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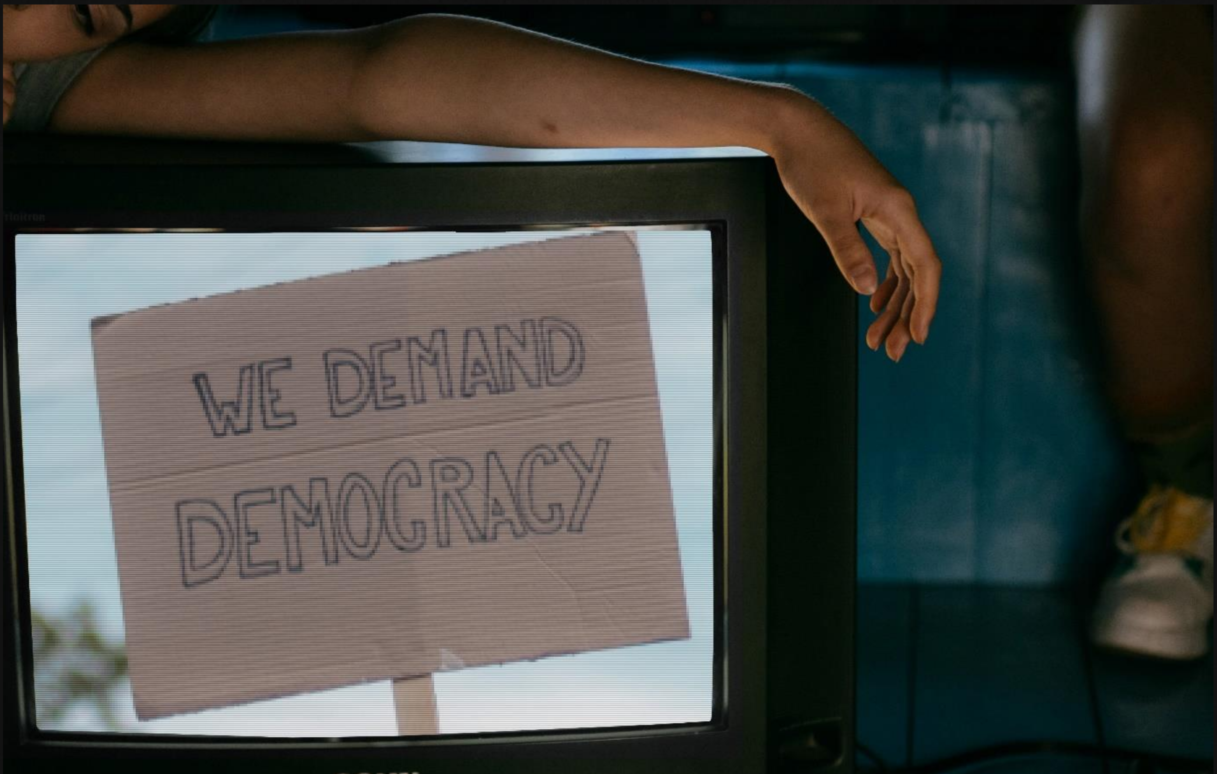
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Special Issue

Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games

edited by

Eugen Pfister, Tobias Winnerling and Felix Zimmermann

gespielt
Arbeitskreis
Geschichtswissenschaft
und Digitale Spiele

This issue was prepared in cooperation with the AKGWDS (Arbeitskreis Geschichtswissenschaft und Digitale Spiele / Working Group Historical Science and Digital Games).

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Turning Votes into Victory Points. Politics in Modern Board Games

Torben Quasdorf

Abstract
Board games are gaining in popularity as well as sophistication on a thematic and mechanical level. We need to understand the role of this medium within our culture at large, especially in areas where board games interact with fundamental cultural values like the idea of democracy. To further this understanding, I will apply Ian Bogost’s concept of procedural expression to board games and analyze two examples that allow me to cover a wide range of phenomena: Karl-Heinz Schmiel’s *Die Macher*, first published in 1986, and T. L. Simons’ *Bloc by Bloc: The Insurrection Game*, first published in 2016. The analysis will demonstrate how a game can represent its political theme on various levels and achieve a conflicting or a coherent political message. The example of *Bloc by Bloc* will prove that board games are capable of expressing very nuanced political positions and stimulating a critical reflection of our political culture and even the role that board games might play in it.

Keywords: Board Game, Tabletop Game, Political Game, Procedural Rhetoric, *Die Macher*, *Bloc by Bloc*, Eurogame, gamevironments

To cite this article: Quasdorf, T., 2020. Turning Votes into Victory Points. Politics in Modern Board Games. *gamevironments* 13, 103-137. Available at http://www.gamevironments.uni-bremen.de.

Nowadays, a computational device like a laptop or smartphone is never far out of reach and with it a plethora of video games. They are available to us at the touch of a button, at any time we like. Modern technology has enabled an unprecedented (omni-)presence of games in our culture as well as an incredible amount and variety of games. This continuing and accelerating trend of the last few decades is adding a new urgency to the task of investigating the nature of games and how they shape and are shaped by the culture around them.

To achieve this goal, however, we must avoid narrowing our perspective to only one type of game, the video game. Jaakko Stenros and Annika Waern (2011) analyzed the potential methodological issues involved in this practice. They criticize the tendency to misinterpret characteristics observed in video games as characteristics of games in general. But even if this “digital fallacy” (Stenros and Waern 2011, 11) were not an issue, the focus on video games is maintained at the expense of other paths of investigation, for example into modern board games which remain, as Paul Booth has pointed out, a “remarkably understudied phenomenon” (Booth 2018, 57).

Mary Flanagan’s book *Critical Play* (2013) is a testament to the power of a wide-scope approach in the study of play phenomena. Her goal is to study “games designed for artistic, political, and social critique or interventions” (Flanagan 2013, 2). However, unlike many scholars, she does not focus on video games alone but looks at doll play, language games or locative games, too. Repeatedly, she is able to demonstrate how these play objects and games can “function as means for creative expression, as instruments for conceptual thinking, or as tools to help examine or work through social issues” (Flanagan 2013, 1). At least one of the two board games I will analyze, T. L. Simon’s *Bloc by Bloc* (2018)[i], perfectly fits Flanagan’s description of a game designed for political and social critique. Therefore, its analysis can serve to expand Flanagan’s catalogue.

Even if this may not have been her primary goal, Flanagan’s chapter on board games demonstrates effectively how games in general

> “are legitimate forms of media, human expression, and cultural importance, and the ways games reflect the norms and beliefs of their surrounding cultures is essential to understanding both games themselves and the insights they may provide into human experience.” (Flanagan 2013, 67)

She also makes this point: “In this playculture approach to media, board games become one of several artifacts of material culture used to trace social practices and beliefs” (Flanagan 2013, 67). This applies, we might add, to all games, not just those created by artists or activists.

We can study a culture by observing the kinds of board games being played and how they treat certain subjects. Whether we look at the mid-19th century’s *Mansions of Happiness* (1843) and the catalogue of moral failings and virtues it preaches or at today’s controversies around colonialist ideology in board games (Bolding 2019; Borit, Borit and Olsen 2018; Flanagan 2013, 77-81; Foasberg 2019), wherever we turn, we can observe board games reflecting “the norms and beliefs of their surrounding culture” (Flanagan 2013, 67) in many different ways. This reflection can be the result of deliberate and conscious design choices, like in artists’, activists’ or educational games. However, it can also be observed in many of the games designed without a specific message in mind. These interactions between games and culture are of course not a one-way street. Just like other media, games are capable of shaping our views on certain topics and ways of thinking. Therefore, it is imperative to understand this sort of interplay, in particular where games meddle with things that are at the core of our collective identity, such as politics.

