

Simulating Terror: An Affective Empathy Approach

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Abstract

Historical education often prioritises factual narratives over the emotional dimensions of past experiences. This paper explores how historically-structured board games, particularly *The Troubles*, foster affective empathy — an emotional connection to historical actors and events. By analysing game mechanics, components, narrative framing, and player engagement, this study demonstrates how board games can challenge players to confront moral ambiguity, power dynamics, and the human cost of conflict. The paper argues that historically-structured board games serve as powerful pedagogical tools, supplementing traditional history education by making emotional realities more significant and efficacious.

Keywords: historically-structured boardgames, Northern Ireland, *The Troubles*, historical empathy, affective empathy, simulation, narrative

1. Introduction

Traditional history education frequently focuses on cognitive understanding: teaching students about historical events, motivations, and consequences. However, an essential component of historical empathy, affective empathy, is often overlooked. Affective empathy involves emotionally connecting with historical figures and understanding their lived experiences beyond mere intellectual comprehension.

One emerging method for addressing these gaps is the use of historically-structured board games (HSBGs) — games designed to simulate the social, economic and political events, conflicts, and power struggles through period-appropriate interactive mechanics (Ambrosio & Ross 2021; Ambrosio & Ross 2023; Ambrosio 2024). HSBGs offer a unique means of fostering this deeper engagement.

This paper examines how affective empathy is cultivated in HSBGs, using *The Troubles* as a case study. By exploring its mechanics, narrative, and player experience, this research investigates how boardgames that are historically-structured evoke emotional responses that deepen historical understanding.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Historical Empathy: Cognitive and Affective

When we study actors from the past it is imperative that we approach them with an understanding of the various structures — within which they conducted their daily lives: the societal, geopolitical and ideological (Smith, 2016).

To be able to both understand and sympathise with these lives past, one approaches such studies through the distinct yet complementary strands of cognitive and affective empathy. Cognitive empathy is the ability to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, and perspectives; affective empathy, the key focus of this paper, involves feeling the emotions of another person, about the emotional connection that resonates with someone else's experience, rather than simply acknowledge and understanding their viewpoint. By engaging with both facets, one is likely to have a broader, more nuanced and critical understanding of a historical topic. However, it is with the latter strand of empathy with which this paper is primarily concerned as it is often overlooked by

game designers.

2.2 Game-Based Learning

Game-based learning (GBL) is an educational approach where games are used as pedagogical tools to promote learning through engagement, problem-solving, and critical thinking (Boyle et al, 2011; Connolly et al, 2012). Unlike traditional methods, which may focus on textbooks and lectures, games provide an interactive experience where students can step into the shoes of historical actors, make decisions, and witness the repercussions of those choices. The potential of board games in fostering empathy lies in their ability to simulate complex historical environments in which players navigate moral dilemmas, understand conflicting viewpoints, and make decisions that affect not only the outcome of the game but also theirs and their fellow players' emotional and intellectual engagement with the history.

Through this immersive experience, students engage in active learning, where their cognitive and emotional understanding of historical events is shaped by their gameplay. They gain insight into the lived experiences of people from different backgrounds — whether they are soldiers, politicians, or civilians — and learn to appreciate the complexity of historical narratives and the implications of human conflict.

2.3 Historical Game Studies

Historical Games Studies (HGS) is a field of GBL aimed at understanding how games can serve as a medium for conveying historical knowledge and empathy. Chapman (2016; 2017) emphasises the potential of games to bridge the gap between didactic, factual histories and the human emotions that underpin these events, arguing that games, particularly those that focus on historical narratives, have the capacity to engage players in critical thinking while allowing them to experience history in a visceral, emotionally veridical way. Chapman points out that historical games offer a unique “lived” experience of history that goes beyond what books or documentaries can provide. Through interactive mechanics, such as role-playing and decision-making, players can experience the consequences of historical actions first hand.

2.4 Historically-Structured Boardgames

Historically-structured boardgames (HSBGs) immerse players within an important “heuristic cycle in which imagination is informed by evidence” (Smith, 2016) as players face period-relevant situations that place cognitive and affective demands on them. Ambrosio’s framework for understanding historically-structured board games focuses on how game mechanics and narrative design are aligned with historical events to foster empathy and understanding (2024). According to the author, historically-structured games are designed to place players within the social and political context of a conflict where their choices are shaped by the historical environment (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Balbane Pass man, Billy Campbell, pictured in foreground, sustained head injuries at the People’s Democracy march at Burntollet, January 1969 (Derry Journal, 2019)

Source: Derry Journal, 2019.

These games often require players to understand the complexities of power, social dynamics, and political

ideologies. Ambrosio's framework emphasises that the emotional and cognitive dimensions of empathy are not merely a by-product of playing historical games; instead, they are intentionally cultivated through the entire game design. By taking on different roles and perspectives, players can experience the moral ambiguities and emotional weight of historical events in a way that encourages both understanding *and* emotional connection.

2.5 Narrative

Communication is fundamental to our existence (Crookall, 1989, p. 5). Narratives shape our perception of the world (Bruner, 1991) and help us make sense of it through definition, analogy, and metaphor, both literally and abstractly (Simons & Green, 2013).

Narratives hold persuasive power, influencing our thoughts and belief systems through what we see, read, hear, and even write (Appel & Richter, 2007; Hanratty, 2013). They also serve a cathartic function for both the storyteller and the audience. As Halpern suggests, when one person truly listens to another's story, emotional resonance and empathy often arise naturally (2001, cited in Barton & McCully, 2012, p. 398).

Narratives humanise history, transforming abstract events into personal stories that evoke emotional responses (Wei, 2011, xvi; Bruner, 1991; Falk & Dierking, 2018, 48–49). The importance of narrative in historical games is crucial to the development of both cognitive and affective empathy. Narrative structures in games provide players with a context that goes beyond mere facts, allowing them to immerse themselves in the lives and perspectives of individuals within the historical event (see Figure 2). The interplay between narrative and gameplay is key in helping players emotionally engage with the history they are learning.



Figure 2. An image depicting the various 'actors' and organisations involved in the Troubles

Source: Box cover artwork, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

As players co-construct and navigate the narrative (Neitzel quoted in Raessens & Goldstein, 2011; Ambrosio & Ross, 2023, 853), they often face tough moral decisions and witness the consequences of their actions, which further drives both cognitive and affective empathy. Additionally, game narratives often allow players to make choices that impact the direction of the story, making them more likely to internalise the consequences of those choices. This "narrative agency" (Cohen, 2001) empowers players to reflect on how their decisions shape history, further enhancing empathy for the individuals affected by those decisions.

Narrative is essential in shaping how players engage with history. It transforms board games from abstract strategy exercises into meaningful explorations of historical even; the combination of storytelling and mechanics fosters a dual-layered form of historical empathy — cognitive understanding of the conflict's complexities and affective resonance with those who lived through it.

2.6 Previous Research

Research on how historical games foster empathy has been extensive, particularly in educational games (Boltz,

2017; Johnson, 2019; Schrier & Farber, 2022). Studies have shown that games like *Freedom: The Underground Railroad* and *Twilight Struggle* not only teach players about history but also evoke emotional responses that allow players to connect with the past on a personal level.

In these games, players are not only exposed to historical facts but are placed in situations where they must make decisions that reflect the moral dilemmas faced by individuals in history. Research also indicates that the use of narrative in historical games is particularly effective in promoting empathy (Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010, 65; O'Donnell, 2024).

By engaging players in stories derived from historical narratives that highlight the human experience, games create opportunities for players to develop both cognitive and affective empathy. For example, in games focusing on war or social movements, players are encouraged to understand the struggles of people who lived through these times while also experiencing the emotional toll of those struggles (Kaplan, Garner, & Brock, 2019). Additionally, studies have shown that the more immersive and emotionally engaging a game is, the more likely it is to foster deeper empathy (Kaseem & Noor, 2021; Donadello, 2022). Games that allow players to make morally difficult choices or experience the emotional consequences of conflict, lead to stronger empathy development, as players are forced to confront the complexity of historical events on both an intellectual and emotional level.

3. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in the concept of historical empathy, particularly as it applies to game-based learning. As previously mentioned, it employs Thomas Ambrosio's framework of historically-structured board games to analyse how *The Troubles* fosters historical empathy through its mechanics, aesthetics and narrative design. By examining the interplay between cognitive and affective empathy in the game, this framework provides a lens to assess how *The Troubles* encourages players to engage with the complexities of Northern Ireland's conflict. In doing so, this study contributes to broader discussions on the role of board games in shaping historical understanding and emotional engagement with the past.

Empathy in Game-Based Learning

While empathy plays a crucial role in game-based learning, its manifestation varies depending on the game's design and intended learning outcomes. HSBGs provide unique opportunities for fostering both cognitive and affective empathy by immersing players in historical contexts and decision-making processes. Understanding how these games engage players on both intellectual and emotional levels is essential for evaluating their potential as tools for historical learning.

Cognitive and Affective Empathy in Historically-Structured Games

Cognitive Empathy

Role-taking. Board games often assign players specific roles or factions with distinct goals, values, and histories (e.g., political leaders, military commanders, or civilians). When players step into the shoes of these roles, they must understand the motivations behind actions that they "find morally repugnant" (Juul, 2001; O'Donnell, 2024, p. 12) or find difficult to comprehend. Each faction has its own interests, and players need to think about the historical context and reasons behind these perspectives: they are tied to particular goals and challenges.

Strategy and Complex Decision-making. HSBGs with intricate rules and moral dilemmas present strategic choices where players must assess the needs of their faction: the historical realities, and the consequences of their decisions. Understanding the complexities of each faction's situation requires players to adopt the disposition of the group they control, thus developing cognitive empathy by engaging with multiple perspectives on the same historical event (Bermudez, 2021, p. 291). Players not only have the opportunity to view the actions of other factions, they may play as that faction at another time.

Historical Context and Reflection. A well-designed HSBG game must include historical backstory and events that prompt players to think critically about how historical figures or groups responded to various situations. Incorporating real historical events, figures, and dynamics in the game's design promotes a deeper understanding of the history. In such games, players often learn about specific historical periods through in-game text, images or facts presented within the mechanics, such as historical documents, timelines, or period-specific actions. By understanding the motivations behind actions, players expand their cognitive empathy, which may already be informed by previous historical knowledge or experience. The game should include challenges and conflicts that were faced by historical groups, encouraging players to engage with history beyond just the narrative, thus fostering cognitive empathy.

Asymmetrical Gameplay. Factions have different objectives, strengths, weaknesses, and historical backgrounds. By playing a faction, players must consider the strategic goals and motivations behind the actions of their assigned group. This allows them to understand why a faction might act the way it does, even if they do not

agree with the actions, and how asymmetrical gameplay contributes to collaborative and competitive play.

Affective Empathy. In historically-structured board games, affective empathy can be achieved through emotional engagement with the game's story, characters, and moral dilemmas.

Emotional Engagement through Immersive Narrative. Historically-structured games can create emotional investment by telling a compelling story that highlights the personal experiences of individuals caught in historical events (Allan, 2019; Naul, 2019). For example, a game might show the emotional consequences of violence, loss, or the struggles of ordinary people during the conflict. Through storylines, players can become emotionally involved in the fates of their characters, helping them develop a deeper connection to the emotional realities of the historical period (Gerrig & Mumper, 2017; Green, 2021).

Player Identification with Characters or Groups. Strongly designed characters in historically-structured games can evoke an emotional response from players. Characters with rich backstories, struggles, and personalities can foster an emotional bond, allowing players to feel empathy for their plight (Kaplan, Garner, & Brock, 2019). The humanisation of characters through storylines and personal stakes helps generate affective empathy.

Moral Dilemmas and Emotional Stakes. Games that present players with difficult moral decisions, where there is no clear "right" choice, can engage affective empathy by making players feel the weight of their decisions. For instance, players might face the choice of engaging in "political violence [which is] socially constructed, rather than a natural or impulsive response to conflict" (Bermudez, 2021, p. 282), or negotiating for peace but risking their faction's position. Such decisions may stir emotional discomfort as players experience the personal and collective consequences of their actions, allowing them to emotionally resonate with those who lived through such choices (Kello & Wagner, 2017; Kaplan, Garner, & Brock, 2019).

Consequences of Actions. The game's mechanics should show the emotional impact of the players' actions. For example, if a player chooses an aggressive tactic, the game might depict the resulting civilian casualties or social divisions, evoking feelings of guilt, sorrow, or regret in that individual player or those participating with him. This encourages players to not only think about the consequences but also to feel the emotional consequences of their actions, leading to a deeper affective empathy.

Immersive Experience through Sensory Engagement. A game's design elements (such as artwork, and physical game components) can enhance the emotional atmosphere of the game, immersing players in the historical setting. For example, realistic depictions of the environment, or depictions of conflict might increase the emotional weight of the game, enhancing players' emotional connection to the event. The components themselves provoke "certain reactions and expectations which we project back on to it in such a way that the polysemantic possibilities are greatly reduced in order to be in keeping with the expectations that have been aroused" (Pearce, 1992, p. 220).

Narrative Theory

Narrative provides the contextual and emotional depth needed to connect players to historical events "it changes what [students] see in the world and how they see it" (Lee in Smith, 2016, p. 15). A well-designed narrative does not just inform but immerses players in the lived experiences of the people involved, and this immersion enables players to both understand and feel the historical realities of a conflict. For cognitive empathy, the story provides historical context, helping players grasp different perspectives, motivations, and strategic dilemmas. Players learn *why* certain factions acted as they did and develop a more nuanced understanding of history. For affective empathy, the story humanises historical figures and civilians, making the consequences of players' actions feel more personal and emotionally engaging.

Cognitive empathy requires players to analyse perspectives and strategic decision-making within a historical setting, and narrative facilitates this by providing historical context, embedding historical details in the game's mechanics, players must consider real-world complexities. Encouraging role-taking in the storytelling, players adopt the perspectives of different factions. They must think critically about how and why groups pursued certain actions, fostering intellectual engagement with historical perspectives. And in shaping decision-making, narrative-driven choices (e.g., how to respond to a political crisis) force players to weigh multiple viewpoints and consequences, deepening their strategic and historical understanding.

Affective empathy is evoked through emotional engagement, which narrative strengthens by creating personal stakes: stories make historical conflicts feel less abstract. Instead of viewing a particular historical period as a distant political struggle, players experience it through the lens of characters whose lives are directly affected (Leith et al., 2019; Smith, 2016). By introducing moral dilemmas, narrative-driven decisions (e.g., whether to use violence for political gain or pursue a long and difficult rout to peace) create emotional tension, forcing players to wrestle with the ethical consequences of their actions. Through storytelling elements (e.g. in-game events where civilians suffer due to factional violence), players feel the emotional weight of historical trauma, fostering a deeper connection to the period — depicting the human cost.

The Interplay of Narrative and Mechanics

HSBGs benefit from an integrated approach where narrative reinforces mechanics. If a game provides historical backstories for factions but lacks emotional stakes, it may foster cognitive empathy but not affective empathy. If a game has immersive storytelling but lacks strategic decision-making, it might evoke emotions but fail to promote critical historical thinking. By merging and providing a balanced implementation of both, a game ensures players think deeply about history while also feeling the impact of their decisions.

Visual Representation

Incorporating images into the game's components, especially those that focus on individual or group fatalities, is an important design decision, as it can strongly influence both cognitive and affective empathy. Visual representations of violence, loss, and suffering have a profound impact on how players emotionally engage with a historical event.

