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Roche, Helen

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ROLEPLAYING FASCISM?: *SECRET HITLER* AND THE POLITICIZING POTENTIAL OF A “LIGHT-WEIGHT” SOCIAL DEDUCTION GAME

Helen Roche

Abstract

This paper treats the social deduction game *Secret Hitler*, including the controversies surrounding its release and online discourses among its player communities, from a critical board-game studies perspective, situating its thesis within broader scholarly discussions around colonialism and historical trauma in contemporary hobby board games. Firstly, the game’s genesis, marketing and mobilisation, which has been used to implicitly justify Nazi “role play” and to marginalise those with reservations about the game’s theme and content, reveals significant continuities with previous white supremacist impulses within the board-gaming hobby in general. Secondly, analysis of online commentary on *Secret Hitler*, both in reviews, and on fora such as BoardGameGeek and Reddit, evinces striking similarities with many of the tropes and themes which Natàlia Lozano-Monterrubbio, Juan Luis Gonzalo-Iglesia, and Núria Araùna-Baró have identified as constitutive of online discourse around controversial colonialist boardgames. Using their analytical schema to parse the discourse around *Secret Hitler* displays this framework’s potential for far wider applicability in critical player studies. Finally, analyzing *Secret Hitler* and the debates surrounding its release and gameplay in detail proves definitively that even more “light-weight” types of analog games may still touch upon serious political and historical issues and shed light on the ways that board-gaming communities can be politicized.

Keywords

board games, social deduction games, *Secret Hitler*, light-weight games, player studies, postcolonial game studies, history, politics

Introduction

Recent work in analogue game studies has begun to acknowledge the negative as well as positive potentials of play in general, and contemporary hobby board-gaming in particular. More specifically, Aaron Trammell’s pioneering theorisation of play’s inherent toxicity, twinned with his in-depth

investigation of the white supremacism integral to the board-gaming hobby's mid-twentieth-century origins, provide a crucial framework for moving beyond a legitimacy focus on the more palatable, pro-social, and "progressive" aspects of analogue gaming.¹ In this connection, critical board-game scholarship employing a postcolonial studies perspective has also become increasingly prevalent in analogue game studies; indeed, a number of crucial early articles published in this journal have proved highly significant in shaping this emerging field.² More recent work, such as Mary Flanagan and Mikael Jakobsson's *Playing Oppression: The Legacy of Conquest and Empire in Colonialist Board Games* (2023), and Michał Mochocki's edited volume on *Heritage, Memory and Identity in Postcolonial Board Games* (2024), has also shown that contemporary board games can be heavily implicated in promulgating harmful stereotypes and whitewashing colonialist violence—despite the fact that "for some, it is surprising to see that games made of cardboard...can produce problematic themes and structures just as well as any media form."³

However, such critical analyses have tended to restrict themselves thus far to the "heavier" end of the spectrum of contemporary hobby board games, most notably "Eurogames" and wargames—while more "light-weight" entries into the board-gaming canon have received little attention, either in analogue game studies or in historical game studies.⁴ One might hazard an analogy here with the ways in which "hard-core" hegemonic PC and console games have long been centred as "real" games, and have therefore tended to dominate research in digital game studies, while other

¹ Aaron Trammell, *Repairing Play: A Black Phenomenology* (MIT Press, 2023); Aaron Trammell, *The Privilege of Play: A History of Hobby Games, Race, and Geek Culture* (New York University Press, 2023). For an emphasis on the positive nature of analogue game cultures, see e.g. Evan Torner, Aaron Trammell, and Emma Leigh Waldron, "Reinventing Analog Game Studies: Introductory Manifesto," *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 1 (2014), 1-5. The impulse to focus on positive aspects of games and gaming in order to bolster games' legitimacy as a field of scholarly research can also be seen in game studies more generally, where reactions to moral-panic-induced condemnations of digital games as violent or puerile (or both) have often been rebutted by affirmations of their potential as a force for good in manifold spheres—see e.g. Jane McGonigal, *Reality is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World*, (Penguin, 2011).

² Will Robinson, "Orientalism and Abstraction in Eurogames," *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 5 (2014), 55-63, <https://analoggamestudies.org/2014/12/orientalism-and-abstraction-in-eurogames/>; Greg Loring-Albright, "The First Nations of Catan: Practices in Critical Modification," *Analog Game Studies* 2, no. 7 (2015), 35-42, <https://analoggamestudies.org/2015/11/the-first-nations-of-catan-practices-in-critical-modification/>; Nancy Foasberg, "The Problematic Pleasures of Productivity and Efficiency in Goa and Navegador," *Analog Game Studies* 3, no. 1 (2016), 19-32, <https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/01/the-problematic-pleasures-of-productivity-and-efficiency-in-go-and-navegador/>; Antonnet Johnson, "Positionality and Performance: A Player's Encounter with the Lost Tribes of *Small World*," *Analog Game Studies* 3, no. 5 (2016), 105-17, <https://analoggamestudies.org/2016/09/positionality-and-performance-a-players-encounter-with-the-lost-tribes-of-small-world/>.

³ Mary Flanagan and Mikael Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression: The Legacy of Conquest and Empire in Colonialist Board Games* (MIT Press, 2023), quotation from p. 16; Michał Mochocki, ed., *Heritage, Memory and Identity in Postcolonial Board Games* (Routledge, 2024).

⁴ Examples include: Giaime Alonge, "Playing the Nazis: Political Implications in Analog Wargames," *Analog Game Studies* 7, no. 3 (2019), <https://analoggamestudies.org/2019/09/playing-the-nazis-political-implications-in-analog-wargames/>; Giaime Alonge and Riccardo Fassone, "Twilight Struggle, or: How We Stopped Worrying about the Hexagons," in *Rerolling Boardgames: Essays on Themes, Systems, Experiences and Ideologies*, eds. Douglas Brown and Esther MacCallum-Stewart (McFarland, 2020), 48-68; Dean Bowman, "Guilt Trips for the Cardboard Colonialists: The Function of Procedural Rhetoric and the Contact Zone in *Archipelago*," in the same volume, 144-60; Torben Quasdorf, "Turning Votes into Victory Points. Politics in Modern Board Games," *Gamevironments* 13 (*Democracy Dies Playfully. (Anti-)Democratic Ideas in and Around Video Games*, 2020), 103-37; Paul Booth, *Board Games as Media* (Bloomsbury, 2021); Thomas Ambrosio and Jonathan Ross, "Performing the Cold War through the 'The Best Board Game on the Planet': The Ludic Geopolitics of *Twilight Struggle*," *Geopolitics* 28, no. 2 (2023), 846-78; Thomas Ambrosio and Jonathan Ross, "The War on Terror beyond the Barrel of a Gun: The Procedural Rhetorics of the Boardgame *Labyrinth*," *Media, War & Conflict* 16, no. 4 (2023), 495-515; Thomas Ambrosio, "Boardgaming after the Fall of Kabul: Player and Designer (Re)engagement with *A Distant Plain*," *Rethinking History* 28, no. 3 (2024), 327-56; Jan Gonzalo-Iglesia, "Analog Simulation and the Indian Wars: Encountering the Other Through Board Wargames," *Games and Culture* 21, no. 3 (2024), 449-73; Maurice W. Suckling, *Paper Time Machines: Critical Game Design and Historical Board Games* (Routledge, 2025). On the Eurogame genre more generally, see Stewart Woods, *Eurogames: The Design, Culture and Play of Modern European Boardgames* (McFarland, 2012).

