if you took over.”³ Most game designers show this sensitivity to the fact that games are imperfect representations of history, but work within these constraints to create games that could add a new dimension to traditional historiographical debates. In presenting these elements of history as variables players can manipulate, designers navigate between the twin necessities of accuracy and playability. *Twilight Struggle*, a board game based on the Cold War, is an example of this contentious relationship. Jason Matthews, one of the creators, acknowledges that the game is not a perfect representation of the Cold War, but that his ultimate goal was to combine research and the mechanics of game play in order to “put players in the perspective of the protagonists [the United States and the Soviet Union].”⁴ In creating the game, Matthews strove to craft rules that were “both comprehensive and flexible” in order to work around the “problems with politics” inherent in the historiographical debates.⁵ In order to achieve this goal, Matthews moves as far away as possible from providing reasons behind why things happened in the Cold War, or even why the Cold War developed as a conflict, in order to create *Twilight Struggle*. However, Matthews wanted to create a game that was also historically accurate. In doing so, Matthews inherently creates a game that takes a

³ Quoted in Uricchio, 330.

⁴ Jason Matthews, interview with Erik Arneson. (<http://boardgames.about.com/od/twilightstruggle/a/interview.htm>)

⁵ Matthews, interview with Arneson.

stand within the historiographic debates, even though the creators attempted to disengage the game from the historiography. In so doing, the game combines elements of realist, revisionist, and post-revisionist historiographical arguments. In this paper, I will provide a brief synopsis of *Twilight Struggle*, analyze what arguments the game makes about the Cold War, examine how it succeeds in the creators' stated aims, and argue that it adds to our understanding of the Cold War conflict. Although the game is largely successful in recreating the politically charged atmosphere of the conflict, it could improve its representation of history. I will conclude by pointing out some areas that are lacking and suggesting some changes that would not contradict the creators' desire to put the players in the position of the protagonists nor detract from the playability of the game.

Playing By the Rules: The Mechanics of *Twilight Struggle*

Twilight Struggle is a two-player, card-driven strategy game that puts the United States and the Soviet Union in competition with each other for control of the world. The object of the game is to dominate the board and out-compete your opponent. A player can win in one of four ways: getting 20 "victory points," controlling more countries and regions than the other player, gaining complete control of Europe, or having the other player take the DEFCON level down to one (Thermonuclear war). The game is broken into 10 turns, which represent approximately three to five years of history. These turns are further divided into six or seven action rounds. Both players play one card each round, or six or seven times per turn.

The playing field of the game is a map of the world divided into regions, such as Southeast Asia, Western Europe, and Africa. Each nation within a region has a “stability number,” indicating how much influence is needed to control that country, or cause it to defect to one side if already controlled by an opponent. The stability ratings range from a high stability of five, for countries such as Great Britain, down to the lowest stability of one, for countries such as Zaire. Countries with a purple box denote their status as a “battle ground country.” These countries gain their status by either being recognized as a regional power or as a site of an actual military conflict.

The mechanics of the game are not motivated by the moving of pieces nor the rolling of dice, but rather by “event cards”. Each card is associated with an event that occurred in the Cold War, such as N.A.T.O. or the rise of Polish Solidarity, all of which have a numerical value (called operations points) that correspond to their relative influence in the Cold War struggle, ranging from one (low) to four (high). All of the cards are associated with the U.S., the U.S.S.R., or both, depending on who ultimately benefits from the card’s event. For example, the N.A.T.O. card has an operation point value of four, and benefits the United States, as the United States gains influence and power in Western Europe. Therefore, this card is designated as a United States card. Neutral cards can benefit whoever plays them. Each player starts with seven randomly chosen cards, which the player can use as the event depicted or for the operations points in order to stage a coup in a country or reduce his opponent’s influence in a country. If a player plays an event card associated with his country for operations points, then the event on the card does not occur. For example, the Soviet Union can choose to play the Warsaw Pact card,

which is a Soviet card, for points in order to coup a country. In this case, the Warsaw Pact event does not occur. However, if a player draws a card that is not associated with his country, he can play the card for operations points, but the event still takes place. If the United States had drawn the Warsaw Pact card, the United States player could use the card for operations points, but the event would still occur and the Soviet Union would benefit. Each player ends up playing about six cards per turn (one per action round), and around seven or eight in the mid- to late- war period. From the event cards to the physical structure of the game board, the key driving force behind the conflict in *Twilight Struggle* is political influence.