Cognitive Empathy Through Visual Representation

Historical Contextualisation. Images of fatalities, destruction, or significant events in the game's historical context can help players connect the emotional consequences to the broader historical narrative. For example, a photograph of an attack during a play session might help players better understand the scale of violence and its effects on communities, shifting their focus from abstract concepts (e.g., "political conflict") to tangible, human experiences. Players can analyse how the loss of individuals or groups fits into the larger political and social dynamics of the conflict, deepening their understanding of the causal relationships that drive the history.

Understanding Different Perspectives. By presenting images that depict different factions or perspectives (e.g., the grief of civilians, soldiers' deaths, or the impact of the violence on communities and families), players gain insight into the varying human experiences of the same historical event. The images can help players reflect on the moral and ethical complexities of the event, encouraging a deeper understanding of the diverse stakeholders. Empathetically, the game can help players understand that the same event is perceived differently depending on who experiences it, which challenges the player to understand different viewpoints more deeply.

Affective Empathy Through Visual Representation

Emotional Impact of Visuals. Images of fatalities, victims, or destruction are powerful in triggering emotional responses. Photographs or illustrations that show the devastation of families, the loss of life, or the physical damage done to communities bring an emotional depth to the game. Players might feel a sense of sorrow, anger, or both when encountering these images, particularly if they depict real historical moments with human faces attached. These images can evoke compassion and emotional resonance with the people involved in the historical event, fostering an emotional connection to the loss and suffering experienced by individuals (Hunicke, Leblanc, & Zubek, 2004).

Personalisation and Connection. When images show individuals or small groups suffering, it personalises the history. Players may connect more with the faces and names they see, which can make the emotional impact feel more immediate and real. For example, if the game's card depicts a family mourning a lost loved one, players might emotionally respond more strongly than if the event were described in abstract terms like "a casualty in battle." Players are more likely to feel empathy for specific individuals or communities, rather than simply understanding the abstract concept of "death" or "casualty" in a conflict. The visual representation gives the emotion of loss a human face, making the history more relatable and deeply felt.

Ethical Reflection Through Graphic Content

Images that depict the harsh realities of war (e.g., dead bodies, destruction of homes, or displaced people) can serve as a tool for reflection. By seeing the outcomes of violence, players might reconsider the moral costs of their in-game decisions. For instance, after making a violent or purely objective decision in the game, a player might encounter a narrative card showing the aftermath of that decision — such as the image of civilian suffering — which can provoke both cognitive and emotional reflection on their choices. These objects and images can prompt players to engage more deeply with the broader impact of their decisions, making them think about the moral consequences of their actions — and the actions of others — in the historical context. This "need to decipher gives us the chance both to bring out what is in the object and what is in ourselves; it is a dynamic, complex movement which unfolds as time passes, and in the act of interpretative imagination we give form to ourselves" (Pearce, 1992, p. 220).

Moral Dilemmas in Imagery. Using graphic images of fatalities forces players to engage with the moral ambiguities of war. The emotional weight of the image often makes players reflect on the human cost of their decisions, encouraging a more holistic understanding of the conflict, rather than a detached, intellectual view of strategy and tactics. The game may evoke a sense of guilt, responsibility, or compassion as players reflect on the visual content, triggering a stronger emotional response to the consequences of war.

Physical Representation

The tangible elements of a game — such as maps, boards, cards, components — play a crucial role in shaping player engagement, influencing both cognitive and affective empathy. The physicality of game components can reinforce historical narratives, encourage immersion, and deepen emotional connections by providing players with a concrete link to the past.

Cognitive Empathy Through Physical Components

Tactile Engagement with Historical Context. Physical components serve as tangible representations of historical elements, making abstract concepts more concrete. Maps, wooden or plastic components, and cards can represent real-world locations, individuals, or events, grounding players in the historical setting. For example, a textured game board depicting an actual urban landscape (see Figure 3) can help players grasp the material realities of conflict, shifting their focus from abstract statistics to lived experiences. Participants can better understand how geography, resource limitations, or environmental conditions influenced their historical analogues' decisions, fostering a deeper comprehension of historical constraints.

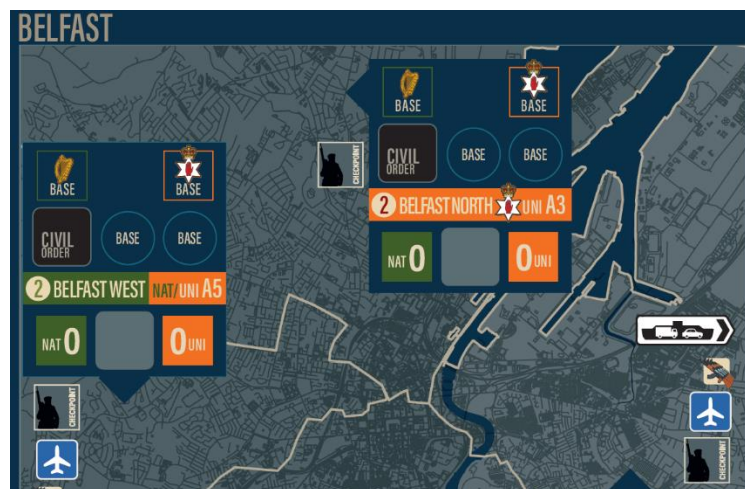


Figure 3. Belfast West and Belfast North

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Manipulating Game Pieces to Understand Perspective. By physically moving tokens or cards that represent different factions, communities, or individuals, players engage with multiple viewpoints in a tactile way. This act of control reinforces an understanding of competing interests, power dynamics, and the shifting nature of historical events. A game in which players must physically place voting pieces in a conflict zone, for instance, may highlight the human cost of war and the difficulty of achieving a peaceful resolution through democracy (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Vote canvassing by the Nationalist faction (represented by the green cubes) in a peaceful Londonderry
Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Players actively reconstruct historical events through movement and placement, helping them comprehend the perspectives of different stakeholders and the complexity of historical decision-making.

Affective Empathy Through Physical Components

Emotional Significance of Tactile Interaction. The physical act of handling game pieces — placing tokens that represent casualties, drawing a card detailing the opportunity to commit a bombing campaign, possibly removing a character from the board — can evoke strong emotional reactions. When players must physically remove a game piece that represents a person, it personalises loss in a way that abstract descriptions may not achieve. The tangible act of removing a piece can create a sense of sorrow or loss, reinforcing an emotional connection to the historical experience and encouraging players to feel the weight of historical tragedies, the finiteness of people and things.

Materiality and Personal Connection. The texture, weight, and design of game components can enhance immersion and evoke an emotional response. A game that uses period-appropriate colour schemes, image quality or font for narrative event cards, or rough, damaged tokens to represent war-torn cities, can create a sensory link to the past. Custom-designed components, such as character cards with personal biographies, can encourage players to form attachments to specific individuals within the game. Players are more likely to emotionally invest in the history being represented when physical components provide a tangible sense of realism, making the game feel more immediate and personal.

Ethical Reflection through Physical Components

Moral Weight of Material Decisions. Physical components can be used to reinforce ethical dilemmas within a game. If players must allocate limited resources using physical tokens — deciding, for instance, which action may be permitted, and which are not — the materiality of the decision can make the moral weight feel more significant. This differs from digital or abstract decision-making, where consequences may feel more detached. The physical act of choosing between different game pieces or tokens can create a sense of responsibility, leading to deeper reflection on the ethical complexities of historical events.

Symbolism and Interpretation of Physical Objects. Game components can carry symbolic meaning, encouraging players to interpret their significance beyond gameplay mechanics. A deck of cards that slowly diminishes may represent dwindling hope or escalating violence, while a game board that physically fragments over time can symbolise societal collapse. Such components invite players to think critically about the historical narrative being conveyed. The evolving physical state of the game can evoke an emotional response, making historical events feel more real and immediate as players witness destruction, loss, or change unfold in a material way.

