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HOW TO WIN AT

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BY ERIK VAN MECHELEN

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How to Win at Diplomacy

Strategy for Face-to-Face, Online, and Tournaments

Erik van Mechelen

This book is for sale at <http://leanpub.com/wind>

This version was published on 2020-08-15



Leanpub

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To every player who has shown me I have much, much to learn.

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Acknowledgments

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How You Think > What You Think

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Also by the Author

Before Diplomacy was taken up by the famous American game designer, before it became widespread, before it was ever played by post or online, this game of cunning, deceit, and grand strategy was played in the taverns and cabarets and tunnels from Paris to Saint Petersburg by commonfolk of Europe. These are conversations on opening strategy between an aspirant and a true master of the form, one Frederico Barbosa.

...

Dearest Diplomat,

This message finds you at a tumultuous time. The Great Powers are consolidating their positions. Units, fleets and armies, are gathering at their borders, preparing for possible armed conflict.

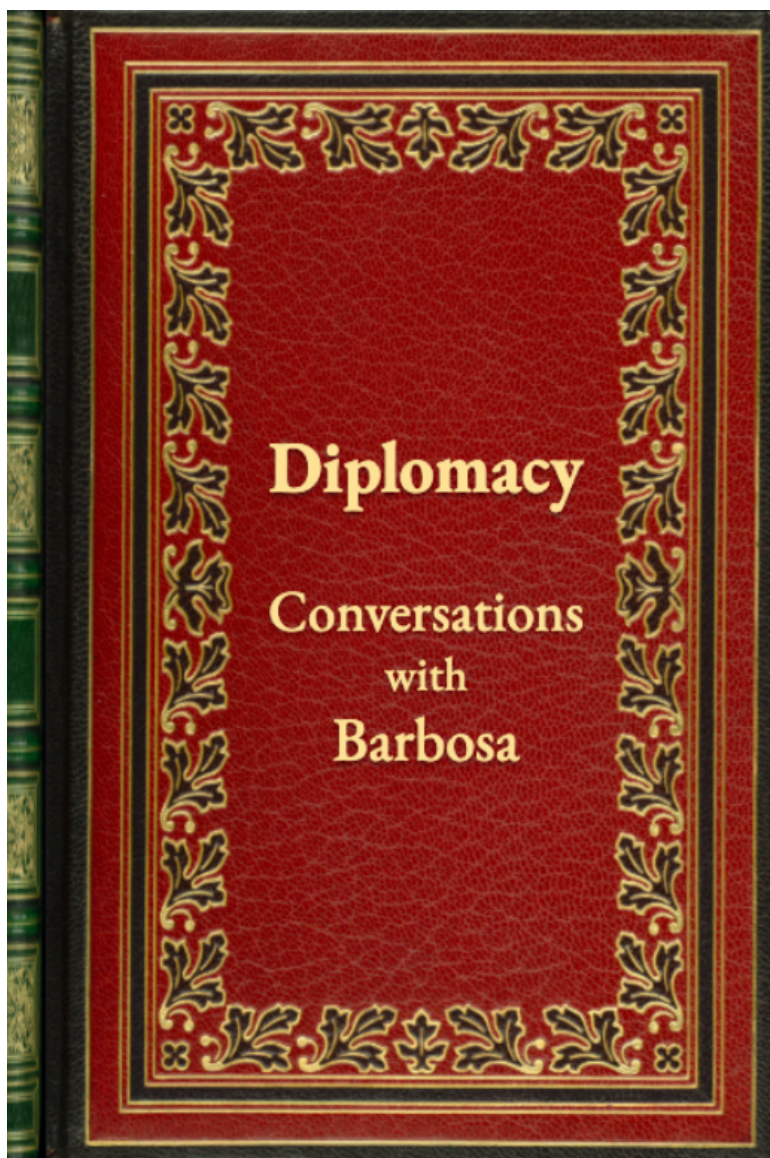
While I may be a lowly plebeian, I have eavesdropped on diplomats in my travels from the corners of cafés and from balconies above private courtyards. From speculation on information gathered in this fashion I have grown relatively rich. And in a world, mind you, where the future is difficult to predict!

...

Read a sample of [*Conversations with Barbosa*](https://leanpub.com/diplomacy)¹

The book you are reading now has much more to offer, however *Diplomacy: Conversations with Barbosa* is available as a paperback and a fun gift to young would-be Diplomacy players.

¹<https://leanpub.com/diplomacy>



Diplomacy: Conversations with Barbosa

Environment

You've decided to join a game of Diplomacy. But where exactly are you taking your talents? Are you logging into Backstabbr, suiting up for your local gaming café, or packing a suitcase for an international tournament?

(Since the novel coronavirus spread across Earth in late 2019 and early 2020, face-to-face games and tournaments are in shorter supply, but hybrid and fully online experiences have thrived.)

Choosing where to play Diplomacy and with whom is an important decision.

Perhaps the first decision is whether to play online, hybrid, or face to face. I recommend all three. Diplomacy is fun and instructive across its many guises and flavors.

Each has distinct advantages and disadvantages. The games will play differently.