platforms and genres, such as mobile games, or so-called “walking simulators,” have often been deemed far less worthy of scholarly attention.⁵

This article aims to remedy this state of affairs by focusing squarely on a title which represents a far less “serious” genre—social deduction—and which has arguably achieved greater mass-market success than the majority of hobby board games: Mike Boxleiter, Tommy Maranges and Max Temkin’s *Secret Hitler* (2015).⁶ A hidden roles party-game in the tradition of *Mafia*, *Werewolf* and *The Resistance*, set during the demise of the Weimar Republic in 1932–1933, *Secret Hitler* divides its players into “liberal” and “fascist” factions, with one of the “fascist” players representing the treacherous “secret Hitler” hidden within their midst.

While *Secret Hitler*’s questionable premise, and its close proximity to the creators of the much-scorned and highly toxic mass-market card game *Cards Against Humanity*—the game was nurtured, co-designed and marketed by *Cards Against Humanity*’s CEO Max Temkin, and developed within the company’s studio space—might seem to mitigate against its being considered a worthy subject of serious scholarly inquiry, I would argue that it can provide a salient (or even salutary) case study for analogue game scholars and designers in a number of respects.⁷

Firstly, the game’s genesis, marketing and mobilisation, which has been used to implicitly justify Nazi “role play”, and to marginalise those with reservations about the game’s theme and content, reveals significant continuities with previous white supremacist impulses within the board-gaming hobby in general. From this perspective, the game arguably facilitates “unethical”, quasi-fascist play, despite its designers’ claim that it traffics in enduring moral lessons.

Secondly, analysis of online commentary on *Secret Hitler*, both in reviews, and on fora such as BoardGameGeek and Reddit, evinces striking similarities with many of the tropes and themes which Natàlia Lozano-Monterrubbio, Juan Luis Gonzalo-Iglesia and Núria Araüna-Baró have identified as constitutive of online discourse around controversial colonialist boardgames in their 2024 essay “No Meeples for *Scramble for Africa*: Online Debates on Playing Historical Trauma.”⁸ Using their analytical schema to parse the discourse around *Secret Hitler* displays this framework’s potential for wider applicability in critical player studies. Finally, analysing *Secret Hitler* and the debates surrounding its release and gameplay in detail proves definitively that even more “light-weight” types of analogue game may still touch upon serious political and historical issues, and shed light on the ways that board-gaming communities can be politicised.

In the sections which follow, I will begin by providing a brief introduction to *Secret Hitler*’s premise and gameplay and elucidating its connections with previous forms of marginalisation in analogue gaming, especially the continuities which it exhibits with earlier abetting of white supremacism and “playing Nazis” during the hobby’s history. The second half of the article will then move on to discourse analysis of player texts and online commentary on the game, following the schema provided by Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.* The conclusion brings the article to a close by outlining some

⁵ cf. Mia Consalvo and Christopher A. Paul, *Real Games: What’s Legitimate and What’s Not in Contemporary Videogames* (MIT Press, 2019).

⁶ Mike Boxleiter, Tommy Maranges, and Max Temkin, *Secret Hitler* (Goat, Wolf & Cabbage, 2016).

⁷ cf. Nick Statt, “With *Secret Hitler*, Cards Against Humanity’s Co-Working Space Becomes an Idea Machine,” *The Verge*, November 29, 2015. On the game’s toxicity, see e.g. Shut Up & Sit Down, “Review: *Cards Against Humanity*—And They Will Know Us by the Trail of the Op-Eds,” *shutupandsitdown.com*, May 7, 2015, <https://www.shutupandsitdown.com/review-cards-against-humanity/>.

⁸ Natàlia Lozano-Monterrubbio, Juan Luis Gonzalo-Iglesia, and Núria Araüna-Baró, “No Meeples for *Scramble for Africa*: Online Debates on Playing Historical Trauma,” in *Heritage, Memory and Identity in Postcolonial Board Games*, ed. Michał Mochocki (Routledge, 2024), 109–22.

of the ethical considerations at stake—including those pertaining to the game's design—and the broader ramifications of this type of politicised theming in a (popular) board game.

Playing Nazi, Playing "Fascist"

While "playing the Nazis" has long been a common phenomenon in wargames both digital and analogue (as Giaime Alonge and others have shown), in recent years, explicit designation of the German side as "Nazis" in any given World War II scenario has almost become anathema.⁹ Units fighting for the Third Reich may be designated as merely "German", or part of the "Axis", and swastika flags or insignia are edited out, usually to be replaced with the red, white and black German imperial flag or a similar placeholder. This squeamishness can often be ascribed to a desire on developers' and designers' part not to alienate German markets, where inclusion of swastikas in a game would normally fall foul of article §86a of the Federal Republic's penal code.¹⁰ Such games would usually steer clear of including Hitler as a playable character or faction leader, most likely for similar reasons—often settling for (slightly) less questionable figures such as Erwin Rommel and other Nazi generals (who were nevertheless extensively involved in the Third Reich's war crimes and atrocities).¹¹



Figure 1: "Liberal" and "Fascist" role cards. Photograph by the author.

From this perspective, *Secret Hitler* breaks at least one mould—it explicitly allows players to take on the role of Hitler himself, whilst still eschewing any specifically Nazified iconography. As previously mentioned, the two factions to which players are assigned are generically designated "liberal" and "fascist", rather than National Socialist, Communist, Social Democrat, or any of the plethora of

⁹ Alonge, "Playing the Nazis"; cf. Jeff Hayton, "Beyond Good and Evil: Nazis and the Supernatural in Video Games," in *Revisiting the "Nazi Occult": Histories, Realities, Legacies*, eds. Monica Black and Eric Kurlander (Boydell & Brewer, 2015), 248-69; Adam Chapman and Jonas Linderöth, "Exploring the Limits of Play: A Case Study of Representations of Nazism in Games," in *The Dark Side of Game Play: Controversial Issues in Playful Environments*, eds. Torill Elvira Mortensen, Jonas Linderöth and Ashley ML Brown (Routledge 2015), 137-53; Eugen Pfister, "'Man spielt nicht mit Hakenkreuzen!': Imaginations of the Holocaust and Crimes Against Humanity During World War II in Digital Games," in *Historia Ludens: The Playing Historian*, eds. Alexander von Lünen, Katherine J. Lewis, Benjamin Litherland and Pat Cullum (Routledge, 2019), 267-84.

