

PIXELS, POLITICS AND PLAY: DIGITAL VIDEO GAMES AS SOCIAL COMMENTARY

"You have taken our reality and made it into a game!?" This comment was made by a student at The University of Texas at El Paso when he was presented with the two video games, *Crosser*[™] and *La Migra*[™]. The games simulate opposing points of view on the Rio Grande. One, which plays like *Frogger*[™], places the player in the shoes of one who is attempting to cross the river/border illegally. The other, which was inspired by *Space Invaders*[™], places the player in the seat of a border patrol agent of the US Immigration and Naturalization Service who attempts to prevent illegal entry. Specifically, they deal with the (il)legal human traffic at the most densely populated international boundary point on earth. The games exist as two complete works which provide a broader insight when played/experienced together. They present a concrete effort to deploy video games as vehicles and venues for cultural commentary and criticism. The reality at the US/Mexico border is a game. The game is one of chance, where the stakes are survival. The author of the games intends to present the development and context for the games, in particular, the novel strategy of repurposing old school digital video games to the ends of commentary and criticism.

Cool Things About *Crosser*[™] & *La Migra*

Preamble

Here I want to use the rhetorical conceit of the features / benefits list to talk about the development of two games *Crosser*[™] & *La Migra*[™]. This gambit seems only fitting as the games also have to serve double and even triple duty; as art, as political commentary, and as play. There are several voices at play in this paper, and they assert themselves without warning.

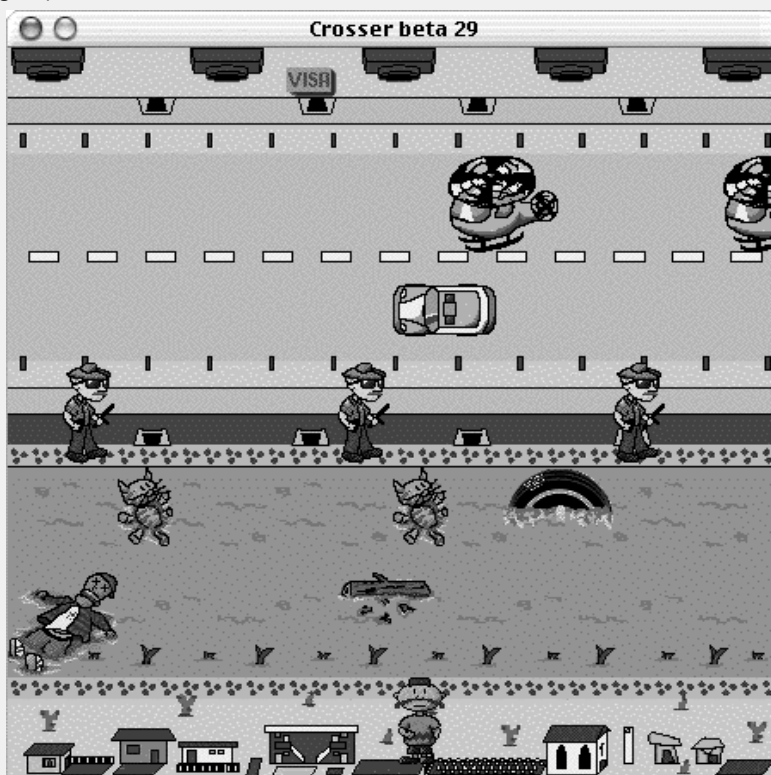
Crosser[™] & *La Migra*[™] are games

Crosser[™] puts the player in the position of attempting to cross the Rio Grande from Mexico into the United States. The path is obstructed by detritus floating down the shallow river and by Border Patrol agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service (known in spanglish as "la migra"), both of which move with uncompromising regularity. If a crosser should meet up with any of these obstacles, she will be sent home -- most of the time. Occasionally a migra-man will turn a blind eye to the crosser and allow her to pass. The challenge is to get across unscathed and to reach the green card at the other side. Can you make it?

