

Strange Meeting

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Available for free from Stephen Agar, 4 Cedars Gardens, BRIGHTON, BN1 6YD, UK.
Email: stephen@strangemeeting.org.uk

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EDITORIAL

Five years between issues is not unprecedented. Richard Sharp had a four year break between **Dolchstoß** 69 and **Dolchstoß** 70. Richard Walkerdine and Paul Simpkins both managed nearly five years between **Mad Policy** 73 and 74, and **Bruce** 39 and 40 respectively. And Chris Tringham went five and a half years between **Megalomania** 49 and No. 50. So I am in good company. **Armistice Day** 22 appeared in September 2003, which was a different world in terms of both the postal hobby and my life.

Back in 2003 the postal hobby was still going, if not strong, then at least OK. In 2003 the Zine Poll listed 40 zines, but a year later that number had fallen to 20 and as far as I can tell the 2004 Zine Poll turned out to be the last. How many mainstream zines are we down to now? Off the top of my head, **Borealis**, **For Whom The Die Rolls**, **Obsidian**, **Ode**; **The Tangerine Terror**, **TCP**, **Variable Pig** and **WIMM**? To all those editors a hearty well done and in particular hats off to John Marsden who is now approaching 300 issues of **Ode** (making it, as far as I know, the longest-lived Dip zine in the UK – and no one is ever going to catch him now).

Five years ago I would have thought that the future was Diplomacy web zines, but that doesn't seem to have happened. Automated web-based programs run and adjudicate Diplomacy games without the need for a zine. Potential editors, freed from the routine of GMing games, don't bother with the zine format and go for blogs instead. Websites do exist with Diplomacy resources, while **Diplomacy World** has managed to keep going (well done guys), but zines in whatever form are almost nowhere to be seen. Maybe it's a generation thing?

My life has also changed a lot in five years. In September 2003 I was just about to move to this house with Esme and my kids, Kate and Freddie. My marriage ended a couple of years later, and since 2005 I have lived here on my own, though I see the kids most weekends. Just as I was failing on the private side of my life, my career has prospered and I now run a part of Royal Mail called RM Wholesale.

Work is fairly intense and pressurised, but it is also interesting and absorbing, which makes up for it.

So why on earth am I doing this again? Search me. Having just spent weeks organising and scanning old zines for www.diplomacyzines.org.uk, I just felt the urge to put finger to keyboard once more. I guess I don't want the format to die just yet and I want to do a small bit to help sustain it, now that I think I have the time to do it justice. Of course times have moved on. Regretfully there is no more Richard Sharp and **Dolchstoß** – to some extent the postal Diplomacy hobby died with him. There can be no more hobby politics, because there really isn't much of a hobby. And we are probably all tired of articles on Diplomacy strategy and variants (let me know if you think otherwise). However, Diplomacy is still the *raison d'être* and without it there can be no Diplomacy zine.

So why **Strange Meeting**? Well, I have published many Diplomacy zines over the years, the principal ones being **Pigmy**, **Spring Offensive** and **Armistice Day**. As this is a fresh start, I didn't really want to re-use one of those titles. Doug Kent suggested **Grey Seal** (I think as a reference to the advanced ages of the likely readers), but it really isn't one of my favourite Elton John songs. I briefly considered **Trench Foot** – but it turned out to be the name of at least two existent rock bands. **Trench Fever** appealed as it has a World War One connection, and it implies that those involved are at best delirious, if not completely was crazy. But in the end I went for **Strange Meeting** as it is another brilliant poem by Wilfred Owen, written shortly before he was killed on 4th November 1918 – a week before the end of the war and almost exactly 90 years ago. The complete text of the poem can be found at http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Strange_Meeting.

So on to Diplomacy. I appreciate that four week deadlines are fairly generous in these days of instantaneous communication – but then many of us have very hectic lifestyles and there are lots of ways to play quicker games on the Internet if that is what people want. I want this to be fairly laid-back experience for all concerned. Inside are two

gamestarts – an excellent beginning. I will give each of the games a name (I assume Boardman Numbers have fallen into disuse?), being the name of an established Diplomacy zine from the past, in alphabetical order. So this time we have Game A (Albion) and Game B (Bellicus). I hope we can start a third game soon as it would be a shame if Terry had to wait a long time.

I don't really want this to become a reprint zine, though the temptation is there with almost the whole of the UK Zine Archive to pillage, but I have reprinted one of my own articles from 1999 inside – one which I had no memory of having written at all! And if I can't remember writing it, then surely none of you will remember having read it. Don't worry it isn't a Diplomacy strategy piece, nor an article on variant design. ☺

Time to go and make a cup of coffee. [One hour later] Bah! ☹

Isn't it odd how some things are the opposite of what you would intuitively expect? I confess that I have a habit of buying myself presents, never having mastered the art of delayed gratification. This can go from the sublime to the ridiculous – like (a) suddenly developing the urge to possess every album ever recorded by the brilliant and much-missed Townes Van Zandt (and thus going mad on Amazon one night) (*sublime*) or (b) buying a gratuitously expensive coffee machine – namely the *De Longhi Magnifica* (*ridiculous*).

Well, I just tried to make a cappuccino and it was luke warm and generally ugh. I took the thing apart and cleaned it religiously. Nothing worked. I couldn't for the life of me work out why something which used to make hot coffees with lots of foam, now produced foam-less cold coffee. Eventually it dawned on me. Turned out the problem was the fridge was a few degrees too warm, which counter-intuitively led to the cold coffee. Apparently it works like this – milk only froths successfully using if it is very cold, so if it is a little warm it doesn't froth it just goes into the coffee as warm-ish milk, which in turns cools everything down and makes a horrible cup of coffee. So, just in case such a thing ever happens to you, now you know. An hour of my life, wasted and I will never get it back.

And so issue one is complete. Now my only problem is to find some people to send it to! I think I will post it to the old **Armistice Day** mailing list, though I guess many will have moved. It would be nice to rediscover a few old friends though.



