Ecosystems and conflict in environmental themed analog wargames.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This presentation aims to analyse board games that depict ecosystems as realms governed by conflict and negative interactions. It focuses on Chad Jensen's *Dominant Species* (2010) and *Dominant Species: Marine* (2021), as well as Phil Eklund's *Bios: Megafauna. Second Edition* (2017). These games employ mechanics derived from wargames to represent Earth's biosphere as a domain shaped by competition for resources and dominance over various territories and biomes.

To conduct the analysis, a biopolitical framework will be used alongside methodologies of ecocritical descriptions of analog games. Paul Booth's framework of Ludic Discourse Analysis (Booth 2021) will be used to elucidate the connections between game mechanics and narrative from a broader cultural and ideological perspective. The presentation will also draw upon Chloe Germaine's (2023) observation regarding the influence of wargames on modern board game design as well as Germaine's framework for analysing environmental themes in analog games. In contrast to games like *Photosynthesis* (Hach 2017), in which, according to Germaine, the wargaming inspiration is not explicit, the designs of Jensen and Eklund incorporate wargame mechanics to conceptualize ecosystems as arenas of overt conflict. Furthermore, biopolitical theory will be employed to examine how the mechanics of the both iterations of *Dominant Species* and *Bios: Megafauna* enable players to govern the life and death of entire species. To this end, Michał Kłosiński's concepts of messianic biopolitics and dystopian thanatopolitics in games will be crucial (Kłosiński 2020).

In *Dominant Species*, *Dominant Species: Marine*, and *Bios: Megafauna*, players control different animal classes (e.g., reptiles, fish, cephalopods) that migrate across a board representing the globe. The wooden pieces do not symbolize individual organisms but entire species, representing multitudes of creatures at once. Consequently, when players remove their pieces from the board, this action signifies the death of an entire population—thousands or even millions of individual organisms. This scale implies that the extinction of whole species is presented within the games' mechanics as a natural and inevitable process. Death and extinction are normalized as integral aspects of the ecosystem and can be leveraged as a strategic component in the struggle for territorial dominance and ultimate victory.

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A further aspect of these games is their representation of environmental interactions. In Jensen's designs, the environment is manipulable; players can alter conditions to hinder opponents and favour their own species. In contrast, Eklund's game features a deck of environmental event cards, making direct player control impossible. Here, players must react and adapt to ever-changing conditions following each event phase. In both games, the constantly shifting climate conditions are presented as a form of "state of exception" (Kłosiński 2020) that is used as the legitimization of the conflict. For a species to survive these environmental shifts, they must evolve and mutate. In the researched boardgames, mutations grant organisms special abilities. Both Eklund's and Jensen's designs represent these adaptations through acquirable cards.

These mechanics allow the *Dominant Species* series and *Bios* to depict conflicts, migrations, and mutations which span over millennia or even millions of years. From this immense temporal perspective, the death of an individual organism, and even the extinction of an entire species, loses significance, provided the animal class can adapt and persist. The conflict-based mechanics borrowed from wargames are thus used to model the long-term adaptability of life. Players are tasked with enforcing their biopolitical power over life and death of whole species. Consequently, these games can be interpreted as a commentary on climate catastrophe, one that frames environmental change as a cyclical phenomenon to which organisms must continually adapt—a notion Phil Eklund explicitly articulates in an essay concluding the *Bios* rulebook. Therefore, by representing ecosystems as sites of what Germaine terms "Hobbesian conflict" (Germaine 2023), these games utilize the mechanics of wargames to implicitly promote a perspective that aligns with anthropogenic climate change denialism. Thus, those boardgames and the pleasures their gameplay produce ought to be evaluated from ecocritical standpoint.

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