"You have taken our reality and made it into a game!?"

Once there, you will have the option of returning to Mexico to visit family. But the return to the US will be as dangerous as the first crossing. *La Migra*[™] puts the player in control of the most sophisticated immigration enforcement vehicle in the nation's arsenal -- the air-conditioned Ford Explorer®. From within this high-tech suburban mobile command center, each INS agent maintains an ever present vigil over their assigned quarter-mile stretch of turf. It is their mission to "hold the line" and to allow no

**By Rafael
Fajardo**



one to pass. Facing an overwhelming number of potential alien invaders, they are armed with specially designed flying handcuffs for use on peaceable offenders; and, with artillery-sized projectiles intended for self-defense in case of threats of violence. If the agent succeeds in her mission to shut down (il)legal human traffic, she will be awarded a commendation. If she fails, she will be overrun by brown hords, and will lose her job.

Crosser™ & La Migra™ are art
That's right! There you have it! The official declaration that will make *Crosser™ & La Migra™* become more valuable to you and your loved ones over time. This statement ensures that *Crosser™ & La Migra™* are a wise investment of your hard earned dollars. The makers of *Crosser™ & La Migra™* are not satisfied with the cultural strategy that states beauty, and hence art, are in the eye of the beholder. Questions of taste are too volatile and subject to the ups and downs of fashion. No sir, we much prefer the rock-solid method of staking an affirmative claim on the terrain of art. That way you can be sure, and your friends and colleagues will have no cause to question.

Feel free to frame and mount *Crosser™ & La Migra™* to the wall. They are ready to be fetishized, go ahead!

The makers of *Crosser™ & La Migra™* have left nothing to chance when it comes to customer satisfaction. Cultural ambiguity is unacceptable.

Crosser™ & La Migra™ are political commentary

The authors of *Crosser™ & La Migra™* have transformed a cultural reality into a game. Or, have they actually rendered a faithful portrait? There is an absence of voice about the life experience at the border, and even within area studies specific to the region, there is a lack of voice originating from the region. There is an overwhelming sense that the region is not worth writing / making about. This casting of shadows may be intentional -- it has been rumoured that five families control the economic growth of the region.

The reality is that it is a game. The informal economy of the US depends upon the human traffic. The game is one of chance. Legislation always signals that there will be greater crackdowns. Blind eyes are turned to

crossers, one never knows when enforcement will become a priority.

Games are a reduction. Eric Zimmerman -- founder of GameLab -- believes that games reduce the possibilities of action, and that, through this reduction, a visionary imagination is sparked in the player. I'm inclined to think that lighting this spark is itself a political act. Rather than employing a militant voice that succeeds only in preaching to the choir, I choose to attempt to engage audiences. Didactics slip too easily into pedantry. I've seen many attempts to adapt ideas about play in the name of learning, of education. Several are alluded to in this paper. Many of such attempts pay no attention to the "play" aspect of games, using only indices of games and trappings of play, without the joy.

Didactic games in this vein are inordinately sincere. I surmise that this is a question of audience and of agenda. The games are not meant for consumption / play by the subjects that they depict. Rather, they are meant to teach more than they are meant to be played. *Crosser™ & La Migra™* use a black sense of humor coupled with a studied cuteness as a tactic to increase the attractiveness to a potential player.



**Carlos Moreno
a clean-cut
hard working
young man
looking for
a good future**

A sampling of games that use the medium of the video game to raise awareness of various issues includes some that overlap thematically with *Crosser™ & La Migra™*. Natalie Bookchin, professor at California Institute of the Arts, has created a series of interlinked games called *Intruder* that explore themes of love and conflict among immigrants from Latin America. Some of Bookchin's works overlay her content with classic gameplay. Another game by Yung Min -- a student at UC San Diego -- called *Vagamundo*, attempts to have the player follow an (il)legal immigrant from the moment of successful crossing all the way to New York and the pursuit of the American Dream. A third, *The Maria Sisters*, by the collective Global Arcade, overlays the game-play of Mario Brothers with a

gender-change, and a switched back-story. It waits to be seen how effective these works (*Crosser™* & *La Migra™* included) are at their triple duty as games, as art, and as political commentary.

