

The DipCon Story The Early Years

By Edi Birsan and Friends



For over 33 years there has been a single Diplomacy Convention that has had universal hobby recognition as the DipCon. The place in the history of gaming conventions as a whole as well as the stories of its development and experiments have often been forgotten, this essay is an attempt to recall some of those times before they fade away.

In the Beginning: In 1967 the postal Diplomacy hobby was only three years old and it supported some three dozen active magazines or 'zines. The centers of the hobby were Southern California, New York, Ohio and Chicago. John Koning of Youngstown, Ohio was one of the more popular publisher/GM's, and in 1967 called for an open house game in his backyard and announced it throughout the magazines. It was the first attempt at a hobby wide gathering. It netted Derek Nelson down from Canada, Rod Walker traveling from Illinois, John Smythe coming from Nebraska plus Stan Wrobel and John Koning for a grand total of 5 players. Five player variants, as well as board games were played with everyone claiming to win something, but no one recording anything in detail by tacit agreement. A great time was had by all and it was duly noted in various articles in the zines. The critical elements of the DipCon story were all there:

- 1. players gathering from far and wide.

This would be critical to convention organizers as Diplomacy players, as the travelers, would provide future support for the commitments to hotels and the like as the DipCon grew.

- 2. advertisement from the postal hobby. Prior to the postal

hobby conventioners had no real way to reach out to gamers.

- 3. an emphasis on the social gathering of the postal hobby

so as to put a real person behind the print.

Two summers later, in 1969 John would repeat the offering. This time the hobby was larger and once again a great time was had by all. One of the purposes of the '69 gathering was to get Rod Walker (from the mid west at that time) and Charlie Reinsel (Pennsylvania) together in the same room. The hobby was riddled with feuds and the Vietnam war was not helping one bit. This time the gathering netted 10, including Jeff Key and myself traveling from New York, Derek Nelson again from Canada (the Canadians have always provided special support for the DipCon and have made the North American experience richer by their perspectives), Chuck Liebenaur and Tony Pandin from Cleveland and a few other locals including Stan Wrobel and John Smythe, who had moved to the Youngstown area. The day started with a standard 7 man Diplomacy game but as more people arrived the game was stopped and a Youngstown variant game was played, which once again everyone claimed to have won or at least to not have lost. The night and the next day also saw multiplayer games including an hysterical game of Blitzkrieg in which the forces were divided up including within the main countries so there was an Air Force commander and an infantry etc. Diplomacy players once again showed their inclination towards chaos when the game was 'won' by a combination of Walker's Red Air Force and Birsan's Blue Armor and artillery units combining to stab their respective allies.

For the record, the feud settling goal had a mixed result, for the duration of the DipCon the feuders got along quite well even allying with one another. A general agreement not to discuss Vietnam helped tremendously, however, as soon as the convention was history and players were back in print their feud faces were back on.

Several critical hobby wide decisions were made here. First it was decided that this was THE DipCon and that 1967 was the first one, therefore this was to be DipCon II. Second, it was also decided that there should be a hobby wide gathering every year somewhere. Jeff Key, who was moving to Oklahoma City volunteered to host the next one. Thus, it became hobby tradition that the selection of the next DipCon was made at a general meeting at the current one.

DipCon III in Oklahoma City, OK, 1970 was a major step up in the development of the DipCon. We moved from the back yard to a college campus. The numbers jumped dramatically with over 100 people showing up over three days. The DipCon also featured other games, including introductions to new games. At this particular DipCon, Duke Siegfried introduced Fletcher Pratt naval games with 1:1200 models and it became quite a rage in the hobby. Once again in typical hobby fashion when the hobby stars divided up for a Jutland Battle Cruiser actions, some of the German rear end commanders cut a deal with the British Front commanders to concentrate their fire on the player with the Derflinger who was committing some team offense. The ship was vaporized by all sides and then the battle was declared won by all and stopped.

The most major development for the hobby at DipCon III was the first official Diplomacy Tournament. A multi-round affair in which the Winner (John Smythe) was judged by overall performance. There was no rating 'system' per se just a general consensus that he had done better than everyone else. And there was no argument about it. There was also awards (plaques) for other gaming events, including Avalon Hill games won for the accomplishment of defeating the French at Waterloo as the Prussians and then turning on the British to beat them. Again typical for Diplomacy players to turn a two sided game into a multiplayer game.