How to achieve this understanding is not as obvious as it may seem. A game cannot be read in the same way as a political pamphlet. As we will see when analyzing Karl-Heinz Schmiel’s *Die Macher* (1986, 2019) a game can seem to portray a political process like the German federal elections in a fairly neutral way – as long as we focus on its narrative or visual content alone. But games contain another expressive dimension, a dimension of procedural representation. On this level, a game like *Die Macher* can tell a completely different story, one that can affirm and foster some of the worst doubts and misgivings we may harbor about democracy and political culture.

“Persuasive Games” (Bogost 2010) is the most influential formulation of this insight. Ian Bogost’s book shifted the focus away from the narrative dimension of games and concentrated on the representational potential that originates from the *procedural* nature of games instead, their nature of being rule-based systems. Such a system is not set up at random, it is constructed following various conscious or unconscious assumptions about whatever the game is about. Embedded in a stock market game, for example, is a notion of how stock markets work. A game is, in Bogost’s words, a “way to make claims about *how things work*” (Bogost 2010, 29).

Once this expressive potential is understood, it can be used to pursue any goals a designer may have beyond the game itself, such as political or educational goals. In our stock market example, one designer may want to utilize a game to criticize ruthless capitalist economics, another may want to educate players on effective investment strategies. Much like a speaker or teacher might use rhetorical techniques to persuade their listeners, a game may exert its “procedural rhetoric” which Bogost defines as “the art of persuasion through rule-based representations and interactions rather than the spoken word, writings, images, or moving pictures” (Bogost 2010, ix).

Although Bogost (2010, 46) focusses on video games, he himself points out that his theory applies to other media as well:

> “Despite my preference for videogames, I should stress that I intend the reader to see *procedural rhetoric* as a domain much broader than that of videogames, encompassing any medium – computational or not – that accomplishes its inscription via processes.”

This is exactly what board games do. Bogost’s (2010, 9-10) criterion is that procedural representation

> “requires inscription in a medium that actually enacts processes rather than merely describe them. Human behavior is one mode of procedural inscription. Human actors can enact processes; we do so all the time. […] Nondigital board and card games offer further examples of human-enacted processes; the people playing the game execute its rules.”

I will follow Bogost’s suggestion and apply his idea of procedural representation to gain a deeper understanding of the interplay of board games and politics. I will analyze two concrete examples, starting with *Die Macher*.

Origins of *Die Macher*

First published in 1986, *Die Macher* dates back to a period in which the board game culture we know today was still in its infancy. It was part of a new wave of game design that, along with other factors, initiated this emerging game culture in the first place. From the late 1970s to the mid-1990s, a new kind of board game design philosophy took hold in Europe and first and foremost in Germany. This board game genre became eventually known as *eurogames*. Klaus Teuber’s *Catan* (originally named *The Settlers of Catan*), released in 1995, epitomizes this style of game and popularized it worldwide when it became a surprise overnight sensation (cf., for the historical and mechanical development and characteristics of *eurogames* Woods 2012, 46-119 and Donovan 2018, 269-290). *Die Macher* displays many of the characteristics that are now associated with eurogames: it can be broken down into basic, intuitive, easy-to-understand rules and mechanics, which are combined and interconnected with great care, enabling complex gameplay and varied strategies for players to explore. Instead of engaging in direct conflict, they compete indirectly, for example by bidding in auctions or rushing to claim certain spots on the board. Players do not destroy and eliminate each other but try to collect the most points over the course of a predetermined number of rounds instead.

Die Macher is an important contribution to the development of the genre and hence of modern board gaming in general. As documented by Woods (2012, 64, 68f.), it was regarded as an innovative design that quickly started to attract attention beyond the German market it was produced for. The first edition of the game was released by *Hans im Glück Verlag*, a publishing company founded by Karl-Heinz Schmiel and Bernd Brunnhofer a few years earlier. Schmiel left the company in 1987. It went on to bring out very influential and successful board games such as *Carcassonne* (Klaus-Jürgen Wrede 2000). A second edition of *Die Macher* was published in 1997, a first multilingual edition in 2006 and another multilingual edition in 2019 which will be referenced throughout this article. Schmiel updated the components and rules with each release.

The box cover art of the 2019 edition already reveals some of the contradictions, which characterize this game. The visuals prominently display political symbols: a hand casting a ballot, marked with a cross, combined with the Reichstag building, which houses the German parliament (fig. 1).[ii] The act of voting and the parliament are supreme symbols of democracy. However, the title *Die Macher* is about something else entirely. It is no coincidence that editions for the international market leave the title untranslated because there is no exact equivalent in English. A *Macher* is a certain type of person, one apt at getting things done in business or politics, a *mover and shaker*, a man of action.

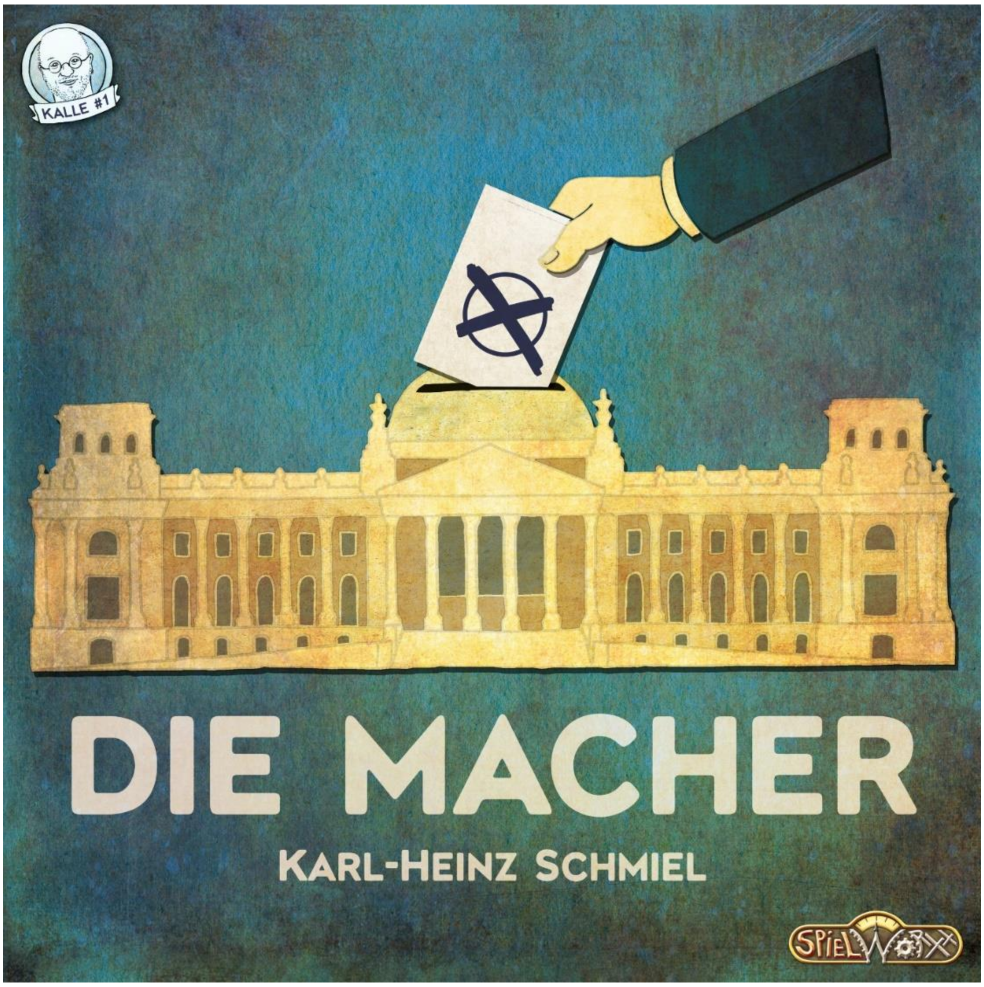

Figure 1. Box Cover Artwork of the 2019 Edition of *Die Macher* © Spielworxx.