Crosser™ & La Migra™ are not politically correct

The makers of *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* have special license to poke fun at themselves! Please don't try this at home, we cannot be held responsible for misunderstandings. Let us take the risk for you! We of otherness have that special je-ne-sais-quoi and ownership over our condition. Of course, if you are of(f) colour yourself, then go ahead, play with yourself. Lord knows we do.

This claim is problematic. In making the claim, I have become exclusionary. The paragraph above is meant to be satirical, but the edge is lost. The claim is bitterly ironic because I was a carpet-bagger on the border. What does it mean that I am claiming special privilege to make fun of "my" own "kind"? I claim more credibility for having lived the experience, but mine was -- and is -- cushioned by another kind of privilege. I'm like a WASP trying to represent for the peeps.

The claim is intended to be a reflexive satire about the politics of otherness as seen from the point of view of the othered. A satire about appropriating and owning that thing that caused you pain.

The games stake out the most gentle of non-PC positions. Mass media have become bland enough that this tepid lampoon caused me to fear an outcry.

Those residing on the border are twice othered, by those at the centers along both sides.

Crosser™ & La Migra™ are multi-level homage

The pop-culture references are multi-layered and are charged by changes in contexts. Each layer experiences this charge, this shift. The result is complex, and hard to define, even for its creators.

Spinning out every thread of influence can dissolve whatever autonomy or power the games have. But some discussion of influences is appropriate, if only to give proper credit. *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* were constructed on a foundation of precedents, technical, artistic, and conceptual. Syntactically, they owe debts to Konami's *Frogger®* and to Taito's *Space Invaders®*. *Crosser™* most resembles its progenitor. Conceptually, the game and the authors have created an intersection of the ideas of several movements: Arte Povera, Teatro Campesino, Miesian minimalism, and rhetorical reduction to the absurd. Further, the authors attempted to set up a resonance with the innocence and joy presented in *Peanuts®* and by *Mario®*. The games do not stop at homage, but extend and expand on the precedents. The games pose novel problems, ask novel questions, and attempt to stretch ideas in novel directions. In this, the authors hope to honor their antecedents. Any measure of success we may have comes from standing on these shoulders.

Crosser™ & La Migra™ are created in a defunct development environment

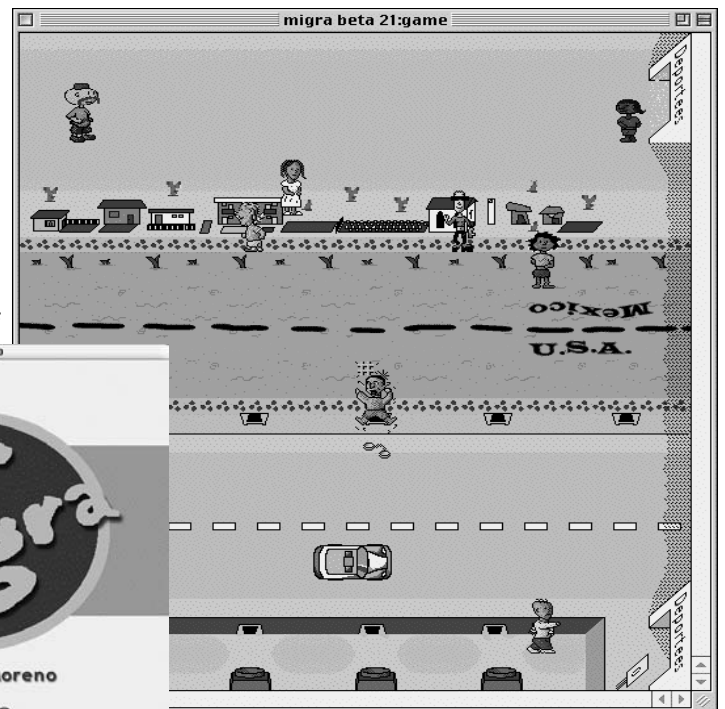
In keeping with the spirit of the inhabitants of the region's colonias, *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* have been cobbled together from the detritus of technological progress! The developers of

La Migra™ have taken advantage of the baby that was thrown out of the bath water by Apple® Computers Inc. This program was proudly, even defiantly produced in Cocoa™, created by Allan Cypher and David Canfield Smith to teach programming to children.