LETTERS

Richard Hucknall

My personal view is that 4-week deadline paper zines were fine in their day, but that email and the internet have opened up a new dimension for playing Diplomacy which is far superior. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed the 1970s/80s and postal Diplomacy, but in my opinion the current email/internet system allowing much faster (and cheaper) games is a definite improvement. You can now negotiate with players world-wide virtually instantaneously

SA: Agreed, if all you want to do is play the game. But I want to create a zine within which games can be played which has some merit in its own right rather than just as a vehicle for a game report. You may be correct that no one will be interested, but hey – let's find out.

I applaud your dedication in putting all the old zines onto the web. It's a part of our past and our heritage and I look forward to seeing more zines appear. I'm particularly interested in **Pendulum** where I gained my very very first solo as Austria in BDC99 in about 1905. I do hope that you have these old zines. I recall the old days when I cranked out 100 or so copies of **FOE** on an old stencil duplicator every few weeks after having spent a couple of days bashing out the contents of a zine and adjudicating numerous games. I still adjudicate numerous game but with the help of software, and then (with help from more software) post them to the web. It's a much easier and quicker process.

*SA: Yes, adjudication software made everything a lot easier. If only Chris Tringham had had such software when he was producing **Megalomania** then that zine may have been destined for great things indeed. I'll probably use Stewart Cross's old program that he kindly wrote for me, if I can get it to run under Vista. All 91 issues of **Fall of Eagles** are now available to read and I will prioritise **Pendulum** just for you. Anyone else any requests?*

You may well have only been 17 in the heyday of postal zines - I was a little older! My PBEM experience was between when I was 30 & 40. My son was born in 1975 and was a baby when I first started producing FOE. He is now 33 and has recently made me a grand-dad, and happily is playing Diplomacy on Dip2000.

*SA: Wow. My daughter Kate is 14 this month – she was born just after **SpOff 28**. Hopefully it will be a while yet before she makes me a Grandfather.*

Kevin Feintuck

Richard Hucknall was kind enough to post info about your marvellous archive on the Diplomacy 2000 site.

SA: *I nearly gave up on the Dip2000 site because at first glance it hasn't been updated for years. I appreciate the games are still going, but I think a casual observer may not realise it.*

Having a quick glance at the early **Ethil the Frogs** I think I may have the dubious distinction of being the first player to be eliminated from any of the **Ethil** games. I also seem to have been pretty heavily embroiled in **War Bulletin**, including a participation in a variant called Diadochi if memory serves well. Spotted Will Haven's name popping up - I still remember Adrian Brine and he comprehensively beating me up in a three player game in his parlour in Teck Street! - All three of us were pupils/students at the Liverpool Institute at the time.

My involvement disappeared very shortly after, probably by 1974. Only last year I finally reappeared, blinking in the light, into the brave new world of E-Mail Dippy. Delighted to report that I performed every bit as badly in my first game on Dip 2000 as I had when **EtF** was still only just past being **Ethil the Tadpole**.

I did subscribe to a third magazine but am blown if I can remember its name. I think it was called something naval and military, possibly **Dreadnought** or **Destroyer**. Its editor, I seem to remember, was "Duncan" but I can't recall if that was first name or surname. He did run strange little political slogans on his front page - one of which "Congratulated our Rhodesian kith and kin on the anniversary of their independence" (you can guess the general flavour!).

SA: *Sounds like Duncan Morris's **Frigate**, which ran from 1973-75.*

Many thanks for the trip down memory lane and best wishes to any other old-time readers.

Ian Pringle

As my involvement in Diplomacy began with snail mail correspondence and getting 'zines such as **1901 and all that** and **Fall of Eagles** (our own Richard Hucknall), it would be great to recreate something of that golden age. I would have to dig some my old 'zines out of the loft for nostalgia sake!! I think I have quite a few copies of Steve Pratt's zine **Ad Nauseum**. You are very welcome to copies. I might also have some of **Jigsaw** (Roy Taylor).

SA: *Ian subsequently found issue 20 of **Ad Nauseum**, which was the only one missing from the Archive. All 33 issues of Ad nauseam can now be seen at www.diplomacyzines.org.uk*

Kath Collman

I read in the last **TBNS** that you are trying to sort out the Zine Archive - I wish you all the very best of luck with that! And congratulations on persuading the British Library to take some complete runs, that will be interesting for posterity.

Anyway, it so happens that I'm trying to have a bit of a clear out. I no longer subscribe to any paper zines, though I take 2 e-zines : **TBNS** and **Dane's Games**. However, I do have runs of :

Bloodstock 150-151; 153-161; 163-172; 174-176; 178-189; 200

Cut & Thrust 205-220; 222-230

Sorry these aren't complete, it's possible there may be other odd issues lurking somewhere. If you're interested in any of these, please let me know as I'll bin anything you don't want!

I've also just come across a few odd issues of **The Cunning Plan**, though I know I recently chucked a whole load of these away ...101-104; 109; 112; 115; 120-122; 125; 134; 137-138

As for which ones should be preserved for posterity ... that's a tough one isn't it? **Dolchstoss** is an obvious candidate, also I would have thought **Mad Policy** and **Zeeby**. I think in the end it has to be a matter of "gut feeling". I would personally go for those which stand out in some way on the grounds of longevity, quality, reliability, also those which were distinctly unusual or quirky.

SA: *Great to hear from you Kath! I am still searching the house for post-2003 zines, but I will come up with a definite list of what's missing soon. Thanks for the offer.*

Pete Birks

The last **GH** was in March 2007 or thereabouts, although, as you can see, my written output hasn't decreased. The British Library moans at me every so often for not sending them copies of **GH**, so perhaps it would be nice if you informed them that it was "deceased". I have a full run here as well. I've been quite good in that fashion.

I don't think that I am difficult to track down! Despite the late Professor Peter Birks (for whom, you might be interested, I once received a freelance payment by mistake!), I'm up to fourth place if I am googled. If I bothered to write for various (larger) poker publications, I suppose I could push myself up to first; but that seems a sad thing to desire.

SA: *just typed "Stephen Agar" into Google. Sadly I am in second place behind a "Stephen Agar" who runs Agar Studios and is a Photographer in Henley-on-Thames. The second hit is me however (though in a Royal Mail guise) and the third hit is me again through a Diplomacy site. More fun is to google "Iain Bowen" - not only is Iain top of the list, but clicking on it goes through to a contemporary photograph of Iain on the Birmingham City Council website. Must have a go at seeing who else I can find up-to-date pictures of... Anyone got old photos from cons we could put in the zine and on the web?*

Toby Harris

Just read your bit in **TBNS**. I'm really sorry to hear things didn't work out with the marriage. Time heals, as I'm sure you know.

