

20 Years After

Pardieu! j'en porte les marques, de notre amitié: trois coups d'épée!... (By Jove, I bear the marks of our friendship: three knife stabs!...) Rochefort, à d'Artagnan.

My first World Diplomacy Convention (WDC) was in the summer of 2006 in Berlin. As a new player who knew almost no one in the hobby, I was thrilled to meet all the luminaries I had only heard about. To my astonishment, I ended up winning the entire tournament. This victory marked the beginning of my long history of playing Diplomacy and attending World DipCon events. Nearly twenty years later, I find myself reflecting on my Diplomacy journey. Much like in Dumas' novel, I got to meet in Varedo many of the "friends" I have made along the way.

WDC, established in 1988 and held annually since 1994, holds a significant place in the Diplomacy community. This achievement owes much to the dedication of countless volunteers. I'd like to extend my gratitude to the organizers of the three WDCs that allowed the hobby to restart post-COVID: Dave Maletsky and the Carnage team for Dover 2022, Lei and Andrew Goff for Bangkok 2023, and Davide Cleopadre and his team for Varedo 2024. Without their hard work and commitment, WDC would not be possible.

WDC also fosters a camaraderie among past winners. Winning a WDC is not just an honor; it also carries the responsibility to participate in future conventions, ensuring the tradition remains vibrant. At Varedo, notable figures like Chris Brand, donning his World Champion robe, and Jamal, sporting his boxing shorts, stood out for their flair and panache. As Cyrano de Bergerac might say, "One does not lightly abdicate the honor to serve as a target to the enemy."

To name all the friends I met over the weekend would take too long, but I was delighted to talk to Fabian after almost 10 years, to see Yann Clouet back in tournament play, and to see all the usual suspects of the European hobby that I had not seen in a while: Toby, Gihan, Rene, Alex, Cyrille, Vincent Reulet, just to name a few.

I was also delighted to see Vincent Dias, who was part of my first online Diplomacy team back in France and one of my roommates during the Berlin WDC. He reminded me of the motto from that tournament: "Jouer sale et Woland, il est méchant." While the true essence is lost in translation, it roughly means, "Play dirty and Woland [my online nickname] is a nasty guy." It felt like a nostalgic return to the beginnings: I was back to the basics.

Board of Death

Of course, you're eager to hear about my games and how I managed to clinch the WDC title among 65 participants. In round one, I drew Russia on the "Board of Death," facing three other past WDC winners: Chris Brand in England, Andrew Goff in Turkey, and Dan Lester in Italy. It didn't start well. Playing Russia with a 15-minute deadline was challenging; I constantly felt pressed for time and even botched a convoy order. In the final turn, I stole a center in Munich and attempted to take Norway from Chris Brand by anticipating a potential self-bounce in SWE and providing unwanted support. It didn't work, but I felt my instincts beginning to kick in. It would have been a dirty swindle, precisely the kind of move I was aiming for!

When You Can't Beat Them...

In round two, I played as Italy. Austria seemed apprehensive and kept their fleet in Trieste, indicating a potential alliance with Turkey. When you can't break them up, join them. I proposed to Austria and Turkey that if I could take Greece, I'd build another fleet and head west. When Austria moved towards Germany, I seized Trieste, then Serbia, and finally Vienna. Collaborating with Geoff Mize in Turkey, we eliminated Austria, and due to some "inexplicable misunderstandings," I ended up taking a couple of his centers as well. Nasty stuff! I finished with 11 centers, while Peter McNamara had 9 as England.

Fortune Favors the Dirty

In round three, I played as France. Given my strong performance in the previous rounds, a decent result would likely secure my spot on the top board. So, I decided to play dirty from the start, forming a Western Triple with Alex Lebedev in England and Zoe Cameron in Germany. The game progressed smoothly, but Wes Ketchum in Austria was gaining ground through a strong AT alliance. In 1906, I approached Alex about potentially taking Holland from Germany. He wasn't too enthusiastic about the idea, so I suggested we bounce in Holland instead. He looked at me for a minute before admitting that he planned to take Sweden and Denmark from Germany this turn. Alex was even dirtier than I was! I took HOL, topped the board with 8 centers, and qualified for the top board, leading the tournament.

No Rest for the Dirty

The top board started well with me picking France once more. England went to Yann Clouet (2004 WDC winner), Germany to reigning champion Jamal Blakkarly, Italy to Peter McNamara, Austria to Ruben Sanchez, Turkey to Sacha Massicard, and Russia to Fabian Straub. The game initially went smoothly for me. In Spring 1902, Russia attacked England and took Norway. In the fall, Germany took Sweden from Russia, and it didn't seem to be an agreed move. By 1903, all my neighbors were embroiled in conflicts, with their units moving away from me, allowing me to grow. It seemed like I was cruising to victory with a clean game.

However, Peter McNamara had other plans. He picked up the pace and rallied the board, making it a competitive game. Yann and Jamal tested my strategy, and one slip could have been fatal. In Spring 1908, I played a clever trick on Peter by allowing his fleet to move to Tunis, which enabled a Turkish fleet to move to the Ionian Sea and take Naples unopposed on the last turn. This maneuver should have secured my victory.

Despite Fabian and Jamal rooting for Peter, Ruben and Sacha were content to see me win. If Ruben had played Budapest to Serbia on the last turn, the game would have been mine, and I assumed that's what he would do. Relaxing too early, I let Peter negotiate some sort of deal with Russia, Austria, and Turkey to keep Ruben alive. This made no sense, but Peter convinced them to make moves that created a guessing game with Turkey for a chance to beat me. Fortunately for me, Peter guessed wrong, and I ended up winning the tournament. I would have felt utterly miserable, but that would have been totally deserved for Peter, clinching the win on such a dirty swindle at the end. And, as you must guess, this is a huge compliment coming from me!

The final turn's orders as drawn up on DBN's video coverage of the game. Peter McNamara (Italy) falls one dot short of repeat champion Nicolas Sahuguet (France). Closing Remarks So, is my advice to everyone just to play dirty? Not exactly. What I advocate is playing to win as unapologetically as possible. You don't go to WDC to make friends. Or rather, you don't make friends by playing nice; you make friends by fighting as hard as you can—stabbing, grabbing, scheming—and then, once the game is over, revisiting the game over some tasty food and your beverage of choice. The competitive spirit and passion for the game are what bring us together and create long-lasting friendships.

Most players go through phases where they play a bit softer, preferring to avoid conflict, choosing to draw games early, or maintaining alliances longer than needed. I was glad to be reminded that sometimes you need to take matters into your own hands and go for glory, and that a bit of practice is needed to play this style of Diplomacy!

As for the future, the next WDC is scheduled to take place in San Francisco in April 2025. Adam and Siobhan are fantastic hosts, and the tournament promises to be a blast, both on and off the boards. If you still need a reason to attend, the best country awards are the cutest teddy bears you can imagine. So, I hope to see you there. Until then, stay safe and stab well.

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