

# Owls Diplomacy News



JANUARY 2007

## Happy New Year!

Where did 2006 just go? On reflection it seems a busy and quick year for me. My wife and I were blessed with our second child on Jan 6<sup>th</sup> and so Benjamin ('Banjo') is almost one. I left employment with a medical company and started up a venture with a partner in the field of organisational culture. And on the Diplomacy front, the Owls Open Tournament and this Newsletter were enjoyable developments.

I trust each of you can recall some new, challenging and successful experiences from 2006. I wish you more in the year ahead.

This issue we meet Thomas de Klerk, the Owls Open champion for 2006. Chris Zepf has contributed an article on no-press play and I've inserted some simple statistics from the 2006 tournament, which I should add is still in progress. One final marathon game is entering 1917.

The other piece of good news is that Manus Hand has re-appeared and is fixing some of the long running bugs. Although I'm sure everyone has felt the slow server response over Christmas. With Manus around let's hope the dpjudge operates more smoothly into 2007.

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## Interview with Thomas de Klerk

by Thorin Munro

TM) Could you introduce yourself to the Owls readers? Where you do you live and work, interests, background, family, profession, politics, literature etc...

TdK) Sure, well where to start ... I'm 39 years old and happily married and 2 kids. I'm living in

Bennekom a little village in the Netherlands. I'm working at Info Support as Manager Learning Solutions, which basically means I'm responsible for the services and training which our education center offers to the marketplace (IT training that is). I'm working now for 10 years at Info Support, started as an IT trainer, which makes my background as history teacher at high school ... well eh ... history? I'm not as surprised about my switch to IT as Jeremy was, as a kid I was already very into computer science, programming games etc and I followed several computer science courses while being at the university. I also have a lot of fun when I play badminton, read fantasy, debate political issues, play computer games, chat with friends exchanging ideas and laughing very loud.

TM) How did you begin to play Diplomacy and when did you discover the Diplomatic Pouch?

TdK) I started to play Diplomacy as a student. I was already very active in the scene of games: role playing games, 1001 variants on risk, board games, war games like Squad leader with big rulebooks, etc, etc. I even had a part-time job at a local game store.

A friend suggested we should try Diplomacy for a change. We found 5 other enthusiasts and started a FtF game to learn the rules, then we played 2 PBM (Play by snailMail) he won the first and I the second. Then sadly it became silent, we tried to get 7 players together, but maybe we should have been wiser and let others win first. But somehow the game was in the back of my mind all the time.

I discovered the Diplomatic Pouch about 8-9 years ago, I was browsing the internet and thought it a cool idea to play that game with colleagues and replace the board with a webpage, I found all kind of stuff, but somehow the idea remained just that ... an idea. This changed when a new colleague came aboard and he told me about his gaming hobby and was very surprised to find a kindred spirit. I told him of my idea and he showed me the DPjudge he was playing for some time now. We were able to find 5 other colleagues ready

to join and so we started on the judge the infosupport series, this is now 3 years ago. Gert Jan Timmerman (also in 3a) was one of our first recruits. Gert Jan and I were hooked and started to play public games on the judge and we entered the Owls community.

TM) Congratulations Thomas! You have won the inaugural Owls Open Tournament, how does it feel?

TdK) Well, tough question. What should have been a glorious moment was a little dulled with the discussion at the end. I still stand by my decision on the way I played, but it did hurt that some people were talking about a shameful game, especially when that is done by people I've great respect for.

But none the less I'm proud on what I've achieved, I could have won with more points difference, but the fact remains I won and I'm proud of that achievement.

TM) Can you describe your experiences over the three rounds? How did the tournament unfold for you?

TdK) Well it was a learning game for me. Over 2 years the dpjudge had never given me France or Russia, so drawing France (1f) wasn't my idea of a lucky draw, but then again I don't really have a favourite country. I believe negotiations are far more important than tactics, so you can win with every country, but having a good feel of your country's strengths and weaknesses clearly helps.