But thats not all! WE recycle!

Cocoa™ was thrown out over the transom, before the project was cut, during a change in leadership at Apple. By using an amazing technology that has been under-appreciated by others, we help keep valuable renewable resources out of the waste stream.

And we continue the long tradition of extending the use-value of the refuse of the developed nation(s). In keeping with the economic dynamic that sends busses and airplanes long past their freshness-dating to Central and South America -- where they can take on another twenty years of useful existence -- the makers of *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* have lifted something from the rubbish bin of "high" technologies and given them a persistence and a life extension. We have made beauty from garbage once again. Our parents are so proud.



We invite those of you who are environmentally conscious to take up the challenge and reuse those pixels and bits that are so easily chucked out when their first intended use has been exhausted. Remember the admonition of your parents. There are people in South America who are going without moving pixels right now, so make sure you use yours to their fullest. Waste not, want not.

There is also a certain democracy to the tool that is being used as the critical edge facing back at the high-tech sectors of art and design. The environment is robust, and turing-capable -- two requisites for any "adult grade" programming language, for any "serious" programming environment. Cocoa™ did not reach, and Stagecast Creator™ -- its successor -- has not reached, the marketing critical mass of the Macromedia products, but it is more democratic in terms of price and usability than anything in the Macromedia suite. The "do as I do" recording of programming and relationships among the objects is an elegant interface for an event-driven environment. So elegant and simple to learn that Cocoa™ was championed for use with children. SWEAT™ (the team organized to produce *Crosser™* & *La Migra™*) proposed and actualized Cocoa™'s use among artists, who are -- by and large -- visual learners. We don't argue for an elimination of one tool over another, but for the space for a diversity of tools and environments to exist. The market logic has insisted on the dominance of one to the detriment of others. To accept this state of affairs would be patently absurd.

Resist!

Crosser™ & La Migra™ take advantage of the latest wave of economic globalization

The games were created in the burgeoning labor market of El Paso / Ciudad Juarez, using the latest twin plant technology. Major portions of this project were elaborated on both sides of the border by a skilled labor force

trained especially for their task(s). This amazing geopolitical development allows us to allocate our production resources more efficiently, and pass the savings on to you, our valued customer.

The region depicted in the games has experienced at least five major waves of economic globalization in the last 2000 years. The details are the topic for another paper, but in schematic form, we include the empire of the Maya, the Spanish colonial period, the evolution of the railroad, NAFTA, and now eBay.

Our skilled artisans are not just employees, but are also proud partners in our progressive enterprise. In a model of entrepreneurial egalitarianism, our worker / owners share in any* profits generated by the sale of *Crosser™* & *La Migra™*. *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* are a product of SWEAT™.

*[*Footnote: on a per-project basis, for a limited time only, void where prohibited by statute or ideology.]*

[Appendix A] Credits

La Migra™, and its companion piece *Crosser™*, are critical commentary in the form of a video game, conceived of as a piece of interactive digital art. *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* are a product of SWEAT™. SWEAT™'s work force at the time of production consisted of:

Rafael A. Fajardo
Project director, principal character design, principal programmer

Ryan Benjamin Molloy
Additional Character design

Tomas Marquez-Carmona
Additional Character design

Francisco Ortega-Grimaldo
Background design, narrative checker

Carmen Escobar
Additional artwork

Miguel Angel Tarango
Programmer

Marco Ortega
Programmer
Cocoa™, Macintosh®, and Mac OS are trademarks of Apple Computers Inc.

