

Owls Diplomacy News



FEBRUARY 2007

More Tournament Talk!

Well, the 2007 Owls Open Tournament is successfully launched. There are twelve boards and a good mix of regular Owls players and those new to the arena. If you have missed the start of first round and think you might like to join, let me know and there may be a vacancy to fill. Otherwise you still have a fighting chance by joining in the second round. Good luck to everyone playing.

In this issue I have patched together a range of player comments about the 2006 tournament. I think you'll find plenty of insights into the styles of play in a tournament and how people felt through the experience. What stands out to me is the increased competitiveness and the heightened paranoia! Because of this, or maybe even in spite of it, I think the consensus was that the event was very enjoyable!

Finally I have included one of those e-mail messages that percolate through the ether. It stirred me into reflecting about Diplomacy. So it's now yours too.

By next issue I'm sure I will have milked the 2006 Tournament for all it is worth, so I'm on the lookout for contributions. Please don't be shy, I'm happy to work with you on shaping ideas for articles!

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2006 Owls Open Tournament Review

by Thorin Munro

I sent a brief survey to a wide range of players from the 2006 tournament hoping to draw out their experience and insights. I think you'll enjoy peeking into the minds of these Diplomats!

TM). Could you give an overview of your experience through the Tournament?

Jeremy Edwards: The 2006 Owls Open challenged me in ways even the Invitational games haven't done. Players really stepped up their negotiation skills and tactics, which created an extremely intense environment. A player had to either stab or be stabbed because being a 'nice guy' usually got you killed.

Andrew McCraith: Quite positive. Lots of fun. Some success, and a little failure. Mostly well played by all, with commitment to the end.

Robert Pace: It was a blast. However, far different from many regular games. More people were aggressive, and there was less trust between players and more stabs.

Andrius Krivas: Generally very enriching. My first elimination, for example. The Tournament virtually turned Diplomacy from an innocent hobby into a demanding sport. Due to the selection system, the level of skill among players at upper-half tables was extremely high. Such concentration of skill is rare in non-Tournament games, even invitational ones.

Jonathan Lawn: Down, up, down. Two frustrating failures to influence neighbours towards the sensible course, and one exciting (if not very hard-fought) solo.

Kyle Billingsley: I enjoyed the first tournament a whole lot. I really liked being able to play in the last round on the second to top board and to do well there. It was a very different experience to play in a game with many talented people and I am hoping that in the 2007 event I can again play with many more talented people.

Gert Jan Timmerman: The first game was just a normal owls-game to me, nothing special. The second round was different, because I was on the 2nd board, which means that I was playing against the better players. Better players send more press and respond more

accurately. In the 3rd round, I was on the top-board and this was a special experience. The best players of the tournament guarantee the best press and a lot of it. I liked it a lot during the game, but I think it does cost so much attention, that one gets too emotionally involved. That is why I was very disappointed with the end of the game, which in my opinion was not right. I got so disappointed that I decided to stop playing Diplomacy for a while and I haven't joined a new game since then.

Peter McNamara: My enjoyment of the tournament increased as time went. I like the swiss system enabling me to get one of my most enjoyable (despite the result) games in 3e.

Lee Lovejoy: I was satisfied with my performance as Russia in the first round (1e). I sparred and won against the English, who proved to be a feisty but in the end, very predictable foe. I think I made some errors in my analysis of the strategic motivations of my neighbors, who were more interested in playing for points in a short game rather than strong long-term strategy. Particularly Turkey, who stabbed me for a couple of centers and held his ground rather than keeping to a very effective juggernaut offensive. Second round was abysmal. I was Russia again (2b) and the Austrian made some extremely poor strategic choices that so unbalanced the board that there was not much of anything I could do. Sometimes people ignore you no matter what. My third round game, with Russia yet again (3e), was fantastic. My first ever solo in an Owls game. I think my own strategy and approach had evolved substantially by that game, and the fact that this game would not be prematurely ended put me in a more familiar strategic framework.

Greg Alderman: My tournament experience was one of erosion. I started out in wonderful fashion with a good DIAS in round 1, and then I experienced my first Diplomacy eliminations in both rounds 2 and 3! Bummer! However, the quality of play was outstanding. People were more locked in and it was more fun than an average game. All owls games are great, but the tournament is special.

