

Brian Train

By Sam Sheikh

They're everywhere in our midst. They look like us, they dress like us, they talk like us (sort of). They're among our highest paid actors, comedians, and entertainers. One of them is even running for the highest office in the United States government!

We're talking about our cousins from the north, of course: Canadians. Gamers in the U.S., and indeed around the world, are privileged to enjoy the talents of a small, but active pool of Canadian consim designers. Perhaps it's the long, cold winters, perhaps it's the vast distances of the hinterland that spark inspiration. But Canadian designers seem to have a different approach, and their games often depict unconventional ideas or subjects.

The trademark of our featured designer is that very unconventional approach. In fact, he is known for his focus on irregular warfare. It is our distinct pleasure to welcome Brian Train to the pages of **C3i Magazine**. Hailing from British Columbia, Canada, Brian is helping us go international with our **C3i** designer interview series.

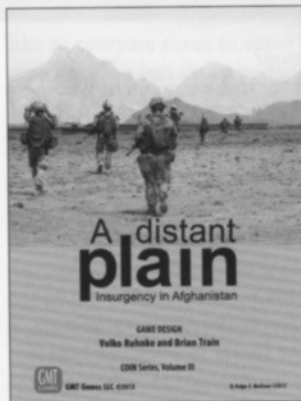
Sam Sheikh/C3i: Brian, thanks for taking the time to talk to us and **C3i's** readers.

Brian Train/BT: Thanks, Sam, always happy to talk about one of my favourite subjects.

C3i: What do you do when you're not designing games?

BT: My *Brotheruf* (paying job) is Education Officer in the British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education. I do research and writing, mostly. When I have free time outside of designing, I like reading, cooking, and metal casting.

C3i: How did you start in the hobby?



Game designer **Brian Train** (left) speaking at **TableFlip 2014** Conference in San Francisco, CA. Designer **Volko Ruhnke** seated on right.

BT: Thirty-five years ago, when I was 15, my favorite uncle gave me a copy of Avalon Hill's **Tactics II**. I had already seen a wargame (a copy of the SPI's **World War 3** that belonged to the older brother of my best friend in grade school), so I got right into it. I don't think my parents ever forgave him.

C3i: You've cited games such as **Tito**, **The Plot to Assassinate Hitler**, **South Africa**, and **Nicaragua** as early inspirations for your dabbling in **COIN** designs. What does your

preference in games say about you versus the general wargaming public?

BT: I started designing games because no one was designing the sort of games I wanted to play, on the sort of conflicts I wanted to see. I played the SPI games **Minuteman**, **The Plot to Assassinate Hitler**, **South Africa**, and **Tito** in the early 1980s because they were all interesting experiments. Not only were they on subjects no one had touched, they were a different kind of game.

Later, Joe Miranda's **Nicaragua! Revolution in Central America, 1961-1988** game in **Strategy & Tactics** magazine Nr120 (with an RBM Studio Map Design; see next page) came along in 1988, and this one was *seminal* in that it mixed political and military action in a way that very few games had done up to that point. Joe remarked that he had designed **Nicaragua** as a rebuttal to James McQuaid's **Central America**, published by Victory Games, that claimed to be about the conflict, but had no political content at all. To me, the latter was a long, wheezy, convoluted exercise in trying to figure out the optimum number of B-52 strikes or Marine brigades required to shatter the Cuban tank divisions that were



Brian Train game designs: **Land of the Free** (1995), **¡Arriba España!** (1997) and **Algeria** (2000)

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lurking on the border with Honduras, gassing up for the long drive to the Rio Grande.... Joe's game was quite different. I find Joe and I are on the same wavelength about a lot of things.

So yes, my tastes in what I like to play and design are not majority ones, insofar as this tiny hobby has a majority of anything. I design mostly on modern or contemporary conflicts because of my personal interest in learning more about them, by researching and building models of them; then I publish them in the hopes that people will try my model and learn a bit about the world around them (or possibly disagree with me enough to go and do some independent reading and designing of their own!)

C3i: How did you meet Kerry Anderson?

BT: I designed my first couple of games in 1990–92 when I was in Japan doing the teach-English bit, and after I came back to Canada I kept designing and started thinking about making my games available. In 1996 or so I met Kerry online, but we did not meet in person for a couple of years.

C3i: Starting a game company is like running an airline or raising thoroughbreds. You end up with a small fortune by starting with a large fortune. What madness prompted you

both to start Microgame Design Co-op (later Microgame Design Group)?

BT: Kerry had the idea to publish desktop-published (DTP) versions of wargames by otherwise unpublished designers in the hopes of attracting the attention of larger companies—or just for amateurs to get their product out there. We sold our first batch of six titles in 1996–97: **Macarthur's War**, **Smokejumpers**, and **Final Frontier** by Kerry; **Land of the Free** and **Arriba Espana** by me; and **Astromachia** (an involved space-ship combat game by Peter Drake).

Kerry's other idea was to make the publishing company non-profit by design, not by outcome, so no actual fortunes were involved. We priced these games for what it cost to produce and mail them—between \$9 and \$12 depending on the currency rate and destination, plus a dollar or so for wear and tear on the equipment (Kerry's computer and colour printer, plus the use of his closet as a store-room). We also spent nothing on advertising or promotion, but word of mouth did its stuff, and in the eight years that the Microgame Design Group was in play, a total of at least 7,000 copies among a total of 41 titles were produced.