I was very lucky to solo in round 1. At first I was almost sure this tournament would be responsible for my first lost in a press game. But I overcame my bad start and with help of a very good ally (and a blundering enemy was also helpful <g>) succeeded in turning the board. I decided to go for the solo, gambling a single HQ would beat a 4-headed HQ in 7 out of 10 cases. Andrew McCraith was a very strong opponent and if he could have controlled all units I would never have reached the solo.

Round 2 started much better (2a) I was playing Russia and succeeded in gaining the trust of Turkey and Austria. This set me in the driving seat in 1901, sadly my inexperience with Russia cost me dearly there. I should have seen the hornets' nest I was running into, but I recognized it when it was too late. Taking the full fury of the western triple and being totally at the mercy of Austria (Alex Woodcock). I early

recognized him as a very sharp player, tactically better than myself actually. I should never have started that journey with a tactically better player as my ally of choice. I'm very good at reading into press and get the feeling of players. But those skills are rather useless when you don't have the position to do anything about the knife, which is coming your way. I succeeded in softening the blow, but no more than that. I considered switching sides early, but France (Brad Basden) never seemed to trust me, always evasive and outright lies, so I felt that switching sides would only get me the same fate as Germany in 2a. I diplomated myself into the draw, I played a weak middle game in 2a, but my end game was good. And I was really impressed with the skill of Alex in 2a.

Well that should have landed me on board 3b, but when playing a tournament you should also know the rules of the entire tournament. And I early recognized the opportunity that taking over positions could give me and took over two vacant positions you had available. So I landed on 2g and 2j (both were Austrian positions and both were in rather hopeless shape). But I succeeded in getting on top in 2g, getting me back on the top board in the third round. I believe you changed the rules after some people protested <g>. ***[TM: In round 3 I did change the replacement player rules - I now only seek replacements from lower boards. In 2g Thomas took over a poor 4 centre Austria in 1906 to top the board with 12 centres in 1910 – an incredible effort - beware the shark in the goldfish bowl!]***

I was quivering with anticipation at the beginning of 3a. Being on the final board was special; I realized I had a shot at the tournament. And last but not least my colleague and friend Gert Jan was also on this board. We have made a rule to avoid playing together in games, but with the tournament this was of course out of our hands. ***[TM: Both players disclosed this relationship early in the tournament and I am glad to report they have the integrity to 'play the game'.]*** We agreed we wouldn't tell each other which country we played. It's special to work closely on a daily basis with someone you know is one of the six other players looking for an opening to land a knife in your back. We were looking for slips of the tongues, dropping false hints (at least I was <g>) and we bored our environment to death with all our stories about this incredible tournament and the fact we both made it to the top board in the final round. Both our wives believe that diplomacy is evil.

Then I met Jeremy, I spotted him early on, his interview and playing style gave him away. I had never played him before really (owls\_100 was too short to count) and I was getting all kind of mixed readings but something intrigued me and I went deeper. We quickly exchanged huge amount of press (and trust me on the huge part :) and we recognized a kindred spirit, both believing that sharing fun and alliance can be as rewarding as going for the solo, resulting in the rest of the board being doomed starting in 1901, plain and simple. Jeremy is really a character; just the amount of press he sends already makes him unique. Of course he is an American, so shock and awe is a very common and accepted battle tactic <g>.

TM) Was there anything that proved critical to your success?

TdK) Trust, reading skills and a huge amount of luck. I'm very good at gaining trust, especially in the beginning of a game (ending up in 1901 in BLA in both 2a and 3a is an example) and somehow I also can read more in press about player's real intentions than most others.

In 3a of course the deciding factor was of course my alliance with Jeremy, but this was made possible by trust, reading skill and luck.

TM) Can you share your thoughts about the 2-way DIAS in 3a? (Recognising that in the context of the tournament either the 2-way or a solo was sufficient for you to win the tournament).