And this is, as we learn, our own role in this game. The rule book opens:

> “In *Die Macher* the players fight for political power in Germany. As party rulers they organize the election campaigns of one of five German parties (CDU/CSU, FDP, Bündnis 90/Die Grünen, SPD, Die Linke) in several federal state elections.” (Schmiel 2019, 2)[iii]

Four or, in a variant, seven such elections are held, each one comprising a game round. Each round consists of a strictly defined sequence of nine phases, in which players may perform the actions associated with that phase, until in the last phase the election results are determined. Players gain victory points based on the outcome of the election. Whoever has accumulated the most victory points at the end of the game is the winner.

***Die Macher*. Basic Gameplay Concepts**

This is not the place to explain every rule, but I want to highlight at least some key concepts of gameplay before moving on to the analysis. Broadly speaking, the result of each federal state election is determined by three factors: the number of “party rallies” a player has organized (and then turned into votes) in a state, a party’s rating on the state’s “trend scale” (it is adjusted whenever a “poll card” is resolved and can add to or subtract from the amount of votes) and the level of congruency between the “party program” and the state’s “popular opinion” on several “political topics” (*Die Macher* 2019) (namely education, digitization, genetic engineering, national security, welfare state, environment and traffic).[iv] These are determined by cards either showing an approving or disapproving stance on a topic (fig. 2). A display of four cards on each “state board” (*Die Macher* 2019) determines the popular opinion of that state. The five cards in front of each player indicate their “party program” (ibid.). Any match serves as a +1 multiplier; opposite opinions on a topic represent a -1 multiplier.

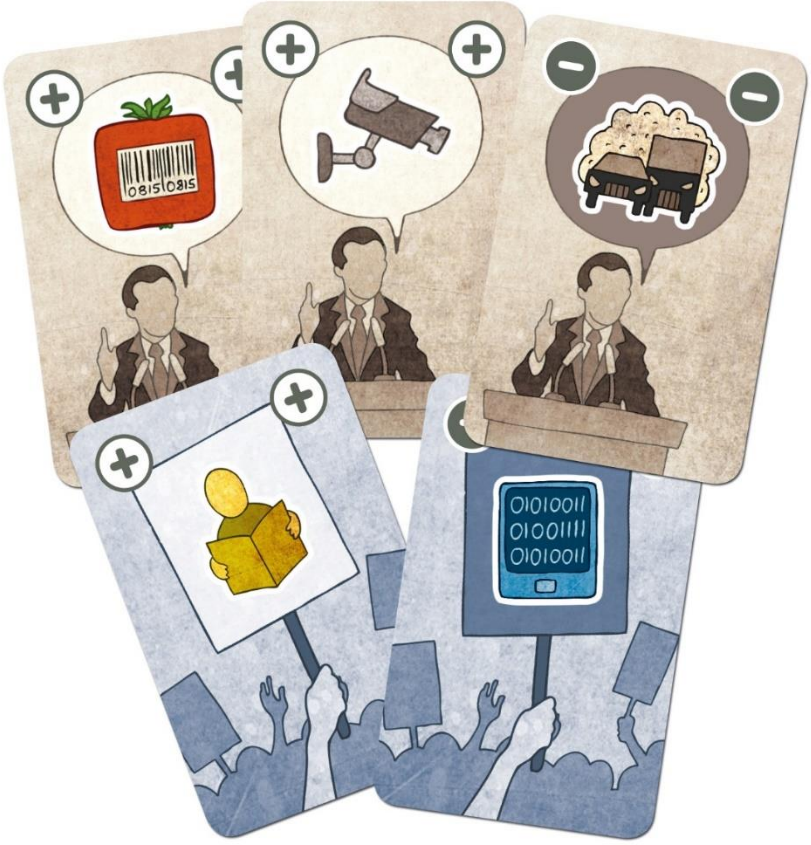

Figure 2. Examples of Card Expressing Political Opinions in *Die Macher* © Spielworxx.

Let us take the following example: we have reached the election phase in Brandenburg. The SPD has six party rallies and a rating of +2 on the trend scale. Comparing the cards on the popular opinion board and the party program, there are three matches and one mismatch: The opinions on genetic engineering, education and environment are a match (+3), but the SPD is pro traffic while the popular opinion is against it (-1). Therefore, the multiplier is x2 and the SPD’s final result is (6+2) x2 = 16. If there is a popular opinion card on the board that is not included in the party’s program, for example on digitization, the card has no effect.

The gameplay revolves around manipulating all these factors in one’s own favor. Even if there is only one state up for voting per round, players are free to influence other federal state boards as well. They may find it to be in their best interest to invest only little resources in the current election and instead put more effort in setting themselves up for a big success in a later round. With these basic premises, the game appears to be well aligned with basic democratic values. The people's political views, so it seems, are driving the outcome of an election. The parties which promise to represent these political views the best end up receiving the majority vote.

In addition to the cover artwork mentioned above, democratic ideas are visually represented throughout the game's components. The shape of the spaces used to mark the parties' trends and number of rallies mirror the roughly semi-circle seating arrangements in many parliaments. The poll cards show the type of bar charts often used to visualize the outcome of an election (fig. 3). On the opinion cards, we either see the prototypical politician on a lectern speaking into a microphone or a mass of people demonstrating and holding up signs (fig. 2). All these visual cues serve to frame the game events within democratic processes.

In addition, the game is very specific about where the elections are taking place. It could have been a non-descript or fictional state. Instead, Schmiel chose to make the game about his home country Germany. The party names and associated colors match those of actual German parties. Certain game features mirror the local circumstances such as the considerable size differences of the German federal states.