¹⁰ *Deutsches Strafgesetzbuch*, §86a. HandyGames' *Through the Darkest of Times: A Historical Resistance Strategy Game* (2020) has proved a recent exception to this rule, with the swastika's use within the game being deemed sufficiently artistic and educational to be legally permitted by the German federal court; <https://usk.de/erstes-spiel-unter-beruecksichtigung-der-sozialadaequanz-gekennzeichnet>; cf. Colin Campbell, "Through the Darkest of Times is a Game about Nazis, but You Won't Get to Shoot Them," *Polygon*, June 12, 2019, <https://www.polygon.com/e3/2019/6/12/18662206/through-the-darkest-of-times-nazis-e3-2019-preview-windows-pc/>.

¹¹ cf. Chapman and Linderöth, "Exploring the Limits."

splinter parties which existed at the end of the Weimar Republic. What is more, all of the “fascist” role cards (including the “Hitler” card) display unpleasant-looking cartoon lizard characters rather than normal people, while “liberals” are portrayed as a range of ordinary humans in caricature (see Figure 1 above).

In similar vein, the game’s box art, “election tracker” boards, and “policy” cards depict skulls, snakes, and other imagery evocative of generalised evil, with no hint of swastikas or specifically National Socialist iconography (see Figure 2 and Figure 3).

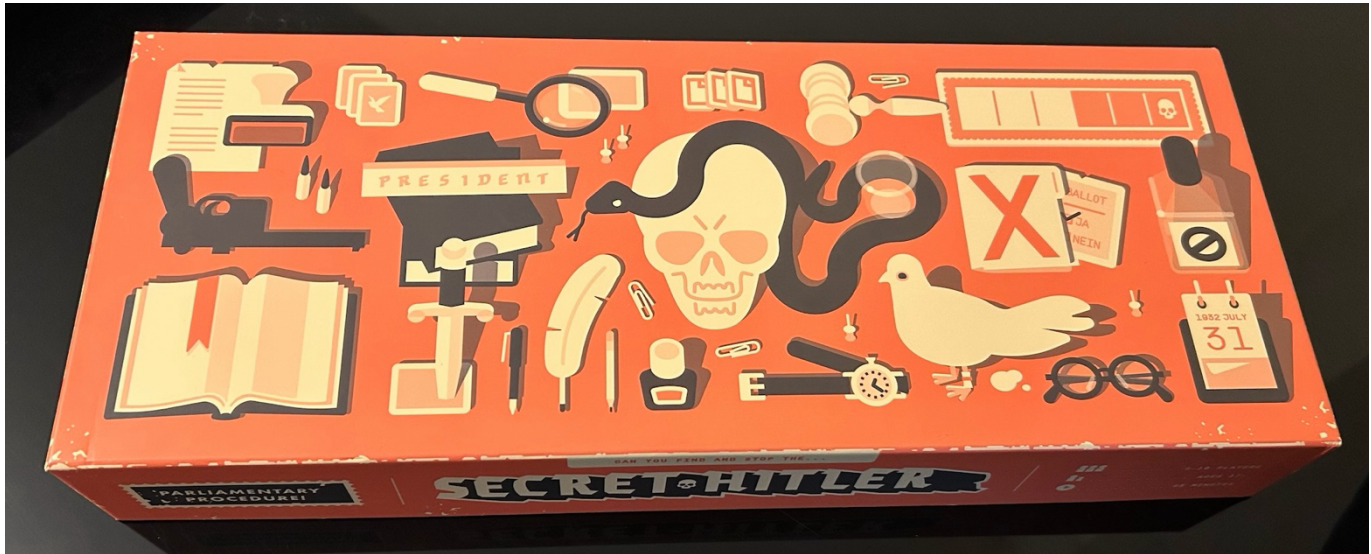


Figure 2: Box art for *Secret Hitler*. Photograph by the author.

While some commentators took issue with the game’s lack of historical “accuracy” in this regard, ultimately, *Secret Hitler* qua social deduction game had to divide its players into two coherent factions, analogous to villagers and werewolves in *Werewolf* variants, or spies and resistance members in *The Resistance*. The fascists’ overall aim within the game is either to pass a sufficient number of fascist policies, or to get the Hitler role-player elected as “Chancellor”. Meanwhile, the liberals’ aim is either to pass enough liberal policies, or to assassinate the Hitler role-player. The fascists know right from the start exactly who is on which team, while the liberals have no clue as to what anyone else’s role might be.¹²

As the game progresses, the role of “President” passes around the table; in the “election” phase of each round, the current President nominates another player to be Chancellor, with all players voting on whether they agree with the nomination. If the nominated Chancellor is elected, they form a “government” with the President and start the “legislative session” phase. The President then takes

¹² At higher player counts, the ‘Hitler’ player is also unaware of the identity of the other ‘fascist’ players. N.B. From here on, I will only place each piece of game terminology in inverted commas the first time it appears, to avoid typographical fussiness. A full version of the rulebook can be found here: https://www.secrethitler.com/assets/Secret_Hitler_Rules.pdf (last accessed 24 October 2025). The description given in the next three paragraphs draws on my account of the game in my forthcoming article ‘*Secret Hitler* and the Ghosts of Weimar: A Ludic Case Study in “Hitlersploitation”’, *Rethinking History* (online first, 2026), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642529.2026.2727380>, which considers various aspects of the game and its reception from a cultural history / historical game studies perspective.

three cards, sight unseen, from the top of a card deck of generic “policies” which are labelled as either “liberal” or “fascist” (see Fig. 3, right), looks at these in secret, and hands two to the Chancellor, discarding the third. The Chancellor likewise looks at the cards that the President has handed them in secret, discards one, and “enacts” the remaining policy by placing it on the corresponding liberal or fascist policy track (see Figure 3, centre).



Figure 3: Game components for *Secret Hitler*. Photograph by the author.

If three prospective governments in a row are rejected by the players in the election phase, meanwhile, the rules state that “the country is thrown into chaos,” and the first card on top of the policy deck is revealed and enacted automatically. Since there are almost twice as many fascist policies in the deck as there are liberal policies, this mechanic ostensibly simulates the idea that fascists benefit most from throwing the parliamentary order into turmoil and sowing distrust, whereas liberals need to work together and establish firm bonds of trust against all odds in order effectively to counter the threat of fascism.

Hence, there are two reasons why liberals might end up passing fascist policies (and thereby risk coming under suspicion from their fellow liberals). Firstly, the unequal ratio of policies in the deck means that it is at least conceivable that the President and Chancellor could simply have picked up a bad run of cards, rather than being fascists in disguise. Secondly, in order to gain special (viz. authoritarian) powers which allow players to covertly check the political identity of another player, or even to assassinate them out-right, a certain number of fascist policies have to be passed. If they want the power to "assassinate" the Hitler role-player, then, it might be in liberals' interest to allow fascist policies to be passed, just so that they can use extra-legal means to end the game in their favour. Here, the game's procedural rhetoric suggests that liberal, democratic states might potentially need to use illiberal methods to prevent the rise of political forces which could overthrow democracy.