TdK) Yep, when I started this tournament I didn't believe in 2-way DIAS in a tournament, I could have written the EOG of Alex in 1b. But I've had several very good 2-way DIAS before this, but a tournament was just different was my idea. In 2 games before this one I've experienced the level of fun it can be when you really, really work together, fully trusting the other will keep his word, but even more important knowing you will also. When you reach that level of trust you don't hold back any more, you share all your ideas and discuss full tactics to beat the rest of the board and having tremendous fun in sharing laughs and ideas. (infosupport02 and db\_challenge01).

You build an in-game friendship, which is strong. I wasn't sending over a fleet in the north to protect my interest (3a), I was helping out a friend. Germany helped me surviving in the first years, so we became in-game blood brothers. This kind of play can only end in a 2-

way DIAS, which is what I feel. It would have degraded the whole experience if I had stabbed Germany (and I mean Germany, because I might happily stab Jeremy in the next game <g>). My alliance in 1f was simply business, we worked fine together, but we were partners because that was our best option at the moment.

Well I can spend a lot of words, but basically if somebody has never experienced this kind of trust and fun before, they will never understand, but I know out of experience how much richer and intense such a game can be, it's even better than a solo. But I never would have thought I would have reached that state in this tournament, but I did.

I like to draw a parallel with a famous 200 km speed skating race (on natural ice, so not skating in 400 m circles) in my country. Only held a few times each century because it seldom happens it freezes hard and long enough to get good ice all 200 km. So you're some kind of national hero when you win this race. So it is an important race to win. In 1933, 1940 and 1956 a group of skaters decided that they would cross the finish line together; feeling that the way had cooperated resulting in beating the rest of the pack of skaters only could end in finishing together. In 1933 and 1940 that happened, but after the second occasion the organization decided to change the rules, making finishing together against the rules. So the 4 skaters in 1956 were disqualified, and no winner was appointed. The moral, I think in 1933 and 1940 had honorable winners; while I sympathize with the skaters in 1956 I think they were rightly disqualified because the rules stated it as being illegal.

TM) Have you formed any views about the difference between Tournament play and one-off games?

TdK) Yep a tournament has its own kind of mechanics, it makes points even more important than the Owls Rating already does. So people tend to be more competitive and more serious than in normal games. This is especially being true for the higher boards. And of course this tournament almost took a year, so endurance and consistent play suddenly also become very discriminating qualities.

Maybe we also should start a discussion about this games being anonymous. Building an owls community, and the tournament stretching out for a year, makes the idea of the game being

anonymous a little naïve. You can't really avoid players recognizing each other and playing on the supposed strength and weaknesses of the other. And what to do with game discussions outside the game? I think it could be material for some nice debates. **[TM: All 2007 tournament games will be set as private games. I have also deleted the NO\_REVEAL rule. However there is still the normal degree of anonymity for players to use as desired.]**

TM) Will you defend your Title in 2007 :)

TdK) I'm not sure. I don't know if I can put in a whole year commitment in 2007, maybe I should quit at the peak of my glory <g>.

TM) How would you describe your style of play?

TdK) Average on tactics, very good at influencing other units by diplomacy. I'm more a role player than a chess player. So I really enjoy exchanging press and sharing thoughts, tactics are secondary. Sadly I'm not a native speaker, so English severely hampers my skill, but still I'm holding my own here. In Dutch I like to even deepen the level of role play, sending out all kinds of broadcast commenting on the game in style and character.

This means I've more satisfaction in talking a unit in the right direction than some super clever tactical maneuver. But I really admire players with sharp tactical minds, but while complementing them on their superior skill I'll try to pick their pockets.

I'm also an alliance player, picking an ally and sticking with him/her to the end. What the end is depends on the way the game evolves, but normally this would mean a solo for me or a n-way draw including my ally. I'll never stab my ally of choice for a few centers just because I can get away with it.

TM) What are your views on the possible results in Diplomacy?

TdK) Well basically I think the solo is the primary goal, some levels below that is the draw. A draw is always better than a loss, whatever the number of centers you hold in a loss. So I'll never stab an ally to gain more centers if that would mean somebody else would solo. I don't believe in second place in a game ending in a solo. The number of centers of the other players just indicates the biggest loser in such case. And I can get quite angry

when players do that to me. But maybe I should be so honest to acknowledge that I shouldn't be, because that's the same as players getting angry at my 2-way draw as a possible desirable outcome.