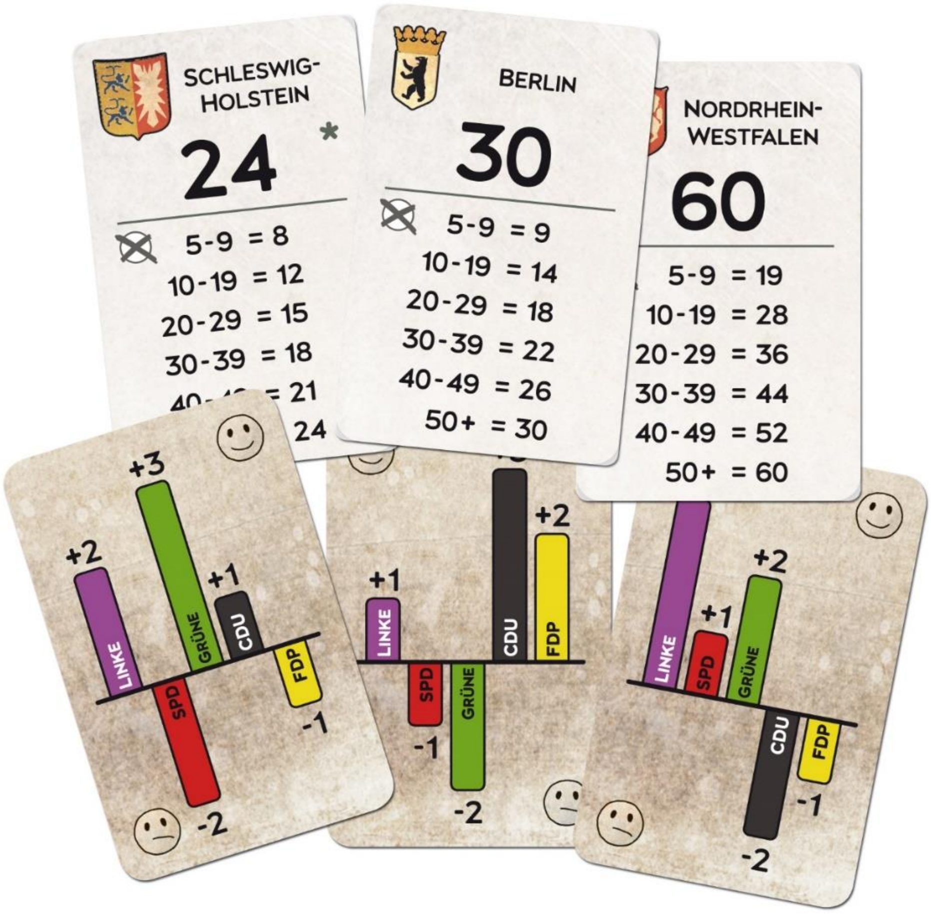
SCHLESWIG-HOLSTEIN
24
5-9 = 8
10-19 = 12
20-29 = 15
30-39 = 18
= 21
24
BERLIN
30
5-9 = 9
10-19 = 14
20-29 = 18
30-39 = 22
40-49 = 26
50+ = 30
NORDRHEIN-WESTFALEN
60
5-9 = 19
10-19 = 28
20-29 = 36
30-39 = 44
40-49 = 52
50+ = 60
LINKE
GRÜNE
CDU
SPD
FDP
+3
+2
+1
-1
-2

Figure 3. Examples of Federal State Cards (Top Row) and Poll Cards (Bottom Row) in *Die Macher* © Spielworxx.

The federal state cards not only cite the state’s name, but also show its coat of arms (fig. 3). All these are highly charged political symbols capable of localizing the game’s event in an existing democratic system. The Germans’ obsession with genetically modified food may be puzzling to an international audience, but we can assume that most players, wherever they are, will be aware of the all in all solid state of democracy in the actual Federal Republic of Germany.[v] All these elements lead players to believe that the game is about democratic elections. Nevertheless, as soon as we shift the perspective away from the political symbols and focus in on which game mechanics are actually used and how they interact, we discover insurmountable discrepancies between democratic ideals and their procedural representation in the game.

The Representation of Democratic Processes in *Die Macher*

Democracy can be defined as the rule of the people. In very broad terms, we can say that in a representative democracy (like Germany) elections are held for the people to choose representatives to whom they delegate their governing authority. This ideal to enable the people to rule themselves is difficult to put into practice without any distortions whatsoever. The interests of a caste of professional politicians, the media with their agendas and other factors exert their own influence on the political process. This is recognized as a flaw in democratic systems as they exist today, but it is also seen as a necessary concession to the practicality of modern statecraft and tolerated as long as it does not get out of hand. In *Die Macher*, this fine balance becomes completely unhinged. Granted, we can see how each state's population has its unique set of political demands and priorities, represented by the popular opinion cards. However, after those cards are dealt during the setup and the actual game begins, the states' populations become completely passive. Not only do they lose all agency, from here on their opinions are being manipulated and molded by the party rulers in order to maximize the number of votes they collect election after election or, in other words, the number of victory points they collect round after round.

To achieve this, the players use media influence. The rulebook explains: "Those players that influence the media in federal states, may shift the popular opinion into the direction of their party program" (Schmiel 2019, 11). What this means is that whoever has the majority of "media markers" *(Die Macher* 2019) on a federal state board may exchange one of the popular opinion cards in each game round. The way to gain media markers is very simple. They can be bought for a set amount of money during the corresponding phase of a game round and then be placed on any free spot on the board. As many other actions the players take in *Die Macher*, it is a very straightforward act of paying money to get what they want. In a similar fashion, they decide how many party rallies they like to buy and when to exchange them into votes at a ratio of 1:1. When the game deviates from this pattern, we often find auction mechanics instead of the buying actions – players outbidding each other, with the desired item (for example, poll cards) being given to whoever bid the most money. Things get worse when we ask how the "party rulers" actually gain the money they are spending: besides their start capital and a round income determined by their position on the "party base" board, they hold "donation cards" (*Die Macher* 2019) they can swap for a large sum as a one-time payout.

The game offers no alternative ways for players to convince the federal states' populations to favor their own party. We could imagine, for example, a rule that rewards players for changing their party program as little as possible and thus receiving a bonus for holding on to their political promises and not acting opportunistically. However, the game's procedural logic promotes the exact opposite. In the second phase of each round, players draw political topic cards and may then exchange up to two cards in their display of five party program cards. It does not matter what role these cards played in the previous election. Abandoning or even reversing political positions does not have any negative impact. Consequently, this will regularly be the logical course of action to secure more votes in the next election. The point is not that such a strategy is permitted by the rules, but that the game does not punish the player for following it or offer alternative ways to achieve the same result. There is only this one way, so to speak, to play the political game. It is not necessary to go deeper into the mechanics of the game to see a pattern emerging. The procedural representation of the political process is the complete opposite of the ideal of a democratic election. The relationship between voters, politicians and media is turned upside down. It is the powerful men at the top – indeed there is not a single woman mentioned or depicted anywhere in the game – who decide the outcome of an election by skillfully managing their funds, buying the media and manipulating the popular opinion as they please.

On a purely mechanical level, *Die Macher* may be a tremendously rewarding resource management game full of interesting decisions. However, it does a great disservice to the political processes it uses as its theme. None of us is so naïve to think that politicians would never make false promises or that the media are completely neutral. It is perfectly legitimate for the game to reflect this in its mechanics. The problem with Schmiel's game is that by adopting the party ruler's perspective on the process and using money as the main resource, it singles out the most problematic and uncomfortable sides of political reality and represents those, and those alone, in its rules and mechanics. A game is, as Bogost has pointed out, a way to make claims about how things work and, in this case, how democracy works. It paints a picture of a political process that could not be further removed from the ideals of democracy.