Creator™ is a trademark of Stagecast Software Inc., 1997. Explorer® is a registered trademark of the Ford Motor Company. Frogger® is a registered trademark of Konami, 1981. Space Invaders® is a registered trademark of Taito, 1978. Peanuts® is currently controlled by United Media Syndicate, Inc. Mario Bros.® is a registered trademark of Nintendo of America, 1983. Crosser, La Migra, and the characters and likenesses of Carlos Moreno, Lino De Pielas, Maria Lucia De Pielas, Nita Moreno, Patricia La Machona, Marcia, X-rodar and Puerco Espin are copyright © 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, 2003 SWEAT and Rafael Fajardo.
email: rfajardo@du.edu
All other trademarks are property of their respective owners.

**[Appendix B]
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[Appendix C]
Selected Survey of Didactic Games

[curated by Rhizome.org. Text, unless otherwise noted, is quoted material from the linked sites]

November 7, 2002

Take on Borders

PBS recently launched "P.O.V.'s Borders," a web site showcasing commissioned and contributed materials dealing with border issues, both literal and figurative.
http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/borders/index_flash.html

P.O.V. collected links to games as a way to think about borders.
<http://www.pbs.org/pov/pov2002/borders/games.html>

The Maria Sisters

Maria has just emigrated to the United States. But at the plant where she works, Maria is exposed to hazardous chemicals, an unsympathetic



"Migra" Man

foreman, and other calamities. Can you help Maria make it through the work day?

[This game appropriates the gameplay of Mario Bros.™ with the "bosses" becoming Maria's bosses at the chemical plant. When she renders them helpless, they are knocked out of their suits and left naked on the platform. Their pink asses left vulnerable. In a twist that could threaten a sexual harrasment lawsuit, Maria jumps the naked bosses to dispatch them. --RAF]

<http://www.globalarcade.org/sv/index.html>

P.o.N.G.

This update of the classic game has a global twist to it.
<http://www.globalarcade.org/pong/index.html>

Banja

What's it like to cross into a strange new world where no one speaks your language, the local customs seem bizarre, and the local currency is honey?
<http://www.globalarcade.org/pong/index.html>

A Week in the Life of...

Can you survive a week in the life of an undocumented worker?
<http://www.bordercampsite.net/YungMin/149E.html>

November 5, 2002

South of the Digital Border

Take a sledgehammer to the logic of linear time. OnRamp Arts' 'Tropical America' invites you to weave through 500 years of Latin American history, collecting sugar cane and speaking to the gods along the way. Save lives instead of ending them. Follow a narrative that's not only intriguing, but soaked in history.
 --Cinqué Hicks
<http://www.tropicalamerica.com>

October 25, 2002

Street Fighter Revisited

You're a new immigrant from Mexico struggling your way to the top in the U.S., looking for breaks along the way. There are few to find as you attempt to duck flying beer bottles, out-manuever a fast-hitting cockroach, and grab restaurant tips before they disappear.
 --Brooke Singer
<http://www.ambriente.com/cart/index.html>

Subset of works curated by Laura Heon for GameShow

Natalie Bookchin
 [Bookchin has a series of works that collectively force the player to succeed in order to hear the continuous narration of a story. Many of the scenarios presented in the games have to do with fleeing. --RAF]
<http://www.calarts.edu/~bookchin/>

Thomson and Craighead

[Deploys the game-play of Space Invaders™ replacing the aliens with a text by Michel Foucault. --RAF]
<http://www.triggerhappy.org/>
<http://www.thomson-craighead.net/>

[Appendix D]

Games vs. Game Theory At the US Mexico Border

There are competing descriptive narratives at the border between the United States and Mexico. I was unaware of this competition at the time *Crosser™* & *La Migra™* were created, but the conversation has proved interesting. Economists are pressing the case for the use of "game theory" as an intellectual space capable of offering predictive models for behavior(s) and for the development of policy. It has been argued by scholars of the border that game theory offers an inadequate ability to describe the motivations of immigrants, legal and otherwise. Regional scholars were looking for a counter-narrative when I arrived to teach and make work in El Paso.