Above is only true when I've to come up with a ranking system and is the way I play no-press games. Diplomacy to me is so much more than a simple game about who gets 18 centers. Sharing ideas, talking, trying to influence people, the psychological games, getting angry, becoming friends all makes this game for me more than only about winning.

TM) What are your views on ethics and honour in the game of Diplomacy?

TdK) Well basically you shouldn't cheat and honor the rules of the game. And you shouldn't make attacks personal. It's just a game so it isn't worth somebody really getting hurt. Those are my own ethics in this game, for the rest deceit and lies are part of the game, so anything goes.

TM) Is there anything about Diplomacy that you apply in real life?

TdK) At a business meeting I was asked about remarkable hobbies (some kind of networking event) and I told about 3a (was in progress right then). I said that I use the same philosophy in my business dealings it isn't only about winning. Other factors can be as important, trust and real good cooperation might be more important than an occasional competitive win.

TM) Do you have a favourite Country / Opening / Alliance?

TdK) Because the judge gave me Italy very often when I started 3 years ago. Because I did very well with Italy (no losses and a solo so now and then) I was getting fond of Italy and my alter ego Duce Scribiri. But having played all countries, I can't say I really have a favorite.

Well I'm still rather proud of my key-lepanto-stab in infosupport02. A 6 center Italy (I could have got 7 centers, but let Tunis be in favor of position) in 1902 isn't very common. But I would like to execute a real key-lepanto once. I love that opening because it involves so many aspects of the game.

I don't have a favorite alliance. I pride myself that given the right kind of player I could make every alliance on the board work, the unlikely

combinations having the distinct advantage the rest of the board tends to spot them when it's already too late.

TM) Are there any memorable Diplomacy opponents and games?

TdK) Well the games, which are most memorable for me, are: The already mentioned infosupport02 (Marco Pii) and db\_challenge1 (Kalle Westh). And I learned a lot about soloists and their way of thinking by playing against Sam Jones, he being partly responsible for my first loss in a press game.

But I got more insight in his world of thinking in owls\_freud. He stabbed for a few centers gain, just because he could, that was blind spot I had before entering the owls games, but it saved me in 2a, knowing I could never trust Alex only on his word to let me have 2 centers in 2a. Owls\_freud was the first (and only) time in a game I got indecent proposals in press, me pretending to be a woman might have helped <g>.

And of course I should finally mention Jeremy Edwards, a unique character to say the least. I loved working with him and sharing thoughts with him, it made the game more intense than I ever have experienced before.

TM) Deep Fritz has beaten Chess World Champion Vladimir Kramnick and this has become to be a regular occurrence. Will computer based Diplomacy ever reach this level?

TdK) Eventually it will, but when we reach that level of artificial intelligence, we may also enter philosophical discussions if we still can consider that intelligence artificial. If a computer can hold his own in a press game, he may also enter the core diplomatie or getting elected as the next president of the United States (likely to be an easier goal than winning a tournament, just kidding).

Maybe that future is not too distant:  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/technology/6200005.stm> (personally I believe this is still distant future, but who am I?)

But computers entering a no-press tournament and winning, that is something what could be in the near future, but because of the lack of finances it's hard to predict when. I even have many worries about the fate of the judge with Manus not really being active any more (at least not visible).

TM) Do you think Diplomacy will ever have the scale and finances of Chess?

TdK) No I don't think so. Diplomacy is around too long to now for me having the hope I could ever cash out my tournament win ☺. The game even had famous players like Henry Kissinger, so we must face it the majority of the world will never understand us diplomacy players.

TM) What counsel would you give others to maximise their success and enjoyment of the game?

