

TALABWO

Third Issue

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TALABWO is a journal of variant postal Diplomacy commentary, ideas, projects and similar brouhaha published by Conrad von Metzko, P.O. Box 626, San Diego CA 92112, USA. Subscriptions 12-\$3. Trades all-for-all with any journal carrying variant games or news, and possibly with others as well. Games are not (yet) played in these pages.

THE MILLER NUMBER CUSTODIANSHIP REFERENDUM: The vote is now counted, and the result is a tie - 22-22. Astonishing! In the separate question on whether the voter felt Sacks was handling his job acceptably, the result was another tie - 27 yes, 27 no.

Walt Buchanan will presumably print the full breakdown of the vote in his own journal, so I shan't. I will say there were two surprises: I was startled that I did so poorly in Canada (5-3 Sacks) and absolutely floored that I did so well in the UK (5-0 von Metzko).

Obviously I do not intend to pursue a claim to Sacks' position based on such a result. Do you suppose I could somehow get away with charging a dollar for each number I don't issue?

Seriously, the vote totals speak for themselves. Opposition to Robert Sacks as Custodian is huge, but not overwhelming. I therefore withdraw my claim, and request that active opposition to the Sacks regime (unless it be based on new evidence or circumstances) cease. I shall issue no numbers nor support any effort to issue them in schism with Sacks.

At the same time, it's obvious that Robert Sacks had better get about a little housecleaning. I strongly suspect there will be many gamesmasters who, because of the issues that caused them to support my efforts, will cease to deal with Miller Numbers at all. And such hobby services are absurd if not universal.

My campaign has raised a few issues. Sacks can deal with them or ignore them, as he chooses. But if he ignores or brushes aside the implications of a referendum result like that one, lots of us are simply going to throw up our hands and forget about Miller Numbers.

I had sort of hoped that the campaign behind this referendum would awaken Sacks to some of the problems, but apparently it did not. In the last two weeks, Sacks has first appointed Jim Hymas as 'Variants Ratings Advisor to the MNC,' and then informed him that if he did not stop working for me, he would be removed from his new position. One simply does not win friends and co-workers by treating them with cavalier whimsey.

I think that ends the Miller Number business in TALABWO. It does not, however, conclude the magazine. It seems to me that we have plenty of other schemes to work on, so...let's be to it.

AFFILIATIONS: TALABWO is affiliated with the World Variant Association. The editor is a member of IDA/NA. We have applied for affiliation with the American Wargaming Association. We are coöperatively affiliated with the Canadian Diplomacy Organization. And we are about to join the National Games Club of England. That sort of covers all the bases, wot?

News and material from any of these groups is welcomed and solicited for these pages.

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PLAYTESTING: Very little response to this, but it isn't a dead horse yet. Ken St. Andre and I chatted about the subject while I was in Phoenix last week, and he and I generally agreed that this scheme - if we can get some warm bodies to help out - could be the most useful of the ideas discussed here.

Ken and I suggest that this be dealt with two ways - in-person and postally. Where there is a local group with the time and interest to test games face-to-face, they should be given all possible help and should be encouraged to report the results of their tests for publication (or, if they prefer, should publish their results and make them available to those interested). Postally, any magazine that wants to play-test a game should be encouraged to do so.

Formally, this won't necessitate much organization. It might be useful to have a sort of central clearing house so that games needing tests, and people needing games to work on, could be channeled to one another.

The important thing, as I see it, is that the results of any test be written down and made public. Running a game by post is all well and good, but it doesn't help many people unless some sort of analysis, during and/or after play, is provided. Very few magazines do this. And only rarely do in-person groups publish information based on their meetings.

Could I have some feedback on this, please? Specifically, I want to know:

1. If you're involved with a face-to-face group, would you be willing to test games (how many? how often?) and report a summary of findings?
2. Publishers: Would you care to run new games (how many?) and report a summary of findings?
3. Is there anyone interested in coordinating these efforts?

For my contribution, I propose to use the pages of TALABWO to test up to three new or newly-revised games. There will have to be the following limitations: I will only deal with games that use a new board; I cannot undertake huge games with reams of rules; and no press will be permitted owing to space. I will not charge a fee, players need only arrange to receive TALABWO. Finally, players should agree before signing up that they will provide a summary of their opinion of the game at the end; players will also be encouraged to submit any comments they care to make as the game goes along, either for immediate release or for retention to game's end.