While no one could claim that *Secret Hitler's* gameplay offers a plausible simulation of the rise of Nazism and the fall of the Weimar Republic—indeed, its premise was avowedly inspired by designer Mike Boxleiter's binge-watching the HBO series *Band of Brothers*—the timing of its crowdfunding campaign, coinciding with the Republican primaries, gave the designers a golden opportunity literally to cash in on rising fears of a Trump presidency in 2016.¹³ The game ultimately raised over 2,500% of its original Kickstarter goal, cashing out at \$1,479,046, and Temkin *et al.* deployed widespread societal anxieties about an analogous authoritarian turn in the US as an astute marketing tool.¹⁴ In numerous press interviews, podcasts and social media posts, the designers plugged the game's potential to teach players about the dangers of resurgent fascism.¹⁵ Following Trump's election, Temkin even sent a copy of the game to every single White House senator, along with a letter urging representatives to consider the historical parallels between *Secret Hitler's* setting and the Trump presidency.¹⁶ Some pundits subsequently bought into this rhetoric, penning op-eds and articles on the game's salutary historical lessons for the present day.¹⁷

However, while the game's mechanics undoubtedly have the *potential* to make players think about the political compromises which might lead a polity down the slippery slope towards

¹³ On the game's inspiration, see Mike Boxleiter, "Secret Hitler: Designing Conflict and High-Tension Moments," *GDC Vault*, 2017, <https://gdcvault.com/play/1024248/Board-Game-Design-Day-Secret>; Jonah Engel Bromwich, "Secret Hitler, a Game that Simulated Fascism's Rise, Becomes a Hit," *New York Times*, September 5, 2017.

¹⁴ Toby Tabachnick, "Secret Hitler, A Game of Intrigue and Deception, but Not for Everyone," *Pittsburgh Jewish Chronicle*, December 28, 2016; Sam Desatoff, "Secret Hitler is Painfully Relevant," *Unwinnable*, September 6, 2017.

¹⁵ e.g. Taylor Hartz, "Secret Hitler Board Game an Unlikely Hit for Chicago Gamemakers," *Chicago Sun Times*, September 16, 2017; Annie Vainshtein, "Secret Hitler, Board Game about Fascism, Gaining in Popularity," *SFGate*, September 5, 2017; Susannah Kemp, "Podculture: Secret Hitler, Monopoly and the Historical Board Game," *The Daily Northwestern*, April 14, 2021. Given Temkin's track record, and the toxic culture which co-workers describe his creating at the *Cards Against Humanity* studios (including abetting racism and misogyny, and whitewashing rape allegations), we might also wish to take his protestations concerning the game's moralising imperatives with a modicum of scepticism—cf. Anita Sarkeesian, "Ending My Relationship with *Cards Against Humanity* and Max Temkin," *Medium*, June 8, 2020, <https://anitasarkeesian.medium.com/ending-my-relationship-with-cards-against-humanity-and-max-temkin-2f25108dfef4>; Nicole Carpenter, "Former Employees Accuse *Cards Against Humanity* of a Racist and Sexist Office Culture: Co-founder Max Temkin Has Stepped Down Following These Accusations," *Polygon*, June 23, 2020, <https://www.polygon.com/2020/6/23/21300435/cards-against-humanity-max-temkin-report>; Nicolas Carter, "How to Know You're Not Insane (And How a *Cards Against Humanity* Staff Writer Was Fired.)," *Medium*, June 25, 2020, <https://medium.com/@nicolas.j.carter/how-to-know-youre-not-insane-and-how-a-cards-against-humanity-staff-writer-was-fired-40fe07fbbfe4>.

¹⁶ Rebecca Cullers, "Cards Against Humanity's Founder Sent His New Game, about Hitler's Enablers, to All 100 U.S. Senators," *Adweek*, February 28, 2017, <https://www.adweek.com/creativity/cards-against-humanitys-founder-sent-his-new-game-about-hitlers-enablers-to-all-100-u-s-senators/>.

¹⁷ e.g. Ivan Krastev, "Secret Hitler and the Risks of Real-life Liberal Confusion: How a Popular Board Game that Pits Two Teams Against One Another Has Lessons for Democracies," *Financial Times*, August 28, 2023; Lothar Gorris and Tobias Rapp, "Finding the Secret Hitler: How Fascism Begins," *Der Spiegel*, August 22, 2024.

authoritarianism,¹⁸ reviews and player accounts suggest that the majority of players either treated the game in a fairly neutral fashion, as a twist on previous iterations in the social deduction genre such as *The Resistance: Avalon*, or that, in some cases, they actually leaned in to the titillating potential of fascist role-play. Although *Secret Hitler* could easily have been tweaked slightly to neutralise this aspect—even just by changing the title to “Secret Dictator” (*vel sim.*) and making the German 1930s setting a little less explicit—it was arguably the edgy appeal of “fascinating fascism” and the Hitler “brand” that made the game such a runaway success.¹⁹ Even reviewers in respected outlets such as *Forbes* reported players “getting into character” by doing Hitler salutes, while online commentators noted that they had often seen winning “fascist” teams leaping up and yelling “Heil Hitler!” in similar vein.²⁰ Other accounts noted the preponderance of relevant chats on Tabletop Simulator being flooded with Nazi-related trash-talk and antisemitic “jokes”.²¹ If *Secret Hitler* had ever been intended as a tool for inculcating resistance to fascism, then the ease with which it could facilitate “playing Nazi” would have belied its usefulness in this regard.

And yet, such developments might not seem so surprising if we consider the long pedigree of Nazi roleplay within the board-gaming hobby in historical terms. Readers need only turn to Giaime Alonge’s essay “Playing the Nazis: Political Implications in Analog Wargames” in Volume 7 of this journal to find evidence of wargamers’ identification with Nazi subjects. Indeed, during the 1960s–1970s, it was not uncommon to find advertisements in the “Opponents Wanted” section of Avalon Hill’s wargaming magazine *The General* containing appeals such as “The Fuehrer desires a good Joe to crush in *Stalingrad*.”²² In similar vein, Aaron Trammell has documented in detail the ways in which articles and even cover-art in these magazines fostered a white supremacist space, idolising Hitler and his military henchmen alongside Confederate generals, and peddling conspiracist and revisionist essays on the history of World War II and the Third Reich.²³ Indeed, Alonge suggests that there existed “a morbid fascination with Nazism” among the US wargaming community—characterised by one of their own number as “odd people who like to wear steel helmets around the house.”²⁴

That such fandom focused on the Nazi “brand” is far from dying out among hobbyists and gamers even in recent years may be demonstrated by Shoshana Kessock’s salutary denunciation of Nazi cosplay—and the commercialisation and fetishisation of Nazi outfits and memorabilia—at GenCon in the mid-2010s.²⁵ Arguably, such normalisation of Nazism might not be an insignificant factor in

¹⁸ cf. Michael Heron, “*Secret Hitler* (2016),” *Meeple Like Us*, July 24, 2019, <https://www.meeplelikeus.co.uk/secret-hitler-2016/>.

