

To Play (or Not to Play) the Nakba

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper deals with analog wargames simulating the First Arab-Israeli War (1947-'49), whose outcome was the birth of Israel and the expulsion of large sections of the Arab-Palestinian population, known in Arabic as “Nakba” (“the catastrophe”). I intend to explore a corpus of nine boardgames, analyzing their “procedural rhetoric” (Bogost, 2007), i.e. the way these games address (or fail to address) political and ethical questions through their mechanics, especially focusing on the representation of the Nakba and more generally of the fate of civilians during the conflict.

Historical simulation games, being games that deal with “causal complexity and theoretical underpinnings” (Chapman 2016a, 76), are clearly meant for a niche audience. What this niche audience prizes the most in these games is their – supposed – accuracy (Suckling 2025, 53). But accuracy is a cultural convention. Historical games are created through a process of abstraction, and the choice of which elements are going to be incorporated into the game and what is going to be left out is anything but neutral. From their very beginning in the mid 1950s till the first decade of the XXI century, hobby wargames (i.e.: recreational products meant for the general public, as opposed to simulations used by military personnel and defense analysts) have normally ignored all aspects of warfare that do not directly deal with combat, such as politics, society, and especially the role of noncombatants.

Things partially changed in the 2010s, with the rise of the so-called COIN games, created by game designers such as Brian Train and Volko Ruhnke. COIN games deal with asymmetrical conflicts – guerrilla warfare, anti-colonial insurrection, urban revolt (COIN stands for “counterinsurgency”). But even before the rise of COIN games, sometimes wargames ventured into the dangerous territory of asymmetric warfare and ethnic cleansing.

I could identify nine boardgames published between 1975 and 2025, entirely or partially devoted to the First Arab-Israeli War. Since authenticity is so relevant for wargamers, one would expect that all these games deal, some way or another, with ethnic cleansing, because it was a key element in that war. But the majority of these

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games avoid addressing the topic. We could say that this is because representing massacres and cruelties in a game could be considered tasteless. Chapman calls it “fear of trivialization through *ludification*” (2016b), drawing on Gonzalo Frasca’s arguments: “Game logic cannot be used to simulate tragic events since tragic agents do not have real choices” (Frasca 2001, 177). But the point is that wargames deal with tragic events. And then, they should openly address topics such as atrocities and ethnic cleansing, not only to offer a really “authentic” simulation, but also to offer a ludic experience that is historically (and politically) productive for gamers. Only this way gamers would play “with the intention and capacity to engage with history seriously” (Suckling 2025, 304), even if – or precisely because – it would mean finding oneself in an uncomfortable situation. According to game designer Cole Wehrle, Volko Ruhnke’s games – and more generally COIN games – are interesting because they are “both serious and threatening. They want to pull players into their dark and complicated decision spaces” (Wehrle, 2016).

But COIN games are not necessarily more “realistic” than traditional “hex and counters” wargames. *The British Way: Counterinsurgency at the End of Empire* (GMT, 2023), while being part of the COIN series, is strictly focused on the military struggle between the British security forces and the right-wing Zionist underground organization Irgun. The game hardly mentions the presence of an Arab population in Mandatory Palestine. *Israel 1948: The First Arab-Israeli War* (White Dog Games, 2025) is a strategy level game where the Nakba is totally absent. On the contrary, two of the oldest games in the corpus I am investigating, *Jerusalem! Tactical Game of the 1948 War* (SDC, 1975) and *The First Arab-Israeli War, 1947-'49* (Decision Games, 1997) openly address the issues of terrorism and ethnic cleansing.

A structural problem with wargames – either in their COIN or “hex and counters” version – is their “territorial vision that pictures worlds as divisible, contestable, conquerable spaces” (Lee 2023, 123). In order to win, players have to occupy areas of the map with their military units. All the rest, civilian lives included, is secondary. So, maybe it is not a chance that the only contemporary historical game on the First Arab-Israeli War that is not silent regarding the atrocities committed in that conflict is a game where the map has a totally minor role. In *Israeli Independence: The First Arab-Israeli War 1948-1949* (Victory Point Games, 2008), the map offers a very abstract representation of the conflict. In fact, it is nothing but a scoreboard on which the player (it is a solitaire game) records their successes or failures with the card play, which is the main mechanic of the game. Every card refers to a specific historical episode, and 3 of them, out of a total of 22, refer to the involvement of civilians in military operations. In particular, one refers to a strategy used by the IDF in the first days of the war: driving out Arab inhabitants from areas near roads by which the Arab regular forces could enter Palestine, in order to hamper their movements.

It is a paradox worth investigating that, in a corpus of nine games, the only one that mentions a strategy concerning roads and the movement of military columns is the only game that does not use a map as one of its main gameplay materials.

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