I much prefer face-to-face. Richard Sharp preferred play-by-mail. You may prefer hybrid or online.

Why face-to-face? It is both the most immersive and also carries the advantage of being time-bound. The game will usually end in well under a single rotation of the Earth. After which we players can reflect on the game, analyze it, joke over blunders, and otherwise commiserate and enjoy hanging out with people who appreciate the game.

In the only other long-form book on Diplomacy, [The Game of Diplomacy](#)², Richard Sharp describes his distaste for face-to-face play. He prefers postal for more intricate strategies and detailed tactics to play out with more precision. It appears to me that online

²<https://diplomacy-archive.com/god>

today plays similar to postal, however there are key differences: the time limits per round (much shorter online) and the amount of press which may be sent (unlimited with today's internet technologies).

Sure, it's not easy to get exactly 7 players for a game. But arranging a game is far from impossible.

You would be surprised—I was!—how quickly a game can be arranged...and pretty soon you might even have club as we did in high school—imagine our teacher's surprise when she would intercept our passed notes during class!—or as we do now, a decade and a half later, in Minnesota! (Chicago's Windy City Weasels have a similar story, becoming a premier environment for face-to-face play across all of the United States these past 15+ years...and it all started with a casual pub game.) Clubs have popped into and out of existence throughout the planet since Diplomacy's inception. Lately, there seems to be an uptick. Exciting times.

Club game action is great, but face-to-face tournament play is arguably the crowning environment to test your Diplomacy skills. At a tournament, players not only get to compete across multiple games but also have the downtime between games to get to know each other and build comradery that lasts a lifetime.

One version of online play I am (or might become) partial to is a fast-paced, time-bound affair. However to my eyes, the infrastructure isn't quite there yet to support it. Perhaps the Backstabbr framework could be adapted to my preferred vision. In [episode 57 of the Diplomacy Games podcast](#)³ hosted by Amby and Kaner, Jon—one of Backstabbr's developers—mentioned the possibility of opening up their adjudication API so that others might continue to innovate in the online Diplomacy world.

Edit: In early 2020, as it became clear that COVID-19 would be keeping many of us inside our homes, the MN Diplomacy Club put on one of, if not the first, livestreamed hybrid game, using Backstabbr for adjudication and phone calls for negotiation between players. I

³<https://diplomacygames.com/interview-with-jon-from-backstabbr/>

expect there will be continued innovation as previously face-to-face tournaments transition to keep us safe while also playing a game we love.

For the sake of completion, in this book I will cover online, hybrid, and live play. See these chapters toward the book's second half.

In addition, I will discuss what kinds of players are most enjoyable to play with. From what I've observed, creating a culture where players want to return to play Diplomacy is tricky, but definitely possible, and not least because Diplomacy is such a great game. (Imagine, for a moment, how difficult it is to get a given person—including yourself—to take up any habit, let alone an entire hobby.)

My dad used to tell me, "Erik, life is full of disappointments". A ground truth if you hold to Thomas Sowell's depiction of the simplified constrained vision of human nature. Maybe offering some words of welcome that also include this sentiment would benefit very new players who expect to win or have too much fun in their first game.

In the Minnesota Diplomacy scene, we have learned much from one partial season in 2018 (6 games) and one complete season (19 games including a Championship game in 2019) and an ongoing 2020 season. A high priority is keeping the games consistently competitive and enjoyable for most if not all players. Again, enjoyment is not necessarily tied to material success, not in life or Diplomacy.

I would be remiss to leave out one more way to play: If you want to go old-school, you could send letters in the mail as press between players and each season send orders to a gamemaster who, after adjudicating the moves, sends out a letter to each player with the results. To save time, you might send adjustments in conditionally (build A Lon if I build at all). Play-by-mail was how the hobby got started in earnest before transitioning online. Email and the gamemaster's ability to publish zines made it easier for players to communicate and enjoy the great game of Diplomacy.

Playing Diplomacy Online

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The Game Conditions

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2020 Minnesota Diplomacy Club Game on Backstabbr

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Sending England North

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France to the Channel?

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Germany Onside

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The Bear

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My Spring 1901 Move Set

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Spring 1901 Orders

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Fall 1901 Begins with Russian Negotiations

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How the Game Went On, And How it Ended

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The Fundamentals

After playing a few games in high school, I read Richard Sharp's *The Game of Diplomacy*⁴. With knowledge of basic tactics from the first chapter, you'll be ready to absorb everything in this book. Be sure to pay mind to support-cutting, the scissors, braces, and the humorous but useful merry-go-round.

We will review all of that here, too, in addition to important nuances you may find scattered around the net, but consolidated here for your convenience.

Knowing what options and constraints you have allows you to get creative, to better generate strategy, to more ingeniously approach the diplomacy.

The Nature of Diplomacy

“Win if you can. Lose if you must. But always cheat.”

One of my favorite film directors, Werner Herzog, reminded me of this quote, attributed to Jesse Ventura, a WWE wrestler and former governor of my home state, Minnesota. While it may provide a catchy tagline (or even approach to good play) for a game like Diplomacy, it doesn't describe WHAT the essence of Diplomacy is.