The player list is now open. Also, the list of suggestions for games to be tested is now open. Players will select their own games, and I will somehow arrange to supply maps and rules.

And finally, I will not run games that are being adequately run elsewhere (i.e. Youngstown, etc.).

Because this magazine, and its games, will run on roughly a monthly schedule, players from overseas are welcomed. However, postage per issue is 62c. I'll compromise the costs with you, but you'll still have to pay more; for overseas air delivery, the sub rate will have to be double the surface rate. (For those trading by surface, your cost will be standard sub rate plus continuation of trade.) Fair?

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WORLD VARIANT ASSN.: Some time ago, as a separate mailing from this, I sent out a two-page 'reorganisation' sheet designed to get the WVA back alive. Response has been generally positive and good. A synthesis of most of the comments on this proposal goes like this:

1. The WVA should be informal, not fettered with constitutions and bylaws and interminable elections and referenda.

2. There should be a chairperson, more for ease of administration than anything else. I suggested myself as chairperson, and TALABWO to be the Association publication. Objections were not made (except as below), so I presume that if I announce that TALABWO is now the journal of the WVA and I am WVA Chairman, nobody will hate me? If you object, please speak up. Please also provide an alternative.

3. I suggested that there be a method whereby new members might be excluded by vote of the original members. This met with considerable disfavour, and I see the point. So it seems that anybody may join as long as they kick in dues.

4. There should be a treasurer, and reasonable dues to cover the costs of the WVA projects. No volunteers have come forward as Treasurer (I flatly refuse to take the job or to handle WVA funds at all). Nick? Cal? Anybody wanna volunteer? As to dues, I suggest five dollars per year. Comments? (At this point it looks as if we will wind up with about twenty members. Further, I'll pay the costs of TALABWO for now, so the dues won't need to be diverted for that. On that basis, is five dollars too much? Too little?)

The various WVA projects talked about will continue in the regular text of the issue.

Now - there was one semi-dissenting voice to the WVA proposal, particularly in terms of making me Chief Honcho and TALABWO the journal. Ken St. Andre suggests that we have an informal, rotating chairmanship, with publication of material by any member at any time the member has anything to print - rather like an APA system (APA = Amateur Press Assn., a device primarily used in science-fiction fan circles where the publication of copies of a journal rotates among the various APA members). It's a reasonable idea, but I fear it won't work, because of the problem of unreliable scheduling. There's no reason at all why various WVA members can't go ahead and print whatever they like at any time - Hartley Patterson is already doing so, see later this issue - but it seems to me that, with several ongoing projects requiring steady progress and continuity, one central voice is quite desirable. I don't especially care whether TALABWO or some other journal is that voice (nobody else volunteered), but the principle of a focal point strikes me as useful. Without it, publication of ideas and work accomplished will be sporadic at best, and much work may be duplicated because people went off in similar directions all at once.

Comments?

Also, Elmer Kinton has offered a form of counter-proposal to the entire WVA scheme: He suggests we incorporate the group into the already-existing GPA (Gamesmasters' Publishers Assn.), which Elmer runs. I'm not clear on just what GPA is, in depth; I know it is very new and untested, dabbles in hobby politics, offers a temporary printing service to gamesmasters whose own facilities are temporarily out of order, and deals in

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a much wider spectrum of postal gaming than just Diplomacy variants. Beyond that, I'm not at all sure what GPA is.

But even on this limited basis, I demur. The part about politics balks me, but that's easily solved and rather minor. Beyond that, the fact that GPA is established is irrelevant; so is WVA, it's just been slightly dormant. Also, I think there's quite a bit more name identification to WVA than to GPA (which reminds me, Ken St.Andre also suggested a change of name, inasmuch as "WVA" isn't precisely accurate and sounds a bit pompous anyway; I disagree, but if you'd rather go with some other title - or none at all - fine. Ken suggests "Penguins"). And finally, the fact that WVA is intended as an extremely specialized group is all to my liking; I really don't want to get involved in a broader-spectrum organisation. (If one of us wants to do so, that's fine, but why link WVA to it?)