¹⁹ cf. Rob Dubbin, “The Humbling and Inspiring Tale of the Game That Proved Hitler’s Name Is Still Worth at Least A Million Dollars,” *The Awl*, December 26, 2015, <https://medium.com/the-awl/the-humbling-and-inspiring-tale-of-the-game-that-proved-hitlers-name-is-still-worth-at-least-a-1cedacc97a8b>. On fascism’s fascination, see the *locus classicus*: Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism,” in *Under the Sign of Saturn* (Farrar Straus Giroux, 1980), 73–105. On the Nazi past as a “brand”, with particular reference to World War II, see Andrew J. Salvati and Jonathan M. Bullinger, “Selective Authenticity and the Playable Past,” in *Playing with the Past: Digital Games and the Simulation of History*, eds. Matthew Wilhelm Kapell and Andrew B. R. Elliott (Bloomsbury, 2013), 152–67.

²⁰ Lauren Orsini, “*Secret Hitler*: For Big Groups, A Heil of a Good Time,” *Forbes*, January 18, 2016; https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/eoldhw/secret_hitler_board_game_pulled_from_montreal/; <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1883038/how-friendly-is-this-game-to-be-played-at-a-vetera>.

²¹ cf. https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/ch8jmo/great_and_insightful_review_of_secret_hitler/

²² *The General* 6 (March–April 1971), 16, cited in Alonge, “Playing the Nazis.”

²³ Trammell, *Privilege of Play*, 51–76.

²⁴ Stephen B. Patrick, “The Rommel Syndrome, or Wargames as a Snare and Delusion,” *Moves* 1 (February 1972), 6, cited in Alonge, “Playing the Nazis.”

²⁵ Shoshana Kessock, “Nazi Redux, Year Two: Or, It’s Still Not Okay To Cosplay As A Nazi,” *Shoshana Kessock*, August 23, 2014, <https://shoshanakessock.wordpress.com/2014/08/23/nazi-redux-year-two-or-still-issues-with-nazi-gear-at-conventions/>; cf. A. A. George, 2014, “Gaming’s Race Problem: GenCon and Beyond,” *Reactor*, August 13, 2014, <https://reactormag.com/gamings-race-problem-gen-con-and-beyond/>.

creating a culture in which, just over a decade later, US government officials have felt able to make Nazi-style salutes in the course of their daily duties.²⁶ In tandem with the far broader “invisible ropes” which often prevent a broader and more diverse spectrum of players from engaging with the board-gaming hobby,²⁷ the tendency to wave away or deride sensitivities about games’ historical content as “political” was used both by *Secret Hitler*’s designers [Fig. 4], and by players, to condemn those who thought that there might be something crass, or even potentially harmful, in roleplaying as the harbinger of one of the world’s most horrific genocides.²⁸

Hey everyone! A bunch of announcements today:

1. Secret Hitler Sticker Pack



Over the course of working on *Secret Hitler*, we’ve received countless suggestions on the theme of the game. Some people have been offended by a reference to Hitler in a game, and wanted us to change the theme. Other people felt that we didn’t go far enough with the WWII theme, and wanted us to add even more. Still more people have asked us to insert contemporary figures like Donald Trump in the game.

Game design is a form of art, and like all art, the goal is to please everybody all of the time. Today we are thrilled to announce that *every single copy of Secret Hitler* will ship with a sticker pack that you can use to dress up the cards to your liking.

Perhaps you want to pretend that historical figure Adolf Hitler didn’t exist. Simply cover him up with the included *Secret Santa* stickers to change the game to a delightful holiday treat for all ages:



Figure 4: Kickstarter announcement making light of potential sensitivities. Screenshot by the author.

²⁶ e.g. Katrin Bennhold, “What Elon Musk’s Salute Was All About,” *The New York Times*, updated January 25, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/24/world/europe/elon-musk-roman-salute-nazi.html>. On popular culture and the normalisation of the Nazi past more generally, see Gavriel D. Rosenfeld, *Hi Hitler! How the Nazi Past is Being Normalised in Contemporary Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2015).

²⁷ cf. Shelly Jones and Tanya Pobuda, “An Analysis of Gender-Inclusive Language and Imagery in Top-Ranked Board Game Rulebooks,” *Analog Game Studies* 7 (2020); also Tanya Pobuda, “Assessing Gender and Racial Representation in the Board Game Industry,” *Analog Game Studies* 5 (2018); Aaron Trammell, “Misogyny and the Female Body in Dungeons and Dragons,” *Analog Game Studies* 1, no. 3 (2014), 23–33.

²⁸ See, for example, <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/maxtemkin/secret-hitler/posts/1440815>, and the online reactions to the articles “Jewish Group Raises Concerns about ‘Secret Hitler’ Board game Sold in Montreal,” *National Post*, January 14, 2020, and “*Secret Hitler* game stocked on Vic shelves,” *9 News*, January 11, 2019: https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/eoldhw/secret_hitler_board_game_pulled_from_montreal/; <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2130412/seriously-stuff-an-article-of-outrage-about-secret>.

Playing Secret Hitler

At this point, we will turn to a more explicitly player-focused analysis of the online discourse around *Secret Hitler*, focusing in particular on relevant posts and threads on Reddit and BoardGameGeek (BGG). Collation of the data was carried out in February 2025—all threads and posts containing the game's name were manually analysed and categorised.²⁹ While many of the comments and threads (especially on BGG) tended to concentrate on the game's purely technical merits and demerits as a representative of the social deduction/hidden roles genre, without considering the game's historical setting and political ramifications in any detail (if at all),³⁰ a significant portion of the threads launched in-depth discussions of the potential issues and tensions at stake in the game's theming, eliciting an extremely wide range of responses of all stripes—from the thoughtfully critical to the outright hateful.

On BGG, there were also a number of threads which were swiftly shut down by moderators because they were deemed too explicitly “political”—especially those in which users began vigorously to debate potential parallels between Hitler and Trump. This most often occurred in the context of the designers' satirical “Trump expansion,” which replaced the text and images on the “fascist” role cards with names and caricatures of members of Trump's initial 2016 cabinet, and swapped the “Hitler” role-card for an unflattering representation of America's 45th President (see Figure 5).³¹

As mentioned above, I have analysed these posts here using the typology which Lozano-Monterrubbio, Gonzalo-Iglesia, and Araña-Baró initially developed for the specific purpose of critiquing online discourse around GMT's cancelled colonialist Eurogame *Scramble for Africa*.³² However, responses to *Secret Hitler* can also be fitted fairly neatly into these same categories—thus proving their wider applicability beyond a purely post-colonial critique. The four commentator/player-types which the authors identify in their article are as follows:

1. **Ethical players:** These players tend to condemn board games which feature historically traumatic/colonialist themes, on the grounds that such settings are quite simply unsuitable for play and enjoyment. They believe that one should display sensitivity and empathy with those who are



Figure 5: Screenshot of the “Trump” Expansion Pack.