How you think of the game of Diplomacy frames how you play it. So, it is important to ask: how are you assembling your model of what the game of Diplomacy is?

In my case, that foundation was laid through an introduction to the game in my sophomore-year high school history class, and later

⁴<https://diplomacy-archive.com/god>

through the DPJudge, through the club I setup in high school, and subsequent online and club games in Minnesota after meeting Ben Johnson, Zachary Moore, and Jake Langenfeld over a decade later. The model was picked up experientially versus theoretically. I don't recall thinking about the game abstractly, in a top-down approach, but rather from a bottom-up approach through game after game with a variety of players. To think about the game from a top-down level, I have to sit apart from the overpowering models of that bottom-up approach, which isn't easy to do.

But here goes:

For me, that Diplomacy is a 7-player game focused on area control guided by secret and simultaneous piece movement. The player who most effectively manages and strategically expands his territory wins or takes part in a draw.

The game is a ritual with comparisons to Machiavellian political philosophy as well as to notions of *realpolitik* present in the era contemporary to the starting positions of the game: 1901. (For history of '*realpolitik*', see the book by Ludwig von Rochau or Kaiser Wilhelm's unification efforts in Germany.)

If you take as reasonable my description above, then we can proceed into a discussion of what to do given these game conditions.

We can say things like: The player who can influence their opponents to collaborate at the right moments and misdirect them in others improves the player's drawing and winning chances.

If we advance the discussion to include game theory, all good strategies include one thing: effective negotiation. In a word, diplomacy.

But HOW should this diplomacy be carried out. Sure, a given game master (GM) or Tournament Director (TD) will detail which ruleset and which guidelines (or house rules) are to be followed. However, the game rules itself do not restrict almost any behavior, negotiation styles, or approaches to the game.

In a game whose explicit rule-set is quite open-ended surrounding the most important aspect—the diplomacy—it

Norms about negotiation may exist in your subculture or the dominating culture of the game, but those are just that, norms in the zeitgeist, rather than bedrock or universal truths about the game.

Let's take a common class of diplomatic interference: interjecting into another ongoing negotiation between other players.

At a recent masked face to face game in my backyard in south Minneapolis, one player was intentionally butting into a conversation I was having. Of course I found it annoying, but it also cut into the amount of time and the clarity with which I could persuade or make plans with my would-be collaborator. How is not this a good move from the distracting party?

You might argue that this tactic is underhanded or irritating. But it achieved its result!

You might argue that because it is underhanded or irritating, that I am less likely to want to work with that particular player going forward, given this undesireably 'dishonorable' behavior. Maybe so. But in that case, that is a risk the player employing that tactic takes on.

There is an alternative way to think about this, which is, that players may take on personas, or masks, or outfits, while engaged in a game. That is, from this view, we should expect players to do whatever it is that fits that persona, or that is acceptable within that perception of that player's persona, and not carry ill-will towards that approach.

Watching how your opponents react to various approaches to the simple act of having a conversation, or conducting their diplomacy, will give you a clue as to how they think about the game. From there, you might deduce an approach that will give you an edge in your diplomatic relations with them.

How you think > what you think.

“Win if you can. Lose if you must. But always cheat.”

Stealing Your Destiny

Winning in Diplomacy requires far, far more than ensuring you get your orders written accurately and in the box on time.

But to give too much away—and believe me, I’m trying—is also double-edged, because it takes away some of the fun of making your own mistakes and discovering new ways that the old guard didn’t see.

This gives you a chance to try new things, like ordering A Lvp H (!) for diplomatic reasons.

Notation

Diplomacy notation or Order Writing is easy to understand once you’ve learned it. I’ll be using the following in this book:

MOVE

A Mar - Spa (Army Marseilles Moves to Spain)

F Ank - BLA (Fleet Ankara Moves to Black Sea)

SUPPORT

A Par - Bur

A Mar S Par - Bur (Army in Marseilles Supports Army Paris Moves to Burgundy)

The order ‘A Par - Bur’ must also be written for the above Support order to be valid.

CONVOY

A Pic - Wal

F ENG C Pic - Wal (Fleet English Channel Convoys Army Picardy to Wales)

The order 'A Pic - Wal' must also be written for the above Convoy order to be valid.

HOLD

A Mun H (Army Munich Holds its position)

Tactics

Here we discuss movement, bounces, supports, support-cutting, retreats, unwanted supports, convoys, and builds.

Fairly simple rules—only 4 options for any unit—and the constraint of one unit per territory lead to many beautiful options for each player in any given season of Diplomacy. The anticipation prior to orders being read is one of the best moments on offer in gaming.

Movement and Intro to Supporting

Armies move between land territories. Fleets along coasts and bodies of water.

A unit, army or fleet, can support any army or fleet moving to a territory that the supporting unit itself *could* otherwise move. It is not necessary for the units to be adjacent one another. A unit may be supported by multiple other units.