Between International Relations and History: A Synthetic Argument for the Cold War

While Jason Matthews argues that, in creating *Twilight Struggle*, he wanted to create a game that would be largely detached from the debates about the Cold War in the historiography.⁶ Nevertheless, the game does make an implicit historiographic argument in its structure and mechanics, which is a mainly realist explanation for the Cold War. It should not be surprising that Matthews, trained in political science and international relations in the 1980s, would create a game that sets up a traditional, realist argument for the Cold War. Political scientists studying international relations developed the realist

⁶ Matthews, interview.

interpretation of Cold War history to create a model to predict international behavior.⁷ Political scientists analyzed the diplomatic, military, and economic relationships of the Soviet Union and United States to each other and to other states in order to determine future behavior. However, certain elements of the game's structure take from revisionist and post-revisionist arguments made by historians seeking to contextualize the conflict. These two approaches broadened questions about each superpower and other states, as well as looking at other factors beyond the 45-year period of the Cold War in order to understand and explain the conflict. The combination of an international relations and history approach taken by *Twilight Struggle* partially fulfills a need in the historiography suggested by Richard Ned Lebow.⁸ Lebow argues, "One of the major methodological weaknesses of the field" is that "very few scholars are preoccupied with studying the categories which *others* deem to be important."⁹ This refusal to examine the other categories of analysis weakens the conclusions that scholars reach, but *Twilight Struggle* does incorporate some elements of the major competing interpretations in the structure of the game. This synthesis, combined with the mechanics of game play, adds a nuanced approach to the debates about the history of the Cold War.

Through the structure and game play, *Twilight Struggle* upholds six key elements of the traditionalist approach. The first way in which the game maintains a realist approach is in the periodization of the conflict. Rather than beginning the Cold War

⁷ Odd Arne Westad. *Reviewing the Cold War*. (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 9.

⁸ Westad, *Reviewing*.

⁹ Westad, *Reviewing*, 9. Author's emphasis. Martin Leffler also addresses this lack of synthesis in his article in the same collection, "Bringing it Together: The Parts and the Whole," *Reviewing*, 47.

within the context of the creation of the Soviet Union, as many revisionists and post-revisionists do, realists point to the immediate aftermath of the Second World War as the starting point of the conflict.¹⁰ A well-known realist, Thomas A. Bailey, makes this point clear in his book *America Faces Russia*, in which he blames Soviet expansionism at the end of the Second World War for the beginning of the Cold War.¹¹ Arthur Schlesinger makes a similar argument when he writes that the “moral antagonism, arising in the wake of the Second World War between two rigidly hostile blocs,” marked the beginning of the Cold War.¹² In a similar vein, the game begins in 1945, after “unlikely allies slew the Nazi beast” and “amidst the ruins of Europe... the two new superpowers fight to make the world safe for their own ideologies and ways of life.”¹³ The event cards also suggest a realist periodization of the war. Although there is some overlap within the cards, the three-period structure of Early, Mid, and Late War follows a realist understanding of the conflict.¹⁴ Charles Reynolds, a political theorist, outlines the three orthodox periods in his article “Explaining the Cold War.”¹⁵ The first period, which “most closely fits the bi-polar model,” runs from 1946 to 1955 and was marked by containment and consolidation of power in Europe, as well as the development of the N.A.T.O. and Warsaw Pact

¹⁰ Charles S. Meier, *The Cold War in Europe* (Princeton, Markus Wiener Publishers, 1991), x-xi.

¹¹ Thomas A. Bailey, *America Faces Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1950)

¹² Arthur Schlesinger, “Origins of the Cold War,” *Foreign Affairs* 46 (1967), 22.

¹³ Matthews and Gupta, 1.

¹⁴ Some cards, such as the “Olympics” card, is recurring, and is therefore an event card in the Early, Mid, and Late War periods.

¹⁵ Charles Reynolds, “Explaining the Cold War,” *Deconstructing and Reconstructing the Cold War*, ed. Alan P. Dobson, Shahin Malik, and Graham Evans. (Aldershot: Ashgate: 1999), 48. This periodization is technically neo-realist, as it developed after the end of the Cold War. This periodization can also be found in the introduction to *The Cold War in Europe*, although it is subdivided into 9 periods, not three.

