

TALABWO

Fourth Issue

ca. 20 April 1977

TALABWO is a journal of postal diplomacy variants, consisting in comment, articles, discussion, progress reports on projects, and almost anything else in the variants milieu except actual games. TALABWO is the journal of the World Variant Association (WVA), a loose conglomerate of activists interested in doing things without fighting over them. Membership in WVA is open to any interested party for an annual fee of five dollars U.S., which gets you TALABWO in the deal. Subscriptions to TALABWO without WVA membership are three dollars for twelve issues. Benefits of membership? You get to participate in what we're doing. That's it.

THE LATEST HOBBY POLITICS HUMOUR: I promised I'd keep hobby politics out of this, and I will, but the latest idiocy is too funny to ignore. Also, it may affect some of you, so you ought to know.

We had a referendum recently, remember? When the result was known, I withdrew from the fight and asked my supporters to do likewise. One of those supporters, Elmer Hinton, decided to keep the battle going, and he announced in his own journal that he was appointing himself 'variant numbers custodian' in opposition to Bob Sacks, and would begin issuing numbers of an unspecified character to all who wanted them.

Being by this time convinced that the answer to the variant world's problems was to just settle down and work on needed projects, and quit feuding, I sent out a letter to a dozen or so people, mostly those who had been my most vociferous supporters, explaining my rationale and asking them not to cause further confusion and turmoil by endorsing Hinton's schism. Elmer's copy was enclosed with an explanatory note indicating that, while I understood what he was trying to do, and was hardly unsympathetic, nevertheless I felt that it was the wrong approach.

Elmer's reply to me was to return my letter to me, torn into about two dozen pieces and jammed in an envelope.

As I've said many times, what this hobby really needs is a few mature leaders....

TO THOSE WHO MAY CARE: Rumours of my impending demise from a serious ailment, whether fostered by me or others, were an April Fool's joke that backfired. I apologise. (If you don't understand what I'm talking about, you're better off.)

THE STUFF I FORGOT FROM THE TOP: TALABWO will trade with any other journal running variants, and may trade with others; just ask. And the party of the first part is Conrad F. von Metzke, P.O. Box 626, San Diego CA 92112, USA.

BADLY ORGANISED PAGE TERMINATOR: This is the end of page one. The remainder of this issue will be relatively cohesive.

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WVA INTERNAL BUSINESS

Greg Costikyan says he might like to join. Mick Bullock says no. It's about time for a potential membership roster, eh? Okay, in a minute.

First - nobody objected to the dues structure, but on the other hand nobody seems to want to be treasurer. Ken St. André indicated he'd take the job "if nobody else volunteered," so - if you were serious, Ken, let me know and you're appointed.

The name. I have two letters on the subject, expressing opposite viewpoints.

From Cal White: "I quite agree with Ken St. André. I'm tired of having a million organisations using their initials for a name. It gets boring and gives life to the saying, 'Life is a Bowl of Alphabet Soup.' I vote we call ourselves 'Penguins'!!!"

From Walter Luc Haas: "Why change a name which exists? What we make out of it is important, not the name. And the name actually says what we intend to do, to be. I am for WVA - and certainly against something like Penguins, Pie-nuts, or whatever...."

Well - aside from the problem of having mis-typed 'Penguins' twice so far, we have a small dilemma. I'm with Walter on this one, because I see a substantial value in having a name that will indicate, without further explanation, the general field of interest of the group. 'Penguins' has the appeal of cuteness and humour, but you can't tell a thing from the name; are we ornithologists, Catholic nuns, book publishers, or what?

We could, I suppose, do both; call the group WVA and the members Penguins. There is one advantage to the latter idea that I see; you may not agree with me that it's especially momentous, but I think it's worth a thought. One of the biggest problems that WVA (or whatever) is trying to get away from is the tendency of hobby organisations to take themselves too seriously, and to feel that they have taken on some degree of special importance simply for existing. In the vernacular, we're talking about puffing, or snootiness, or self-inflation. We've generally agreed that we don't want that attitude to take hold here, yes? Now, tell me; who in the hell can get too serious about someone who calls himself a Penguin?

