

War Cards (Meditations)

War Cards was built on a design challenge to create a game where the rules could only be expressed in *haiku*, in only 17 syllables. Could an antiwar game be made in such a format?

The basic concept for War Cards was to present the player with the question of what antiwar really means. Is it opposition to all wars? Or do you pick and choose the wars you are opposed to? How can you be antiwar by picking and choosing the wars you are opposed to – doesn't this follow the logic that some wars are 'just' or 'justifiable'? To be truly antiwar do you have to be a pacifist?

War Cards presents the player with a set of note card sized playing cards. Each card contains the name of a war that America has fought in: currently there are 22 cards in the stack, though several of them are amalgamations of multiple wars. The cards are wrapped in a piece of paper containing a haiku, which serves as the game rules, asking:

*Pick cards for wars fought.
Choose by whether we should have.
How do you judge choice?*

Because the rules are more vague rather than specific, there are several ways of interpreting them and of playing this game. One way is to make the player consider each war based on his or her knowledge of the conflict. The player would then consider and choose whether or not he or she thought the war should have been fought – whether the player was for or against that war.

The basic concept for War Cards was to present the player with a question: what is the necessity of war and how did we judge the reasons we entered, fought, or are still fighting a war both at the time of the conflict and at the present? In retrospect, it is sometimes easier to make decisions knowing their consequences.

The central ideas for War Cards was to force the player to make decisions based on incomplete information, something that should not be done in a life and death situation that affects millions of people, such as a war. Because there are so many wars the United States has engaged in, and many of them, such as the Barbary Wars and the Quasi-War, are very obscure, the player is not likely to be well-versed in the history of all 22 conflicts or series of conflicts. By making decisions based on incomplete knowledge, the game sets the player up by forcing him or her to perform an action that should not be done: to play the game is to play against the logic the designer would like the players to use. It was also my hope that the player might become interested in learning more about a war he or she does not know anything about, such as by looking the information up on Wikipedia.

A second concept behind the game was based on the picking and choosing of wars. If players divides the wars they are for and against into two separate piles, they may find that there are many cards in both piles. This would be a visual interpretation of the player's 'stance' and thus be able to tell him or her something about their feelings about war.

Because the game is forcing players to think, its key forms of play are choice and interpretation, a combination that is rarely seen in games and is central to this approach in creating games that make the

player think about something more than just how to win the game.

Playtesting and Earlier Versions

In the original version of War Cards, each card had the years in which the war was fought and who it was fought against. In addition, there was a set of two point values on the back of the cards: one for Pro and the other for Anti. Generally, the larger value was given to the stance that was opposed to popular opinion, based on the concept that it is more difficult to be opposed to a popular opinion than to follow it, and thus 'standing alone' could be considered a strength. The point values were used as an additional visual measurement of the player's stance based on the concept of 'picking and choosing' wars.

In the playtesting, the point values became interpreted as the goal of the game. Rather than to aim for a low score, as in golf, some players thought that the objective was to get the most points possible. For this reason, the game became an exercise into satirical debate against popular opinion rather than about meditation and interpretation. As a result, the current version of the game removes additional information on the back of the card, though this had originally been considered a key component to the game's design – it simply became an additional layer of interpretation that could go in several different ways because the rules were unable to directly explore it.

It was a bit disheartening to try building a game that is attempting to produce serious conversation when the results of play were not. This may result in changing the desired audience of this type of game – for instance, how can an antiwar message be best communicated to the so-called 18-24 year old male who is interested more in destruction and competition? Should I be attempting to target this group as part of my audience? Or is the cultural concept that games are simply for fun and are not expected to express any message simply an opinion that cannot be overcome? If this is the case, then when an unexperienced player picks up a game, they may automatically begin play considering that the game is supposed to be 'fun' and that they should be 'having fun' as they play it.

These are central recurring problems that emerge as a result of any socially conscious game design, not simply with the construction of antiwar games. Confronting and overcoming them should be a central goal to the production of games of this type.