Linking this Framework to *The Troubles*

To successfully integrate both cognitive and affective empathy into a historically-structured board game, the

game needs to offer both intellectual challenges (through strategic thinking, understanding of historical context, and perspective-taking) and emotional engagement (through narratives, moral dilemmas, and the emotional consequences of actions). Games that achieve both can create a holistic learning experience where players not only understand the historical complexity of an event but also connect emotionally to its abhorrently human cost.

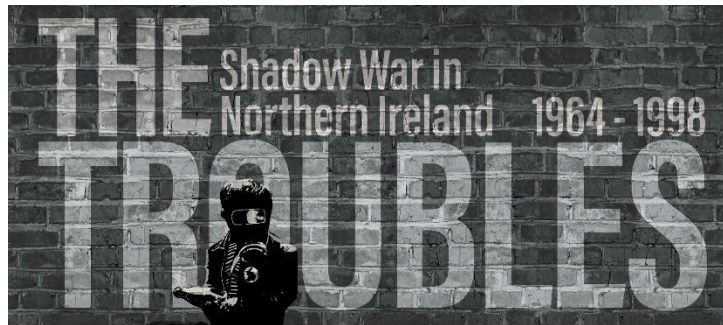


Figure 5. Iconic image of the ‘Boy in the Gas Mask’

Source: from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Cognitive empathy in *The Troubles* may come from understanding the motivations behind the actions of paramilitaries or the British Forces and analysing the political strategies involved. Affective empathy could be elicited when players are emotionally moved by the effects of their decisions, such as the suffering of civilians or the devastation of a community torn apart by violence. By combining both, a game like *The Troubles* can foster a deeper historical empathy that teaches players not just to understand but also to feel the impact of the events, creating a more meaningful and reflective experience.

Everything from the use of images, symbols and colour on narrative cards serves as a tool to provoke both cognitive and affective empathy. They help players intellectually engage with the historical event by providing a visual link to the consequences of actions, and they evoke emotional responses that humanise the history. By carefully selecting and presenting these images, game designers can deeply enhance the emotional and intellectual impact of the game.

Through the narrative, physical and visual elements, *The Troubles* transforms historical learning into an immersive, multisensory experience, reinforcing both analytical understanding and emotional connection to the events of the Northern Ireland conflict.

4. Case Selection: *The Troubles*

Historical Context: A Background to The Troubles

The period of conflict that engulfed Northern Ireland between 1969 and 1998 is commonly known as the Troubles. Its origins can be traced back to the sectarian divisions that emerged when King James I of England unified the predominantly Catholic island of Ireland with England and Scotland in 1604.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there were three formal attempts to challenge the union with a largely Protestant Great Britain. After the third failed attempt to secure Home Rule, Great Britain partitioned six of Ireland’s thirty-two counties in 1922, incorporating them into the United Kingdom, while the remaining twenty-six counties became the Irish Free State, now the Republic of Ireland.

Between 1922 and 1969, Northern Ireland operated under a Unionist-controlled electoral system that was predominantly Protestant and widely regarded as designed to uphold a socio-economic structure that disadvantaged the Nationalist, mostly Catholic population, who identified as Irish rather than British (see Figure 6).

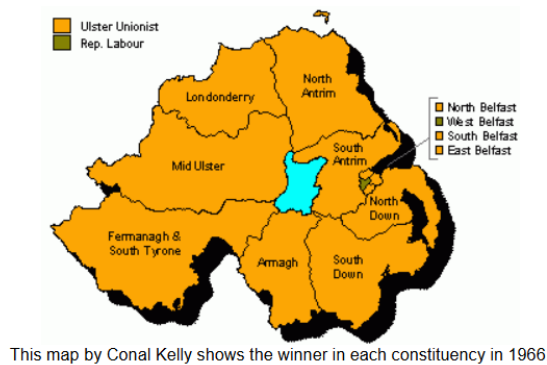


Figure 6. Map of 1966 Westminster Election Results in Northern Ireland: Unionists dominate Nationalist MPs (11-1)

Source: ARK Northern Ireland 2025.

Although Unionist Prime Minister Sir Terence O'Neill sought to address these inequalities amid the rise of the civil rights movement — such as the Campaign for Social Justice in Northern Ireland (1964) — and the emergence of a Catholic middle class, his reforms provoked a resurgence of the Loyalist paramilitary group, the Ulster Volunteer Force (UVF). Viewing these changes as a threat to Northern Ireland's union with Britain, the UVF launched a series of bomb attacks on utility infrastructure. This, along with other acts of civil disobedience targeting the Nationalist Catholic community, stemmed from fears that O'Neill's progressive policies would ultimately lead to a united Ireland and weaken ties with the UK.

In August 1969, as sectarian violence escalated, British troops were deployed to protect Catholic communities under attack from the UVF. Their presence would extend for four decades, making it the longest military deployment in British history. The Troubles resulted in approximately 3,500 direct fatalities, but an estimated 24,000 additional deaths were attributed to “structural violence,” in which socio-economic conditions severely impacted quality of life, contributing to increased mortality rates (The Treason Felony Blog, 2021).

Cognitive & Affective Empathy

For historical events like the Troubles, which are emotionally and politically charged, empathy becomes an essential tool for learning. Cognitive empathy allows students to grasp the different political and ideological stances held by various factions (e.g., the British Forces (BF), the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Unionist political parties). Simultaneously, affective empathy helps students emotionally engage with the personal toll of violence, loss, and division, fostering deeper emotional understanding and reflection on the impacts of the conflict of Northern Ireland.

Authenticity & Sensitivity in Narrative Framing

The Troubles focuses on the simulation of a highly sensitive and traumatic period in Northern Ireland's history, and its narrative structure reflects this complexity.

Narrative Cards

Released in 1993 and designed by Mark Herman, *We the People* is widely regarded as the first wargame to incorporate the card-driven (CDG) mechanic. In this system, playing cards not only supported but also influenced players' actions, evolving to depict key historical events in a narrative-driven manner. Since then, numerous board games have adopted this mechanic, including *Paths of Glory* and *A Distant Plain*.

The Troubles utilises the card-driven game (CDG) mechanic. Enshrined in *The Troubles* are 260 such cards known as Narrative Events, each of which has an accompanying expanded textual narrative in the accompanying Historical Playbook.

Play begins with an initial Scenario setup, of which there are eight. Each Scenario (named an ‘Epoch’) contains a specific series of Narrative Cards, each representing actual events within a timeline (see Figure 8). Mainly episodic in nature, these artefacts depict a day or succession of days in the historical timeline of Northern Ireland between 1964 and 1998, and each card has an accompanying summary of the actual event in the accompanying documentation. Ranging from the strategic and geopolitical to the tactical, domestic and deeply individualised and personal, each card helps to narrativise “the meaning of a violent past by positioning it as an episode of longer historical processes” (Bermudez, 2021, p. 279).

Most cards also provide the executing faction with instructions to create an effect in the current play session that is historically-accurate, or provide an ahistorical alternative as some Narrative Cards enable a feature known as a

Development or a Temporary Effect, which mimics an historical event, enables or disables a player's capabilities or changes their victory conditions consistent with the dynamics of the actual narrative permanently or until some temporary condition has been met or exhausted. (See Figure 7)

Utilising colour schemes and imagery that evoke the media of a particular time period can enhance emotional engagement, making players more likely to relate to historical experiences and cultivate affective empathy (see Figure 7). Hegarty elucidates on the authenticity of each of the 260 unique Narrative Cards present in *The Troubles*, many of which feature a still image derived from the medium of the time:

"The images are meant to evoke the main media of news in my youth - newspapers, with TV style and color coming later in the cards. They are meant to be rough and a bit fragmentary like many of my memories of the Troubles. I remember mistaking an image of bombed out Beirut for Belfast when I was still in primary school... Hard black/white contrast like the narratives of the sides" (D. Hegarty, 2023).