A common opening, should France desire to guarantee ownership of Burgundy by Fall 1901, is A Par - Bur with A Mar S Par - Bur. Even if Germany plays A Mun - Bur, the French army from Paris arrives in Burgundy with a strength of 2 vs the unsupported German army arriving from Munich with a strength of 1.

Players may support their own and other players' units. Both are useful.

How Orders are Read & Adjudicated

All orders, no matter the sequence of their reading, are said to occur simultaneously. Aside from a small handful of paradoxes, successfully adjudicating orders by hand in a face-to-face game quickly becomes second nature.

However, for new players, keep in mind that because all moves are said to occur simultaneously. You don't get into a territory simply by moving there 'before' me (based on which player's orders are read first) so long as I have also ordered a unit there.

Generally, if no gamemaster is present to adjudicate, players will take turns reading orders for each player, beginning with their own. Starting with one's own orders prevents the reader from verbally changing his orders after announcing another player's orders (that he didn't like). Whatever orders are legibly written on the order sheet or notebook is final.

As in life, anticipation is often better than the real thing. We humans, as poet David Whyte has put it, are in constant anticipation of arrival. The arrival is usually a relief or disappointment rather than elation.

Bounces

When I was still creating YouTube videos, I opted to end them with a parting "Bounce you soon!", a variation of Chris Martin's "I'll stab you soon" to close his own excellent videos.

Bounces are frequent. This is in part because of the rule restricting one unit for one territory, and in part because of the unit density (the number of units relative to the territories available to move through on the game board). Certain territories are critical and are often occupied through much of a game. Others, like Clyde or the Adriatic Sea, are more situational.

A bounce occurs anytime at least two units attempt to occupy the same territory, with equal strength.

Perhaps the most common early game bounce is in the Black Sea.

Turkey orders F Ank - BLA and Russia orders F Sev - BLA.

Bounces can help you defend a key territory while also ultimately maintaining the territory in which a unit sits. Consider Germany arranging a bounce with France in Burgundy in Spring 1901.

Bounces may also be used to help an ally.

Imagine this situation, where Austria should like to disguise an alliance with Russia whilst defending against a potential Italian stab.

Austria:

A Tri - Vie

Russia:

A Gal - Vie

Italy:

A Ven - Tri

The Austrian and Russian armies bounce. The Austrian army then returns to Trieste, where it bounces with the incoming Italian army from Venice. If this is a Fall turn, Austria will now be able to build in Vienna. If Austria had desired to build in Trieste (perhaps seeking a fleet build), he would have had to vacate Trieste, but in this example would have been foiled by A Ven - Tri.

Self-Bouncing

Self-bouncing (referred to as the scissors by Richard Sharp) effectively allows a player to defend three territories with only two units. Often used to defend a home center whilst keeping it open for a Winter build.

You might also use the self-bounce to both defend an already-owned center and keep a new center taken in the Spring.

Or, more simply, you may wish to hold onto gains and defend access to pivotal territories:

France has an army in Belgium and Marseille, with an English fleet in NTH, a German army in Mun, and an Italian army in Pie. By ordering A Bel - Bur and A Mar - Bur, France can safely protect Burgundy and hold Belgium and Marseille from his neighbors' potential prods.

The Brace

When two units attempt to switch places, both with equal strength of two (or more), they remain home. This is known as a brace.

Why not call this a bounce? It is very similar to a bounce, but is distinguished from the average bounce in that the starting positions of the moving units are adjacent.

Beleaguered Garrison

The beleaguered garrison rule, which states that if a province is attacked from two (or more) sides by equal forces, any unit occupying the province cannot be dislodge, even if it is weaker than all the individual attackers.

Imagine a German army has reached Galicia but both Austria and Russia should like to occupy that territory.

Austria:

A Vie - Gal

A Bud S Vie - Gal

Russia:

A War - Gal

A Ukr S War - Gal

Germany:
A Gal - Vie

The result here is that the German army in Gal is the beleaguered garrison—not only surrounded but attack from two parties each with a strength of two. However, neither the Austrian nor Russian armies gain Galicia. The German army is not dislodged and stays put.

Building

When, at the end of a Fall season—the beginning of Winter—a player's supply center count is greater than that player's current unit count, that player may build in any unoccupied home center. Armies in land territories. Fleets on any coastal territory.

Players may waive builds (save them for later), but this is risky given the fact that player may lose one or more supply centers that very next year.

The building rules, which extend from the end of Fall center counts, lend to a considerable amount of the tactics and strategy available in Diplomacy. After neutral centers are gained, usually by end of 1902, any center gained for one power is a center lost by another.

Most game types do not allow for negotiation during Winter seasons, which means players must analyze the outcomes from the Fall moves and place their builds without further discussion.

Opening home centers for builds at key moments is a crucial aspect of tactics and strategy as well. (See the upcoming 'unwanted support' in this chapter.)

If during a Winter phase a player's units exceed that player's owned supply centers, that player must remove units to equalize. Any units the players owns may be disbanded (removed from the board). As removals take place during the same Winter phase as builds, there is no negotiation. Choose your removal wisely.

Supports Continued

Supports may be **cut** by any unit attacking the territory of the unit providing support.