Let me give you a concrete example of what I mean. Robert Sacks, the Miller Number Custodian, uses on all his envelopes, pre-printed return address stickers that read, "Robert Sacks, MNC." When first I saw that, I thought I would die laughing - at Sacks, not with him. How pompous can you get?! But - if Sacks' labels had read, "Robert Sacks, Penguin," I strongly suspect I'd have written him immediately and asked to be his friend, sight-unseen.

Okay, it's a minor point, but then sometimes minor points are the stuff of which major ones are made. I wonder where IDA/NA would be now if certain individuals hadn't gotten so wrapped up in their own titles? Well, anyway, I'm going to suggest that the WVA remain the WVA. Further, it can be commonly understood that members who call themselves 'Penguins' are, in fact, members, not actual penguins. I mean, hell, if you can compromise to please everybody, why not?

We could, I suppose, Ghod forbid, hold a vote....

Next point. There is a very good possibility that my entire role in the hobby will drastically change quite soon, and if that happens something will have to go. In my view, TALABWO is the most expendable thing I do, mainly because there are so many other people interested and (seemingly) willing to work. On this basis, I wonder if you would

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kindly start thinking about a new WVA Chairperson (sorry, Piglet); this would, of course, entail publishing TALABWO or equivalent. I am not going to exercise any sort of dictatorial power over my successor; it'll be entirely up to the members. But I would like to hear offers. Note, this is not a definite thing, just probable. And before anybody gets mad, let me say that, though I'm not yet at liberty to discuss just what I'm referring to, it is something which I think you will eventually agree takes precedence; further, it will put me in a position to be a lot more useful to the variant world than I now am. And in any case, I am not talking about dropping from WVA; I simply don't think a leadership role will be possible.

Okay, here's the (potential) membership roster:

ALDERSON, Daniel - 6720 Day St., Tujunga, CA 91042
COSTIKYAN, Gregory - 1675 York Ave., New York, NY 10028
DAVIS, Fred C., Jr. - 3012 Oak Green Ct., Ellicott City, MD 21043
DOYLE, Ferkin - 259 Johnson St., Apt. V-1, Philadelphia, PA 19144
DUNNING, Larry - 46 Holmesdale Rd., West Midland, 6056, Perth, W. AUSTRALIA
GARVEY, Der - 22 McDonagh Road, Ballyphehane, Cork City, IRISH REPUBLIC
HAAS, Walter Luc - Postfach 7, CH-4024 Basel 24, SWITZERLAND
HEMTON, W. Elmer, Jr. - 20 Almost St., Nashua, NH 03060
HYMAS, James - 250 Glen Manor Dr. W., Toronto, Ontario, CANADA M4E 2Y1
JANTA-POLCZYNSKI, Martin - rue Dodonée 79, Box 10, B-1180 Bruxelles, BELGIUM
LEEDER, John - 1903 42d Ave. S.W., Calgary, Alberta, CANADA T2T 2M6
PATTERSON, Hartley - 'Finches,' 7 Cambridge Road, Beaconsfield, Bucks.,
HP9 1HW, UNITED KINGDOM
PHILLIES, George - 910 Tenth St., Apt. B, Santa Monica, CA 90403
PETERS, Jim - 5004 N. 68th Drive, Glendale, AZ 85303
ST. ANDRE, Ken - 2232 E. Pinchot, Apt. 8, Phoenix, AZ 85016
VEDDER, Richard - Dept. of History, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85721
von METZKE, Conrad - P.O. Box 626, San Diego, CA 92112
WALKER, Peter - B.R. 3, Belfast, Prince Edward Island, CANADA COA 1A0
WALKER, Rodney - 1273 Crest Dr., Encinitas, CA 92024
WALKERDINE, Richard J. - 43 Chapel Grove, Weybridge, Addlestone, Surrey,
KT15 1UG, UNITED KINGDOM
WARE, Richard - TEP 253 Commonwealth Ave., Boston, MA 02116
WHITE, Calvin - 1 Turnberry Ave., Toronto, Ontario, CANADA M6N 1P6

If anybody else receiving this magazine might be interested, please advise. And if anybody knows of anyone who ought to be invited to join (there are no limitations), kindly let me know that too.