alliances.¹⁶ The event cards mainly focus on this alliance building and events in Europe from 1946 to 1955. The second phase ran until 1972, and witnessed the expansion of the Cold War conflict into Central and South America, as well as Southeast Asia.¹⁷ Reynolds argues that the United States and the Soviet Union began development of the ICBMs and thermo-nuclear weapons as the main basis of security, and the event cards faithfully follow this development, as cards such as “Missile Envy” and “Arms Race” demonstrate. The mid war period of the game runs a bit later than 1972, taking the period into the late 1970s, but the expansion of the conflict into other parts of the world and the length of time are analogous to the orthodox periodization. The last period ends in 1991 with the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the re-unification of Germany. This period, Reynolds contends, was marked by the abandonment of deterrence and the search for security cooperation.¹⁸ The event cards strike an even balance between the Soviet and United States in the late war deck (nine for each country), suggesting this level playing field and the abandonment of deterrence. Although the game does not take the chronology up to the end of the Soviet Union, merely to the fall of the Berlin Wall, it maintains a realist starting point for the Cold War, as well as a neo-realist periodization of the conflict.

Realists argue that the aggression of the Soviet Union was the reason behind the Cold War conflict, which is also maintained by *Twilight Struggle*. Schlesinger argues that the “orthodox American view...has been that the Cold War was a brave and essential

¹⁶ Reynolds, 45.

¹⁷ Reynolds, 45.

¹⁸ Reynolds, 45.

response of free men to communist aggression.”¹⁹ Realists maintain the U.S.S.R. was the aggressor, taking on the role of a militarily maintained empire, and that Stalin and the Soviets actively sought conflict.²⁰ The game does not make explicit claims about Stalin’s aggression, but the U.S.S.R. does start the conflict. In the game, the Soviet Union initiates the first turn, and the United States responds. The rest of the turn then follows, with the Soviet Union initiating an action and the United States responding. The event cards for the Early War period also favor the Soviet Union numerically, with 14 Soviet cards as opposed to 12 American, which furthers the argument that the Soviet Union was an aggressive threat in the Early War period requiring American response. The numerical superiority in the event cards suggests that the Soviets had more aggressive intentions during the early war period, as the cards allow for aggressive Soviet behavior and threatening Soviet influence. The combination of early war event cards and having the Soviets start the game makes a clear argument for Soviet aggression as the originator of the Cold War.

The third argument the game makes about the Cold War is the inherent bi-polarity of the conflict. Arthur Schlesinger maintains that in the aftermath of World War II, only two viable powers remained, the Soviet Union and the United States, which led to competition and rivalry for power and hegemony.²¹ The game maintains this bi-polarity, as the game requires two players, with each player taking on the role of the competing super powers. Other countries are not involved in the conflict in an interactive way,

¹⁹ Schlesinger, 25.

²⁰ See Schlesinger, 22 and Bailey, *America Faces Russia*.

²¹ Schlesinger, 22.

which strengthens the concept of bi-polarity; the center acts upon the periphery, rather than the periphery having an active role in the conflict. These peripheral countries only come into play as passive recipients of superpower influence or as an event card to be played by a superpower. By being reduced to a mere event, the country is stripped of agency within the world of global politics and diplomacy. Further, the operations points associated with periphery events, such as “Romanian Abdication” or “Fidel,” are very low, never exceeding two points, with the exception of those few that deal with several countries or entire regions, such as “Eastern European Unrest.” The low value of these event cards suggests the relative insignificance of periphery events on the core of the bi-polar conflict. The one exception is China, which has the special designation of being abstracted into its own card, passed from one player to the other as it is played. Even though China played a significant role in the Cold War, it acted independently. The game denies China this independence, as China becomes a card to be played and passed back and forth. By not allowing other countries to take active part in the conflict, the game makes the argument that the Cold War was bi-polar, rather than multi-polar or multi-national.²²

Another point that speaks to a realist argument for the Cold War grows out of this bi-polarity. As articulated by realist Kenneth Waltz, bi-polarity, nuclear weapons, deterrence, and the lack of any major war meant that the Cold War conflict was a period

²² Revisionists such as Geir Lundestad make the argument that the conflict was multi-polar, and that the decisions of other countries influenced the shape and direction of the Cold War. See Geir Lundestad, “How (Not) to Study the Origins of the Cold War,” in *Reviewing the Cold War: Approaches, Interpretations, and Theory*, ed. Odd Arne Westad (London: Frank Cass, 2000), 64-80.