For all JC's squawking in **TBNS**, it would appear that time changes things in the Dip hobby too. For example, whilst my own dress sense has gotten notably better year after year (swapping leather jackets & Dr Martens for shirts & smart jackets) the same cannot be true for the rest of the rabble who just seem to get scruffier with age! Phooo, you should see some of the rag-tag hole-ridden woollens these guys turn up to conventions in. Anyone would think they'd been knitted by JC's granny!!

FiF Diplomacy is all but dead in the UK nowadays. We get 2 – 4 boards at Manorcon, and there are a couple of postal zines still going. The main Dip hobby is really the U.S. and the European continent. I'll be going to the French NDC again this year (12 – 14 December) and probably doing a lot of Diplomacy related travelling next year too, now that my work can be done 100% from a laptop & mobile phone. (even the "0800" number diverts to my mobile).

So do join me if the urge takes you; the foreigners almost all speak very good English these days and the English are always made very welcome indeed.

SA: I guess the issue is that if I am going to go abroad, do I really want to spend a whole day playing Diplomacy? Hmmm. I am considering hosting an old-fashioned 70s style HouseCon though. Would that tempt you?

Alex Richardson

Thanks very much for your e-mail – it was good to hear from you. Of the zines you mention, I think **TCP** is still going, as Nick Kinzett said recently that he has a subzine there. Pete Birks would appear to have moved into blogging (perhaps inevitably) and writes about poker and spread betting (again...) – as far as I can work out, **GH** finally disappeared as a print fanzine about three years ago.

SA; Pete reckons it was march 2007 – but the last issue I can find is 271 – anyone know of anything later?

I agree with you about how sad it is to see so many defunct zine websites on the Internet – all that enthusiasm used to so little effect. Even I can't ignore the fact that the 'UK Dip Hobby' is dead: things were never the same after *The Year Without A Zine Poll* and now it's just a scattered handful of zines running things for their own discrete groups of subscribers. Such a shame, but at least the online Zine Library will prove that it did once exist.

SA: What's the story of the death of the Zine Poll? The 2004 Zine Poll still had 20 zines in it – why did it vanish? The "dead" web sites are a bit

spooky – frozen in time. You would have thought that they would all have been deleted by now.

As for the missing **Obsidian** issues, I'm afraid that I cannot help. My zine collection was lost early in 2002 (including a complete run of the Obsidian master sheets) and so I now have only a handful of issues from before that date, all of them accounted for in the Archive. Sorry.

SA: Great pity that you no longer have copies of your own zine. I think I have them all apart from 24, 29-30, 42, 44, 47. Can anyone help?

*One thing that has struck me in trying to locate where the hobby has got to in the past few weeks, is that it has become very fragmented very quickly. Has the trading system broken down and are zines no longer in a position to plug / review each other? Hopefully I can find out which zines are still around and try and get the information all together in one place. Maybe a (very very small) issue of **Mission from God?***

Dave Oya

A blast from the past is always welcome, though of course I had assumed that Stephen would have been absorbed into the Eye of Sauron by now. Bureaucracy in Mordor is shocking these days. Anyway, yes, I am still running **Wimm?**, for my sins. It's now up to issue 81 and chugging along nicely (but slowly) despite my best efforts to bugger it up, entirely due to my scarily enthusiastic sub-zine editors.

SA: Very well done on 81 issues –more than I ever managed (well, without at least two folds and changing the name...). Look forward to seeing the next issue.

Mog Firth

I'm almost at the point of relaunching **Fit of Rage**, which was always dependent on publishing the new beer guide for Leeds. That happened at the end of last year, followed by new job starting, so now the zine is possible. "Almost at the point of" could mean a number of things though...we'll just have to see.

SA: Go for it! Two new zines in one year! This could be the beginning of a dead cat bounce.

Chris Tringham

It's kinda weird to see all those old issues of **Megalomania** on the web - especially as I don't have them in my possession (I think they're in my brother's cellar). Yes, I'm still in Hong Kong, and still married, and our son (John) was 10 years old last week.

SA: What's it living in communist China – is anything actually different to before? Do you get back much? Isn't issue 79 a little overdue now?

**Constructive Criticism, Negativity
or Feud?**

by Stephen Agar

A. Excerpt From Ethil The Frog No.14 (1978)

by John Piggott

"So what is my motive in reviewing a zine? Simply, I aim to tell the reader something about the zine, and to give him a guide as to whether he would enjoy it or not. I do this in the best possible way (some would say it is the only possible way), by saying whether I myself like it, and if so why, and if not why not. Then, knowing my prejudices, the intelligent reader can make up his own mind. In this respect, an unfavourable review can be more useful than a favourable one. For example, readers of *Time Out* will have read the work of one Dave Pirie. Pirie is literally the most unperceptive film critic I've ever come across, and if I feel like going to the cinema the first thing I do is to look out the Pine reviews of the films available and use them to narrow down the list. If Pirie likes a film, it must be rubbish! This is an infallible guide -unfortunately the reverse is not always true, though it is a good 90% of the time.

"It's obvious that for a review to be of any use at all, the critic must tell the truth about his feelings, so that's what I do. I praise the things I like and I damn the rubbish. Unfortunately a lot of rubbish is produced in this hobby. I also attempt to outline ways of rectifying the faults I find, if I can think of any, even though few editors pay much attention. (Funny thing, but the ones who are shrillest in their demands for "constructive criticism" are the least likely of all people to act on good advice when it's offered.)

"Did someone mention "kindness"? It has its place, and that place is nowhere near the public prints. To receive kindness is a privilege, one which a man who thrusts himself on my consciousness by sending me his zine has foregone. Yes, the truth can hurt - terribly - which means that sensitive people shouldn't expose themselves in public, right?