Well, there are my prejudicial comments. In the spirit of not voting endlessly on everything, I'm going to decree (hah!) that WVA is the name and will be the group, unto itself. If people write to me and tell me I shouldn't have done that, I'll quickly back down.

WVA potential members: Jim Hymas, Dan Alderson, Hartley Patterson, Ken St.Andre, Jim Peters, Cal White, Martin Janta-Pelczynski, Fred Davis, Walter Luc Haas, Richard Walkerdine, John Leader, Ferkin Doyle (haven't heard from Ferkin, but he keeps printing 'WVA' atop his mastheads), Elmer Hinton, Dick Vedder, Der Garvey, George Phillies. Decline to join: Stuart Dagger, Lew Pulciphier. (Both, however, indicate they will kick in the occasional tuppence-worth.) Not heard from: Laurence Gillespie, Greg Costikyan, Dave Kadlecck, Larry Dunning, Mick Bullock. Of this latter group, I am almost certain that Costikyan and Kadlecck won't be interested, so I'm dropping them from the list. Dunning has indicated in print that he doesn't care to join, but I'm waiting for a reply to a recent letter before I accept that as final. Gillespie, no idea. Bullock, I think, is rather angry with me - quite justifiably, I might add - over some problems two years ago, so we'll have to see.

WVA is in session. Onward. (Any suggestions for new members or invitees?)

Hmm...I just thought of some more: Gil Neiger, John Piggott and Ake Jonsson. Letters will be leaving shortly.

HANDBOOK AND VARIANT DESCRIPTIONS: Lots of confusion here, so let's try a synthesis.

First of all, Hartley Patterson is once again publishing his newsletter 'The Darien Settlement,' which is eminently worthwhile to all interested in the subject of variants. Hartley is at 'Finches,' 7 Cambridge Road, Beaconsfield, Bucks., UK HP9 1HW. Send him an int'l. reply coupon or two for a copy.

In 'Darien' #4, Hartley takes up the subject of a variant handbook. He mentions that NGC is supposedly working on one, and so is the U.K. professional magazine 'Games and Puzzles.' There is also one other similar project which I'm not at liberty to reveal, but suffice it to say that there's a lot of interest in the idea.

Variant descriptions - a compendium of capsule summaries of all known variants - is quite another thing, but work on both projects will intersect quite appreciably. So here's the status of the scheme as of now:

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1. Hartley says that unless someone else is already at work on a handbook, he will take over and get one going. Well, WVA is hard at work, but I see no reason why this should freeze Hartley out; in fact, all the better. Hartley, you are (as if I had such power!) appointed Handbook Coördinator. Take it away in 'Darien.'

2. Assuming we don't run into gross bickering, three WVA people - Cal White, Jim Hymas and I - have each agreed to pony up \$20. (roughly 35 pounds apiece - oops, I converted the wrong way, make that 12 pounds) to finance a handbook. Right here, I'd better print two addresses: Cal White, 1 Turnberry Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M6N 1P6. James Hymas, 250 Glen Manor Drive, Toronto M4E 2Y1.

3. Lew Pulsipher acts as the voice of doom in these discussions. He says that, in his view, based on the past sales of variant handbooks and packages, and the player handbooks issued by IDA, sales of any new handbook in any form are likely to be weak. I tend to agree, but I also tend to be willing to try one and see what happens. However, I think we'd better not get too massive (= expensive) a project into our teeth, 'cos if it doesn't work we'd hate to lose our shirts, trousers, shoes and gold fillings all at once.

Hartley's brief idea in 'Darien' is a handbook of about five major variants, including maps, rules, and presumably some articles and commentary. He suggests as candidates for inclusion Abstraction, Atlantica, Youngstown, Mercator and a space and Tolkien addition.

Generally, I like Hartley's possible inclusions. For Tolkien, I recommend Hartley's own 'Downfall.' For a space game, let Pulsipher decide, that's his field of expertise. Youngstown okay as long as it's Walkerdine's version. Mercator damn right! Atlantica and Abstraction good possibilities. Other ideas: Cline 9-Man, Diadokhi-V, 1885, Hyborean Dip., Gesta Danorum.