Mark Haines: I had only played three or four games of Diplomacy when I joined round two of the tournament. I drew England, and worked with France against Germany. By the time Germany was eliminated, I was lucky enough to have France trust me a bit too much. I had the perfect opening for a stab,

and I took it. With just a little bit of diplomatic work (and luck again!), I was able to disrupt an anti-solo alliance by the other players, and took the momentum of my conquest of France into my first solo. On the positive side, I was proud of my performance -- but on the negative side, that put me at a table full of sharks for round 3! I drew France and was able to get a solid start by joining Germany in a Sea-lion and eliminating England. The level of intrigue and deception in this game was certainly something I'd never seen before, as Andrius's Turkey slowly worked his way through double- and triple-crossings, gaining all the while. In a remarkable bit of diplomacy, he was able to betray both Austria and Italy, only to have them support him later out of loyalty. In the end, Austria had just enough spunk to push for a draw, and I was happy to take it after an exhausting amount of intrigue.

Ivan Milovanovic: On a scale 1 to 5 – strong 4! I had very little experience in playing diplomacy when this tournament started. First two rounds were very competitive (I was on the second board in second round) but the third round was a disappointment (third board). No one seemed to be interested in playing; it was more like a no press game.

TM). Were there any key factors that influenced your result?

Andrius Krivas: I think that drawing Austria in the first round was key to my lower-than-expected performance. An additional serious difficulty was that in that very first game I met one of the toughest-playing and most experienced Owls whom I hoped not to have to fight before the final game (Brad Basden). With him as Russia and me as Austria, I stood no chance:)

Robert Pace: Getting myself set up and stabbed in year one of round 2 killed me.

Jonathan Lawn: How well I could understand my neighbours made all the difference.

Jeremy Edwards: I think each game influenced how I played the next game in a significant way. I played the first game as I would a normal invitational and was stabbed for the solo instead of remaining in a 2-way draw. In the second game, the gloves came off and I stabbed my way to a solo in that game, becoming the type of stab-a-holic I typically despise. In the third game, I tried to recreate the result of the first game, and this time, I

found a faithful ally who felt the same way. We shared a victory and I placed second overall.

Andrew McCraith: The first year. Survive year 1 without any major enemies and you've got a shot. All my games followed this rule, both when I did well and when I got knocked out early.

Lee Lovejoy: In the third game, which I won, I was able to take advantage of the hostility that players held for each other over stabs and betrayals. In the end, it seemed that I annoyed my neighbors the least and their desire to spite each other was greater than their desire to see me win.

Kyle Billingsley: There were two. I did not play in the first round because I missed it, and I think I could have done a lot better had I played there. I was also playing on a board in the second round with many people who were just average players. I really felt it the whole game and was never really challenged in walking into the solo there. I even had the chance of finishing with 20 centers, had I not let others take them so that they might have higher scores. It seems that a lot of your first and second round scores are going to be based on how good the people are that you are up against. In this current game I think I will do well because I am allied with someone who I am much stronger at tactics than. This gives me a huge advantage because I am eliminating a stronger player and allying with a weak one. If I had been in a different game it could have gone the other way, or they could have allied against me. I feel that this is the way diplomacy goes, but I just wanted to throw it out there.

Gert Jan Timmerman: One key factor is to press a lot and answer all press immediately. The consequence is that it will cost a lot of time and gets you emotionally involved too much. Another one is to be a real tournament-player. Not be satisfied with anything less than you can get.

Alex Collins: Games that dragged on were not so much fun.

Peter McNamara: The rule allowing Thomas de Klerk to take over the Austrian position in 2g. Putting a good player as the replacement increased the quality of the game and turned the result from a probable French solo to a three way AFR. As Russia, I certainly benefited from this rule!

Greg Alderman: My results were affected greatly by my personal paranoia! Seriously, I think I failed in both rounds 2 and 3 because I was so nervous about building the right relationship that I was paralysed in building any. I just couldn't land with a good ally, and that cost me dearly. You have to find someone to trust and roll with it right away. Otherwise, you send out the weakness vibes and people step right on that. I wish I could say I was going through a rough personal time at home or something to explain this behaviour, but it was just the simple pressure of the tournament!

Mark Haines: Luck is always a factor, of course. The way things happened to fall in the second round letting me solo is the major reason I made it as far as I did. I tried to stick with the common advice of always talking to everybody, all the time... it gets hard sometimes when real life gets demanding, but silence will always sow suspicion.