"There is another way of writing zine reviews besides the one I use. Here, the critic, fearful of bruising the poor editor's feelings, confines himself to humming meaningless platitudes and, where he finds he really doesn't like something, either ignoring the fact or maintaining that he actually doesn't mind it, really. Some would call it kindness - I wouldn't, for it devalues genuine praise, which is a very, very cruel thing to do. More significantly, it involves telling lies, which sakes it worse than useless to any readers (not that there are likely to be many, of course; most people feel the same way as I do about criticism, because it is, after all, something one need only attract by choice. The low profile has many adherents among those who would rather watch)."

**B. Friendliness - A Look At
"Constructive" Criticism (1980)**

by Torbjörn Ström¹

"The thing that has impressed me the most about the postal hobby, aside from the fact that the game itself is sheer hell, is the general atmosphere of helpfulness and friendliness I've found", Bruce Linsey wrote in his first issue of *Voice of Doom*. This is certainly true for the US part of the hobby. Everyone who takes an initiative there, whether it is to start a new zine, or doing something else, is met with friendliness. The new editor will find that his fellow editors give him plugs, advising their readers to write for a sample, ending the plug with the words: "If he gets the support he deserves I am sure his zine will turn out to be a good one". For instance, if Steve Agar had started his zine *Here We Go Again* in the USA I am sure everyone would have helped him, writing articles, as well as given him positive plugs; instead of writing letter expressing their pessimism about the magazine, and giving bad plugs *before* the first issue was published, as actually happened in England. Now the question whether there is such a friendly atmosphere only in USA, and not in England arises. Let's try to find out by listening to some words of wisdom expressed by Mike Allaway in his zine *Pyrrhic Victory*. What he says is all very true, but I want you to look at a certain thing:

"If you start a zine one thing you shouldn't do is take too much notice of what other editors say. You will almost certainly find several editors that don't like your zine, that's their opinion only. If you have a circulation then that is the vindication for you starting a zine. It's the paying customers that are important (though don't pander slavishly to their tastes) and if you keep them happy it doesn't matter a toss what other editors think of your fine."

"Did you notice that it is almost taken for granted that a person starting a new zine in England will receive negative criticism for doing so? Well, if a person is prepared to take up perhaps 25% of his spare time producing something that is mainly aimed at making it possible for others to enjoy themselves playing a good game, the last thing he needs is such criticism, especially since he is likely to make an economical loss on the venture. Instead everyone should wish him good luck and try to help him to get things going. Negative criticism isn't the way to encourage people to take initiatives, and it is no wonder that there is a steady decrease in the number of zines in UK.

"What I can't understand is why the critics use a scale ranging from +2 to -8, when it as perfectly possible to let ones readers know how good I consider a fine to be by using a scale from +1 to +10. Even if I say that all zines are good when I review them (and all zines are good in some respect) it is perfectly possible to let my readers know how good I

¹ From *The Baltic Battler* No.9 (July 1980) (a Swedish zine).

consider a certain zine to be by the degree of "positivism" I use. The difference will be that the new editor which I review won't feel as if his effort ain't appreciated.

"Now no one should accuse me of not seeing the value of constructive criticism when it comes to help others improve their zines. Constructive criticism is all very good, but why say "it is bad", when one can say "there is room for improvement"? To use a negative language is not my way of being "constructive". Another fault of some reviewers is too only point out the bad sides of another zine, and completely omit the good ones. One can't get a fair picture of the reviewed zine from such a review. Do you get the right impression of *Megalomania* if one only mentions the bad games service?

"It may look as if I think all UK editors are guilty of this "negativism". Of course this is not the case, the large majority doesn't condescend themselves to this sort of behaviour. Most of them are of course in this hobby to play the game and have fun, in a friendly atmosphere. However, there is a little "elite clique" who believe that the most important thing for a zine is to be literary perfect. An intellectual style is more important than a fast turnaround for them. The main motivation for these people being in the hobby is to boost their egos, impressing other by displaying their "superior" intellects vis-à-vis persons who aren't as good as they are at writing or arguing. To them the game of "arguing" (for the sake of arguing) which they run in their zines is more important than the games of Diplomacy, which are mainly included to get subscribers. My advice to new publishers is to ignore these people, don't let them stop you from running an efficient zine, which may not be up to their standards when it comes to literacy, but most certainly is far better than theirs when it comes to creating a friendly atmosphere, which keeps your subscribers happy."

C. Editorial From *Acolyte* No.60 (1984)²

by Pete Tamlyn

"Well, as many of you will no doubt have read in other 'zines over the past few weeks, this is the last issue of *The Acolyte*. It is not a hoax, this 'zine is folding.

"OK, I know I said last issue that I wouldn't fold even though I was a bit pissed off with things. However, it didn't take much to convince me that this had been a gross mistake. Those of you who sub to other 'zines will doubtless read several stories in the next few weeks purporting to reveal "The Reason" and there have certainly been a few unpleasant incidents. For example, if you have a GMing dispute and discover that several editors seem determined to make the player concerned a national hero and continue to

² August 1984

spread deliberate lies about how you handled the affair long after it has been amicably settled by all concerned... well, it makes it very difficult to run games in a fair and honest atmosphere, does it not? However, sad as it may seem, this sort of thing is inevitable. There will always be a few anti-social idiots around the Hobby and the more well known you become the more of a target you are. A year or two ago I would probably have shrugged all this off and carried on. Now? well, you know. The real truth of the matter is that I simply no longer have the patience, enthusiasm or thick skin needed to do this Job. Having realised this, it was a very simple decision for me to recognise that I ought to stop now whilst most people would remember *Acolyte* with reasonable affection rather than try to carry on and get more and more irritable and get to the stage where people are telling me that I ought to fold.

"So, the decision is final; please don't write and try to get me to change my mind. Indeed, with the news having been given to various people in good time for them to make the necessary arrangements, I've already had quite a few of those and have not been persuaded. Equally I've had a few people parading the crocodile tears and continuing to rub salt in any wound they can find, and two pages of abuse from Dolton saying how much he despises me and how lucky the Hobby is to be getting rid of me. These I shall also ignore. I will not be subscribing to any zines, even though I will miss several of them, because I have no wish to see what is said about me after I have gone: it will either be unpleasant or embarrassing. As with many other editors, I may well be back at some time in the future, but for now I would just like to forget about things for a while, OK? Thanks."