²⁹ I have selected for quotation below passages which, in my view, serve as broadly representative of comments in each category, although many other similar examples could have been cited instead. All quotations are unchanged apart from the correction of obvious slips in orthography, and italicisation of game titles. N.B. I have refrained from identifying individual users' handles to preserve their anonymity; full references are available on request.

³⁰ For an example of this tendency, see <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2828202/first-impressions-of-secret-hitler>.

³¹ cf. <https://trumppack.deals/>.

³² Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.*, “No Meeples.”

descendants of the oppressed and are cognisant of the dangers of normalising biased or white supremacist views of history. Overall, they believe that the industry should avoid publishing games with insensitive themes, and that other members of the community should avoid endorsing them.³³

2. **Critical players:** These players tend to admit to feeling unease around the potential dangers of historically traumatic and colonialist themes in games but consider that the presence of such games can still beneficially enhance public debate within the hobby, or contribute to the development of social consciousness concerning the issues at stake. They may believe that such games can perform a useful pedagogical function, facilitating empathetic discussion and considered reflection about colonialism and other forms of historical oppression, and providing opportunities to “talk about traumatic topics in a conscious way.” However, “ethical” players may accuse them of trying to whitewash history in this regard.³⁴
3. **Ludic players:** These players insist that games cannot be held to real-life standards, and that “simulation and playability must be free from ethical constraints.”³⁵ While not necessarily insensitive to the fraught nature of the oppressive pasts in question, many believe that game-play itself should be dissociated from history, and that one should be free to choose to play any game, regardless of its theme or ideological position. They see attempts to make reparations for the faults of the past as an “imposition”, and hence experience tensions with the views of “ethical” players, which they perceive as an attempt to dictate the parameters of their own play.³⁶
4. **Guilty pleasure players:** Such players are more likely to have their comments removed due to moderation standards, since they tend to “recognise the unethical pleasure of ‘playing’ cruel dynamics of history,” or even perpetrating in-game atrocities. Their discourse frequently tends to deploy irony or black humour, rejects any attempt at regulation, and often castigates any calls for historical or colonial consciousness as excessively “woke” or “politically correct.” Like “ludic” players, they also advocate a strong demarcation between play and its pleasures on the one hand, and life in the real world on the other.³⁷

In addition, it is worth noting that the discourse on *Secret Hitler* contains numerous comments which we might place at the intersection between “ethical” and “critical” commentary, in which players level criticisms more specifically at the game’s historical accuracy:

Lots of the concepts sound fascinating, but won’t be funding it [...in part] because of it feeding into the very unhistoric “Nazis vs. liberals” as if those were the only sides/options then or now, as well as for the liberals being presented as fluffy-confused dog-lovers rather than war profiteers or what have you. Could never play this without that simplification driving me nuts.³⁸

³³ Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.*, “No Meebles,” 114.

³⁴ Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.*, “No Meebles,” 115.

³⁵ Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.*, “No Meebles,” 115.

³⁶ Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.*, “No Meebles,” 115-16.

³⁷ Lozano-Monterrubbio *et al.*, “No Meebles,” 116.

³⁸ See <https://www.shutupandsitdown.com/games-news-231115/>.

[...] I think they should have avoided this theme to begin with. It affirms the reductionist views we hold about that time period, and by doing so, it belittles the real reasons why dictators rise to power. Here, Hitler is just a punchline; fascism is a buzzword.³⁹

I don't have a problem with the theme per se. I think games can be great tools for exploring and understanding historical events. What turns me off from a game is typically the argument that is made through the game's theme and mechanics. [...] *Secret Hitler* gravely distorts the history of how Hitler came to power in Germany, and in doing so pacifies the real threat of fascism and authoritarianism. It's presented as a kind of "Whoopsie-Daisy" event, in which the *Führer* jumps out of the cake last minute and proclaims something akin to "Haha, it was me all along!" It is important to understand that the historical figure Hitler never lurked in the shadows. He bombastically navigated preexisting political systems, and was appointed chancellor largely through democratic process. [...] As such, *Secret Hitler* does not explore its setting in any meaningful way, instead just employing it for the shock factor. [...] I believe that it is important to understand the historical and psychological circumstances that led up to the atrocities of WWII, so that we are better prepared to point out similarities in current events. I will play *Secret Hitler* if it's brought up at a party as to not ruin the night, but I will never support the game myself or introduce anyone to it. As a wargamer, I am not adverse to serious themes, nor to the pushing around of cardboard pieces representing German troops and Nazis. If I am playing the German side, I'm acutely aware of the implications of victory and of whom I represent in-game.⁴⁰

In similar vein, responses which we could categorise as "ethical" often begin with a disclaimer to the effect that the game might have something to offer from a purely ludic perspective, but that ultimately, the commenter simply cannot look past the egregiousness of the theme:

[...] I own *Secret Hitler* and did have fun playing it. But what I found was that I liked its similarities to *Werewolf* and other hidden identity social deduction games, and the assets for *Secret Hitler* are top notch. I stopped playing it when I realized that all it does is make the process of triggering one of the cruellest times in human history into a game. People will not learn anything from this game in schools. Gamifying something like this only stands to make it seem more acceptable.⁴¹

I am really fed up with political correctness and all of that but this is pushing it, even I find it offensive. Play *Die Macher* if you like German politics. This, to me, is far beyond that. There is a strong mismatch between theme and weight. Hitler did not just pull a trick in a short, little, social deduction, fun game—he actually got masses into seriously crazy shit that brought horror and death to many people. Take a look at *Freedom: The Underground Railroad* if you need an example on how to treat serious stuff in boardgames as a medium.⁴²

[...] I've been disturbed by the way this game is being thrown around in light of our political climate—historians know about the dangers of normalization. And this is the first step on a slippery slope. [...] ⁴³

³⁹ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1491046/secret-hitler-my-initial-impressions-from-a-resist>.

⁴⁰ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2130412/seriously-stuff-an-article-of-outrage-about-secret>.

⁴¹ See https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/eoldhw/secret_hitler_board_game_pulled_from_montreal/.

⁴² See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1637470/dirty-little-shtler-a-space-biff-review>.

⁴³ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1691956/ive-played-it-once-secret-hitler>.