Figure 7. Narrative Card No. 153: Two IRA prisoners depicted undertaking the 'blank protests' in the Maze Prison

Source: from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

From the narrative card imagery, the paratextual elements — the rulebook and historical supplement — players are under no illusion that they are dealing with anything other than actual events, many of which involved atrocities and the fatalities of approximately two thousand innocent human beings.

NARRATIVE CARD RANGES							
Beginning	End	Title		Card #s	# Cards	Limited Duration (9.2) #Cards	# Developments
1964	1970	"Wars and rumours of wars...the end is still to come" (Matthew 24:6).	▲	1-61	62	20	5
1970	1974f	The Bloody Years	●	62-109	48	24	13
1974F	1974O	Sunningdale	◊	110-135	26	26	5
1974O	1979	Talks & H-Blocks	★	136-168	33	11	7
1979	1983	The Thatcher Years #1: Iron and Hunger	●	169-194	26	13	7
1983	1987	The Thatcher Years #2: Target Mainland	◆	195-213	19	9	5
1987	1992	The Thatcher Years #3: Anglo-Irish	◆	214-237	24	12	8
1992	1997	The Road to Peace	■	238-254	17	12	5
1997	1998	"They shall beat their swords into plow-shares" (Isiah 2:4)	▼	255-260	6	6	2
1964	1994	The Troubles		1-260	260	95	52

Figure 8. An overview of the nine Epochs into which the Narrative Cards are divided; 'The Troubles' is the use of all 260 cards played in chronological order

Source: Scenario table from Rulebook, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with

permission from Compass Games LLC.

Contextual Framing

With *The Troubles*, the historical context is embedded in the game through narrative event cards, mechanics and iconography that are derived from real-life political and social tensions. Furthermore, the paratextual elements — rulebook, historical supplement — provide additional narrative backstory and references to primary sources, which may be used (before, during, and after gameplay) as materials to prevent historical misconceptions. For example, electoral data pertaining to win ratios and parliamentary seat distribution between the Nationalist and Unionist political parties representing Northern Ireland in the United Kingdom were garnered from Ark Election data (see Figure 9) and used for each Scenario setup.

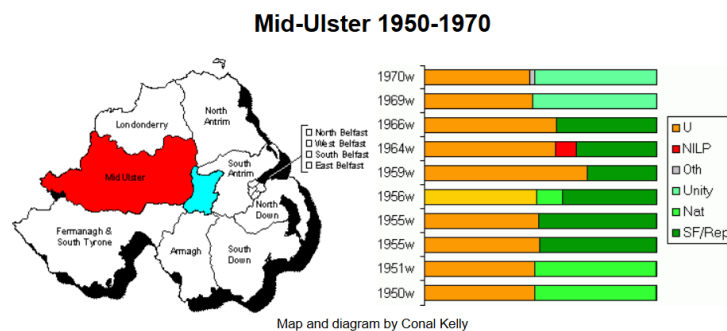


Figure 9. Northern Ireland Westminster Election Data

Source: ARK Northern Ireland 2025.

Primary Sources & Diverse Perspectives

Incorporated are multiple historical viewpoints to reflect the complexity of the period, avoiding binary representations (e.g. “good vs. evil”) and instead offer diverse viewpoints, including marginalised voices. *The Troubles* presents multiple factions (e.g., the British Army, Republican and Loyalist paramilitaries, and Nationalist and Unionist political parties), avoiding oversimplified depictions of conflict (Sisler, 2008). In this way the simulation should not impose a single “correct” interpretation but allow players to explore different perspectives.

Mechanics That Reinforce Historical Structures

The game mechanics reflect real political and historical constraints — e.g., asymmetric power structures, difficult moral decisions, and indirect as well as unintended consequences, forcing players to operate under different limitations, mimicking the real power imbalances (see Figure 10).



Figure 10. *The Troubles* models Northern Ireland's representation within the United Kingdom's Westminster Parliament

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Player Choice & Consequence

Many decisions in *The Troubles* carry weight, mimicking the uncertainty and stakes of real historical actors. Players should face difficult decisions with no easy solutions, mimicking historical dilemmas, with players forced to deal with the consequences.

Tension & Conflict Representation

Instead of purely focusing on direct combat, there is an emphasis on political manoeuvrings, societal pressures, or ethical dilemmas to capture both the period's domestic and international complexity.



Figure 11. International

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Figure 11 highlights the arms networks that supplied both the IRA and Loyalist paramilitary organisations included the Republic of Ireland and United States of America, both of which were instrumental in the signing of the Good Friday Agreement and the cessation of violence. This area of the simulation allows both paramilitary factions to spread their terror beyond Northern Ireland.

Role-Playing & Perspective-Taking

Diverse Player Roles

Players step into different perspectives (e.g., political activists, politicians, paramilitaries, security forces) rather than reducing the conflict to binary factions. Games such as *The Troubles* should encourage players to understand the motivations and constraints of historical actors. Players take on different roles that mirror the complex decision-making of historical actors rather than reducing the conflict to a military game of attrition. Equipped with actions that allow them to kill or bomb, so too are they similarly imbued with the ability to support political progress, enact ceasefires and engage in a peace process.

Moral Ambiguity

Presented scenarios have no clear “right” answer, reflecting the ethical complexities of historical events. These force players to reflect on historical decision-making, to weigh short-term gains against long-term consequences both for themselves and the other participants.

Empathy Building through Mechanics

Mechanics such as constrained decision-making, resource scarcity, or moral dilemmas to immerse players in the historical context. Elements of the game system respond to player choices in ways that highlight real historical consequences — alterations to the movement within the map; affecting the turn-taking mechanism to demonstrate power imbalances; a Random Event Chit (REC) mechanism to simulate the random nature of paramilitary attacks.

Unlike traditional war games where civilians are often an afterthought — or simply omitted — *The Troubles* places them at the centre of the conflict. Civilians and non-combatants play a role, reinforcing that the conflict impacted more than just military factions, with imprisoned and fatalities in clear sight on the playing area and having impact on victory conditions. This forces players to consider how their actions affect not just military goals, but also the lives of ordinary people — enhancing empathy by requiring engagement with

non-combatants' experiences.

Avoiding 'Gamification' of Tragedy

Respectful Representation of Violence & Trauma

The design of *The Troubles* avoids making suffering a mere game mechanic; rather than glorifying or abstracting violence (Robinson, 2012), games should focus on its impact on individuals and communities. The game does not trivialise violence; instead, it explores its political and social ramifications, ensuring that suffering and conflict are contextualised rather than turned into abstract resources.

Non-Traditional Win Conditions

Rather than a simple victory/loss system, it considers goals like negotiation, compromise, or reconciliation to reflect real historical stakes, or long-term social consequences. Players must navigate the lasting consequences of their actions.

The Visuals

Already well-established in the games industry for political and wargame-themed titles such as *1960: The Making of a President* (2007), *Labyrinth* (2010), *Red Flag Over Paris* (2021), Domhnall Hegarty produced all artwork for *The Troubles*, stating:

"I went with a color scheme that most reflects my memories of the troubles. Late Seventies through mid-Eighties, the time when I was least consciously aware that there was anything out of the norm with the state of things" (D. Hegarty, 2023).