TM). Are there any significant differences between Tournament games and one-off games?

Jeremy Edwards: The biggest difference is the competitive nature of the tournament. If playing in an invitational game is like swimming with sharks, then playing in the tournament is like swimming with piranha.

Robert Pace: Definitely more competitive. Everyone wants to win and plays like it. In regular games people are more accepting of keeping alliances and not going for the solo.

Andrew McCraith: People were less vengeful. If you stung them, they were willing to help as long as you let them live so they could get some points. That's less common in one-offs. Also, very few CDs.

Andrius Krivas: In the Tournament, more factors come into play than in one-off games. In addition to each individual game's strategy, there is a clear need for an overarching whole-Tournament strategy. Also, the spirit of competition is expressed more clearly, leading to more aggressive playing style. While one-off games are characterised by excitement and fun, Tournament games are more characterised by paranoia and exhaustion.

Kyle Billingsley: Only small differences. I am a little less risky because I am more concerned about the amount of points I get. In a non tournament game I play with a lot of risk and

attacks and things, but in this tournament I won't ever let anyone win if I can stop it. But in terms of going for a solo or for a draw, I will always go for the one that will get me the most points at the highest success rate.

Gert Jan Timmerman: The most important difference is that in a normal game, you might settle for a draw with more players than necessary, because it is no big difference whether there are more or less participants in a draw.

Lee Lovejoy: The primary difference is strategic motivation. In the first two rounds, the game has a time limit and maximising one's center count for the timed draw is an attractive goal towards which many of my opponents seemed to play. This creates a situation where powers that normally have difficulty maintaining an alliance can work together and situations in which powers which normally succeed in longer term alliances have less motivation to stick it through. In contrast the third round has the same end game as a one-off game. The only difference might be a slightly higher intensity level from all players than might otherwise be expected since the last round is the last chance to rack up some points.

Jonathan Lawn: The first two games were normal Owls games, but I think most people tightened up on the top table in the last round, looking for alliances more, and being less ambitious.

Peter McNamara: Yes. Time draws. Also, I think I saw some tournament-centric play in round one, where three players took an easy draw in 1905. Being on lower boards later on would mean less difference's I presume, since there is less chance to win the tournament.

Greg Alderman: A big tournament advantage is that there seems to be more incentive to play because players are eager to see where they actually stack up against their peers. So, I experienced everyone playing well even when they were down. That does not always happen in one-off situations. A disadvantage from my standpoint was that it tended to heighten the sense of going for total blood. It does not encourage mercy or long-term allies. I think this is a weakness of the scoring system that I have no idea how to fix. We are weighted heavily toward wins, as it should be, but Diplomacy is one of the few board games where multiple players can "win" by OUTSTANDING gamesmanship. The best

games I have played in are DIAS games and not solo's.

Mark Haines: The main difference I saw was the caliber of play. There also seemed (at least to me) to be a greater sense of urgency -- these games counted for more than a one-off game in some respects. I also think, at least in round three, that some players were probably more cautious, more willing to take a draw. I know I was anxious to get a draw and rest on my respectable performance, rather than possibly be eliminated embarrassingly after such a good start.

TM). If you play another tournament would you do anything differently?

Mark Haines: I'm playing the 07 tournament. The main thing I'd like to do differently (and I'm not really succeeding yet) is to increase the volume of my press... I still hit times where with real life's demands, I don't talk to the other powers nearly enough. All in all, the tournament was a great experience and I thoroughly enjoyed it -- it's always fun to play against the best!

Andrius Krivas: Oh yes, I would avoid the mistakes I made as Archduke:) And perhaps, I'd try and make a better effort at controlling my Diplomacy paranoia and trusting my allies a little more than I did this time around.

Gert Jan Timmerman: I would try not to get so emotionally involved in a game, as I did in the last game of this tournament.

Lee Lovejoy: I'll adjust to the different motivations carrying players into the middle and end game. Of course, I think I've evolved as a player quite a bit and will try to put those lessons to good use.

Jonathan Lawn: Work harder to understand the other powers' motivations early on.

Jeremy Edwards: I would definitely watch my back and not take any alliance for granted. I would also try to maintain my idealist method of game play and not allow myself to become a stab-a-holic.

Kyle Billingsley: Would I do anything differently. Probably not, I might take more risks in the future, but it depends on how my first round goes. I really like to be ranked and play the last round with people as good as myself. I sometimes wish that there was a game every year that was 7 or 14 or 21 of the best 30

players. It would be nice to play with that higher level of player.