4. Jim, Cal and I are somewhat thinking along the lines of printing up, in one or several volume(s), little summary descriptions (5/6 to a page, photo-reduced) of all known variants. And that's what the sixty bucks is for, officially. But this project has some serious problems. We have lots of interested people (most of the 'yes-on-WVA' list have indicated they'll help), but where in the hell are we going to get all the variants to review? Try though I might, I cannot answer this problem. There are rather more than 200 variants which have been played postally - God knows how many more which have not - and of these, not more than half (if that) can be gotten to through 'usual channels,' e.g. Diplomacy World, our own collections, collections of non-WVA people who will contribute, etc. Where do we get the rest? The variant banks have them, which effectively means Walter Luc Haas, but that's a heck of a lot of photocopying for him and a lot of money for us.

The best idea I've come up with is that we start at the top and work down in stages. First, we accumulate all the variants we can. Next, we arrange to have one or more of us receive any new variants that come up in future. Then we start compiling the capsules, and issue them in installments; whenever we get, say, 30 completed, we announce them and print. Loose-leaf format plus a cumulative index will take care of library problems, and the new numbering system (see on) will make it a snap.

And then, slowly, as interest is gauged from results and time/money allow, we start delving into the obscure ones, asking for donations of archive copies whenever possible.

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The most serious flaw in this proposal is that the later volumes will be the least interesting. Good new variants will help compensate, but in general the strong (popular) variants will have come first, and the long-forgotten obscurities will all come together last.

5. Now for a quick summary of my ideas on all this. First, I propose that I take myself out of a leadership role in the Handbook project, mainly because I can't do everything, and also because there are at least three (and undoubtedly more) superbly-qualified people hard at work - Hartley, Cal and Jim Hymas. (Well, it's that Jim is so common a name that I thought it wise to use surnames....how about Jim the Scot? - oh hell, I shouldn't have mentioned that, Hartley will have a wee fit!) Let Hartley coördinate it in 'Darien,' and let Cal (with his 'Janus') and Jim (with 'Der Fliegende Holländer') do it. You still have my twenty clams, and I have every intention of being active; I just ain't gonna run the show. If you guys will keep me supplied with progress reports and commentary, I'll toss it in here.

And for the variant reviews, I'm going to ask Dan Alderson - who has expressed an immense interest in the subject, and who is a hell of a workhorse when he gets going - to lead the way. For the moment (until I hear further from Dan, who may not be in a position to publish or get as active as I think he'd like to be), send comments to me - particularly, let me know how you feel about the comments I made above on getting all the material together and issuing it in installments. Also, much of the material we compile for this project will get into Diplomacy World, either through Pulshipher's or my writings for that journal. To that extent, we can easily reprint what comes out of there.

Enough. Is there any major disagreement with all of this?

GAME OPENINGS JOURNAL. Response favourable, but sparse. I'm having trouble getting data to input into the thing, so I'm asking all interested parties to undertake doing me a favour: Will each of you reading this (in North America), who is interested in the subject, sit down right now and make a list of all variant openings known to you? I'll compile it into the first issue of the game openings newsletter and send it to all potentially interested parties.

There seems to be a consensus that such a publication is not needed in the UK. I've written to Pete Swanson, who publishes something along these lines, to get his opinion. Also, Richard Walkerdine has agreed to distribute any UK edition of such list. Maybe the answer to all of this is a big ad in Diplomacy World - how about I stop this drivel for the moment and fashion such an ad, and fire it to Walt?

This project deferred until next issue, wherein it will hit the fan in big time. Thanks to all who commented, especially Richard Ware who is plugging me in his own publication (the one with the Russian title).

FLASH BULLETIN: Larry Dunning of Australia has agreed to join WVA, though he hasn't a lot of time to spend. One more! Thanks, buddy! Larry also expresses interest in playtesting, but that's a silly thing for him to say inasmuch as he and his magazine (Tau Ceti, a superb general postal gaming journal) are about the most active playtesters anywhere on earth. Next, I think I'll appoint Larry Custodian of the St. Andre numbers, for postal Tunnels and Trolls variants....