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TALABWO is the name of a fictitious African country invented by American author Don Westlake for his comic mystery novel 'The Hot Rock.' Talabwo and the other invented African state, Akinzi, are rather loosely patterned after the actual nations Rwanda and Burundi. There is no particular reason for my having chosen 'Talabwo' as a title for this magazine, other than the fact that the name appealed to me. As to pronunciation, your guess is as good as mine. I've taken to saying it with the stress on the second syllable, viz. 'ta-LAB-wo,' but in talking on the 'phone with others I find that it's more common to aim for the first syllable, viz. 'TA-lab-wo.' In all cases the vowels are as in Italian, and the consonants as in English.

VARIANT HANDBOOK: I am going to propose that this project be tabled for the time being. There is apparently going to be (or, at least, the possibilities are very good) a professionally-produced 'variant package,' or handbook, put out in the United Kingdom, possibly by the UK distributor of Diplomacy, Philmar. Lew Pulsipher advises that the NCG and Hartley Patterson have therefore dropped their efforts to produce such a thing.

Now, the fact that a pro-package may be in the works, is no reason to abandon our project; possibly quite the reverse, this may be just the impetus to variants that we need to make a handbook of our own succeed. However, there's really no point in continuing until we find out just what Philmar plan to do, if anything. Once we know what not to duplicate, we can quickly return to this project. But I hate to see us spend a lot of time and money on a scheme that may duplicate someone else's work.

Objections (I hope not) to a temporary pause in the action?

VARIANT DESCRIPTIONS: Here is Lew Pulsipher's suggested format for the outline descriptions of variants:

Title/designer/number of players/basic scenario/basic type (new board, old board, new or old rules)/size of printed map/number of centres (if applicable)/number of units/number of land & sea spaces/printing method/length of special rules/date of design/date and place of first publication/length of play ~ taking standard game as 'medium' and bracketing it out, with reference both to postal and in-person play/special comments/personal comments from evaluator/evaluator's initials.

Lew then offers the following example, using the Walker version of Youngstown:

Youngstown Variant/Youngstown Diplomacy Club, revised for publication by Rodney C. Walker/10/expansion of regular board idea/new board, standard rules with minor changes/usually 20 x 30 inches/72/72/Xmm land, Xmm sea (Lew didn't have the exact figures when he roughed this out)/varies with publisher/one page/1968/1969, special publication by R. Walker/very long in-person and postally/many different versions with small rule or map changes; off-board boxes permit movement from Pacific to Atlantic/popular but overrated; revision desirable/l.e.p.

(NOTE: This is an example, it is not intended to be absolutely accurate; Lew did it for illustrative purposes from memory. I have edited a couple of spots very slightly.)

Having offered this suggested outline, Lew asks for suggestions for improvement or revision of the format. Here are mine:

First, add the variant designator. Second, add an indication of which of the variant banks have the items in stock at the time of review;

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key the information on size of map, type of printing, and length of rules to the variant bank edition (WVB unless otherwise specified). Third, drop the actual counting of land and sea spaces, and substitute a rough ratio comment ('entirely land,' 'largely land,' 'land and sea about equal'); if, because of the nature of the game, the ratio is deceptive, this can be mentioned in special comments (which would be necessary anyway).

For the item on basic scenario, Lew has six groups: expansion of regular game, realistic, historical, abstract, hypothetical, sci-fi--fantasy. For game type, there are three: old rules with new board, new rules with old board, new and new. I see no objection to lifting these categorizations as they stand.

The question of 'evaluator's comments' remains. Here's where we get subjective; the rest of the data are purely statistical, or at least absolute, but opinion could get us into some trouble.

For instance, let me take a game that has had some popularity - John Biehl's Ancient Hebrew Kingdom Diplomacy. If I were writing personal comments on this, I would come out with something like: "Very prone to stalemate lines and sluggish movement; poor potential for alliance development due to narrow limits of playing board and small number of players; generally an extremely dull game." My experience with AHKD is that it has too few players jammed together in a very small playing area, with no room for maneuver and therefore no room for much imagination or alliance intricacy. Therefore, the game tends very quickly to become a two-on-two stalemate, and about the only real thrill in AHKD is that it teaches you very quickly how to thoroughly analyse intersupport possibilities to hold a stalemate line. But anybody with any analytical abilities at all will soon figure out how these possibilities are analysed, and how they are applied in the particular game, and thereafter there's nothing to do.