A unit may not cut the support of a unit supporting an attack on the original unit.

Imagine France has armies in Ruhr and Burgundy and Germany has an army in Munich. France orders A Ruh - Mun and A Bur S Ruh - Mun. Germany does not save himself with A Mun - Bur (or A Mun - Ruh; two units may not trade places). The army in Munich is dislodged and must retreat if possible.

Unwanted Support

Usually, when your neighbor supports one of your units, to move or to hold, it is a good thing. But sometimes, you don't want the support you end up getting.

Suppose France hopes to free up Marseille for a Winter build.

France:

A Mar - Gas

A Spa - Mar

A Bur - Mar (intending to self-bounce and also prevent Italian A Pie - Mar)

Italy:

A Pie S Bur - Mar (!)

The result?

French A Bur - Mar succeeds, which covers Marseille, preventing a build there.

If France was hoping to build a fleet, this scenario might represent the rare scenario where it is acceptable to waive a build. The option of waiving a build is usually a tremendous luxury.

Movement Continued

Here are several more types of movement that involve multiple units.

Chain Movement

This refers to any time you move a sequence of units, beginning with the first moving into an adjacent territory, with the others backfilling one after the other.

Chain moves, when pulled off, are powerful.

When the lead unit in a chain is bounced, however, every other unit in that chain is bounced back to its starting point as well.

Merry Go Round

Three units may exchange territories in a triangle pattern.

Occasionally, this takes place in the Balkans, and less frequently in the Low Countries.

Convoys

The last kind of movement sees a fleet convoy an army through a body of water.

Imagine the English player hopes to take Belgium in Fall 1901 (ambitious). He might followup his Spring orders with:

A Wal - Bel

F ENG C Wal - Bel (C = Convoy)

F NTH S Wal - Bel

Wal - Bel succeeds unless France and/or Germany also put a supported unit into Bel. This could occur as follows: Germany

orders Ruh - Bel and is supported by France's Bur S Ruh - Bel, we have a bounce-2 vs 2-and the English army returns to Wales.

The above is for example only. This set of moves is unusual in Fall 1901 as it means that England is not going for the neutral, Norway.

Disrupting a Convoy

A convoy is disrupted if the convoying fleet is dislodged.

Let's imagine the above actually occurred in Fall 1901, and France builds a fleet in Brest in Winter 1901.

English tries the convoy again, but France dislodges the fleet with F Bre - ENG and F MAO S Bre - ENG. (The convoy fails-the army in Wales stays in Wales-and the English F ENG must retreat.)

The Bunny Hop

While two units may not trade places, even F Por with F Spa(sc), you may convoy a unit 'around' another.

Play this out:

Italy:

A Pie - Mar

F LYO C Pie - Mar

France:

A Mar - Pie

F Spa(sc) - LYO

Leaving aside France's dubious orders, the result is Italy's army in Piedmont moves around or bunny hops the French army going east, and lands in Marseille.

Retreats & Disbands

Retreats take place when a unit is dislodged.

A unit may retreat to any adjacent territory that is both unoccupied and where there were also no bounces that season. The unit may also be immediately disbanded (removed from the board).

There is no negotiation during retreat phases. If retreats for more than one player are to be made, this must be written down (in face-to-face games) or happens without press.

If two or more units choose to retreat to the same territory, they are both/all removed from the board.

In a Fall season, it can be useful to disband a dislodged unit and rebuild a new fleet or army in a home center.

If you are unable to rebuild, retreating to an open territory lets you analyze the board and make the proper disband during the Winter adjustments phase.

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Beautiful Imbalances

I've designed a few games with my brothers, including board games and an iOS game, and so I enjoy analyzing a game from the designer's perspective. Participating in local IGDA events or design events like Protospiel—where fellow MN Diplomacy council member, Jake Langenfeld, was testing his 'Masters of the Senate'—has taught me more about how to approach games critically.

The more I play, look at, and think about Diplomacy, the more beautiful imbalances I see. Like a guitar, whose harmonics arise from imperfections, Diplomacy may be the wonder it is by virtue of these quirks in its design.

Consider this chapter a kind of *interlude* which might be skipped if you so desire.

Here we'll discuss unit mix at game start, the proximity to stalemate lines of neutral supply centers, the relative position of home centers to stalemate lines, supply center density, and unit density. All this will set us up for a more rigorous discussion of the coordination problem in the following chapter.

After reading this chapter, you'll understand why Turkey doesn't start the game with F Smy and why Italy and France don't often do well when they fight each other. You'll also see that since England and Turkey are behind stalemate lines, their existence retains uncertainty and imbalance in a game's board texture, as problematic and powerful as a rook on the seventh rank in a game of chess.

(In a previous version of this book, I had labeled this section 'Inequality', which was not only inaccurate but also risked readers believing I was somehow in favor of all forms of inequality.)