D. Are Diplomacy Zines Killing The Diplomacy Scene? (1998)

by Nic Chilton³

"Although it seems an absurd idea, if you look around the UK zines it all proves to be the case. I have a few runs of zines that were around in the 1980's and they seem to be supportive of the postal hobby, where as today's counterparts do not seem to be. The best way for the hobby to progress is for the "readership", and by that I mean people who subscribe to zines - not editors, to see more zines. If you subscribe to just one zine then you are missing out on a rich seam of interesting zines that are around. Most people rely on what editors say about other zines as to whether to bother sending off for a sample, this is because most editors see a wide variety of zines available.

"However, the current "trend" is to give negative reviews of other zines, taking any opportunity to put

³ Extract from editorial from *GAME* No.24 (July 1998).

the boot in. Is it any wonder then that players don't subscribe to more zines? Unfortunately this also means that if the current zine someone subscribes to either folds or ends up not being to their liking, so they don't renew their subs, then the reader is more likely to leave the hobby completely than to go through the process of trying to find a replacement. Maybe it is in the nature of the hobby for editors to back stab each other and make catty remarks (hence last issues cover), but it does cause great detriment to the hobby. Indeed there has been more than one zine that has folded as a result of attacks from fellow editors. If the hobby is in the pursuit of making itself extinct, why protest. Say goodbye to postal hobby it could well be dead by 2010."

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### Constructive Criticism, Negativity or Feud?

by Stephen Agar

The above are only a small selection - I could have reprinted equivalent comment from every year since 1972! By my own confession in all these things I have been poacher and gamekeeper, aggressor and victim. There is a certain irony that one of these pieces uses criticisms made of me (in an earlier incarnation and at the hands of Pete Birks, I think) as examples of the sort of negativity that the hobby often suffers from. Yet, many think of me as someone who does not lightly miss an opportunity to do another editor down. I believe that the truth is that this subject is a lot more complicated than some people would have you believe.

#### "Genuine constructive criticism"

However genuinely such criticism is meant, this is usually taken by the recipient of the criticism as hostility - because zines are like one's children, you criticise my zine and you criticise a part of me and all too often such "genuine" criticism is wrapped up in bitchy or patronising language. Whatever they may say in public, all editors take criticism of their zines personally, even if they say they do not. Indeed, the "constructive criticism" may indeed be motivated by hostility, but the editor concerned hasn't got the nerve for simple vitriol. It may be possible to take constructive criticism from a teacher - but the teacher/student relationship does not exist in this context, where editors are generally seen as belonging to the same peer group. Similarly, it may be just possible to take constructive criticism in private, but harder to swallow when it is all too public.

People like Torbjörn Ström, above, claim that constructive criticism is OK - but if you have criticism of any sort in Dip zines then things quickly degenerate into sulks, feuds or bankable grudges to be repaid when the opportunity presents itself. After

all, how many of us would appreciate a house guest offering constructive criticism of our newly decorated living room? Indeed, I would go as far as to say that adverse comments about an editor's zine hurts far more than comments about him as a person (as that is easier to ignore), so it may be that "constructive criticism" is more likely to lead to hostility in the hobby than anything else. I certainly don't agree with Torbjörn that you should leave a reader to guess the bad points of a zine by taking account of what is not said (much like leaving a jury to work out that a Defendant has a criminal record by the fact that no evidence is called as to his/her good character - silly). Unfortunately, negative comments are far more interesting to write (and read) than good ones - witness this brief review of **Albatross** from John Piggott:

*"It's a depressing thought, but the first issue of **Albatross** was undoubtedly the best; it's gone steadily downhill since then, if only because it's been getting longer..."*

#### Being antagonistic to get attention

Antagonism to attract attention is a tactic of long standing in the postal Diplomacy hobby, and often successful. I used this tactic myself back in **Spring Offensive** No.3 when I deliberately attacked various long-standing zines for being "dinosaurs" which were stuck in a rut etc. etc. As a result I had letters from no less than 12 editors in the following issue commenting on my position (mainly negatively) - excellent feedback, all of which lead to the newly launched **SpOff** making an impact (something any new zine must struggle to do). On the Internet, when someone expresses an opinion they don't necessarily hold (at least to the degree it is expressed) in order to get a reaction from others, the piece in question is called a "troll". There is quite a bit of "trolling" in the postal Dip hobby (e.g. the piece from **GAME** printed above).

#### Being antagonistic to foster a reputation for acerbic wit

Being antagonistic does carry with it some risks - if you are too bitchy you will just alienate the person/group you are being bitchy about, who will treat it as hostility. This is especially true if your purpose is simply to provoke. A good example of this, from probably the most provocative editor the hobby has ever seen, is John Piggott's numerous digs at Roy Taylor - a particular vivid one being:

*"And just to emphasise my point about blunders, Roy, I'll draw your attention to the final report for NGC 173 (**Jigsaw** No.43, page 4). In this so-called regular game the board evidently contained 35 supply centres in 1906. By 1910 this had diminished to 33, but in the final stages of the game the number grew again: there were 35 centres in 1911, 37 in 1912 and when the game ended in 1913 there were 40!! And these*

are facts Roy. They were typed by your own fair hand on pristine duplicator stencils (I can almost smell the aroma of the wax, so vivid is the image in my mind). You yourself smeared these stencils with the very best ink money could buy, and you then proceeded to drag them over many sheets of paper. Facts, Roy! And what have you to offer in return? Paranoid fantasies, no more. And my own, private fantasies are more interesting than yours. Roy baby, when you've got some facts, let me know, huh? Then I'll listen to you."<sup>4</sup>

Quite a tirade over what amounted to a mis-typed SC chart (something it is very easy to do) - there was no suggestion that the game had been GM'd badly. This, and other digs, led to the following editorial in **Jigsaw** No.44:

"...what I have just read on **Ethil the Frog's** front cover has managed to send me into a complete rage, enough of a rage in fact that, if John Piggott had been within distance he would have found himself in hospital after being on the wrong end of a martial arts two fingered punch to his eyes, which is, I admit, rather a stupid admission on my part because he wrote it with the sole intention of provoking some form of letter from me..."<sup>5</sup>

And as we know from recent exchanges of letter in this zine, after all these years the hurt is still felt. In extreme cases this tactic can backfire an even generate a bit of a backlash against the publication doing it (e.g. Mark Wightman's recent description of **GAME** as a "sterile pile of rehashed shite").