of stability.²³ The game upholds each of these points in arguing for the relative stability of the period. I have already discussed the bi-polarity of the conflict, but the relationship between nuclear weapons and deterrence is a major element in the mechanics of game. The threat of nuclear war, indicated by the DEFCON level, keeps players from pursuing a strategy of unrelenting aggression. Each military operation brings the DEFCON level down by one, limiting where both players may invade. For example, at DEFCON 4, neither superpower may make a coup attempt in Europe. Each subsequent degradation of the DEFCON level restricts action further. The ultimate deterrence, however, is the threat of losing the game. A player who degrades the DEFCON level to DEFCON 1 loses the game. The threat of thermonuclear war therefore deters both players from staging coups or performing other military actions, even though the game requires players to perform a minimum of military action in each turn. This structure suggests a fine balance between the perceived need to maintain influence in other countries while not pushing the other player too far or moving too far towards DEFCON 1. At the end of each turn, the DEFCON level is brought back up by one, if it is below five, which also indicates a sense of stability. The ability of the players to remove or ameliorate a sense of danger indicates the security created by a stable system. Because of the two-player nature of the conflict, the DEFCON level is easier to maintain, combining the arguments for bi-polarity and the threat of thermonuclear war into an argument for stability through deterrence.

But how did this inherent bi-polarity that allowed for stability develop? Realists argue that one of the causes behind the bi-polarization of the conflict was the centrality of

²³ Kenneth Waltz, "War in Neorealist Theory" in *The Origin and Prevention of Major Wars*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg and Theodore K. Rabb (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 51.

the “German question” at the end of the Second World War, the fifth point of the game’s realist argument. Kenneth Waltz suggests that the collapse of Germany after WWII led to a power vacuum in Central Europe.²⁴ The Soviet Union attempted to exert their influence in the Central and Eastern European region as a result, forcing the United States to respond. Thus, the issue of political influence in Europe was central to the early war period, and would be a dominating factor throughout the rest of the conflict. *Twilight Struggle* follows this reasoning, as one of the ways in which either player can win the game is to decisively control Europe. Europe, as a region, also contains the highest number of possible victory points, making it an important area for both the Soviet and United States player to consider in strategic planning. The game extends the conflict throughout the rest of the world, but maintains the centrality of Europe and the German question throughout the entirety of the game.

The last way in which the game makes a realist argument involves the overall politics of the period. Although ideology is cited as a motivating force behind the Cold War in the introduction to the rulebook, the structure of the game makes the argument that the superpowers were instead engaged in realpolitik.²⁵ Jon Mearscheimer, a political realist, contends that the Soviet Union and the United States were engaged in a conflict to control lesser countries in order to dominate the world.²⁶ Because of the high level of abstraction inherent in the game’s construction, players end up fighting to maintain a

²⁴ Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison Wesley, 1979) and “The Emerging Structure of International Politics,” *International Security* 18 (Fall, 1993).

²⁵ Matthews and Gupta, 1.

²⁶ John Mearscheimer, “Back to the future: instability in Europe after the Cold War” *International Security* 15 (Summer, 1990)

balance of power and levels of influence in foreign countries. There is never a sense that the United States invades a country in order to set up a capitalistic society; rather, the United States places a numerical marker within a country in order to control the country and gain its associated points. The conflict in the game is not over the merits of capitalism or communism; rather, it is over dominance, influence, and edging your opponent out of countries in order to win points. Threat perception and the importance of influence in other countries in *Twilight Struggle* combine to make the argument for realpolitik as a motivating factor behind foreign policy, rather than ideology.

Although *Twilight Struggle* upholds a seemingly traditional realist interpretation of the Cold War, it also challenges and undermines this argument through its structure and integration of revisionist and post-revisionist viewpoints. The major challenge that the game presents to the realist theories of the Cold War is the use of chance and randomness. By drawing cards and using dice, the game challenges a model of predictability by adding an element of randomness that pushes the options for both players beyond the expected. Some obvious options may never be available to players; for example, the United States may never get a chance to add influence in Western Europe if the Soviet player draws the “Marshall Plan” and holds on to it for the entirety of the game. Even though it would seem predictable, within the realist argument of U.S. reaction to Soviet expansion that the United States would influence Western Europe in order to “stem the red tide,” the option may never be available and the predictability of the behavior overturned. The use of chance therefore offers the greatest challenge to the

idea that the Cold War can be explained through models and paradigms, and encourages players to consider that the outcome of a conflict cannot be predicted.