What Border Studies Want

Descriptive, Predictive, Prescriptive; these are the proposed goals for the study of an area, with the power of theorization increasing as we traverse the sequence. The area in

question is the border between Mexico and the United States. The goals reflect a desire to not only understand but also to model, and to legislate; and, by legislation, to link the region to the national interests in a form of realpolitik. It is hoped that the successive links will bring the spotlight of attention on the region, and with it development dollars. There are certain truths that the rhetorical politics of the nation have been unwilling to address. Not the least of these is the necessity of the (il)legal, (il)licit human traffic to the economic viability of the nation.

Insufficiency of Game Theory

Game theory* quickly becomes insufficient to describe and predict behaviors of the (il)legal traffic in humans. The fundamental requirements for successful use of game theory are not met. The motivations of the players do not fall within the specification, the number of players is indeterminate, and the possible end-states and payoffs are unclear. Further, not all of the rules are known to all of the players.

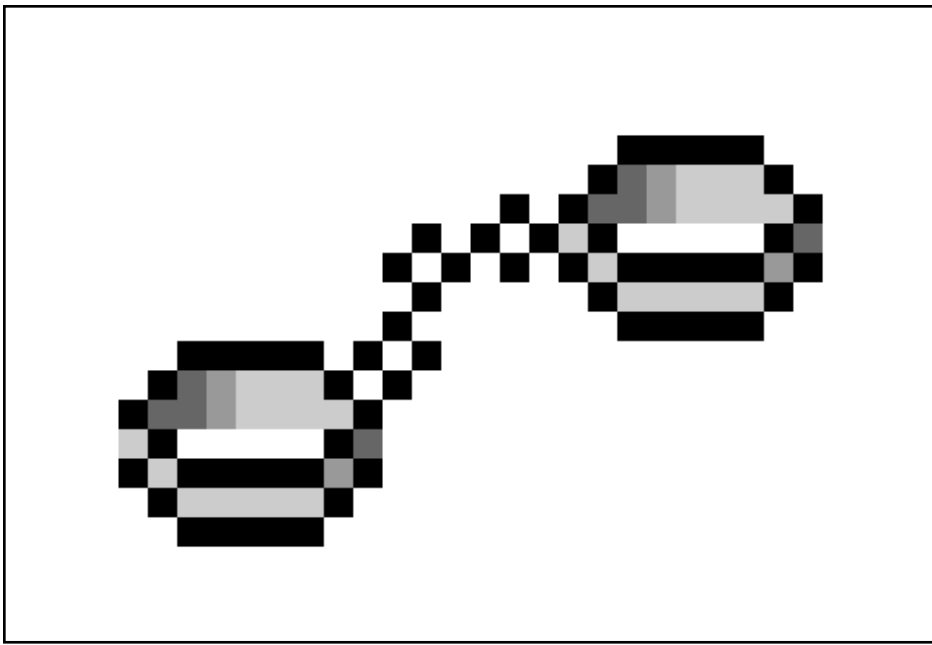
The complexity of the game at the border quickly becomes unwieldy. There are certainly more than two actors on the field. Two teams are insufficient, as well, to cover or

describe the possibilities. There are the crossers themselves, who arrive from a diversity of communities. There are the federal agents whose job it is to patrol the border, and who are employed by a diversity of agencies: INS, the National Parks Service, combined military forces, etc. And, there are state and local agencies charged with policing. And there are the residents who may act to draw traffic, and there are passers-by who will sometimes act to help or hinder the traffic. There are coyotes and various other opportunists who seek to profit from mediating the traffic. These groups all work together to act on the system.