The entire 'world' inhabited by the six factions is confined within a 22" by 34" playing space that depicts the Six Counties of Northern Ireland. It represents 14 thousand square kilometres of urban, open and rural land upon which thousands of lives were lost. It depicts the border between the North and the South of Ireland, which for some represents a scar remnant of hundreds of years of wrestling; for others a fragile, porous division between Home Rule and Unionism. The names on the map: Londonderry (Derry), Belfast, Westminster, Dublin, Enniskillen, Omagh. Small pinpricks on the map; huge reservoirs of hurt, once peaceful communities now forever grieving.

Civilians and Soldiers: Emotional and Intellectual Engagement

Civilians.

Cognitive Impact. The images depicting civilians who suffer because of political or military conflict may make players intellectually reflect on the disproportionate impact of war on non-combatants. These images may prompt players to consider the moral complexity of their decisions that affect innocent lives, especially in a highly polarised conflict like *The Troubles*. This helps to build cognitive empathy, as players may understand the historical consequences of conflict on vulnerable populations, a photograph or illustration of a family displaced from their home or injured civilians in a bombing. This visually highlights the human cost of war, shifting the focus from military strategy to the real-life consequences for families.



Figure 12. Civilian casualties and prisoners sit alongside British and RUC Forces, IRA and Loyalist factions

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Affective Impact. Civilians are often perceived as innocent bystanders, making images of their suffering particularly effective in triggering emotional empathy. Players are more likely to feel sorrow, compassion, or

guilt when confronted with images of civilians, especially those depicted in positions of vulnerability or suffering. These images can elicit an emotional response that may lead to players reassessing their decisions, especially if *they* have made choices that harm civilians in the game (see Figure 12). Players may experience guilt or empathy for the civilian populations affected by decisions made in the game, even if those decisions were motivated by strategic considerations either by themselves or by their fellow faction players.

Soldiers.

Cognitive Impact. Soldiers, the British Forces (BF) and the Ulster Defence Regiment (UDR), as well as the police force, the Royal Ulster Constabulary (RUC), as active participants in the conflict may prompt players to focus more on the tactical and strategic dimensions of the conflict. Images of soldiers can foster cognitive empathy by helping players understand the role of the military in a historical context. However, these images can also challenge players to think about the humanity of soldiers — how combatants are individuals caught up in a larger ideological or political struggle, which can foster understanding of the complex moral choices soldiers face. A photograph of soldiers in combat, or a soldier mourning the loss of comrades, are types of images that can help players understand the personal toll of warfare, as well as the human cost of following orders in a conflict.



Figure 13. Belfast West is in a state of ‘Civil Disorder’ as the result of the Loyalist faction activating an active service unit

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Affective Impact. Soldiers’ images may evoke emotional reactions such as sympathy or frustration. While soldiers are often seen as “combatants,” images that focus on the human side of soldiers — showing their emotions or vulnerabilities — can trigger affective empathy. For example, a soldier’s sorrow for the loss of a comrade can as a result of an engagement with a Loyalist paramilitary (see Figure 13) may prompt players to feel sympathy for that individual, even if they are part of the “enemy” faction. These images also help humanise soldiers, making them more than just “enemy combatants.” Players might feel compassion for soldiers who face moral dilemmas or stress from the realities of war, which can create a more nuanced emotional experience of the conflict.

Victims and Perpetrators: Moral Reflection and Empathy Development

Images of Victims (Both Civilian and Soldier).

Cognitive Impact. Victim images, particularly those of civilians, bring the player’s focus to the consequences of violence and its victims, forcing them to think critically about who suffers in a historical conflict. Images of victims — whether they are children, elderly people, or individuals caught in a bombing — focus the player’s attention on the broader social consequences of conflict, fostering understanding of the disproportionate impact that violence has on non-combatants. A depiction of a child or family grieving after an attack or displacement, which can deepen the player’s understanding of the cost of conflict on families and communities.

Affective Impact. Victim images elicit strong emotional responses. Players may feel anger, grief, or guilt upon encountering images of victims who have suffered due to violence or injustice.

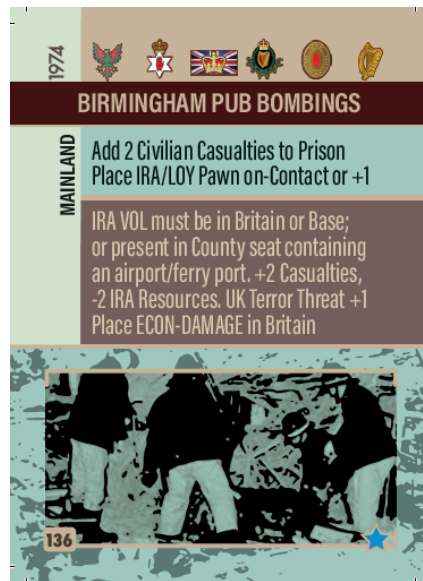


Figure 14. Narrative Card No. 136: Firemen attend the scene of the Birmingham Pub Bombing which claimed 21 lives, with over 180 others injured

Source: from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

These images (see Figure 14) humanise the consequences of conflict, creating a powerful emotional connection with the individuals who bear the brunt of it. This can lead to greater empathy for the marginalised and oppressed groups in the game. Sadness or compassion for victims, which might influence a player's moral decisions in-game, encouraging them to adopt a more empathetic approach to the characters they interact with.

Images of Perpetrators.

Cognitive Impact. Depicting perpetrators — whether they are soldiers or paramilitaries committing violence or political leaders responsible for decisions — can make players reflect on the role of power, authority (especially Britain's initial role, but subsequent reputation within the Nationalist communities), and ideology in conflicts. It challenges them to think about the moral and intellectual motivations behind actions that cause harm. These images may promote cognitive empathy by forcing players to reflect on the motivations, fears, and rationalisations that drive people to become perpetrators. A paramilitary or military faction (see Figure 15) giving an order that results in civilian casualties, which prompts players to think about the moral responsibility of those who instigate violence or oppression, and the context leading to this decision.

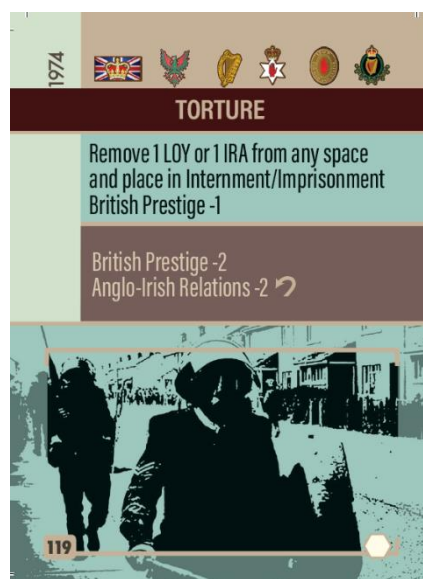


Figure 15. Narrative Card No. 119: RUC men brandish riot gear on an unknown street in Northern Ireland

Source: from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Affective Impact. When depicting perpetrators, the emotional response can be more complex. Players might feel anger or frustration toward individuals who cause harm, especially if these perpetrators seem to act without regard for human suffering. However, showing perpetrators in moments of vulnerability (e.g., a leader questioning their decisions) can foster a more complex emotional empathy, making players reflect on how even perpetrators may be humanised by their own internal conflicts. A feeling of resentment or disgust for the perpetrators of violence or oppression, but potentially also compassion if the images suggest the complexity of the perpetrators' own personal or ideological struggles.

Images of Paramilitaries/Terrorists: Ideological Commitment and Moral Dissonance.

Cognitive Impact. Paramilitary fighters or individuals labelled as “terrorists” in historical conflicts often operate outside conventional military structures, motivated by ideological, political, or social grievances. Images of such individuals can challenge players to think critically about the motivations behind armed resistance, exploring how groups justify violence as a means of achieving political goals. Unlike conventional soldiers, paramilitary members are often deeply embedded in local communities, blurring the lines between combatants and civilians. A photograph of a masked paramilitary member holding a weapon (see Figure 16) in an urban setting, or a propaganda poster promoting their cause.