The structure of the game also includes three specific elements of revisionist and post-revisionist arguments about the Cold War. First, the randomness of the game makes it very difficult to develop a long-term player strategy, as players must play to the cards in their hands and react to the actions of the other player. The game is fast-paced and can change quickly, forcing players to think tactically, rather than strategically. This lack of a long-term plan challenges the traditional narrative of Soviet aggression and long-term plans for global domination. As argued by Melvyn Leffler, a famous revisionist, the Soviet Union did not appear to have a “definite design for the economies and societies of Eastern Europe” and that Stalin’s “foreign policy is not as much inexplicable in its parts as incoherent in its whole,” suggesting that there was no cohesive long term plan on the Soviet side.²⁷ The players of *Twilight Struggle* end up following a piecemeal approach in their own “foreign policy” as they respond to perceived threats from the opposing side and to the luck of the draw. The impossibility of long-term strategy, as presented by the game, maintains a revisionist argument while challenging the realist argument that Soviet aggression was premeditated.

The game also incorporates two post-revisionist arguments: the first is about the origins of the conflict, and the second is about the nature of the conflict. Although I argued above that the game makes a traditional realist argument for the outbreak of the

²⁷ Melvyn Leffler, “Inside Enemy Archives: The Cold War Reopened,” *The Cold War, Vol. 1* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 209-210. For another argument about the lack of long-term strategy, see Ralph Summy, “Challenging the Emergent Orthodoxy,” in *Why the Cold War Ended*, ed. Ralph Summy and Michael E. Salla (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1995), 10.

Cold War, it simultaneously makes a post-revisionist argument within the first few rounds of the first turn. Post-revisionists such as Geir Lundestad argue that the Cold War was not the fault of one side or the other; rather, the Cold War was an interactive affair, as the United States and the Soviet Union reacted to each other's actions.²⁸ The game maintains that the Soviet Union took the first action, and that it had a slightly more aggressive advantage, as the event cards demonstrate, but the Soviet Union is not overbearing in the first turn. The Soviet player cannot dominate the first rounds of the game, because the game is structured for interactivity from the start. The United States is equally involved in the first, and all subsequent turns, and can even take control of a turn during the "headline phase."²⁹ The inherent interactivity of *Twilight Struggle* argues that the two superpowers were equally engaged in the conflict from the beginning, and that an action initiated by one began a chain reaction of action, reaction, and counteraction. This interactivity undermines the seemingly traditional argument about Soviet aggression that the game designers make for the origins of the Cold War, as well as agreeing with the arguments made by post-revisionists.

The second way in which the game integrates the post-revisionist approach relates to the nature of the conflict. Post-revisionists, such as Lundestad, contend that both the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. were imperialistic, countering the realist argument that points only

²⁸ Geir Lundestad, "Why Was There A Cold War?" Cold War Forum and Cold War Project. (<http://hibo.no/asf/Cold-War/about.htm>)

²⁹ The headline phase begins each turn. Each player selects a card from their hand and plays it as an event. The card with the higher operations value begins the round. In the case of a tie, the United States player begins the turn. Matthews and Gupta, 3.

to Soviet expansionism as a cause for the conflict.³⁰ Lundestad argues that the Soviet Union and the United States maintained different types of empires, as the Soviets had to rely on force to maintain its empire, whereas the United States' imperialism was "more in accordance with the will of the local populations," and was "welcomed."³¹ The game loses this finer distinction between the two types of empire, flattening them into near equivalency, but it does make the argument that both the Soviet Union and the United States were empires. The game does not allow players to merely maintain power; instead, they are forced to constantly expand and exert control over other countries. The game requires players to perform military operations in every turn, and players can lose points for failing to attempt coups in other countries, thus arguing that both countries wanted to expand their dominance into other regions. This imperialistic nature of the conflict is further articulated by the victory point system, which maintains that the Cold War was a zero-sum game. There are a fixed number of victory points, and either the United States can have 20 and the Soviet Union zero, or vice-versa. The concept of a zero-sum game fits in with the concept of both powers fighting an imperialistic war, as the countries that the two superpowers vied for control of were fixed commodities. While the game flattens out the distinction between the type of imperialism that the United States and the Soviet Union embodied, it does a good job of pointing out that the war was not merely fought because of Soviet expansionism, but because of the interaction between Soviet and American expansionism.

³⁰ Geir Lundestad, "Empire by Invitation? The United States and Western Europe, 1945-1952" in *The Cold War in Europe*.

³¹ Lundestad, "Empire," 145.

