

C-Diplo - Saint or Sinner?

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I don't think it is right for me to say what I consider the best Diplomacy scoring system because, for starters, I am biased. Let's be honest - we all are !

C-Diplo was invented by the French hobby. I am not sure precisely when but my first encounter with it was at EuroDipCon 1997 in Namur, Belgium. The event itself was rather special, set in the Citadel on the top of a massive hill. It has a really splendid medi-evil look about it, overlooking the town which plays host to some splendid shops, cafes, markets, bars, casinos, you name it.

The way C-Diplo works is to award points at the end of the game as follows :

1 point for playing : Total 7 points
1 point per s.c. : Total 34 points
38 bonus points for the table-topper : Total 38 points
14 bonus points for 2nd place : Total 14 points
7 bonus points for 3rd place : Total 7 points
Grand total : 100 points.

Yeah, 100 points ... hence the name "C" Diplo. Kinda catchy 'n' cool.

For the finer points, an 18+ scores 100 points (with everyone else scoring zero) and tied places share the bonus points appropriately. I.e 4 players sharing 2nd place would each gain one quarter of the 14 + 7 points. Simple as that.

What I would like to explain is why this system was invented and some of the "good" that it achieves. The "bad" is pretty clear for all to see too !

First and foremost, the system is simple. In fact, as simple as it can possibly get - all games have a score value of 100, and the scores are easy to add up. That makes life easier for the tournament director; the folk who, let's face it, do all the work at face-to-face tournaments. If they are doing all the work, it is hardly fair that the players go whingeing at them for wanting an easy life !

Secondly, the system is "pure". It works on the concept of the following hierarchies :

An outright win is better than ... Topping the table is better than ... Jointly topping the table is better than ... Coming 2nd is better than.... Jointly coming 2nd etc

The point ranges are as follows:

Outright win : 100 points
Topping table : 45 points minimum - 56 points maximum
Equally topping table (2 players): 28 points minimum - 39 points maximum
Coming second : 19 points minimum - 31 points maximum
Etc.

It makes the goal of the game very simple : to get the most points, all you need do is make sure that you have more centres than the other players at the end of the game. Thus, topping your board with just 6 centres (to everyone else's 5 maximum) gets you 45 points, whilst a 17/17 split gets you 39 points.

Some players (typically U.K. & U.S.) will dispute this as wrong. "17 centres is much better than 6, no

matter what the system" (hence the reduction of the 1st place bonus to 28 for the worldmasters tournament). Indeed, yes, it is harsh, but the point remains - with a 17/17 split you have not topped your board !

So what C-Diplo does, very clearly (and purely, like it or not) is to make the goal very blatant and obvious for all to see from the very start. None of this contemplating whether your 16 centres (behind a 17) will score more points than someone else's table-topping 7. It says loudly and clearly : table-toppers get the points, amen.

Ok, so that's the system, but how does it work (and not work, for that matter) ?

French tournaments tend to be at either universities or the city hall games fair. In both cases, non-Dippers are in ample supply and new recruits on tap. What do new recruits want from a game ? Well, I will offer you the French game to the American and see what you think :

The french play to 1907 and the game is over within 3½ hours.

The Americans play to, what, 1915+ and games last for 8+ hours (so I am told). The UK usually plays to 1911 or 1912 and games will generally last for 8 hours, allowing an hour for that "lunchtime beer" ("c'mon, pal, let me buy you a beer", *cue evil thoughts*)

So, firstly, you have a shorter game - that is attractive to the newbie (or most newbies anyway). But where C-Diplo comes in is as follows :

A shark allies with a newbie. Game end comes around and you end the game with 11 centres, the newbie 10. You get 50 points, the newbie gets 25.

"Ah, just one centre, I nearly won !", cries the newbie with excitement. "Yes", says the master, "you almost won it - you played really well, congratulations. Maybe next time you'll do it".

And so, the newbie is hooked - with that "almost, but not quite" hook, line and sinker.

Meanwhile, the shark knows all along that he doesn't need to stab his ally - just get one more centre ! It's enough to get him on that final top table, from where the tournament winner will emerge (you typically need, from 3 or 4 preliminary rounds, a table topper and a 2nd, or sometimes two table toppers).

Compare that to the UK-style systems which reward a "closeness to the win". Points go up in a non-linear scale (centres squared, kind of thing) and every centre is worth heaps more points than the last one. So, one 17 is worth more than a 9 and an 8. Much more. And in this case, the ally has to be stabbed and you gotta grab their centres. The newbies get wiped and think "bah, I'm not playing that again !"

So the first thing that struck me about C-Diplo was not just the simplicity but also the FACT that the French have more players than other European Dip nationalities. Unlike France and Sweden, they had no major postal hobby gelling them together, and yet they had more players on the f.t.f. scene. Why ? Because on the whole, the games were more "user-friendly" to the new guy. More chance of survival and a shorter game. More players survive 1907-finish C-Diplo games than any other system I know of.

And then we get to the tournaments which, say, don't use C-Diplo, don't have a top board and just say "best 2 results count". How many times does the guy in 2nd or 3rd at the end of the tournament think "bah - the winner landed a really easy board !"