So. The game had a bit of popularity for a time, and may still have; at least one major publisher still offers it for sale. Thus, it seems that many people like AHKD. For whatever reason, they would naturally object to my commentary. But if I wrote anything else, I'd be dishonest in terms of my opinions.

Another example. There is a newly-designed variant called Hyborcan Diplomacy, soon to be printed in Diplomacy World, which may very well be a superb game - in a lot of ways I think it is - but I would have a lot of trouble making comments on the thing because it bores me. The reason it bores me is that I am completely uninterested in the scenario. Conan the Conqueror? No thank you. This is not a worthwhile opinion, except for my own purposes; if I put into a review a line like, "boring game because scenario uninteresting," somebody ought to have my hide. And yet, I would have been honest; if I wrote "very intriguing game," I'd be a liar even though fewer complaints might come in.

All this waffle was intended to get the reader into some sort of free-association state of mind. Should these descriptions include subjective comments at all? If so, under what limitations?

Clearly, some types of 'opinion' will have to be avoided - both positive and negative. "Bad game" is absurd; either say why, or don't say it. "Bad game because the designer raped my wife" is self-evidently

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worthless. "Bad game because the scenario doesn't appeal to me" is not much better. "Bad game because power X is too strong and power Y is too weak" is getting us into more of a grey area; there are lots of people who feel that imbalance in a game, as long as it isn't too gross, is not necessarily a fatal flaw. (Most of the Tolkien variants have the common 'flaw' that Mordor is far too strong, and yet look how many people enjoy Tolkien variants immensely. For that matter, the regular game has some balance problems too.) And then we get to the detailed complaints: "Maneuverability poor in Balkan region," or some such thing; well, given the right setup, any area is a maneuverability problem. I have heard it argued that in the regular game Turkey is in a poor position because she has little room to maneuver around the home area; others claim that Turkey is in a good position because nobody else can maneuver either. Austria is caught in a sort of sandwich; but boy!, does Austria have open options! Russia has too big a frontier to defend; Rumania also has one extra unit and a lot of bargaining potential because she faces on so many strategic areas. Germany is stuck in the middle; Germany has good inner defence lines. And on and on.

Comments on this, please.

New aspect. Cal White writes as follows: "I object to more than one volume. Why bother with several volumes? At least if somebody buys it as one book and doesn't like it, he can't stop buying the series. I know this is rather cynical, but I object on aesthetic grounds also. I don't like flipping through several books to find something...."

"Possibly the reason that you would want to put out editions would be to keep the set up to date. An alternative would be to add a little to the initial price of a single volume and offer an update sheet which would come out every six months and would contain all the new variants for that period. The guy who did most of the initial compiling could print the sheet, or mail it to someone who'd print and mail it. Each purchaser would receive the sheet three or four times and then he'd have to start paying (for it)...somewhat the same principle that the encyclopedia companies use when they offer a yearbook...."

"The only problems we would face would be: 1) It might drive the purchase price up kind of high; of course we could offer it as a free service paid out of WVA funds. 2) This requires a fairly long commitment on the part of the guy doing the capsules. Not really that much of a problem. 3) Either a paucity of new variants or a lack of accessibility could make the update sheet rather scanty. Again not too much of a problem, especially of this is a free service."

Actually, Cal, my reasons for suggesting multiple volumes were these: (1) In case something happens to the project part-way through, at least some of it will be in print. (2) We don't really know yet how well such stuff is going to sell, and I don't see any accurate way of judging in advance - all the more so if we're talking about a project that won't see the public eye for a long time. If we work in installments, we can gauge response as we go, and gear future efforts to the apparent demand. (3) The one-volume system is possible even within the installment system. Simply produce the material in loose-leaf form; obviously there will have to be an index anyway, so one-volume freaks can just use a single large binder. (4) With reference to the loose-leaf format, subsequently-discovered gross errors (there