Although *Twilight Struggle* maintains a fairly traditional argument for the causes and outbreak of the Cold War, it incorporates some of the counterpoints made by revisionists and post-revisionists that seriously challenge realist viewpoints, creating a more synthetic argument than it would first appear. This synthetic approach broadens questions about the causes and course of the Cold War conflict, as it allows players to consider vastly differing answers to the same questions. This approach could possibly lead to new conclusions about the causes that led to the Cold War, or reaffirm the belief in the nature of the conflict as it occurred. By allowing players to play out multiple interpretations of the Cold War conflict at the same time, the game can lead to a greater understanding of how these interpretations can fit together, even while they seem to contradict each other. For example, the game argues that the Soviet Union was to blame for initiating the Cold War, while at the same time arguing that interactivity led to the creation of the conflict. This synthesis allows both interpretations to co-exist, and players can decide for themselves if the Cold War mainly because of Soviet aggression, interactivity between the U.S. and U.S.S.R., or if the truth lies somewhere in between.

Victory and Defeat: The success and failure of *Twilight Struggle* as a representation

In assessing the success and failure of *Twilight Struggle* as a representation of the Cold War, there are three main issues that must be addressed. The first is whether or not the game succeeds in its stated goals. Although the game designers were unable to create a historically accurate game completely divorced from historiographical debate, they do

succeed in their other stated goal: to put the players in the position of the protagonists of the bi-polar Cold War.³² The game does achieve this aim, as well as fitting in with post-revisionist arguments made by Michael McGwire and Marc Trachtenburg for the importance of Soviet and U.S. threat perception as a motivating force behind Cold War foreign policy.³³ Threat perception is a key component to the argument that the Cold War was an interactive affair, as the United States and the Soviet Union tactically responded to the perceived threats each made. Examples of threat perception and response include the buildup of nuclear arms and the placement of influence in key areas to maintain control in those areas. The game follows this argument for threat perception and tactical response quite clearly. Scoring cards, which allow players to gain victory points by counting up the number of countries under control and gaining an associated number of points, are shuffled in with the rest of the deck. Players cannot hold scoring cards through several turns. The scoring card must be played in the turn in which it is drawn, unlike event cards. Players holding scoring cards typically place more influence or stage more coups in regions for which they hold the scoring card, raising the suspicion of their opponents. The opponent, in response, also places influence or stages coups in that area. The mechanics and structure of the game thus force players to develop suspicions of each other's motives and respond appropriately, even if there does not seem to be an immediate benefit. The game reinforces the idea that if your opponent is in a region, there must be a good reason for him to be there; therefore, you had better place influence there

³² Matthews, interview.

³³ Michael McGwire, "National Security and Soviet Foreign Policy" and Marc Trachtenburg, "American Policy and the Shifting Nuclear Balance," in *The Origins of the Cold War*.

as well! The game creates a fast-paced and tension-filled atmosphere while promoting the idea that perception was a key aspect of foreign policy decisions, succeeding in the designers' stated aim.

The second issue that bears upon the success of *Twilight Struggle* as a representation is how well it succeeds as a challenge to traditional historiographical representation. In the introduction, I proposed some of the ways in which games could be effective historical representations. *Twilight Struggle* represents the positive post-structural aspect of gaming as representation, but fails to represent the multivalent nature of history well. Although the game maintains the traditional beginning and end points of the Cold War, as well as following a realist periodization of the conflict, the game succeeds in unmooring the events of the Cold War from their traditional narrative timeline. Within the structure of the game, events such as the Korean War might occur in the 1960s, the 1980s, or never. By playing with the chronology of the conflict, the game designers challenge the idea of inevitability that can be present in a traditional narrative. When events within the deck do not occur, the importance of these events for the ultimate outcome of the Cold War is also challenged, problematizing the idea of what makes an event historically important. For example, the United States can still win *Twilight Struggle*, even if the Marshall Plan is never played, which leads players to look at the other reasons why the United States won in their particular game scenario, and what implications this could have for the actual history of the period.³⁴ The negation of

³⁴ This also falls in line with some of the debates about the actual effectiveness of the Marshall Plan within the historiography. See Alan S. Milward, *The Reconstruction of Western Europe, 1945-1951* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1984).

inevitability and importance of historical events provides a serious challenge to the historiography of the Cold War, as it argues against the idea of decisiveness and determining factors. In this way, *Twilight Struggle* succeeds as a tool for re-interpreting history and debate.