A Problematic Message and Its Causes

This begs the question why anyone would want to design a board game with such a bleak message. Is it a mistake to take the game so seriously when in fact it is meant to be satirical? Maybe the intention is to over exaggerate certain aspects, thus expose and ridicule them in the way political cartoons do. Then designing (and playing) the game would be a means of reflecting on and criticizing Germany's political culture. After all, the financing of political parties or the media influence on election outcomes are very real concerns and certainly worth addressing. The dilemma with *Die Macher* is that an interpretation like this may well be able to reduce some of the game's inconsistencies. However, it emphasizes and highlights other inconsistencies at the same time: If the game was meant to be a satire, should we not expect some irony for example in the description of the actions in the rulebook or in the depiction of politicians on cards and other game components? Instead, the subject is portrayed in a very neutral, serious and respectful light on the textual and visual level, as is demonstrated by the quotes and images of the 2019 edition cited throughout this article.

It looks like there is no easy way to dissolve the game's inherent contradictions. Considering the board game medium and its history, this should not come as a surprise. It could very well be an unintentional effect of a common pattern in the board game design process. The links between the mechanics and the theme of a board game are often relatively loose. In many cases, we do not find it difficult to blend out the theme, look at the mechanics alone and still see much of the same game. Taking the theme away does not render the actions the players are supposed to perform impossible or incomprehensible. This loose linkage is particularly prevalent in eurogames and has become the cause of recurring criticism of that genre. It is a typical complaint that allegedly the designer solely focused on the mechanics and *tacked on* a theme at the very end as an afterthought. The praise eurogames receive for the ingenuity and craftsmanship of their mechanical design often goes hand in hand with a strong criticism of their failure to do justice to the subjects they pick as their themes (Woods 2012, 104-110). Over time and in response to this criticism, game designers have become much better at interconnecting mechanics and themes and started exploring new thematic territories.[vi] The next game analysis will serve as an example for this development. But *Die Macher* was designed well before that time. We can speculate that the unsettling subtext of the game emerged unintentionally when certain mechanics and a political theme were combined into a game without fully realizing the consequences.

Let me stress though that there is a more important point here than to moralize and judge this classic game from the early days of the eurogame genre. The point is that *Die Macher* is a demonstration of the transformations political ideas can undergo when they are incorporated into games. The politics in games are not always what they seem or claim to be. We need to raise our awareness of the procedural expressiveness of games and develop our ability to decipher it. From game designers to players, reviewers to researchers, the need to advance a sort of game literacy becomes urgent when political values are at stake. To further expand our understanding of politics in board games, I will analyze another example.

An Intervention in the World of Gaming?

Bloc by Bloc: The Insurrection Game was first published in 2016 by Out of Order Games. A second edition, with moderate changes to artwork, rules and physical components, came out in 2018 and I will refer to this edition throughout the article. Designer T. L. Simons also created the game's artwork and even founded his own publishing company to produce and sell it. This DIY approach to board game production is not uncommon, though often born of necessity, for example because a designer is unable to find a publisher for their game.

However, Simons' motivations laid elsewhere: to publish the game himself gave him additional opportunities to honor and express the political ideals that he wanted the game to represent, for example by upholding social and ecological standards in the production process (Simons 2018b). Also, the whole game is published under a Creative Commons license and the necessary files to create a homemade copy (*print and play*) are freely available on the publisher's website. This way, players may choose if they want to create their own game, which Simons made sure is easy, affordable and legal, or buy a ready-made copy. This small move is easy to overlook but has important implications: it removes the game from the market cycle and positions it as a creation valuable in and of itself, not just a product meant to make a profit. We are already beginning to see what Simons means when he calls *Bloc by Bloc* an "intervention in the world of gaming" (Simons 2018b). It poses the question of how much of the board game industry's output is shaped by economic interest rather than the imagination and inventiveness of game authors.

Compared to *Die Macher's* clean, restrained cover artwork, the image on the box of *Bloc by Bloc* is more reminiscent of a panel taken from a comic book: a lively, colorful drawing, full of playful little details (fig. 4). We are thrown right into an action-packed scene. But if this is a snapshot, then what is the whole story about? We see some rioters about to clash with the police. Who are the good guys and who are the bad guys? The central, orange figure has broken handcuffs still tied around its wrists. The green figure is about to throw a Molotov cocktail at the police. What else could they be but criminals? Yet, somehow, the artist seems to sympathize with them, putting them at the center of the picture and humanizing them with a variety of facial expressions. The inherent violence of the scene is defused and subverted by the fact that all the figures are anthropomorphized cubes, easily recognized by any board gamer as one of the most basic and ubiquitous game components.

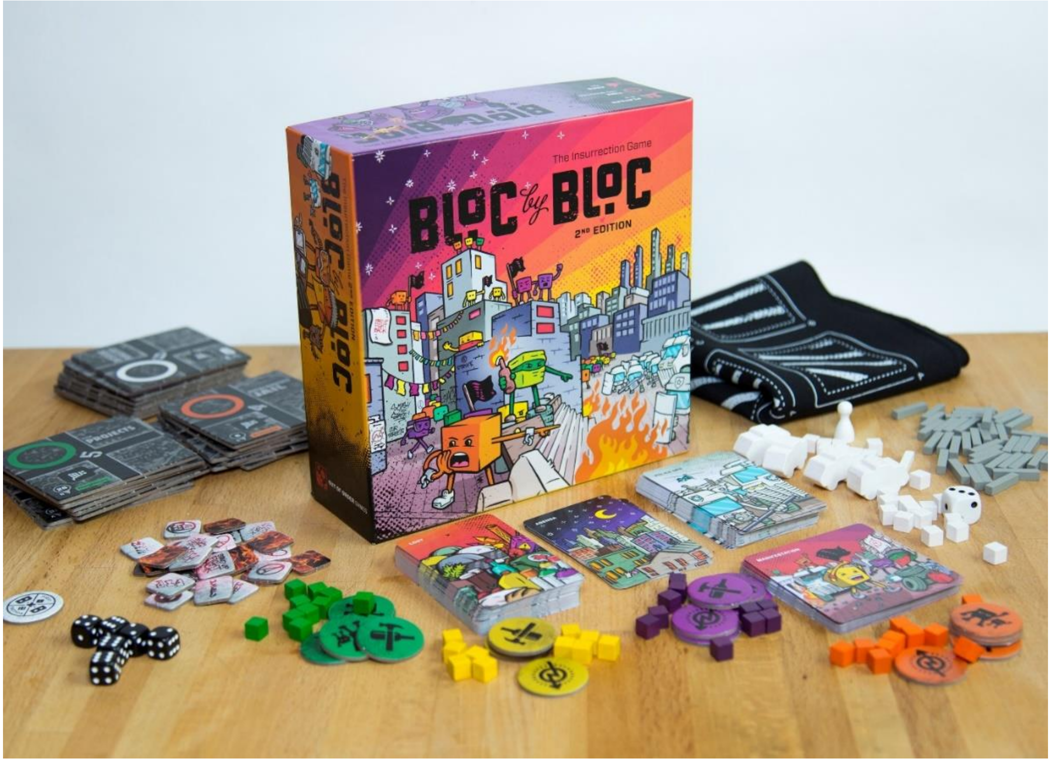

Figure 4. *Bloc by Bloc* Box and Components © Out of Order Games.