### **Sniping (in fun)**

I think this is the area which has got me into the most trouble. I feel I can take the piss out of people I know and like, especially if we have some differences between us. However, what seems like a humourous dig when you type it, may not be read as such by the subject. For example, Duncan Adam's zine **The Laughing Roundhead** used to have lots of typing errors - so when I referred to it in **SpOff** I often deliberately mistyped its name (something which I though amusing) - but I subsequently learnt that I was really pissing Duncan off, as he felt sensitive about the quality of his spelling. Similarly, when I patched things up with Toby in late 1997, I felt that sufficiently relaxed about things to make several good-natured (or so I thought) jibes at his expense - but he construed it as pure hostility. In email there is a convention of using a smiley ☺ when you don't intend something to be taken seriously, and recently I have found it a useful device from time to time. In a similar vein (I hope) it was rare in his latter years that Richard Sharp did not make some dismissive comment or other about me in **Dolchstoß**; but I

<sup>4</sup> **Ethil the Frog** No.16 (April 1978)

<sup>5</sup> April 1978.

thought that a great honour. A good example (from issue 240) is:

"Oh, John, it's always such a relief to find I disagree with you. It's almost like the "Agar Test" - if you agree with Stephen you know you must be wrong, and check back over your reasoning. Quite useful, really. I know you aren't quite that batty, but similar principles apply."

Great stuff!

### **Misrepresentation (or selective memory syndrome)**

This is feud territory, often generated as a result of someone attempting constructive criticism, but maybe adding just a bit of caustic wit and the person on the other end interpreting it as aggression. Feud's usually involve some disagreement as to some facts or some interpretation of facts; as each party to the feud restates their position they "elaborate" on the position of the other in order to demonstrate the weakness of their position etc. etc. This can be quite entertaining if you see both zines and appreciate the degree of "spin" which is going on, but a subscriber who only sees one half of the argument is in danger of taking too much at face value, and consequently over-estimating the degree of hostility involved. I have always thought that Richard Sharp was a master at this sort of thing.

Many feuds can be good-natured, but on occasions can get out of control, spiralling into personal dislike, especially if one or other party starts to believe there own propaganda (in such things, who was actually correct does not really matter in the end). I have had too many feuds while editing **Diplomacy** zines to keep track - but Peter Calcraft and Toby Harris certainly spring to mind (while I have certainly crossed swords with John Colledge, Kim Head, Chris Palm, Iain Bowen and Mark Wightman). One well known feud which almost ended up in violence was that between John Piggott and Eric Willis - John made constant and niggling attacks on Eric's zine, **Leviathan** (which was a poor zine delivering a poor service), causing Eric to approach John at a hobby meet and threaten him. An ugly confrontation ensued with Eric eventually backing down (to John's relief - Eric was over 6 feet tall).

### **Pure hostility**

This is surprisingly rare, and usually only a final reaction to what is described above. At the risk of offending Roy Taylor, I think that several of his descriptions of John Piggott in **Jigsaw** were examples of this, but this rather tame one from **Jigsaw** 45 will suffice:

"Piggott, I'll tell you is a prize prig, he will never give in, he's something akin to John Stonehouse whom, you may remember, had the gall to falsify company books, deaths, passports - you name it - and yet, in his own eyes he was guilty of

*nothing; he and his fellow prigs make me bloody sick.*<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, there are other excerpts I could print, but this aspires to be a family zine. In my opinion, John's own attacks on Roy don't fall into this category - not because they weren't very cutting - but because hostility is a strong emotion, and John saw such sparing as an exercise in itself; he didn't actually care enough to feel that strongly about what he was arguing about. I could contrast this with John's anti-Eric Willis tirades (e.g. describing Eric Willis as "a truly repellent blob of protoplasm"<sup>7</sup>) where it did seem that he might just be starting to get involved.

### **False indignation syndrome**

Worth mentioning, because it is fairly common. Once editors get involved in a slanging match (at whatever level), one way to close the debate down and try to retain the moral high ground is to complain bitterly about negativity in the hobby and how horrible people are. On occasion such complaints may be justified, but all too often the person doing the complaining has been quite content to indulge in fisticuffs themselves (E.g. Kim Head's comment in the last editorial in *Life's Rich Pageant* that "*I could do without the juvenile and sometimes quite unpleasant mentality which appears to be rife in the hobby at the moment...*"). However, given the reputation of John Piggott, who can resist a chuckle at this review of *Howay the Lads*:

*"For a time last year I had high hopes of this zine; alas, these hopes have been dashed. A callow, whining editorial posture is combined with bitterly vitriolic attacks on hobby members... it's a very surly zine, and while they probably don't feel an insane hatred for their enemies, it's hard to escape the impression that they do."*<sup>8</sup>

### **It's easier to be against**

Someone has a new idea, pour cold water on it. Someone has an initiative, tell them it won't work. But never come up with new ideas or initiatives yourself (after all, others may be hostile). We've all seen it, and as a knee-jerk reaction I don't like it - "though constructive criticism" of such things is OK... The history of the hobby is littered with good ideas which were slammed from day one and so never saw the light of day. Indeed, you have only got to propose that the hobby needs some sort of a front organisation to recruit (something I still believe) and you can hear the knives being sharpened.

So how much of the above is justified? For what it is worth, I think any hobby which avoids constructive criticism is just going to be so self-congratulatory and boring that anyone with any spirit will desert en masse or die of tedium. However, constructive

criticism leads inexorably to feuds and sniping. I don't like genuine hostility, which rules out (I would rather retain that for people who do hurtful things that matter in real life), while moralising about how terrible it is to have arguments in print is often hypocritical (though sometimes convenient). Just being against everything is just depressing, and one reason why this hobby is dying so quickly.

Reprinted from *Spring Offensive* 66 (January 1999)

## **ZINE ARCHIVE**

The online zine archive is slowly growing bigger at [www.diplomacyzines.org.uk](http://www.diplomacyzines.org.uk). In recent weeks I have had donations of more zines from Ian Pringle, Keith Thomasson, Jeremy Tullett and Alex Richardson.