Although the post-structural elements of *Twilight Struggle* allow for a nuanced interpretation of Cold War history, the game does not take full advantage of the possibilities that the game structure presents for representing history. Within a game, multiple factors can be represented simultaneously, demonstrating the myriad elements that shape the course of history, which are not easily represented in a straightforward narrative. *Twilight Struggle* implicitly acknowledges that economics, politics, and military maneuvers are all key elements of the history of the Cold War through the influence and stability points. However, the abstraction of the combination of these elements into points flattens them into a simplistic argument for mere political influence. Culture, economics, domestic and foreign politics, and national security are some of the many influences that shape foreign policy. By presenting these as factors as variables that players could manipulate, the game could add more layers of complexity, deepen the context, and provide a more accurate historical representation. In doing this, the game could take better advantage of its possibilities as a historical representation.

The final issue that should be examined in the analysis of *Twilight Struggle* is how accurate it is in depicting the specific history of the Cold War. While the game is a useful tool for challenging and reinterpreting Cold War historiography, the representation of the actual conflict misses some of the important elements of the conflict that would help

players have a better understanding of the actual history. One of the major problems with the game is the presentation the Cold War as a fully formed event that emerged out of the aftermath of the Second World War, rather than as a conflict that developed over time. The game starts with a divided board in 1945, rather than giving players the sense that the conflict between the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. began developing at the conferences at the end of World War II and escalated through the end of the 1940s.³⁵ Although this structure fits in with the game designers' desires to avoid the debates over the origins of the Cold War, the selection of a starting point and of a completely bifurcated world makes an implicit argument about the beginning of the conflict. The division of the world makes the conflict inevitable, instead of one of many outcomes that could develop from the aftermath of WWII. In the interests of playability, the game designers may have chosen to remove the negotiations and conversations that the Big Three had at the close of World War II, but allowing the players to navigate through the diplomatic dealings of the conferences would give them a greater sense of how the Cold War developed. This mechanism would also allow them, in the words of Sid Meier, to "see how it would work if [they] took over."³⁶ By moving the conflict back in time and making permitting an uncertain outcome, *Twilight Struggle* could take better advantage of the opportunities for representation that a game presents while more accurately representing history.

The lack of the Yalta Conference is one of the key events missing from the event card deck for *Twilight Struggle*, but there are many other events that are missing as well.

³⁵ David S. Painter and Melvyn Leffler, "Introduction," *The Origins of the Cold War*.

³⁶ Quoted in Uricchio, 330.

For example, China's revolution in 1949 and rebirth as a communist regime was an important element of the Cold War struggle.³⁷ The game takes the revolution out of its context and starts the game with the U.S.S.R. holding the China card, denying China's independence or revolution. China was an active and independent participant in the Cold War, supplying manpower and support for revolutions in many Asian and Southeast Asian countries.³⁸ The game abstracts China into a card that allows for additional influence placement in Europe, but at no time in the game do players get the sense of China as a national entity with independent interests and conflicts with Moscow.³⁹ Other events, such as the construction of the Berlin Wall in 1961, Détente in the early 1970s, the conflict in Afghanistan in 1979, and the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 (despite the end date of the game) are all missing from the event card deck. This exclusion can lead to discussion about the relative importance of certain events, just as the randomness of the event card deck can do, but the lack of these key events is problematic. While historians, students, and political scientists can debate the importance of specific events in the narrative of the Cold War, less knowledgeable players will not get the full picture of the Cold War that the game attempts to depict. In the designer notes, Matthews and Gupta write, "wherever there were compromises to make between realism [historical accuracy] and playability, we sided with playability."⁴⁰ If the events were excluded in the interests

³⁷ Shuguang Zhang, "Threat Perception and Chinese Foreign Policy," *Origins*, 276-293. See also John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 160-161. China's involvement in the Cold War conflict was far more complex than the abstracted card portrays.

³⁸ Zhang, "Threat Perception and Chinese Foreign Policy" and Michael Hunt and Steven Levine, "Revolutionary Movements In Asia and the Cold War", *Origins*, 257-276.

³⁹ Zhang, 276-77.

⁴⁰ Matthews and Gupta, 26.

of playability, the game designers could include supplemental timelines of the Cold War, a suggested bibliography, or even a few pages on why they chose to exclude certain events. Not only would this information be interesting in the interests of historical game design, but it would also be informative for players looking to get a fuller picture of the Cold War.