Figure 16. Narrative Card No. 139: A female IRA volunteer on active duty

Source: from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

These images can encourage players to reflect on how ideology, community identity, and historical grievances shape participation in armed conflict. While players may initially view paramilitaries as purely violent actors, imagery that humanises these individuals — such as depicting them in moments of loss or imprisonment — can foster cognitive empathy by encouraging an understanding of their perspectives, even if players do not condone their actions.

Affective Impact. Images of paramilitaries or terrorists invariably provoke strong emotional reactions, including fear, anger, or discomfort. These figures are frequently associated with acts of violence directly or indirectly targeting civilians, making them more likely to be perceived as aggressors. However, when presented in a more personal or vulnerable light — such as through images showing the emotional strain of living a life of violence — players may experience a more conflicted emotional response (see Figures 17). A paramilitary member grieving over a fallen comrade, or one looking at a childhood photograph before carrying out an attack. These images may create a sense of unease, sadness, or even reluctant sympathy, as they reveal the personal costs of ideological violence.



Figure 17. Two IRA prisoners undertaken hunger strikes

Source: www.anphoblacht.com.

Players may feel both condemnation and pity for paramilitary fighters, particularly if the game explores how individuals are radicalised or coerced into joining such groups. This duality can create moral dissonance, forcing players to grapple with the complexities of labelling individuals as purely “villains” or “freedom fighters,” depending on perspective. It is exactly the elicitation of reflexive critical analysis that historically-structured boardgames bring to such topics.

The Physical Components

In *The Troubles*, physical components play a crucial role in fostering both cognitive and affective empathy by making historical events more tangible and emotionally efficacious. The game’s two map-boards, narrative cards, counters and wooden components, serve as material representations of the conflict, allowing players to engage with history in a tactile way.

The main playing area depicts Northern Ireland as well as other status tables; a smaller separate map depicts Belfast (see Figure 18).

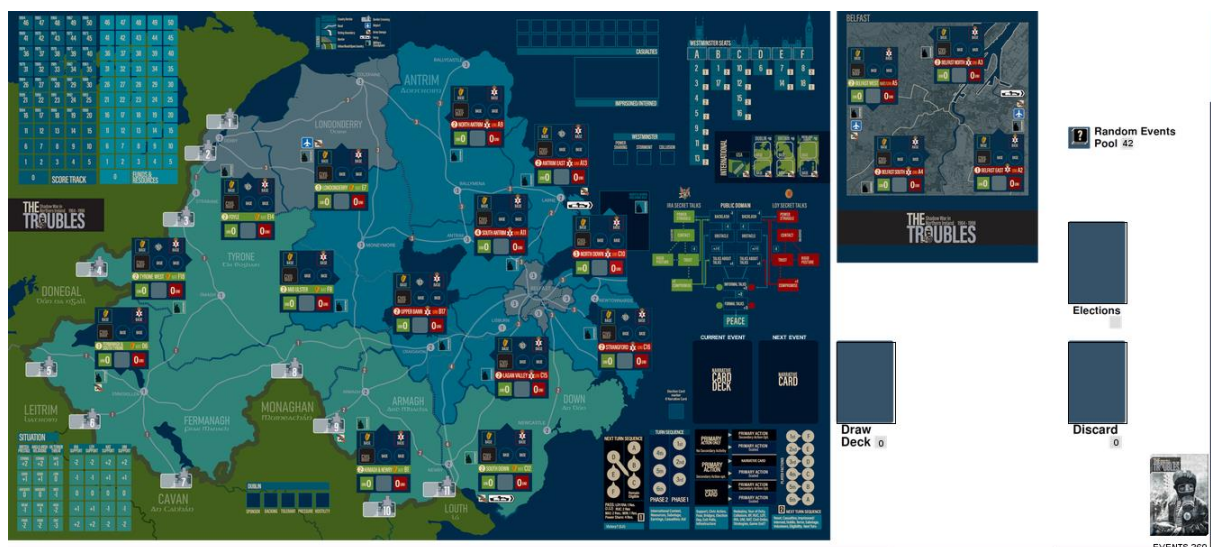


Figure 18. The Main Map and Belfast Insert

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

Every object in *The Troubles* provide a unique visual experience that enhances emotional engagement, as they

maintain a veridical resolution and density of information (Leinhardt in Paris, 2002) that cannot be replicated through photographs or drawings. This authenticity can evoke stronger feelings of empathy in viewers as they connect with the tangible aspects of history.

From a cognitive empathy perspective, handling physical components — such as moving wooden cubes or octagons, placing military checkpoint tokens, or managing resources and funds — encourages players to think critically about historical constraints and decision-making. The act of positioning figures or drawing narrative event cards helps players grasp the complex interplay of geopolitical strategy, violence, and community resilience, making the conflict’s historical dynamics more comprehensible.

In terms of affective empathy, the materiality of the game reinforces emotional engagement. The removal of character pieces due to violence, the destruction of locations on the board, or the deterioration of community stability through card mechanics can evoke a sense of loss and grief. The physical interaction with these elements makes the human cost of the conflict more immediate and personal.

Additionally, the game’s ethical dimension is heightened by its physical components. Players may face moral dilemmas when choosing how to allocate limited resources, deciding the fate of civilians, or witnessing the escalation of violence through game mechanics. The tangible nature of these choices adds weight to their consequences, prompting deeper reflection on the real-world impact of similar historical events.

Facilitating Reflection and Discussion

The discourse that occurs during and after engagement in any simulated activity is as integral to the design as are the physical components and the mechanics:

“game design should start with the place where the participants are going to learn, that is, with the debriefing. At the very least, the debriefing should be a design consideration right from the start” (Crookall, 2010, p. 908).

Debriefing Mechanisms.

HSBGs like *The Troubles* should offer mid- and post-game discussions, reflection prompts, or companion materials to encourage critical thinking about historical empathy. Players should be encouraged to discuss their experiences and compare them to historical realities; reflect on historical events and how different perspectives shaped the conflict.

Scaffolded Learning.

HSBGs should be part of a broader learning framework, including supplementary materials and discussion guides. While primarily a board game, *The Troubles* can be used as an educational tool to foster discussions on historical memory, to explore how history is remembered and interpreted differently.

5. Discussion

Comparative Analysis with Other Games

To highlight *The Troubles’* approach, it’s useful to compare it to other historical games that tackle similar themes.

Table 1.

Game	Historical Setting	Approach to Narrative & Empathy	Comparison to <i>The Troubles</i>
<i>Twilight Struggle</i>	Cold War (1945–1991)	Geopolitical strategy, limited personal empathy	Focuses on high-level politics, lacks personal narratives seen in <i>The Troubles</i> .
<i>Labyrinth: The War on Terror</i>	Post-9/11 Global Conflict	Counterinsurgency mechanics, ideological struggle	Uses asymmetry like <i>The Troubles</i> , but focuses on U.S. vs. Islamic insurgency.
<i>This War of Mine</i>	Civilian perspective in war	Survival-based, highly affective empathy	More focused on civilian suffering, whereas <i>The Troubles</i> balances combatants & civilians.
<i>Freedom: The Underground Railroad</i>	Slavery in the U.S. (19th century)	Players take on abolitionist roles, high affective empathy	Like <i>The Troubles</i> , forces moral choices, but focuses on activism rather than conflict.
<i>Pax Pamir</i>	Great Game in	Players shift loyalties between	Similar asymmetry & political

	19th-Century Afghanistan	factions	negotiation, but focuses on colonial power struggles.
<i>Wir Sind Das Volk!</i>	Divided Germany (1945–1989)	Economic and social struggles between East & West Germany, structural empathy	Shares an asymmetrical dynamic with <i>The Troubles</i> , but focuses on internal tensions within a divided nation.
<i>1979: Revolution in Iran</i>	Iranian Revolution (1979)	Story-driven, personal choices, strong affective empathy	Like <i>The Troubles</i> , it emphasises individual perspectives in a broader historical conflict, but with a more cinematic and linear approach.