Again, the box cover artwork already expresses much of what is characteristic of the actual game. It takes on a serious topic and does not downplay its controversial implications, but approaches it in a playful way. The rulebook is completely straightforward and defines the game's mission from page one:

> "*Bloc by Bloc: The Insurrection Game* is a semi-cooperative game simulating protest movements, riots and popular uprisings in urban areas around the world during the first decades of the 21st century." (Simons 2018a, 2)

Our role in the game is described a few pages later:

> "each player controls a faction of revolutionaries struggling together to liberate the city before time runs out and the military arrives. The enemy of all factions is the police that protects the state and works against players to crush the insurrection." (Simons 2018a, 5)

Most players will notice right away, even if only intuitively, that this setup is a deviation from the conventions of game theming. The mainstream of board game production has always shied away from overly political or other controversial topics. The influential eurogame design philosophy with its ambitions of family-friendliness only reinforced the game industry's pursuit of mass appeal. The ideological transformation that Elizabeth Magie's *The Landlord's Game* (1904) underwent to eventually become the bestselling *Monopoly* (1935) is one famous example (Salen and Zimmerman 2004, 520f.; Donovan 2018, 77-98). However, there are other early political games apart from *The Landlord's Game*. One example even involves protests and clashes with the police very similar to Simons' design: *Suffragetto* (ca. 1907-08) is an early 20th century board game about suffragettes fighting the police. The suffragette pieces either make it into the *House of Commons* or, when captured in this checkers-style game, get thrown into prison. An article by Renee Shelby (2019) analyzes the game's "antagonistic stance toward the government and its challenge of sexism and gender inequality." As such, *Suffragetto* is an early example of procedural rhetoric in board games to get a political message across.

Simons has pointed out that *Bloc by Bloc* was created with similar intentions in mind (Simons 2018b). But he has actually gone one step further and created a "webzine" called "All Power to the Blocs" to "reflect on some of the struggles that millions have participated in across the world over the past decade" and to "share a few stories of the uprisings that this game is directly based on" (Simons 2016). Six such events between 2006 and 2014 in the USA, Mexico, Greece, Egypt and Turkey are portrayed on the website, alongside artwork sketches and other materials used during the game design process.

In 2006, protesters occupied the city of Oaxaca, Mexico, and established an anarchist community. For months, they were able to resist attempts of police and military forces to take back control (Rénique 2009). Another event portrayed is the 2011 occupation of Tahrir Square in Cairo, an important episode of the Arab Spring. The violent protests in the USA, in Oakland 2009 and Ferguson 2014, mentioned on the website will probably resonate particularly strong with a contemporary audience because a similar event, the death of the African-American George Floyd at the hands of a white police officer in Minneapolis, sparked worldwide protests in 2020.

The political debate around protests like these is often twofold: On the one hand, it covers the underlying political issues themselves, on the other hand, it deals with the legitimate shapes and forms of protest. Many different positions can be adopted in a debate like this. The standpoint expressed on the website – and in the game, as we will see – is clear: it demonstrates undivided solidarity with the rioters and insurgents, their political goals and criticism of neoliberal capitalism, police brutality, corrupt and authoritarian regimes. There seems to be no criticism of violence caused by the protesters though and this is where this standpoint becomes controversial. However, the analysis of *Die Macher* has shown that a game may claim to be about one thing and then turn out to be about something else. That is why a closer look at the details of the game is required as a next step.

***Bloc by Bloc*. Basic Gameplay Concepts**

If we focus on the gameplay alone for a little bit, we find that *Bloc by Bloc* is a typical modern eurogame. From the games Simons cites as influences, Matt Leacock's *Pandemic* (2008) is probably the most important. Both combine area control, action point allowance, variable player abilities and cooperative gameplay mechanics. Each player controls one of four unique factions called "workers," "students," "prisoners" and “neighbors” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018).[vii] The actions of their common enemy, the police, are executed automatically. It is not one of the players who takes the role of the opponent, it is, so to speak, the game itself. Each player also holds a secret “agenda card,” usually describing a “social” agenda, asking them to build “occupations” (ibid.) in the districts associated with their player color and some other tasks. When two players fulfill a social agenda, all players collectively win. In the same way, they immediately lose collectively if certain conditions are met: a player is eliminated or the game’s timer runs out. There is a crucial exception to these rules, making this a semi-cooperative type of game: a player may hold a different type of agenda card instructing them to secretly follow a contrary goal. If they achieve it, they alone are the winner and the other players lose. This adds tension to the game because players constantly need to look out for suspicious behavior and maybe even take action against a player secretly sabotaging the group effort.

During setup, square “district tiles,” each with titles such as “Financial District” or “Gentrifying Residential Zone,” are put out in a 5 x 5 grid to create the map of a nameless “city” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) that is the game board. The tiles also form a network of streets, indicating the way player and police units may move (fig. 5). *Bloc by Bloc* is essentially an area control game. Units move around the board, occupy territories, erect barricades to hinder enemy movement and fight each other if they end up in the same space. However, this applies only to situations when the colored “blocs,” as the players’ units are called, meet the white “riot cops” or “riot vans” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) of the police. Amongst themselves, they coexist peacefully and collaborate to achieve certain goals.

An action point allowance mechanic regulates the options a player has during their turn: at the start of their turn, a player rolls three to five dice, depending on how many of their units are present on the board. This determines the number and types of actions available to the player. To perform one of the basic actions (such as moving units, building barricades) any die may be spent. To perform an "advanced action" (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) (such as building an occupation, looting a shopping center, defeating a riot cop) the die spent must show a number equal to or higher than the value on the district card (the district's "difficulty" [ibid.]) to which the advanced action is applied. Let us look at an example: The "prisoners" faction has five units on the board and rolls three dice: a one, a four and a five. The player has some blocs on the "Supermax Prison" (ibid.) tile and would like to build an occupation there. But the tile shows a six. Since they have not rolled a six, this move is not possible. The player decides to spend a die to move the blocs to a shopping center instead, on a tile showing a three, and spends either the die showing a four or the one showing a five to perform a loot action.

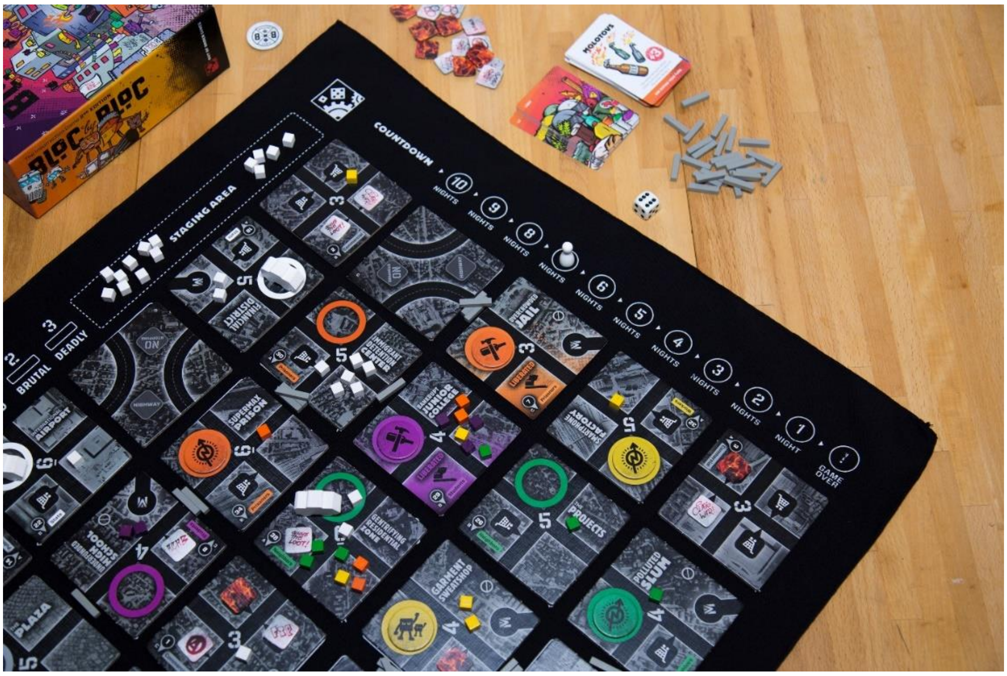

Figure 5. A Game of *Bloc by Bloc* in Progress © Out of Order Games.