Unit Mix at Game Start

What if Turkey started the game with A Con, F Ank, and F Smy ? Suddenly Greece isn't leaning Austrian and the Ionian Sea is under threat in Fall 1901...Italy would have to think twice about playing F ION - Tun and might more often opt for the safer F ION C Apu - Tun. And then, if it became standard for Italy to take Tunis with the army, you might even see moves like Turkish F AEG S Alb - ION, both breaking up the convoy and dislodging the Italian fleet (likely to Tunis). The Turkish support for Austrian F Alb - ION might be in exchange for Greece.

All this speculation is to show that a Turk beginning the game with F Smy, versus having to wait till Winter 1901 to build it, makes Turkey stronger by virtue of the immediate unopposed F Smy - AEG.

With such an opening setup, Russia is also stronger because Turkey cannot even threaten to play A Smy - Arm. Would this lead to the Juggernaut (Russian/Turkish alliance) being used with even more regularity?

My guess is that Calhamer and his playtesters considered and probably even explored situations like the above. It was probably the right decision to keep England and Russia as the two powers with two fleets to start the game.

Relative Position of Neutrals

Notice the relative position of each neutral supply center to each Great Power's home centers. Now consider those same neutral supply centers relative to stalemate lines. By Mark Berch, [here is one of my favorite articles](http://www.diplomacy-archive.com/resources/strategy/articles/stalemate_lines.htm)⁵ on stalemate lines.

⁵http://www.diplomacy-archive.com/resources/strategy/articles/stalemate_lines.htm

Let's take them one by one.

Norway: Immediately adjacent to Saint Petersburg but a natural neutral for England.

Holland: Usually Germany's but also adjacent the North Sea.

Denmark: Usually Germany's but also adjacent the North Sea and Sweden in 1902 on.

Sweden: Either empty with a German bounce (A Den - Swe) or Russia's, adjacent to English-owned Norway and German-owned *Denmark* in 1902 on.

Belgium: Could stay neutral in 1901 or go to any of France, Germany, or England.

Spain: France's, and quite safe from neighbors.

Portugal: France's, relatively safe as well.

Tunis: Italy's, with reasonable medium-term security.

Serbia: Austria's, adjacent to five other supply centers in the Balkans.

Greece: Usually Austria's, but occasionally Italy's or Turkey's, after 1901 its ownership is in question.

Rumania: Most often Russia's, at least in 1901.

Bulgaria: As close to a sure thing for Turkey as Spain is for France.

Obviously, the neutrals seem necessary to gather so as to build additional units. For some great powers, capturing them does require risk, the risk of pulling your units out of useful defensive positions. (Or from useful positions to launch attacks on your neighbor's home centers.) The most obvious being Austrian F Tri - Alb on its way to Greece. If Austria can pull this off, win Greece and not lose Tri, he will likely build two and also have his F Gre in a useful position to work with either of Italy or Turkey.

For France, gathering the Iberian neutrals could leave Burgundy exposed. It's rare to see a Russian A War - Sil in Spring 1901, but a German positioning for Den, Hol, and perhaps Bel is severely weakened by A War - Sil. (The German would likely bounce Russian F GOB - Swe if Russia opens with A War - Sil.) In the German case, trying for additional leverage on Belgium with A

Mun - Ruh does leave a question for Munich if France opens to Burgundy.

This is a partial list of risks. You can probably see a few more with minimal difficulty. For a statistical analysis of which powers overall position improves by taking ownership of specific centers in 1901 or 1902, see [this article by Josh Burton](#)⁶.

If you've succeeded in gaining the neutral/s, you are rewarded with a build! This solves part of the vulnerability you created in moving toward the neutrals and away from your home centers. However, once the neutrals are all captured, the game is suddenly a zero-sum affair. Lose a center, lose a unit.

Because of the game design, we now have several imbalances which cause tension. Norway, owned by England unless he has been Sea Lioned (Fall 1901: F Den to NTH, A StP - Nwy, and even worse if France has taken the English Channel), is adjacent Russia's home center of Saint Petersburg. How will Russia and England ever relieve this tension?

Germany's ownership of Holland and Denmark, in conjunction with England's F NTH, will long be cause for diplomacy between those two players.

Austria's gain in Serbia seems safe enough, but Greece is less stable. Rumania, if held by Russia, is potentially under fire from Bud, Ser, and Bul. Or is Turkey's just-gained Bulgaria at risk to a combined Austrian-Russian effort? In [Josh Burton's statistical analysis](#)⁷, there is evidence that Russia's game improves dramatically with ownership of Sweden, and reasonably with ownership of Rumania, but less so.

I also now invite you to consider the relative positions of the neutral supply centers (and groupings of neutrals) that you and your neighbors own to common stalemate lines. The board is *not* setup in such a way that 7 players sit in a grand circle around

⁶<http://uk.diplom.org/pouch/Zine/S2007R/Burton/statistician2.htm>

⁷<http://uk.diplom.org/pouch/Zine/S2007R/Burton/statistician2.htm>

supply centers evenly distributed at the circle's center. If that were the case, more games would end with 5-, 6-, or even 7-way draws, as players would be able to protect their centers around the edges while dipping their toes into the center without risking their home dots.

You can try this thought experiment yourself, by assigning supply centers to territories that are currently not centers.