Room For Improvement: Possible Solutions to the Problems of *Twilight Struggle*

In the previous section, I suggested some of the ways in which *Twilight Struggle* could be improved in order to make it a more successful representation of the Cold War. In playing *Twilight Struggle* and in thinking about the history that it represents, I developed some other suggestions that would address some of the problems identified above, take better advantage of the possibilities of a game as historical representation, and hopefully remain sensitive to the game designers' aims. The first suggestion I have would be to change the event cards. Currently, the event cards present an event as something that has already taken place with an outcome that is favorable to either the Soviet Union or the United States. The operations points, as well as the designation of whom they benefit, make a case for inevitability. Instead of having an event in which players do not know the outcome, the event card tells players what the outcome is. Instead of having an event with a predetermined outcome, the event cards simply could be a problem that the superpowers will have to face. To demonstrate how this would work within the game, I will use the "Marshall Plan" event as it is now, and how it could

be changed to be a more effective representation. In the game, the “Marshall Plan” has an operations point value of 4, and it benefits the United States. The event allows the United States to place influence in seven, non-U.S.S.R. controlled, Western European countries. The structure of this event card makes the argument that the Marshall Plan worked and that it had the effect of increasing U.S. influence in Western Europe. Further, the event card does not give any sense as to why the United States decided to implement the Marshall Plan, what it did for these Western European countries, or why it allowed the U.S. to place influence there. Instead of presenting an event and its outcome, I think that the game could be more effective as a representation if the event cards were something to which the two players had to respond. The Marshall Plan was a response to the perceived economic instability of post-WWII Europe, and the fear that this economic instability would lead to increased communism and Soviet influence in Western Europe.⁴¹ The event card could thus be “Economic Instability in Western Europe.” Players could then respond to this problem in a variety of ways. Instead of holding a hand filled with the pre-determined events of the Cold War, players would hold a hand of possible ways in which to respond to “Economic Instability,” including economic aid, diplomatic envoys, military action, propaganda, and a myriad of other options. Each of these cards could have a cost to play, determined either by the rules or by the specific event card. Players could also play a combination of cards in an effort to respond to the event. The resulting influence could be determined by a combination of the amount spent on the effort and the roll of the dice. The use of dice would add in the element of uncertainty that accompanies

⁴¹ Michael Hogan, “The Marshall Plan,” *The Cold War in Europe*, 203-240.

any effort, as well as more accurately depicting the debates about the significance of “key events,” such as the Marshall Plan. This proposal is a bit more complex than the current structure of the game, but it takes fuller advantage of the possibilities of gaming as demonstrating a panoply of influential factors and being more historically accurate. It would also allow players to interact more fully with both the historical context and each other within that framework.

The second way in which *Twilight Struggle* could improve its representation is to make the game more multinational. Instead of abstracting China into a card, China could become another player. It would be impossible to have a player for each country, as it would render the game unwieldy, but players could represent regions of the world, such as Western Europe and South America. These countries could have special sets of cards that would allow them to influence the two superpowers, as well as react to the decisions made by the superpowers. Continuing the example above of “Economic Instability,” the Western Europe player could decide which superpower’s “offer,” or combination of solutions, was most appealing. This would add in a sense of interactivity and diplomacy and be more historically accurate, as well as allowing the periphery to act upon the center. In so doing, *Twilight Struggle* would increase interactivity, accuracy, and allow for more players.⁴²

Conclusion

⁴² Another option would be to have two sets of rules, which would allow for both two player and multiplayer set ups. This would allow for the incorporation of both sets of suggestions.

Twilight Struggle represents a massive undertaking for a historical representation. Although it attempts to disengage itself from the historiographical debates, it makes an implicit argument that at first seems realist, but also offers significant challenges to the realist approach. Through the structure of the game and in the incorporation of revisionist and post-revisionist viewpoints, *Twilight Struggle* offers a more synthetic overview of the Cold War than would seem possible in a heavily abstracted representation of a complex conflict. On the whole, the game succeeds in its aims of recreating the atmosphere of the Cold War era, broadening our understanding of the tactical responsiveness and threat perception that shaped U.S. and Soviet foreign policy. The game also challenges us to question the idea of narrative and inevitability in the Cold War, as well as the importance of “key events” presented in the historiography. However, the game does not take full advantage of the possibilities presented by gaming structure to represent the Cold War in a drastically new way, nor does it go far enough in its representation of the history. By considering the issues of historical representation and the possibilities games offer in representing history, it is possible to improve *Twilight Struggle* to take fuller advantage of the possibilities of gaming and the need for historical accuracy. I have proposed some ways in which the game could be improved. By increasing interactivity, I think that the game will still succeed in its aim of creating an atmosphere of tension and tactical planning while increasing accuracy and remaining playable. In sum, the game is an excellent tool for encouraging analysis and possible reinterpretation of the debates within the historiography, but fails as an introductory representation of the Cold War, as it lacks

several of the elements which are key to understanding the causes, course, and end of the Cold War.