TdK) Some basic rules for the game (not new, but very true none the less)

- ◆ The golden rule number one is: Don't be silent! You see that players who can combine press quantity with a certain level of quality are hard to beat. Just sending a press or two is killing in a game of some skill.
- ◆ Be flexible in your tactics and never hold grudges in the game. If someone lied to you don't mark him for the rest of the game, just re-evaluate every situation and ask yourself is it in his best interest to tell the truth this time.
- ◆ Believe your own lies ☺, it pays to stay close to truth as possible, you're much more convincing that way and very hard to catch.
- ◆ Try to find out discreetly what kind of players you're facing. Knowing if a player considers a 2-way draw a possible ending or not for example, can make a huge difference, it makes it easier to predict his/her moves or which buttons to push.
- ◆ Remember this isn't chess, all the strategy articles, etc, etc are all scrap metal if you have negotiating skills. Don't get too much stuck in dogmas like "Germany can never work with France, etc, etc".
- ◆ But more important play the game the way you think its fun and don't let people like me lecture you, just stay true to yourself.

TM) Any final remarks?

TdK) Well only this, that I would really like to thank you for all the work you have put in setting up the owls series and this tournament in particular. I can imagine the work it takes, especially with the judge playing tricks on us. We owls can't thank you enough and should never take your work for granted.

TM) Thanks Thomas! I know the readers of this newsletter will agree we have a worthy champion! Congratulations.

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## **No-Press Games**

### **The Skills Needed To Win**

by Chris Zepf

Calling all diplomats! Please board the train! Leave your clever tongues and your petty words behind, because our next stop is the land of no press! Persuasiveness is useless here; strategy determines who will take the crown of victory. But there is more to it than meets the eye. . . .

Strategy and tactics are the first things that come to mind when thinking how to win a no-press game. That is good, because strategy and tactics are the foundation for your victory. Words can't help you, so you must make for yourself your own empire. Opening strategy and end-game strategy are the most important times in the game to get things right. Start out strong with the right opening, cruise to the end-game, and clean up the competition. But what is the right opening strategy?

Your best bet is to pick a direction and go. You must hope that others will see what you are doing and join in, or maybe they have the same idea right from the beginning. Otherwise, join in with someone else. Flexibility is a must for no-press games because there are no set plans for what will happen.

Certain powers are easier to play. For example, I have only seen England win a no-press game once. England is usually terrible in no-press games. I have seen England get rolling once or twice, but only win once, and that was in strawberry19. It is usually stopped early on by France and Germany. This is because it's just easier to communicate hostility towards England. If France or Germany build a fleet, you can bet that they're hostile towards England. Besides, both France and Germany start with one fleet; the most obvious place to go with it is England.

In the other corner, we have Turkey. Now, I guarantee that 95% of the time Turkey will not be eliminated before 1903 (sorry to paint the target on all you Turkeys out there, but it's true). Turkey is very often attacked early in games with press, but it almost never happens

in no-press games. Why? It usually takes communication through words to organize an attack on Turkey, so in no-press games, Turkey usually gets a reprieve. And when Turkey gets out of the gate, it starts rolling and it doesn't stop. That's why Turkey has the best chance of soloing in a no-press game (in my opinion, anyway, whatever that adds up to).

Germany and Austria are the hardest to play (England is the one that gets eliminated most often, but Germany and Austria are harder to play). They are central powers, and in no-press games, you can expect the majority of the fighting to take place in the middle of the board, because that's the easiest and most obvious direction to pick when looking for some centers. But Germany and Austria don't get eliminated as much as England. That's because many times luck is on their side. Germany often goes after England, as mentioned, although that's almost always where its luck runs out. Austria can sometimes jump in on a Russia-Turkey duel, or run completely alone and still sweep the eastern side of the board clean, which I have seen done under the right circumstances. But be that as it may, England, Austria, and Germany are the top three most eliminated powers.

Russia, as I have personally learned a few times, can go down hard pretty quickly. Russia borders on many potential enemies, and without communication, it will sometimes get attacked from all sides. It will always get attacked by someone or other, that's a given fact, but Russia can deal with one or two enemies; it's when everyone wants a chunk of it that it falls, and that happens a lot.