Similarities and Differences

Compared to traditional war games (*Twilight Struggle*, *Labyrinth*), *The Troubles* humanises history more, focusing not just on grand strategy but also on the personal and emotional impact of conflict. Conversely, civilian-focused games (*This War of Mine*), *The Troubles* does not solely focus on civilians but balances military, political, and social perspectives, making it more comprehensive. *The Troubles*, in depicting social and political struggle, presents both oppressors and insurgents, rather than focusing on one side of a struggle. Factions are equipped with actions that are both strategic and tactical, aimed at destruction or peaceful negotiation, allowing geopolitical and domestic narratives to be simultaneously woven into an emerging co-constructed personal and collective narrative (Neitzel quoted in Raessens and Goldstein, 2011).

Implications

For Designers

Narrative Complexity. Games should provide rich, multi-layered narratives that offer a variety of perspectives as “narratives that de-normalize violence expose the agency and responsibility of different actors, on different sides of a conflict” (Bermudez, 2021, p. 282) The moral dilemmas presented should force players to reflect not only on the outcomes of their decisions but also on the human cost of these decisions, which helps build both cognitive and affective empathy.

Asymmetrical Gameplay. The use of asymmetry in gameplay, where players take on roles with different objectives and challenges, is essential in helping players understand the diverse perspectives within a conflict. Game designers should continue to develop mechanics that encourage players to inhabit the personas of different individuals affected by the historical event. The use of colour schemes and imagery that reflect the media of a specific period can deepen emotional engagement, making players more likely to connect with the experiences of others and develop affective empathy. Sensitively-deployed graphics with non-gratuitous imagery would help “to mitigate some of the weight of the subject matter” (Juil, 2013).

Emotional Engagement Mechanics. Designers should embed mechanics that allow players to connect emotionally with the game’s period-appropriate characters and situations. This could involve using dynamic, context-sensitive events, arresting narrative card imagery, and which carry historical and ahistorical consequences that highlight the emotional stakes of the conflict being modelled. Visual representations in games or educational settings can evoke emotional responses that resonate with players’ memories and perceptions, enhancing their ability to empathise with characters and situations presented in the narrative.

Player Agency and Consequences. Players should be provided with realistic and meaningful choices and foregrounding the consequences of their actions can amplify both cognitive and affective empathy. Game designers should ensure that decisions have both temporary and long-term impacts that affect both the player’s understanding of the conflict and their emotional connection to it, which authentically mimics the temporal progression of the events being simulated.

By considering these design elements, game developers can create experiences that are not only engaging but also serve as powerful tools for fostering empathy in players, helping them navigate the emotional and intellectual complexities of historical (and ahistorical) events.

For Education

Incorporating educational elements like fact-based content, historical context, and post-game discussions can enhance the empathy-building potential of the HSBGs. Game designers can work with educators to include built-in reflection questions or discussion prompts to encourage deeper engagement with the history being portrayed.

Use of *The Troubles* in Classroom Settings

Pedagogical Strategies. To maximise the potential for cognitive and affective empathy, educators should employ strategies that deepen students' engagement with both the emotional and intellectual dimensions of the game. Some effective strategies might include:

- **Debriefing Sessions.** After playing, facilitating class discussions where students can reflect on their choices and the emotional impact of the game. Educators can ask students to reflect on how they felt when making difficult decisions or when witnessing the consequences of their actions. These discussions could centre on the differences between cognitive and affective empathy, helping students articulate the emotional and intellectual aspects of their experience.
- **Role Play and Perspective-Taking.** Pairing game sessions with structured role-playing exercises, where students must assume the perspective of a specific faction or individual (e.g., an Irish civilian or a British soldier), can enhance their ability to understand the conflict from multiple viewpoints. This allows students to further immerse themselves in the game's complex moral and ethical dilemmas.
- **Journaling and Reflection.** Encouraging students to keep journals or reflective essays after playing the game can help them process their emotional responses (affective empathy) and analyse the strategic decisions they made (cognitive empathy). These reflective exercises would prompt deeper thinking on how historical events can impact individuals on both an emotional and intellectual level.
- **Integrating Media and Context.** To provide students with a broader understanding of *The Troubles'* historical context, educators can incorporate documentaries, primary sources, and other educational media alongside gameplay. This enriches students' knowledge base and facilitates a more nuanced engagement with the game's content.

Narrative

Ultimately, *The Troubles* demonstrates that historical board games (HBGs) must integrate narrative into their mechanics to be effective tools for historical empathy, and that historically-structured boardgames (HSBGs) are a progression of this medium. Such games excel by:

- blending strategy with emotional weight: players are not just making strategic moves but are also emotionally invested in the consequences of those moves;
- encouraging perspective-taking: through asymmetrical mechanics, players adopt the perspective of real historical actors, experiencing their constraints and motivations;
- emphasising the human cost: rather than glorifying violence, the game forces players to reckon with its moral and social repercussions.

By achieving both cognitive and affective empathy, *The Troubles* serves as a powerful model for how board games can deepen understanding of history beyond textbooks, where we “think of history pedagogy not in relation to knowledge as a thing made but to knowledge in the making” (Ellsworth, 2005, as cited in Butler, 2013).



Figure 19. Narrative Card No. 260 marks the formal cessation of the violence of the Troubles in Northern Ireland

Source: VASSAL, from *The Troubles: Shadow War in Northern Ireland*. Reprinted with permission from Compass Games LLC.

The holistic collection of features available from the objects of *The Troubles*, such as textures, colours and imagery, contributes to a more immersive experience, allowing individuals to empathise with the historical context and the people associated with those objects.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the efficacy of historically-structured boardgames (HSBGs) and their ability to support the development of affective historical empathy in their players.

Through the incorporation of historical storytelling and visual representations, HSBGs bring to attention often overlooked facets of history, like paramilitary violence or ideological tensions, forcing players to engage with historical complexity and difficult moral dilemmas. HSBGs, by fostering empathy and affective learning, create emotional connections by placing players in the shoes of individuals affected by historical events, making marginalised histories personally relevant. They expose the emotional consequences of war on civilians, offering an experience beyond traditional military-centric, attrition-focused narratives.

Promoting active historical inquiry and critical thinking through experiential learning and agency in decision-making, HSBGs transform history into a dynamic, contested field, requiring players to engage with ethical dilemmas and historical inquiry. Rather than passive learning, players analyse evidence and motivations, actively questioning dominant narratives and understanding history as a multifaceted process. Through co-constructed interactive storytelling, HSBGs provide opportunities for immersive learning, allowing players to make historical decisions with real-world consequences. This visceral approach leads to deeper understanding and personal investment in historical conflicts, offering insights beyond what textbooks can provide.

Acknowledgements

This research is dedicated to those who were directly and indirectly affected by the Troubles in Northern Ireland. I acknowledge the immense suffering and trauma experienced by individuals, families, and communities during this challenging period. I extend my deepest sympathy and respect to those who lost loved ones, endured hardship, or were impacted by the violence, conflict, and division.

I am grateful to the survivors, witnesses, and individuals who shared their stories and experiences, often under difficult circumstances, for the purpose of this research. Their courage and resilience in the face of adversity have profoundly shaped this work.

This research aims to contribute to the ongoing efforts of understanding and healing, and I hope it offers a small part in the broader dialogue of reconciliation and peace.

I would like to express my deepest gratitude to Liz Boyle and Murray Leith for their invaluable guidance, support, and encouragement throughout the course of this research. I also wish to thank Thomas Ambrosio for his assistance and for his invaluable work on historically-structured boardgames (HSBGs).

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