### **Missing in Action**

All zine missing from the Archive (more or less) pre-2003 are listed at:

[http://www.diplomacyzines.org.uk/missing\\_zines.htm](http://www.diplomacyzines.org.uk/missing_zines.htm)

The following are specific zines I would really really like to find and which I think there is a sporting chance one of you might have. Photocopies would be fine and all expenses would be reimbursed.

*Dolchstöß* 79 (Sept 1984) (damn, how did that one get lost?);

*Megalomania* 63 (October 1994) (the only issue missing);

*Hannibal* 10 (April 1974) (also the only issue missing).

## **MINI E-ZINE REVIEW**

*The Blue Nosed Special* (issue 212) is an e-zine distributed as a Word document from John Colledge ([Dunorroch@dsl.pipex.com](mailto:Dunorroch@dsl.pipex.com)). Quite a few hobby old-timers still feature here and it has lists open for *By Popular Demand*, *Fictionary Dictionary*, *Desert Island Dreams (and Nightmares)* and *Preposterous Prose*. The last issue was over 20 pages long with almost three quarters being editorial, letters and film reviews - so plenty to read. Quite a lot of culture in *TBNS* actually - John even admits a soft spot for Tracey Emin (who I have always fancied a bit - always gone for scary women). Not that keen on most of her art though. I went to the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition this year (OK, I went to a booze-up at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition this year) and there was a room filled with work chosen by her, including a video of a naked woman doing a hoola-hoop with a hoop made from barbed wire, which cut her the more she did it. Only the men in the audience were mesmerized.

<sup>6</sup> May 1978.

<sup>7</sup> *Ethil the Frog* No.13 (December 1977)

<sup>8</sup> *Ethil the Frog* No.15 (March 1978)

## DIPLOMACY HOUSE RULES

### 1. General

1.1 Except as mentioned below the 1971 Diplomacy Rulebook will be used (subsequent rulebooks are the same in all material respects – just often less clearly written).

1.2 Deception of the GM is never allowed and in particular it is not acceptable to forge orders from another player. All players must be open and honest in their dealings with the GM.

1.3 The GM's decision is final on any interpretation of the rules of Diplomacy, these House Rules or any eventuality not covered by the two documents combined. Where the GM has discretion under these House Rules, his decision will be final and accepted in good grace by all players.

### 2. Starting a Game

2.1 Players should apply to me (Stephen Agar) if they wish to play a game of Diplomacy. Preference lists for countries will be used if supplied, but final allocation of countries is entirely at the GM's discretion.

2.2 The GM must be aware of the real identity and postal address of all players. It is not necessary for a player to play under their real name - using a false name is permitted provided that the GM is aware of the true identity of the player concerned.

2.3 Obviously, a player cannot play more than one Power in any given game.

2.4 If a player changes his email address he should inform the GM and the other players immediately

### 3. Game System and Orders

3.1 The game will usually be played on a two season game year. Thus Spring orders *should contain retreats* (which may be conditional on that season's moves) for vulnerable units, in the absence of which any dislodged unit will be disbanded. Autumn orders *should include conditional retreats and conditional builds/removals*. The conditional builds may be conditional on the previous season's moves or retreats. This is really not as difficult as it sounds. Trust me.

3.2 If two or more players attempt to retreat to the same space they will stand each other off and both units will be removed from play, though a player may indicate which unit is to have priority if both units are his.

3.3 If a player fails to submit build orders in an Autumn move ***then no builds will be made even if due.***

3.4 Unless there is a clear instruction to the contrary "Remove A(Par)" means *"remove the army that was in Paris before this season, but may not be now."* - though if there was no Army in Par at the beginning of the move, but there is at the end of the move, then that A(Par) will be removed instead.

3.5 If a player fails to submit removal orders in an Autumn move (or the country is in Anarchy) then the GM will disband units *which are not in supply centres*

as necessary. The distance of any such unit from the nearest home sc will be calculated and the furthest unit removed. In the event of a tie units in sea spaces are removed first, then units outside the home country. In the event of a tie, fleets are removed before armies and if all else fails disbands are made alphabetically. Thus, England would remove F(HEL) and F(SKA) before A(Pic), but A(Pic) would go before F(ENG) or F(NTH). A(Bel) and F(Hol) would not be removed.

3.6 Orders should be clear. However, the GM will accept any orders that are unambiguous, however badly written.

3.7 It would greatly assist if orders for different games were sent in different emails or on different sheets of paper. Ideally, each set of orders should state player's name, game, country, year and season.

3.8 Implied orders will be accepted, for example "A(Mun) S A(Ruh)-Bur" is a valid order to both units, however, a contrary explicit order (E.g. A(Ruh)-Bel, A(Mun) S A(Ruh)-Bur;) will override an implied order, *the unit is not considered to be ordered twice*. Thus in this instance A(Ruh)-Bel would be a valid order while A(Mun) S A(Ruh)-Bur would be a misorder.

3.9 A misordered unit purporting to move cannot be supported in place.

3.10 Orders should be submitted in good time for the deadline set in the most recent issue of the zine. It is a good idea to send a set of provisional orders upon receipt of the game report.

3.11 Late orders will usually not be accepted, but the GM reserves the right to accept late orders in exceptional circumstances at his discretion.

***Therefore you should not assume that it is safe to reveal your plans after the deadline. Wait for the adjudication!***

### 4. No Moves Received

4.1 Failure to submit orders by the deadline will result in an NMR ("No Moves Received")

4.2 The effect of two successive NMR's means that the offending country will be placed in Anarchy.

4.3 When a country goes into Anarchy the GM will apply the "Return Home" rule which means that he will remove all the units belonging to that country from the board and replace them with an army in every unoccupied centre belonging to that country. From that point onward those units will stand unordered, but may be supported by other players.

4.4 The GM will *not* start a game with a NMR even if it means holding the game over and finding a new player.

### 5. Abbreviations

5.1 In game reports provinces will be abbreviated to the first three letters of their names, capitals for sea spaces, lower case for land spaces.