That's enough on the powers. We've covered strategy throughout the game. What other skills are needed to win? Well, logic is a biggie. Getting into the mind of the enemy and predicting what he will do. Even if your moves seem nutty, if you move that way for the right reasons, you will do well. But don't just put yourself in the shoes of the enemy and ask yourself, "What would I do?" and then defend against it. Just because you would do it that way doesn't mean that the enemy would. And remember, like Sun Tzu says, "The enemy is never wrong!" Use all your previous experiences to help you decide what is most likely to happen.

Which leads us to our next skill: erratic ordering! In other words, make it so no one can predict what you are going to do. Take what you first think of doing and shift it in some way

so that the other guy is unlikely to defend against your moves (it's like predicting what the enemy is predicting). It could be an odd support command here and there, or putting a unit in motion where the enemy might think the unit would hold. Erratic ordering can help you, or it can make things worse. Usually I use it when I'm starting to lose ground, so that my attacker can't predict my moves and attack my weak spot. Make sure that when you use erratic ordering you know the possible consequences of your moves.

The final skill we will discuss is the skill of communication without words. There's sign language and body language in the world; well, there's Void Language in Diplomacy (or at least I call it Void Language)! I call it that because when you use it the most likely result is a void. Let's say that I'm Russia, and I want to support Turkey into Serbia with my army in Rumania. I would order A RUM S A BUL -> SER. Now, usually that would turn out as a void. But I have gotten my point across; Turkey will move A BUL -> SER next movement phase. I can order the same thing again, but this time it will not be a void. Also, moving to a province that you have no hope of claiming on your own qualifies as Void Language. Your move to said province will probably bounce, but a neighboring power might pick up on it and support you to the province. Anything of that sort would be considered Void Language.

Has anyone heard that song, "The Sound Of Silence," by Simon & Garfunkel? There's a line in there that goes, "In the naked land I saw. . . . people talking without speaking; people hearing without listening. . . ." That really does describe a no-press game. I wonder if Simon or Garfunkel ever played Diplomacy?

Well, that's all there is. If you haven't played in a no-press game yet, what are you waiting for? I've just told you all you need to know! There's usually a no-press game in need of players somewhere on the judge. Quick, play! But don't do it too quick, you might hurt yourself.

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### Owls Open Tournament 2006

As you have probably deduced, the inaugural Owls Open Diplomacy Tournament has been run and won.

The full results table will be published once all games are completed. At the same time I will add all results into the Owls Ratings. The

complete set of spreadsheets will be filed at the Owls\_Diplomacy Yahoo! Group for anyone wanting the raw data.

The **players player poll** has is more or less complete with a strong alignment between the top tournament places and recognition by peers of Diplomatic skill:

1. Jeremy Edwards (11 votes)
2. Thomas de Klerk (7)
3. Patrick Levin (5)
4. Alex Woodcock (4)
5. Lee Lovejoy (3)
- =6. Alexander Lomski, Andrew Crollard, Andrius Krivas, Chris Burgess, Chris Wiley, E Steev Ramsdell, Kyle Billingsley, Michael Bilow, Nathan Tillotson, Sam Jones (2)

Overall Country performance statistics listed below, with one game to be added. The central powers need some new strategies, particularly in the context of a Tournament... ☺

	<b>Avg Score</b>	<b>#SOLO's</b>
Austria	<b>4.347</b>	<b>0</b>
England	<b>8.354</b>	<b>2</b>
France	<b>9.215</b>	<b>5</b>
Germany	<b>6.340</b>	<b>2</b>
Italy	<b>5.021</b>	<b>1</b>
Russia	<b>9.271</b>	<b>5</b>
Turkey	<b>9.340</b>	<b>4</b>

Total of 128 players involved across 37 games over one year of play.

The PRIVACYWORD for this year is: OWLS

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### Owls Player Feedback

Can you update my e-mail as follows so that I can still receive your wonderful Owls Newsletter! Thanks!!!

Greg Alderman

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"An idea is something you have.  
An ideology is something that has you."  
-- Morris Berman

**Thorin Munro**  
**Sydney, 2<sup>nd</sup> January, 2007**