Yeah, we see that a lot - and all too often tournaments are decided by the boards the players land on.

We only have to see round one of the Worldmasters tournament to see that some players are having an easier ride than others. So, what a top table does (and, thank heavens, the Worldmasters has one !) is to say "ok, you guys are the top seven players so far ... now go and fight it out amongst yourselves so that the true winner will have beaten the other 6 top players". This produces no such bad feeling about whether or not the eventual winner was worthy !

And how does C-Diplo come into all this ? Well, other systems may reward a closeness to the win. Some guy lands an easy board and gets a 17. 56 points. Meanwhile, another guy lands a rough board, but tops it with 6. 45 points. Not a lot between the scores because the fact remains that both players had one thing in common - they played "better" (or, rather, got more centres than) the other 6 players in their respective games.

To my mind, what the C-Diplo / Top Table combo does is perfect the structure of preventing easy tournament wins without landing easy boards.

But, hey, any scoring system that respects a top table (ie, play X rounds and lump the best 7 results into a final, which must produce the winner) gets full marks in my book. You simply cannot award a player with the trophy for getting a lucky draw allocation against 6 newbies, whilst the rest of the tournament are sweating blood against fellow sharks. That method is nothing short of pants ... total and utter pants!

Ok, what are the downsides of C-Diplo ? At EuroDipCon 1998, the UK was introduced to C-Diplo for the first time. A few complained that "they were winning their board and then in the last round some numpty threw away some of his centres so that someone else topped the board. It is crazy, it is stupid - how can this be allowed ? How come I can lose most of my points in one turn just because of some total and utter wanker ?"

Indeed, how can that happen ?

Well, first and foremost, I can tell you without exception that the vast majority of such whingers were not exactly tournament winners themselves. They were primarily the guys who might normally finish in the 10th - 30th positions of a tournament. Not that this really matters, but the complaints didn't come from the main players. Why ? Simply because the "better" players tend to adopt the attitude "ok, that's the system, I need to adapt my strategy to it and play to it". One such player was Phil Day, winner of World Dip Con 1. Phil's results in this tournament (his first encounter with C-Diplo) were quite remarkable. In round 1, he was 5th on the board, after being stabbed left, right and centre in some cut-throat game-balancing affair. The table topper in that game (Steve Jones) had one more centre than the second placed guys (myself, Ivan Woodward and some other guy) ... who all had the same s.c. count. Four players within one centre of each other, and Phil just two centres short of the pack. C-Diplo in pure form, huh ?

Phil scratched his head a little and said something to the tune of "I can see I'm going to have to get the hang of this". Round 2, he got the bonus points for 3rd place in his game, round 3 he was second and round 4 he topped the board.

Not that this says everything but it is indicative of a quality player learning a new system and playing to it. But, at the end of it all, Phil also said he preferred other systems. Fair enough.

So, the guys who were winning and had centres chucked by other guys to lose them the game ... why ? Why would someone chuck centres away to stop you winning ? Er, let me see now, could it possibly be because you have been "less diplomatic" than the guy who eventually topped the board ? I put

this to one of the whingers and the response was “no, I was perfectly diplomatic. It was just that this total wanker went and chucked the game for no reason !! It makes the game a lottery !! He was a total and utter pratt and I’m never going to play that guy again !!!”

Hmm, that’s diplomacy for you and I rest my case.

Fact is, players do not throw games if they think you have played well and have been the most diplomatic on the board. And that brings me back to the point that the biggest whinges came from those less likely to ever actually win a tournament.

Moving on, one of the things that I also praise C-Diplo for is alliance play.

Generally speaking, there is nothing worse than being in a game where two players ally to the end, wipe the board and you are on the receiving end of it. With C-Diplo (and I speak generally here, there are many exceptions !), as soon as an alliance pulls ahead, the others gang up on them, split them and the game balances out once again. An unusual game, maybe, but one where it is difficult to race ahead with.

To finish with, let me give you a comparison.

On the one hand C-Diplo generally produces games where players maintain the balance of power. One guy sneaks ahead, others bring him back to size. In so doing, another guy sneaks ahead, and the others bring him back to size. A third players sneaks ahead as a result of this, and again he is brought back down to size. Eventually, after an agreed game limit (19XX), the game ends and the player with the most centres claims the lion’s share of the points. Often it is the guy who started off the worst and was attacked in 1901 or 1902!

Now I will quote you (not word for word, just from memory) the speech Allan Calhammer gave at World Dip Con 1 : “In the early play-testing games, we found that as soon as a player sneaked ahead, the others would gang up against him. In turn, everyone would have their moment of glory in leading the game.”

Am I missing something here or should the ideal system (which most accurately simulates the game’s inventor’s ideals) not encourage a style where everyone jumps on the leader ? One simple method is to reward the eventual board leader with all the gold, and the others with a few crumbs. Hence a final reason I consider C-Diplo to be “as good as any”, but it doesn’t mean I’ll not enjoy playing any system.

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