5.2 Exceptions are:

GoB = Gulf of Bothnia

GoL = Gulf of Lyons

Lvn = Livonia

Lpl = Liverpool

MAO = Mid Atlantic Ocean  
NAf = North Africa  
NAO = North Atlantic Ocean  
NTH = North Sea  
Nwy = Norway

NWG = Norwegian Sea  
TYS = Tyrrhenian Sea

5.3 Other abbreviations used in game reports are:

NMR = No Moves Received  
NRO = No Retreat Ordered  
NPRO = No Possible Retreat Ordered  
MS = Mutually Supports  
Std. = Stands

A(Kie)-Hol = Failed Move

A(Kie)-Bur = Illegal or Impossible Move or non-existent unit.

\* = Retreating Unit

## 6. Errors

6.1 In the rare instance of an error creeping into an adjudication the error should be brought to the GM's attention *immediately*. Do not assume that someone else will do this.

6.2 Any errors carried over for more than one season will stand, however bizarre.

6.3 Obvious errors (e.g. failing to underline a failed move) should not delay the game and players should submit orders on the basis that the moves printed were correct.

## 7. Skullduggery

7.1 Impersonation of the GM is not allowed. This is a departure from the traditional rule in postal Diplomacy games. However, given the ease with which the technologically competent can forge emails (and the difficulty of detection by those less well versed in the skill of reading email headers) this rule has been altered to take account of the realities of the situation.

7.2 On the other hand, it would be a shame to outlaw all skullduggery, therefore impersonation of another player is allowed, other than in dealings with the GM.

7.3 Forwarding an email from one player to another player is allowed (though some may think it bad manners!). Of course, recipients of such emails will be aware that the contents of forwarded emails are easily altered.

7.4 A player may "cc" or "bcc" another player in on any emails he sends, including communications with the GM.

7.5 Players must accept that Diplomacy is a game in which behaviour normally deemed unethical in civilized society is permitted. Therefore they should not be offended if others attempt any manner of scams or confidence tricks not prohibited by these House Rules in order to gain an advantage.

## 8. Game Endings

8.1 A game may be ended at any time on any terms proposed by any player or the GM by a unanimous vote of the players.

8.2 Normally, if a endgame is proposed NMRs will be taken as assent; forgetting to vote, but submitting orders will be taken to be dissent.

8.3 At his discretion the GM may declare that abstention will be taken as assent on a first vote, **so read endgame proposals carefully.**

8.4 The GM retains a discretion not to end the game in accordance with an endgame proposal if more than half of the non-NMRing players have made no mention of the endgame proposal in their orders. This is to prevent absurd results.

8.5 The identity of the player proposing the endgame will not be revealed, nor how individual players voted.

8.6 The rules of Diplomacy state that "Draws include all survivors". However, players may agree an endgame result where surviving players are not ranked equally on the basis that all players are agreeing that if the game had continued it would have resulted in some of the extant players being eliminated.

## 9. Proxies

9.1 A player may sign over control of one or more units to another player at any time and indefinitely, provided that the player so doing continues to receive the zine. In the event that the player giving the proxy stops receiving the zine then the proxy immediately ceases to have effect.

9.2 Such an arrangement may be cancelled at any time, without notice, by the player concerned.

## 10. Press

10.1 Press releases for publication alongside the game are welcome and may be conditional on that season's moves.

10.2 The GM will have a reserved dateline that may not be used by the players. The reserved dateline for Stephen Agar is "Versailles".

10.3 The names of the seven capitals (Vie, Lon, Par, Ber, Rom, StP, Con) or the seven Powers followed by "(Govt.\*)" are reserved for the players concerned and are thus guaranteed to be genuine.

## 11. Maps

11.1 Regular Diplomacy games in the zine will usually have maps with the game reports, however they do not form part of the adjudication. The GM will have no sympathy with anyone who misorders on the basis of an error in a map, if the game report was correct.

## 12. Anything Else

The GM reserves the right to extend these House Rules to cover situations not covered by the House Rules as they currently stand as he thinks fit.

October 2008

## GAMES

### Regular Diplomacy

#### ALBION (Gamestart)

##### AUSTRIA:

Douglas Kent ([diplomacyworld@yahoo.com](mailto:diplomacyworld@yahoo.com))

##### ENGLAND:

Jeremy Tullett ([jeremy.d.tullett@btinternet.com](mailto:jeremy.d.tullett@btinternet.com))

##### FRANCE:

Mark Stretch ([m.a.stretch@btinternet.com](mailto:m.a.stretch@btinternet.com))

##### GERMANY:

Toby Harris ([toby@responsiva.biz](mailto:toby@responsiva.biz))

##### ITALY:

Mog Firth ([mogcate@aol.com](mailto:mogcate@aol.com))

##### RUSSIA:

Robin ap Cynan ([RMapC@aol.com](mailto:RMapC@aol.com))

##### TURKEY:

Ian Pringle ([pringle.ian@btinternet.com](mailto:pringle.ian@btinternet.com))

### Regular Diplomacy

#### BELLICUS (Gamestart)

##### AUSTRIA:

Terry Hayes ([TELBOY203@aol.com](mailto:TELBOY203@aol.com))

##### ENGLAND:

Smiley McKinnon ([Boltar35@aol.com](mailto:Boltar35@aol.com))

##### FRANCE:

Pat Vogelsang ([godawgsgo33@yahoo.com](mailto:godawgsgo33@yahoo.com))

##### GERMANY:

Beartla de Búrca ([Beartlab@yahoo.ie](mailto:Beartlab@yahoo.ie))

##### ITALY:

David Latimer ([davidlatimeryork@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:davidlatimeryork@yahoo.co.uk))

##### RUSSIA:

Chris Babcock ([cbabcock@asciiking.com](mailto:cbabcock@asciiking.com))

##### TURKEY:

Phil Amos ([P.V.A@btinternet.com](mailto:P.V.A@btinternet.com))

### WAITING LIST

*Regular Diplomacy:* Dipper McGregg

Any demand for anything else?

### *This was*

#### **STRANGE MEETING**

#### **ISSUE 1 (October 2008).**

Available for free on request from Stephen Agar, 4 Cedars Gardens, BRIGHTON, BN1 6YD, UK.  
Email: [stephen@strangemeeting.org.uk](mailto:stephen@strangemeeting.org.uk)

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MIDNIGHT (GMT) FRIDAY 21<sup>st</sup> NOVEMBER**

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