Selfish motivations are a presupposition of game theory. It is thought that players will make choices that maximize personal benefit and that minimize personal loss. To make categorizations of this nature at the border requires a flattening of the range of motivations of immigrants, legal and otherwise. All too many make the crossing for altruistic reasons, enduring not only the hardship of the crossing, but successive hardships once inside the US. The financial gains and benefits are not retained but are sent back to homeland to benefit wife and children.

The players are not uniformly rational (or their rationales don't match each other, and don't necessarily match the definition of "good" presumed by the analyst).

There is no clear end-state that ends the game. (Il)legal human traffic at the border does not end at the border, but continues on to major metropolitan centers, and even into Canada. Further, the (il)licit traffic does not necessarily begin at the Mexican side of the border, but can begin in Central America, Asia, or Europe. Economists employing game theory can, perhaps, use a conceptual black box approach to productively isolate the border



region and derive highly localized theory, but I am not qualified to spin this thread.

Each player does not know, in full detail, the rules of the game(s) nor the potential payoffs for other players. Crossers can be said to seek better opportunities, but they step into the unknown with respect to the potential pitfalls. They share hope, or perhaps despair. They will likely not know the language, they will not know their rights under the law. They will assume that they are afforded no protections. They will not know the penalties for being caught, though some folklore in this regard may exist.

[* Footnote: A definition of GAME THEORY

"Game theory is a branch of mathematical analysis developed to study decision making in conflict situations. Such a situation exists when two or more decision makers who have different objectives act on the same system or share the same resources. There are two person and multiperson games. Game theory provides a mathematical process for selecting an OPTIMUM STRATEGY (that is, an optimum decision or a sequence of decisions) in the face of an opponent who has a strategy of his own.

In game theory one usually makes the following assumptions:
 "(1) Each decision maker ["PLAYER"] has available to him two or more well-specified choices or sequences of choices (called "PLAYS")."
 "(2) Every possible combination of plays available to the players leads to a well-defined end-state (win, loss, or draw) that terminates the game."
 "(3) A specified payoff for each player is associated with each end-state (a [ZERO-SUM game] means that the sum of payoffs to all players is zero in each end-state). "
 "(4) Each decision maker has perfect knowledge of the game and of his opposition; that is, he knows in full detail the rules of the game as well as the payoffs of all other players."
 "(5) All decision makers are rational;

that is, each player, given two alternatives, will select the one that yields him the greater payoff."
 "The last two assumptions, in particular, restrict the application of game theory in real-world conflict situations. Nonetheless, game theory has provided a means for analyzing many problems of interest in economics, management science, and other fields. (IIASA)"
 --principia cybernetica
http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ASC/GAME_THEOR.html]

The Usefulness of Games for Border Studies

Games are useful to Border Studies in two ways. The first is that they offer a populist didactic tool that describes life along the border. The second is that they offer a compelling counter-narrative and critique to game theory since both require a flattening to succeed.

The importance of a populist didactic tool is not to be underestimated. There is an absence of narratives about life along the border in popular and mass media. Sociologists and ethnographers of the border credit an absence of these narratives with a narrowing of economic opportunities.

Contributions toward mitigating this absence will help solidify regional identities, and dissemination of these narratives will raise the profile of the region. The emergence of a home-grown counter narrative, likewise, will help solidify regional identities of a cultural and of an academic sort.

Both methods involve a flattening of the world, a reduction of possibilities in order to achieve their aims. The application of Game Theory to the dynamics present at the border will require a reduction of motivations and potentials to an absurd point, and that reduction will render whatever predictive power game theory has impotent. Games also present a universe of reduced possibilities but in games, players are allowed to project themselves into the universe, and imagine themselves in the place of their avatar. While Game Theory is limited by its reductions -- in this application -- game players are empowered by the limitations necessary for games.

I will take the academically "correct" position and say that there is room for both methods (and more) at the border. But I will simultaneously take the pop stance that the poetic method will likely have greater impact.



MaLucia de Piele's Lino's sister enjoys wearing traditional dress