Peter McNamara: Hopefully just improve my own play. And pray that I don't draw Germany again!

Robert Pace: My general style is very aggressive, but I don't want to leave myself open for a stab - too many sharks out there! Yikes!!

TM). Do you have any other observations? [I have responded to these points.]

Greg Alderman: I am signed up for the '07 tournament and I am playing it right now, but I think in '08 the first board assignments should all be random. I would pool all the players and then randomly assign them to boards. In that way, you eliminate the temptation to play with "loaded dice" in the first round game, because it is possible and probable that friends can jump on the same board.

[TM: I've considered this intermediate step a number of times and suspect that making the entry process this rigorous is likely to be a significant deterrent to players joining and also slow down the start. The possibility of collusion in the first round exists. I do become familiar with players and that helps know who knows whom. The games are all Private status. Yet to be convinced the effort is of enough benefit, when compared against the ease of players simply joining a game.]

Alex Collins: I would have folks sign up in advance and try to put them together based upon current owls rating. I would also look at expanding to incorporate other maps. Since starting play on the DPjudge. I've moved more and more towards using alternative maps.

[TM: Very interesting idea! Three rounds, three variants. Maybe some-one would like to take up Alex's idea? Particularly some-one familiar with the variants available.]

Robert Pace: FYI - it looks as though not all of the tournament games were counted as Invitational games so that they did not receive the 1.25 modification to the score.

[TM: Only the games from the top half of the second and third rounds were rated as Invitationals. The first round is essentially random and the bottom halves in later rounds are also 'open slather'. The competitive nature of the tournament games is a good argument

for all games to be rated at the 1.25 bonus. But I did want to have a simple differentiation.]

Andrew McCraith: I'd love to get a few more stats. First, an overall "strength of schedule" at the end. I know the tables I played, but where did the players I face end up. Second, a by nation recap. Does Austria always lose, or is it a relatively even distribution.

[TM: For those who missed the other worksheets on the 2006 Results spreadsheet, you'll find each round expanded and also a range of game and power statistics.]

Andrew McCraith (cont): Thanks for pointing that out. Somehow I missed the last sheet.

I was interested in the power analysis for two reasons. First, I'm was interested in a real data sheet that proved the point that same nations are harder than others. Most of the results were as expected, but I was quite surprised to see Italy so low, on par with Austria.

Second, in a tournament like this there is a low of benefit/pain based on the draw. It's hard to compare two players if one is Austria and Italy and the other played France and Russia. But how does one handicap such things? I did a quick effort (see attached if you care). Based on the overall tournament average for each power, I calculated a "power handicap" calculated as the overall average for all powers in all games divided by the overall average for a specific power. Example: if the overall average points per game was 7.4 (as it was in this tournament) and Austria averaged 4.3 (as it did in this case), then handicap for Austria is 173%, or in other words every point earned playing as Austria should count as 1.73. On the flip side the average for France was 9.3, so the handicap is 80%.

This approach makes a good stab at weighting each players position. Granted you can't take into account everything, like the strength of the other players, but it seemed like a decent approach. It can't really be applied to the overall Owls scoring (unless somebody is keeping an ever running total of Owls games to adjust the handicapping. It is also pure coincidence that this would have moved me from 11th to 4th (I played Austria and Italy both well - relatively speaking). Note, Thomas was still #1 either way (while he might have rocked with France and Russia, he also played Austria and did very well there.)

Anyways, given your effort creating the spreadsheet, I figure you might appreciate my thinking. Do you know if anybody else has suggested approaches for weighting/handicapping based on the initial power?

[TM: Thanks Andrew. I have filed your spreadsheet along with the results sheet at http://games.groups.yahoo.com/group/Owls_Diplomacy/ Very interesting idea to recalibrate all scores at the end of the tournament based on power performance.]

Peter McNamara: The article "How to be a Gamemaster without really trying" in the F2006M issue of the Zine got me thinking about timing for diplomacy games. In particular, why 48 hours and why the weekday deadlines only. With the growth of easy internet access, I wonder how many people would prefer weekday deadlines only over a game with deadlines on all days of the week. I was thinking of how your timing would compare with 72 hour deadlines seven days of the week, the games would approximately run at the same pace, but the deadlines would be more evenly spread out. At times in owls games I have found difficulties with the shortness of the 48-hour deadline, especially when dealing with the type that tend to only send press between 2am and 6am local time.