From the Gaming hobby as a whole, the melding of board games, miniatures, naval gaming and Diplomacy became the standard for the development of game conventions to this day.

DipCon IV was in San Diego, CA 1971 organized by Larry Peery and was another campus affair. While there were multiple rounds of gaming there was no tournament structure of any kind.

DipCon V was in Chicago, IL 1972 and was another major paradigm shift in the Hobby and gaming.

Len Lakofka took the DipCon and made it part of a general gaming convention and placed it inside a major hotel. With Diplomacy players as the core of the travelers, and with the zines as advertisements support Lakofka put forward an excellent venue for gaming. It would also be at this convention that Gary Gygax (a long time Diplomacy player) introduced that other game system: Dungeon and Dragons that would sweep the country.

DipCon V also provided the first structured tournament with a first round of 49 players with the best of each table going to a final round of a single game.

The winner of the tournament was a local face to face player that no one in the postal hobby had heard of (Richard Ackerley). This triggered the first of many endless discussions on whether there should be seeding or separation of postal players from others so as to keep the focus of the DipCon on postal players. While kicked around for many different times and ways, the results have always been that the DipCon is an open convention to all comers and is not reserved for one branch of the Diplomacy hobby.

The shift to the hotel setting also triggered another long debate that cannot be resolved and that is the 'feel' for a convention being focused on Diplomacy only and general large scale gaming conventions. Over the course of decades the Diplomacy hobby shifts back and forth between big venue game conventions such as Origins or BPA and the smaller scale greater focus on Diplomacy such as is common in DixieCon. The advantages of the large scale venue always remains the access to more players, more games, while the smaller scale advantages is 'closeness, comradery and more of a feel' and recognition of the winner within the hobby as a whole.

Chicago became a major focus for the DipCon starting in 1973 and almost became the permanent home until the local convention was taken over by an organization run by Gordon Anderson, who subsequently went into financial difficulties, including defaulting on prizes to the DipCon winners. This combined with a political fight over the copyright of the name DipCon caused the hobby to go back to an older idea, sponsored by Larry Peery, that the convention should rotate around North America.

The Tournament in 1974 in Chicago had another unique outcome: the first meeting and the subsequent marriage of Doug and Marie Beyerlein who remain married through the time of this writing (2000).

The 1976 Tournament at Origins II in Baltimore was a high mark in the history of the DipCons with 29 boards registered in the first round and about 230 players over all playing in the largest tournament ever held in North America. The system also saw the introduction of the new concepts of Best Country awards introduced by the tournament directors: Edi Birsan and Mike Rocamora as an incentive for players who did poorly in their first round to play extra hard in their second round game so as to get a trophy. The scoring system also had a variation on the concept of top board in that the games in the second round were seeded based on the first round with extra points awarded to those that played in the 'tougher' board in the second round.

The DipCon Society, basically those who showed up for a Sunday hobby meeting at each DipCon, formed a charter after about 6 years of back and forth hobby politics in the mid 70's. The charter can be amended by the vote of two sequential DipCon meetings and established a formal rotation of the DipCon around North America which has seen remained divided into the West, Central and East sections containing America and Canada.

The selection process of the DipCon has remained a matter of a simple vote of majority at the hobby meeting scheduled at each DipCon. Twice in the last 33 years for various reasons there was no bid for the next DipCon and thus there was no decision on the selection of the DipCon (1980 and 1981). In

both cases a three player panel was chosen to make a selection for the hobby as a whole, a system that worked quite well to the surprise of everyone including the members of the panel.

The DipCon, which at one point was called the DiploCon, has provided over the years the best backdrop to the gathering of the Hobby elite and new comers. It has seen the experimentation of all sorts of different scoring systems, administration styles, as well a forum for a face to face discussion of hobby issues and views. Now with the development of the World DipCon (WDC) rotating around the world, the North American DipCon still remains as the place where it all started. Going strong after 33 years, it has a special place in the hobby and our hearts.

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