Such criticisms will often be rebutted by more “critical” players, who in this context often stress *Secret Hitler*’s potential to open up debate about the circumstances in which democracy might fail, and the necessity of building trust within the political community, especially on the left:

I think the theme of the game is very strong. It’s not littered with historical references, sure. Nor is it a simulation of the complex political history at the time. But it is a very thematic game in that it shows the lure of power, how a small driven minority can manipulate a majority by preying on their fears and how aggressive misinformation, spreading half-truths and speculation can get people to actively work against their own interests. [...] it creates an atmosphere where it becomes frighteningly easy to understand how otherwise clear-thinking people could be swayed into supporting a malicious leader. I think the game is much less about pre-WWII Germany than it is about fear and paranoia being political tools to manipulate people with. [...] The historical setting is just the easiest way to get people to grasp what’s happening.⁴⁴

I think that what this game is really about is being careful with your votes and that our votes have consequences. [...] I think the whole point of this game is to make people aware of that and that the theme is just another way to drive that point home. This is why they have made a variant where you can be Secret Trump.⁴⁵

I’m Jewish, and I don’t understand the issue that Jews would have with the game. They do understand that on one level it’s about teaching the dangers of fascism, right? Maybe not? If anything I’ve been bothered by reskins of the game that seem to soften the message, as though dealing with the rise of Naziism is “too real” for people.⁴⁶

Other “critical” commentators suggest, often from an explicitly pedagogical perspective, that the game might—with sufficient circumspection—be usable as an effective history-teaching tool in schools or universities:

[...] I believe *Secret Hitler* would be a wonderful teaching tool to help students understand “how Fascism works.” [...] I have been retired since 2011, but spent over 40 years as a teacher of history, and used games extensively in my courses. I was fortunate to have been able to teach an advanced placement class in the History of the Third Reich, and really could have made use of this great game in that class!⁴⁷

I teach about the Rise of Nazism and the Holocaust and have used the game before in an academic setting, and by and large have had very good responses to it. That said, the one time I had a negative response, it was an extremely negative one, and I could easily have seen it costing me my job if I was not myself from a family of Holocaust survivors. People are going to internalize—and externalize—their trauma in their own way [...].⁴⁸

⁴⁴ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1491046/secret-hitler-my-initial-impressions-from-a-resist>.

⁴⁵ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1491046/secret-hitler-my-initial-impressions-from-a-resist>.

⁴⁶ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2348912/fyi-and-do-you-think-this-was-right-and-should-we>.

⁴⁷ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2238198/how-fascism-works>—the rest of the post includes a detailed commentary on how the game implements the steps outlined in Jason Stanley’s *How Fascism Works: The Politics of Us and Them* (Random House, 2018). These comments also chime with my original motivation for researching the game—I teach a historiography course on the Weimar Republic to second-year undergraduates, and thought that *Secret Hitler* might represent an interesting form of contemporary Weimar “reception” which could also shed light on how the rise of the Third Reich tends to be emplotted, and its contingency.

⁴⁸ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2348912/fyi-and-do-you-think-this-was-right-and-should-we>.

"Ludic" commentators, meanwhile, tend to handwave any potential for trauma or offence away—they aver that *Secret Hitler* should be treated as a game, and nothing more:

Being Hitler in your real life means something and that comparison should be avoided at all costs. Being Hitler in a board game means nothing outside of the boardgame and you should enjoy and/or avoid by whatever makes you feel bad.⁴⁹

Don't let the name of this game scare your gaming group off, it is nothing more than a social deduction game with interesting mechanics, fantastic game-play, easy to understand rules and fantastic components.⁵⁰

The name "Secret Hitler" is going to pique a casual gamer's curiosity more than something like "The Resistance". You pretty much immediately know the game is going to be lighter and sillier than a typical board game. Perhaps if we were in Germany or Israel there would be a problem but I really doubt that the average person in the U.S. would hesitate at playing the role of Hitler in a mocking way. I go to a weekly gaming group at a bar with 50-80 people where it gets played at least once every time and I've yet to see someone shy away from the game because of the name. Most people just aren't that sensitive and politically correct. I'd also have to ask myself if those sensitive types really seem like they would be fun to play with anyways.⁵¹

Here, Mary Flanagan and Mikael Jakobsson's concept of "casting" might prove useful: those players who are not prepared to "at least temporarily, buy into the premises of [the game]," taking on *Secret Hitler's* pre-constructed roles and seeking to enjoy playing the rise of Nazism, will necessarily be excluded from play.⁵² Thus, anyone who might feel discomfited or threatened (for example due to their ethnicity, gender or sexuality) by the thought of replaying a historical period whose consequences could have led to their own annihilation is automatically excluded and denied their right to an opinion or a legitimate sense of grievance. As a consequence, the game's clientele becomes essentially limited to those who can view its theme with equanimity as neutral, satirical, or "fun".⁵³

As Lozano-Monterrubio *et al.* note, such "ludic" criticisms often deploy the rhetoric of the "market" to legitimise their views:⁵⁴ "Tough break the theme not being digestible to you [...]. I guess that means you're not the target market."⁵⁵ Other users also deploy the discourse of "censorship" and "freedom of speech," especially in the context of concerns being voiced about the game by ethnic minorities or Jewish organisations:

Not being able to mention Hitler, discuss the evils he led, look at how he got to power is a real problem for democracy. I am sorry if anyone is triggered by anything, support and help is needed, but censorship in this is a real problem. [...]⁵⁶

[...] Hitler was terrible. But at his core, he always wanted to control (and in too many cases stop) the lives of others so that he could make what he thought would be a perfect world.

⁴⁹ See https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/wjdv85/is_anyone_else_slightly_uncomfortable_playing/.

⁵⁰ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2344863/secret-hitler-played-and-reviewed>.

⁵¹ See https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/4rugc0/secret_hitler_a_second_interesting_analysis_by/.

⁵² Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 87, 125, 141-2.

⁵³ For a critique of such attitudes to "fun" among hobby board gamers, and their connections with white supremacy, see Trammell, *Privilege of Play*, 91-3.

⁵⁴ Lozano-Monterrubio *et al.*, "No Meeples," 118.

⁵⁵ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/1657226/a-low-in-gaming>.

⁵⁶ See <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2130412/seriously-stuff-an-article-of-outrage-about-secret>.

Controlling the lives of others, and preventing them from enjoying what they want to enjoy, will not stop that.⁵⁷

Indeed, some of these protestations seem eerily reminiscent of the defensive reactions which Aaron Trammell discusses in relation to 1970s *Diplomacy* groups—or, more recently, responses to Ajit George and Shoshana Kessock's afore-mentioned critiques of Nazi cosplay at GenCon.⁵⁸

Finally, we come to the "guilty pleasure" players, who—in this context—appear to take explicit pleasure in playing as fascists, and particularly as Hitler. Even designer Tommy Maranges recalled that in play-testing sessions, his guinea-pigs would be especially excited at this development ("Aw man, I finally got to be a Fascist!").⁵⁹ Some users publish flippant reviews replete with Nazi puns, and suggest that the fascist role-cards would have been better off featuring pictures of genuine Nazi historical figures.⁶⁰ In other instances, criticisms of the game by BIPOC or Jewish people are derided in indisputably hateful ways.⁶¹ Meanwhile, within this constituency we also find cases of players justifying using Nazi salutes, or shouting "Hitler!" or "Sieg Heil!" during role-play, as totally legitimate:

Nazi salutes whilst role playing. It will never go outside the game because the game itself is isolated. Someone does a Nazi salute in public (non game related), nobody is going to say "it's just a joke, we do it in *Secret Hitler* therefore it is fine". Nazis and salutes are shown in famous sketches anyway (Key and Peele for example). The line we're crossing is fine.⁶²

While we must always be aware that the intention and veracity of internet posts can never be fully verified, and that some users may have been deliberately setting out to mislead or bait others,⁶³ the existence of these problematic discourses around the game cannot be disputed. As Lozano-Monterrubio *et al.* have shown, online fora as sites of debate and contestation are also crucial arenas for forging players' opinions, political consciousness, and market decisions;⁶⁴ being derided or targeted online can also cause genuine harm to those on the receiving end of unkind or vitriolic comments. Thus, the toxic potentials of the play space and player communities engendered by *Secret Hitler*'s ambivalent, Janus-faced design become more fully apparent. Whether or not it has the potential to teach a political lesson of some kind if played responsibly, when a game is at least partially designed to titillate, and allows players either to ignore or wholly to embrace its thematically more traumatic or politically questionable elements, then the net effect may be a normalisation of those elements, and the exclusion and marginalisation of those who cannot in good conscience acquiesce in treating its play as mere "fun."