The same rule applies whenever a player wishes to spend a die to perform the action “defeat a riot cop” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018). One white cube per die can be “sent back to the staging area” (ibid.). This also lowers the “police morale” which ranges from “timid” to “brutal” and even “deadly” (ibid.) when it is at its highest level. Defeating one of the four riot vans requires multiple subsequent attacks.

After players have performed all of their actions, the game moves from the night phase to the day phase which is when the police moves and attacks. A number of cards from the “police ops” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) deck is drawn (a higher “police morale” [ibid.] level means more card draws) which contain instructions on how to move the police units around, how many units to add and so on. Barricades may deflect units. But they are destroyed in the process. If the cops end up in a district with blocs or occupations, these are removed.

These are some of the basic gameplay concepts. I will now move on to the analysis and bring up more details about the rules as necessary. The analysis will show that *Bloc by Bloc*, other than *Die Macher*, achieves a remarkable coherence in its visual, narrative and procedural treatment of the insurrection theme.

The Procedural Rhetoric of *Bloc by Bloc*

There is little to no indication to which city or country the game takes place in. Players are not told explicitly why there is an insurrection in progress either, but we can find plenty of hints on the district tiles. The “International Airport” or “The Park” appear innocent enough, but we can also spot an “Immigrant Detention Center”, a “Polluted Slum”, a “Garment Sweatshop”, an “Overcrowded Jail”, a “Bankrupt Junior College” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) and so on. Clearly, these are not just some random urban spaces, but places with apparent social, environmental and economic issues that affect the kinds of “factions” the players are controlling, but the city also has a “Financial District” and a “Privatized University” (ibid.). Due to the random setup of the game, such tiles may end up right next to each other and make it even more obvious that this city is characterized by the kind of inequality and unresolved social issues that can be one of the root causes of urban uprisings (Slooter 2019).

We can expect that in a city like this, some people would be more inclined to join an insurrection than others, depending on what kind of district they inhabit. Indeed, the difficulty value printed on the tiles is lower in the kinds of districts we would associate with poverty or marginalization. As a result, it is much easier to perform advanced actions like building occupations or fighting the police in these districts – a die roll of four is sufficient compared to a die roll of six in the most difficult districts. There is also a mechanic which allows players to flip tiles from their “repressed” to a “liberated” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) side, with various beneficial effects. This too is easier or harder, depending on the difficulty value of that tile.

In order to win the game, players need to use their limited resources efficiently. The game invites them to observe the differences in the tiles and to use them to their advantage. In this way, the game teaches players a certain way of reading the layout of a city. Unless they decide to ignore the district descriptions and focus on numbers alone, they will realize that it is a good strategy to first focus on the quarters where the poor and marginalized live in order to get the insurrection going. Once they start building occupations like the “Social Center” they start transforming dysfunctional spaces such as the “Bankrupt Junior College” or even the “Abandoned Zone” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018). If all goes well, we also see the colors on the board change from mostly black, white and grey to the colorful mix of players’ blocs, occupations and liberated districts (fig. 5).

The way the looting of shopping centers changes the face of the city is more ambivalent: first, tokens showing graffiti are put down, then, tokens showing flames indicate that these places burnt down. The graffiti show anarchist symbols, but also aggressive political slogans like the acronyms ACAB or FTP (short for *All Cops Are Bastards* and *Fuck the Police*). The “loot cards” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) we can gain this way have the same effect of inviting us to look in a different way at the ordinary things around us. Each loot card is structured in the same way: it gives the name and image of an item and then describes the effect the card has when played. For example, we may draw “Old Tires” which allow us to “Build 2 barricades”, or “Fancy Clothes” we can use to “Move 1 bloc or 1 mob through any districts with police” (ibid.) (normally our movement would be blocked by police units). Again, the game teaches us a different way of looking at things: fireworks become weapons, furniture becomes a barricade, a fire extinguisher becomes a smoke screen, and so on. No professional military equipment is needed. With ingenuity, everyday items are sufficient to arm the insurgents. In the middle of all kinds of potential weapons and barricades, we may also discover a unique card called “Board Game” (ibid.) – a clever addition pointing out to players that even what they are doing right now, playing a board game, could be a crucial ingredient of an urban insurrection.

The most common loot card in the deck is the one depicting “Molotovs” which increase the value of a die roll when the “defeat a riot cop” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) action is performed. This card may be the strongest reminder that an average game of *Bloc by Bloc* will be unwinnable if we want to abstain from using violence against the police. The game does not mention anyone getting injured or even dying and instead talks about units being “sent back to the staging area”, but we have every reason to believe that these “clashes” (ibid.) with the police are violent, just like in the events that inspired the game. We can build “social centers” to gain loot cards instead of looting shopping centers if that is what we prefer, but there is no other way than to engage the police if they occupy a district we need to control in order to fulfill our "social agenda" (ibid.).

This is certainly the most controversial aspect of the game: it seems to argue that in order to achieve victory it is necessary and justified for certain political movements to resort to the use of violence. At best, it is indifferent to which strategies, some more confrontational than others, are chosen by the players. For a game as rich in subtleties, this is a remarkable, radical deviation from the long tradition of civil disobedience and non-violent resistance known to us in theory and practice. For example, in 2011, during the same time as the events Simons (2016) cites as his inspirations, the USA saw the massive protest movement of *Occupy Wall Street*. David Graeber portrayed the events in his book "The Democracy Project" (2014) and made it very clear how non-violence was a fundamental principle and key to the success of that political movement that was guided by an anarchist philosophy that would certainly not be out of place in *Bloc by Bloc*. I have pointed out how the message of *Die Macher* goes against democratic ideals. We have to extend this criticism to *Bloc by Bloc* for not even including the option of a non-violent strategy to achieve victory.

Besides the controversial use of violence, we can analyze more aspects regarding the representation of and the interplay between the different factions and the police. In the context of a political game like this, innocent-looking production choices can assume a highly symbolic meaning. For example, all the game components representing the police are white. This can be read as a comment on the lack of diversity in law enforcement, for example in the USA, where a majority of police officers is white and other groups are often underrepresented. The components of the prisoners faction are orange, the same color as prison uniforms in the United States.