As it is, Tyrolia is not a supply center. Nor is Silesia.

Instead, with the exception of Spain, neutral supply centers are positioned adjacent to but not usually directly on common stalemate lines. This means that for a stalemate line to be properly established, a player must put his neutral supply centers at risk. More commonly, a player will aim to create a mini-pseudo-stalemate line—blocking a neighbor's attack—which puts his owned centers at risk from other neighbors.

This simple imbalance innate to the Diplomacy board texture keeps players jostling for position from game start to game end.

Furthermore, so long as Turkey or England are in the game, there are players in control of units that are *behind* common stalemate lines. The potential for imbalances to be exploited remains. Whilst a volatile or savvy Turkey or England remain in the game, a stalemate position cannot be established. Nor should, from a Turkish or English strategic perspective, this be allowed.

For a deeper statistical study of relative imbalances relating to solo victories, see this article, ["The Statistician: Solo Victories"](http://uk.diplom.org/pouch/Zine/F2007R/Burton/statistician3.htm)⁸ by Josh Burton.

⁸<http://uk.diplom.org/pouch/Zine/F2007R/Burton/statistician3.htm>

Why Austrian A Bud - Rum (Mostly) Doesn't Work

There are several openings which are game-theoretically weak, even accounting for special diplomatic considerations. Austrian A Bud - Rum would be one of those.

One way to stretch your Diplomacy muscles is to reason through why this is the case. In doing so, I actually found an edge case where A Bud - Rum *might* be reasonable, but I'll save that for the section on country-specific strategy.

Why it doesn't work becomes fairly obvious when you consider normal openings from Russian, Turkish, and Italian neighbors and the necessity of securing Serbia in Spring 1901. Doing so sometimes lets Austrian F Alb - Gre with support in Fall 1901.

From there on, Serbia, a neutral supply center itself, is the fulcrum of five other supply centers. That Austrian army in Serbia will be doing a *lot* of work going forward in the Balkans. And I know many of you don't think this way, but that army will likely survive most of the game. Even if dislodged, it is a difficult army to disband until Austria's position is a 1- or 2-center disaster.

Why Italy and France Don't Fight

Given the strategic importance of MAO, Spa, and WES to endgame stalemate lines, it may seem to reason that Italy and France could and should fight, and that this fight would produce profits for the winner.

In actual play, a positive result for either power is harder to achieve.

I'm going to make short work of the obvious reasons which have been discussed before so as to move onto the not obvious reasons.

Obvious:

By not fighting, France and Italy can focus their attention elsewhere.

Other powers are likely to gain *more* from a weakening or elimination of either Italy or France than Italy or France themselves.

It takes a long time to win this fight.

Not Obvious:

- 1 Italy and France are not really neighbors.
- 2 Moving away from neutral supply centers.
- 3 How many units it takes to win this fight.

Italy and France are Not Really Neighbors

Switzerland's wall and Piedmont's gate already keep Italy and France separated by land. (If Switzerland were passable, not only does Venice feel a lot weaker, but access to Trieste and Vienna through Tyrolia or vice versa would be vastly improved. As an exercise, consider the relative proximity of Italy's home centers and Austria's home centers to Marseille.)

Since the land route is cramped, let's examine Italy and France's proximity by boat. The Tyrennian Sea, the Gulf of Lyon, and the Western Med create an ocean of distance to cross.

Italy cannot steal a center from France. Nor can France steal one from Italy. (Almost all other neighbors can steal centers given their proximity.) Even something like F MAO - WES in Fall 1901 setting up a convoy to NaF in Spring 1902 is hardly a surprise attack. And, by contrast to say an English move of F NTH - SKA in Fall 1901, where England can arrange plans with either Russia or Germany, it is clear what F MAO - WES (and a Winter 1901 build of F Mar) intends.

In MNDC2020 Game 01, France started as described above and even successfully convoyed to Tuscany in Fall 1902, leap-frogging the Italian army in Piedmont. Frankly, while tactically successful, France only had a single army in the north (Burgundy) and this approach left France open to an attack from Germany. (Had this been a Western Triple, France might have been okay.) In that game, it was only by helping Austria into Venice so that Austria could from Venice support French A Tus - Rom that France was able to in Winter 1903 build an army in Brest (having already lost Paris) to try to hold on.

Moving away from Neutral Supply Centers

Having earlier discussed the gravitational pull of neutral supply centers, we gain another theoretical insight about why France moving on Italy is suboptimal.

Let's suppose France owns Belgium. We know this only occurs in about a quarter of games come Winter 1901, but it is not uncommon for France to own Belgium at some point in 1901-1904, during which time she might consider moving on Italy.

As soon as units move away from the protection of Belgium, it will be harder to hold it. And once it falls, where do you think either of its new owners—England or Germany—are moving next? If England has eyes on France, moving against Italy immediately makes it difficult to hold MAO. If Germany comes a knockin', Burgundy is in trouble.