[TM: I have begun to offer some open Owls games with this timing. I think Peter is correct that the overall length of the game will be similar. I may well offer both options in future. I still want to cater for those who play their Diplomacy from work (tsk, tsk!) or school.]

Thanks to everyone who contributed to this patchwork of inspiration.

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Shay's story

At a fundraising dinner for a school that serves learning disabled children, the father of one of the students delivered a speech that would never be forgotten by all who attended.

After extolling the school and its dedicated staff, he offered a question:

"When not interfered with by outside influences, everything nature does is done with perfection. Yet my son, Shay, cannot learn things as other children do. He cannot understand things as other children do. Where is the natural order of things in my son?"

The audience was stilled by the query. The father continued. "I believe, that when a child like Shay, physically and mentally handicapped comes into the world, an opportunity to realise true human nature presents itself, and it comes, in the way other people treat that child."

Then he told the following story: Shay and his father had walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, "Do you think they'll let me play?"

Shay's father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shay on their team. But the father also understood that if his son were allowed to play, it would give him a much-needed sense of belonging and some confidence to be accepted by others in spite of his handicaps.

Shay's father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shay could play, not expecting much. The boy looked around for guidance and a few boys nodded approval, why not? So he took matters into his own hands and said, "We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning." Shay struggled over to the team's bench put on a team shirt with a broad smile and his Father had a small tear in his eye and warmth in his heart.

The boys saw the father's joy at his son being accepted. In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field, grinning from ear to ear as his father waved to him from the stands.

In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to be next at bat. At this juncture, do they let Shay bat and give away their chance to win the game? Surprisingly, Shay was given the bat. Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible 'cause Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball.

However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognising the other team putting winning aside for this moment in Shay's life, moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least be able to make contact.

The first pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher. The game would now be over, but the pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to first base. Shay would have been out and that would have been the end of the game. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball right over the head of first base, out of reach of all team mates. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, "Shay, run to first! Run to first!"

Never in his life had Shay ever ran that far but made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled, "Run to second, run to second!" Catching his breath, Shay awkwardly ran towards second, gleaming and struggling to make it to second base.

By the time Shay rounded towards second base, the right fielder had the ball, the smallest guy on their team, who had a chance to be the hero for his team for the first time. He could have thrown the ball to the second-base man for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions and he too intentionally threw the ball high and far over third base's head. Shay ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home. All were screaming, "Shay, Shay, Shay, all the Way Shay" Shay reached third base, the opposing shortstop ran to help him and turned him in the direction of third base, and shouted, "Run to third! Shay, run to third" As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams and those watching were on their feet were screaming, "Shay, run home!" Shay ran to home, stepped onto the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the "grand slam" and won the game for his team.

"That day," said the father softly, with tears now rolling down his face, "the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of real humanity into this world."

Shay didn't make it to another summer and died that winter, having never forgotten being the hero and making his Father so happy and coming home and seeing his Mother tearfully embrace her little hero of the day!

NOW A FOOTNOTE TO THIS STORY:

We all send thousands of jokes through the e-mail without a second thought, but when it

comes to sending messages about life choices, people think twice about sharing. The crude, vulgar, and often obscene pass freely through cyberspace, but public discussion about decency is too often suppressed in our schools and workplaces.

If you're thinking about forwarding this message, chances are that you're probably sorting out the people on your address list that aren't the "appropriate" ones to receive this type of message.

Well, the person who sent you this believes that we all can make a difference. We all have thousands of opportunities every single day to help realise the "natural order of things."

So many seemingly trivial interactions between two people present us with a choice: Do we pass along a little spark of care and humanity. Or do we pass up that opportunity to brighten the day of those with us and leave the world a little bit colder in the process? A wise man once said every society is judged by how it treats it's least fortunate amongst them.

PS: With a challenge like that in mind, how could I not include this story in ODN!! – TM.

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Owls Player Feedback

"Ever since I dropped out of the black belt rank, I have been enjoying the game again! Whatever the outcome, it will be fun."
- Gerry Evenwel

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"Discussion is an exchange of knowledge; argument an exchange of ignorance."
-- Robert Quillen.

Thorin Munro
Sydney, 3rd February, 2007