Conclusions

Ultimately, then, drawing on Miguel Sicart's explorations of ethical game design and game play, we might suggest that, while *Secret Hitler* masquerades as an ostensibly "ethical" game—or at least a

⁵⁷ See https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/wjdv85/is_anyone_else_slightly_uncomfortable_playing/.

⁵⁸ Trammell, *Privilege of Play*, 80-93; George, "Gaming's Race Problem"; Kessock, "Nazi Redux."

⁵⁹ Tommy Maranges, "The One Time I Was Wrong While Designing *Secret Hitler*," *Medium*, April 4, 2016, <https://medium.com/@tommygents/the-one-time-i-was-wrong-while-designing-secret-hitler-d4343413ae53>.

⁶⁰ e.g. <https://boardgamegeek.com/thread/2217060/secret-hitler-a-kool-review> —I have deliberately chosen not to reproduce the majority of the comments in this category here, due to their potentially offensive nature.

⁶¹ See https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/wjdv85/is_anyone_else_slightly_uncomfortable_playing/.

⁶² See https://www.reddit.com/r/boardgames/comments/eoldhw/secret_hitler_board_game_pulled_from_montreal/.

⁶³ cf. Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *The Ambivalent Internet: Mischief, Oddity, and Antagonism Online* (Polity Press, 2017); Whitney Phillips and Ryan M. Milner, *You Are Here: A Field Guide for Navigating Polarized Speech, Conspiracy Theories, and Our Polluted Media Landscape* (MIT Press, 2021).

⁶⁴ Lozano-Monterrubio *et al.*, "No Meeples," 119.

morally thought-provoking one—it can also facilitate highly “unethical” play in ways which its designers ideally could and should have anticipated and mitigated.⁶⁵ While players are also moral agents who might reasonably be expected to use ethical thinking and judgment during play, designers are necessarily placed in the role of “cultural opinion makers... creators with a large role and responsibility in the shaping of our culture,” and ethical problems caused by design issues will inevitably affect the game experience and all agents within it.⁶⁶ In the case of *Secret Hitler*, Rob Dubbin sums up this dilemma very neatly:

The people who made *Secret Hitler* advertise it as a playable psychological model of how totalitarianism takes root. Their sales pitch also reassures that the game “doesn’t model the specifics of German parliamentary politics.” Which makes sense: just as all art must draw some line around reality, so did *Secret Hitler*’s designers pick and choose from the horrific totality of actual-Hitler’s work, isolating just the right parts to weave into their party game. [...] Of course, it’s also a laudable goal to want to make people sensitive to fascism, and the dynamics that can help it along. Here are a few to watch out for. One is desensitizing people to fascism’s consequences. Another is to reframe its historic perpetrators as little more than mascots and thematic bunting. A third way to make fascism seem appealing is to demonstrate its remarkable ability to move units. As a game, *Secret Hitler* claims to be about subverting the mechanisms of tyranny. As a marketing campaign, it seems to rely on emulating them.⁶⁷

We might link these criticisms with Aaron Trammell’s observations in *The Privilege of Play*, where he suggests that “hobbyists have the privilege to imagine, develop, and play games that are radically subversive. Yet more often than not, this privilege fuels the representational dynamics that further the status quo of white masculinity.”⁶⁸ Furthermore, as Mary Flanagan and Mikael Jakobsson have noted, games tend to reinforce cultural rules and boost player roles that are already culturally dominant, thereby bolstering their propagandistic qualities.⁶⁹

From this perspective, Torben Quasdorf’s observations on the necessity of analysing politics in modern board games seem particularly apposite:

In a culture where the number of board game players is rising continually and the games themselves are becoming more and more diverse and complex on a thematic and mechanical level, we need to develop a comprehensive understanding of this medium and its interactions with the wider cultural ecosystem. This becomes all the more urgent when we realize that some of them touch on topics, such as democratic ideals, that are at the fundament of our political culture. What happens when political ideas are incorporated into board games? What mechanisms within this medium are affecting and transforming them? What are the unique ways in which board games can express a political standpoint?⁷⁰

We might conclude by asking: what happens, indeed, when unsavoury political stances are inserted into culture and normalised within game-play? Could the potential titillation of roleplaying a “fascist”, or even Hitler himself, and the licence with which a subsection of *Secret Hitler* players seems to have embraced engaging in at least symbolic Nazi behaviour, contribute to mainstreaming the extreme in

⁶⁵ cf. Miguel Sicart, *The Ethics of Computer Games* (MIT Press, 2009), 37, 41.

⁶⁶ Sicart, *Ethics*, 73, 102-3, 148; quotation from p. 38.

⁶⁷ Dubbin, “Tale.”

⁶⁸ Trammell, *Privilege of Play*, 19; cf. 91-3.

⁶⁹ Flanagan and Jakobsson, *Playing Oppression*, 87.

⁷⁰ Quasdorf, “Votes into Victory Points,” 131-2.

a society in which toxic white masculinity has been identified as “one of the most pressing concerns”?⁷¹

By engaging with these questions throughout this paper, I hope to have proven not only the importance of turning our attention to the darker as well as the more positive potentials of analogue games and gaming, but also the need to take all kinds of tabletop games seriously—not only those which are thematically and mechanically complex, but even (or especially) those that purport to be the least serious.



Dr. Helen Roche is Professor in Modern European Cultural History at Durham University, and co-editor in chief of *Fascism: Journal of Comparative Fascist Studies*. She has published extensively on Nazism, fascism and the contemporary far right, and classical reception studies; her most recent book, *The Third Reich's Elite Schools* (OUP, 2021) was featured in the media nationally and internationally, including appearances in *The Times*, *Guardian*, *Telegraph*, on the BBC and Sky News. Forthcoming publications in Historical Game Studies include “Gaming” History? *Digital and Analogue Games as Contemporary Historical Sources* (CUP), and (with Vinicius Marino Carvalho) she has recently been commissioned to co-edit the *Oxford Handbook of Historical Game Studies* (OUP).

⁷¹ Trammell, *Privilege of Play*, 23; cf. Adrienne Massanari, *Gaming Democracy: How Silicon Valley Leveled Up the Far Right* (MIT Press, 2024).