From Italy's point of view, a move on France may require it to move out of ION, an enticing landing zone for either an Austrian or, more likely, a Turkish fleet. If Italy owns Greece as a fifth center, or perhaps Trieste in an AI Modern Borders setup, he must rely on his ally to protect it while committing units westward.

It Takes A Large Force to Win This Fight

Even with a French jump into WES or an Italian into GoL or Pie, considerable forces are needed to swiftly win this fight. It is arguably one of the slowest fights on the board.

If left alone, France or Italy could win this fight, but will the unlikely victor be making gains faster than other parts of the board?

From France's perspective, it usually takes three fleets to break Italy's two-fleet mix (if Italy is only on 4 centers). France would probably need to be on five or six centers to think about even trying this.

From Italy's perspective, it will also take three fleets to break either into MAO, Spa, or Mar. (Or two fleets and an army, but even that isn't a guarantee.)

Oftentimes, because of the drawn-out affair, other powers will be able to lend a hand, but that hand is more likely to tax Italy or France for the help than play second-fiddle to the invasion.

Supply Center and Unit Density

There are 75 territories, of which 34 are supply centers.

It takes 2 units to dislodge 1. As most players begin the game with only 3 units, it takes a majority of a player's units to dislodge another player's single unit.

The playing area is, to repeat a word I used while describing the space between Italy and France (by land), cramped. This unit density means it is usually not so easy to reposition units (without risk)—consider how as England it may be difficult to replace your fleet in Belgium (perhaps a compromise with either of France or Germany to at least get your fifth center) with a more useful army.

Each Great Power's territory is different, however, and well-suited in some cases to its historic geopolitical situation.

For instance, since Ivan the Terrible, Russian leaders have realized they needed to push outward (offensive realism) to avoid others pushing over the plains in their northwest or through gaps in modern day Rumania or Armenia. In other words, defending Russia is not so pleasant. An army in Moscow, which borders all home centers, is useful, but not enough to defend Saint Petersburg and Sevastapol at the same time. Losing either of its ports, especially its warm-water port, is particularly damaging. While Russia likely gives up big draws or solo chances by permanently losing Saint Petersburg, losing Sevastapol rings a different sort of alarm bell which cannot be snoozed. Unless of course you [try to build a fleet in Moscow](#)⁹.

⁹http://www.dipwiki.com/index.php?title=The_Coast_of_Moscow

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Why There is Still No Game like Diplomacy

Richard Sharp said it well when he remarked that to win in Diplomacy you have to be a complete cad. I for one had to look up the definition: A man who behaves dishonorably, especially toward women.

I never knew or spoke with Sharp, so I won't ever know the his tone or meaning here—a good deal of his book is quite humorous—nor do I necessarily support playing precisely in this way, but I more or less see his point.

(If someone answers your simple question of ‘Shall we bounce in the Black?’ with as wishy-washy an answer as the preceding paragraph, beware!)

Even half a century after Sharp wrote those words, dishonorable-behaving men (and women) remain among us—in fact our hearts may be split!

Thankfully, too, the great hobby of Diplomacy persists and is healthy as ever, from vibrant online play to club leagues to increasingly competitive tournament play, even with hybrid online games here in 2020.

Even if all of us who adore, even love, the game as we do—traveling hundreds of miles per year in horse-drawn wagons to play in face-to-face tournaments—decided to quit today, a young gamer would find it buried in the sand, and as in Jumanji unleash its dark but necessary chaos back into the world.

If for no other reason, we should not forget how to lie nor how to deceive convincingly, lest the boundary between truth and

lies dissolve completely as the boundary between chivalry and chauvinism.

I've said the above to underscore my leading explanation for why Diplomacy persists when the zeitgeist says it should not: While other games seem to apologize for the behavior they promote, Diplomacy does not hide from its nature, and instead says, "You are a human playing with and against other humans: Use what tools you have, as they will use tools against you."

The decision to forgive trespasses or to take revenge is up to each individual, and while notable, this decision is hardly the most important part of the game.

There are aspects of each of us, as individuals, and collectively, as a human family, which are undeniable, no matter how much we might intellectually rebel against them. When we are out of balance, we hunger for those aspects which bring harmony to life, we have a need to experience what some may call the vices. If anything, to my way of thinking, Diplomacy is one of the most productive environments to live in those vices for a time, if only so as not to build up debts that come due at an unexpected and unfortunate moment in your actual day-to-day life.

The relationship you have with yourself is arguably the most important of all, and even the sharpest and most introspective among us cannot completely know ourselves. If we are honest, we can grasp a kind of fact which says we are willfully blind to part of ourselves, just to go on living. But insofar as I do understand a surface-level portion of myself, this understanding has not only led me to play Diplomacy regularly, but also to exercise, to read, to write books like these, to endeavor to write novels, to find work in a small gamification company as an enthusiastic community manager, and to invest in several key relationships from family members to artists and designers and creators in the Minneapolis-St. Paul neighborhoods.

You can probably guess why I suspect there is no game—yet—

like Diplomacy, but for the purposes of keeping you on edge as to whether I'll walk into Trieste, I'll reserve a fuller discussion till later.

There is presently urgent business of Diplomacy in which to attend.