Many of the elements that separate *Bloc by Bloc* from older political games like *Suffragetto* are associated with techniques developed only during the last few decades of board game design. Even if they really wanted players to see the events from the perspective of the suffragettes, designers of games like *Suffragetto* had no way of avoiding that one person must assume the role of the police force. *Bloc by Bloc* uses cooperative gameplay, popularized by the 2008 release *Pandemic* and others, to circumvent this issue. As a result, the burden for one player to play the police is lifted and their actions are incorporated into the game. However, the design of a cooperative game comes with its own challenges. The level of difficulty must be well balanced and players must be incentivized to look beyond their own units and abilities and discuss and implement a collective strategy. This is, of course, a procedural expression of the idea of solidarity that is required for political movements to gather the strength to challenge state authority.

Certain game mechanics are designed in such a way that the desired outcome is nearly impossible to achieve unless players pool their resources and act together. To defeat a riot van three subsequent attacks are required during one night phase. That usually means that a player must spend three dice of four or a higher value, an improbable die roll. The chances are much better if different factions converge on the riot van and combine their best die rolls to destroy the powerful police vehicle. Even more obvious is the liberation action. In a board game procedural representation does not necessarily take the form of rules, it can also be expressed in the physical components themselves. Here, every player has only ten blocs at their disposal which are usually spread in different locations. Once their supply is exhausted, they simply cannot put blocs on the board anymore. In order to liberate even the easiest district eight units are required. Some loot cards do bend this rule, but generally speaking it means that a district can only be liberated if multiple factions decide to achieve this goal together and put a mix of their units in the same district.

Whether we consider the textual, visual or procedural level, we find the same political message everywhere. It is encouraging us to collectively rise up against inequalities and repression in our societies and teaching us how our liberation might be accomplished. In sharp contrast to *Die Macher,* the game is very consistent in repeating and mirroring this message on all levels. However, this design approach has its own risks. *Bloc by Bloc* could easily have ended up as an uncritical glorification, an all too blunt, all too one-sided piece of leftist propaganda.

The game is able to avoid this pitfall by incorporating a self-critical discourse, a reflection of the constrictions, inner threats, even self-destructive tendencies that can go along with political activism. Again, the key tool to express this is found at the procedural level of the game. *Bloc by Bloc* is first and foremost experienced as a cooperative game, but there is always the chance that one of the players only pretends to help the others in implementing their social agendas while secretly following the “Nihilist” or “Vanguardist” (*Bloc by Bloc* 2018) agenda. That player will typically try to manipulate and use the other players, claiming to suggest a course of action because it is for the greater good, when in reality it only helps that one player to claim victory alone. For example, in order for the “Nihilist” to win, the player must have an occupation in a “Public” (ibid.) type of district and at least six shopping centers must have been burnt down. This incorporates a common accusation against participants of urban riots during which shops sometimes get looted: that their motives are not political, but criminal ones. It is fascinating how the relatively simple, well-established mechanic of semi-cooperative gameplay can be used to such great effect to generate the same unease, suspicions and paranoia in players that can take hold when various parties ally in a political movement.[viii] It pushes the players to question themselves and the justification of their actions constantly. Are we really just looting this place to acquire the means to liberate more districts, or do some among us push this course of action because they want to see shopping centers burn?

By hardwiring this kind of critical thinking and self-reflection into the game, it is able to go beyond replacing one power fantasy with another – the glorious rebellion and rise to power of the oppressed. This way, Simons (2018b) is able to fulfill his ambitious goal for the game to be

> “a response and a challenge to the ubiquitous narratives of colonization, industrialization, statecraft, authoritarian hero-worship, and chauvinist violence that dominate much of tabletop gaming—and digital gaming even more so.”

Not only does it reverse the perspective and play out a scenario from the point of view of the oppressed and marginalized instead of the one of the *Macher* in power, but with its self-reflective quality it also questions and critiques our willingness to believe in such narratives and perpetuate them by playing them out in one board game after another.

Conclusion

In a culture where the number of board game players is rising continually and the games themselves are becoming more and more diverse and complex on a thematic and mechanical level, we need to develop a comprehensive understanding of this medium and its interactions with the wider cultural ecosystem. This becomes all the more urgent when we realize that some of them touch on topics, such as democratic ideals, that are at the fundament of our political culture. What happens when political ideas are incorporated into board games? What mechanisms within this medium are affecting and transforming them? What are the unique ways in which board games can express a political standpoint? To make some progress in answering such questions, I have analyzed two board games that represent a wide range of ways to merge politics and gameplay.

At first glance, Karl-Heinz Schmiel's *Die Macher* seems to be a fairly neutral, serious depiction of a democratic election process. However, as the article has demonstrated, board games contain a dimension of procedural expression similar to the one Bogost described for video games. Once we incorporate this perspective into our analysis, *Die Macher* turns out to be more of a caricature of democracy. T. L. Simons' *Bloc by Bloc*, designed three decades later and building on design innovations like semi-cooperative gameplay, is far more sophisticated in integrating visual, textual and procedural components to achieve a coherent treatment of a political topic. It is also political in the sense that it can be read as a critical comment on the underlying ideologies of many modern board games – for which *Die Macher* can serve as an example.

The self-reflective and critical qualities in *Bloc by Bloc* represent a significant step in the maturation of this medium. It is one proof point (among others) of what the medium is capable of and that we have reason to expect much more sophisticated board games with even greater cultural significance in the future, a rich source for future research and, last but not least, enjoyment for the players.

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[i] Multiple editions of *Die Macher* have been published between 1986 and 2019 as well as two editions of *Bloc by Bloc* in 2016 and 2018. Unless otherwise noted I will refer to the latest edition of each game throughout the text.

[ii] I would like to thank Spielworxx and Out of Order Games for providing images and permissions to illustrate this article.

[iii] The English rule book quoted here can be accessed on the publisher's website: https://www.spielworxx.de/downloads-regeln/, accessed 14 November 2020.

[iv] When referring to game components, I use quotation marks to indicate that these are direct quotes and the exact terms used in the rulebook. Assigning a name and thus defining what a component is meant to represent is a significant part of the political framing of a game.

[v] The annual *Democracy Index* conducted by The Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Germany at number 13 worldwide with a rating of 8.68 out of 10 points in 2019 (The Economist Intelligence Unit 2020, 10). An annual report of political trends and election results in Germany can be found in the "European Journal of Political Research Political Data Yearbook" (Kinski 2020). One important change in the German political landscape that is not reflected in *Die Macher* is the rise of the AfD, a new right-wing party founded in 2013, that was able to win substantial amounts of votes in several elections.

[vi] This general type of issue, that conflicting messages are expressed in different aspects of a game, is of course not limited to board games. In a 2007 article Clint Hocking coined the term "ludonarrative dissonance" to describe the "powerful dissonance between what it is about as a game, and what it is about as a story" he experienced when playing *BioShock* (Hocking 2007). This term was widely adopted to analyze and criticize similar effects in other video games (Seraphine 2016) and it may turn out to be useful for board game research as well. This potential can't be explored here though because the games this article focuses on do not contain the kind of fleshed-out, intricate story that serves as the referencing point for discussions of ludonarrative dissonance. Examples of such board games can be found in Marco Arnaudo's *Storytelling in the Modern Board Game* (2018).

[vii] Again, I will use quotation marks when referring to game components to indicate that these are direct quotes from the rulebook or text printed on the game components themselves. The rulebook is also available on the publisher's website: https://outofordergames.com/blocbybloc/, accessed 14 November 2020.

[viii] Two examples of influential semi-cooperative board games are *Shadows Over Camelot* (2005) and *Battlestar Galactica: The Board Game* (2008).