The goal of the MDG was to promote aspiring designers, and I think we achieved that. Kerry had already been published. Besides me, Paul Rohrbaugh, Bruce Costello, and Hjalmar Gerber became recognized, and Peter Schutze started his own company (Schutze Games), and so on.

C3i: Can you tell us some stories about your experiences running MDG with Kerry?

BT: In 2000 we had to change the name from Microgame Co-op after getting a letter from the Alberta provincial government. Apparently the word *co-op* there is reserved for agricultural co-operative enterprises, so to continue to use the term we would need to have a board of directors, file annual reports of annual general meetings, pay for registered status, and make a bunch of other expensive changes, none of which would grow any wheat. There were many suggestions for a new name, but I liked this one.

Hmmm... not too many other anecdotes, really. We would sometimes get email inquiries from potential customers or potential designers, each of whom in his own way had no idea what he was getting into. I do recall we got a proposal, in all seriousness, from a guy who had done a game he wanted to call **Lawn Wars**, in commemoration of the great



(Above) Game map for **Nicaragua! Revolution in Central America** in *Strategy & Tactics Magazine* Nr120 by RBM Studio, Art & Map Design, ©Rodger B. MacGowan, 1988, 2015

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American suburban tradition of competitive lawn care. We turned him down gently.

In the fall of 2004 Kerry put the MDG into suspension because he wanted to go back to school to get his PhD (he's a meteorologist for the Canadian forest service). But I guess publishing was in his blood, because in 2013 he brought the MDG back, producing a mixture of old and new titles—with die-cut counters yet! (see <http://members.shaw.ca/kerryanderson/MDG/MDG.html>)

C3i: Now that you've gone solo, have you been able to convert your knowledge on COIN into actual coin?

BT: I once quipped to Kerry that, hour for hour, the time we spent on designing and publishing these games would have been much more profitable if we had spent it collecting aluminum cans. He's never let me forget it. Never was, and certainly never will be, in this line of work to make money. In good years it's a hobby that barely pays for itself; in other years it's an ordinary (if somewhat eccentric) time and money sink.

Sometimes you can do some good, though. Volko Ruhnke and I donated our first royalty payments for *A Distant Plain* to the *Wounded Warriors* organizations in our respective countries.

In 2014 I started BTR Games, a DTP-style outfit for producing my own titles, when and how I want them to appear (see: <https://brtrain.wordpress.com/btr-games/>). Some are older designs that have been out of print for years and given a graphic update and some rules rewrites; others are new titles. In homage to the old MDG I sell them for what it costs to print and mail them, plus a buck or two—\$15, which is about what an MDG DTP game would cost in 2015 dollars. The only difference is that DTP technology is a bit more advanced, giving a nicer looking product, and I print the counters on a sticker sheet, so you don't have to mess with glue, also making it very easy to produce two-sided counters. And I still stick 'em in comic book bags.

C3i: I love this quotation from you: "Wargames are telescoped, bloodless consequence-free models of protracted, bloody, and atavistic human actions; players almost never deal with the fallout of what they've done." What is it that you do in your designs to give players a taste of that fallout?

BT: Gee, that's a clever line. I had to Google it to see where I said it (it was from when I was *Boardgamegeek Designer of the Month*, back in 2012). I'll answer your question with the line preceding it in the diatribe: "...my more recent designs treat this topic in a bit more depth—starting with *Andartes*... and continuing on with *Kandahar*, *EOKA* and *District Commander*, players who engage in overly enthusiastic and deliberate violence

have to deal with the aftereffects of *kinetic* operations through the loss of popular support, movement of popular attitudes to the other side, the progressive difficulty of operations for both sides in *terrorized* areas, and so on."

The last two games listed haven't been published yet, but *EOKA* (a game on the 1955–59 Cyprus Emergency) has the mechanic of violence chits that are slowly removed over time, and in the *District Commander* series of modules neither player gets points for population control in a terrorized area, and the player who caused it may be penalized points—you get the idea. These are examples of simple mechanics to make players think a little bit about what's involved in *destroying the village in order to save it*.

I first used the idea of terrorized areas in my game on the Algerian War (MDG 2000, *Fiery Dragon* 2007), and given that the game partly influenced Volko Ruhnke's design of the COIN system, I wasn't surprised to see it surface there too. When Volko and I worked together on *A Distant Plain*, we had a mild difference of opinion about the use of terror, which in that game is a discrete operation carried out by the two insurgent factions to reduce *Support* for the government and build *Opposition* to it. He favored this interpretation; personally I subscribe to the work of the political scientist Stathis Kalyvas and others who think that the use of indiscriminate violence is counterproductive, and tends to suppress the tendency of non-combatants to support either side.

C3i: Designing any irregular warfare model must be hard because wargames are closed-loop systems, while real-life is not. For example, in *Millennium Challenge 2002* (Editor's Note: *A major war game exercise conducted by the United States armed forces in mid-2002*), Lt. General Paul Van Riper used such unconventional tactics that the referees simply hadn't allowed for. How do you account for inputs or actions that are hard or impossible to anticipate?

BT: Wargames are indeed attempted models of real life, and there is a tremendous amount of abstraction and blurring going on in every step of a game's design, development, and eventual play. And as the saying goes, the one thing you could never write is a list of all the things that could never occur to you. So you hope that the model you have created is flexible enough to allow for or explain that unanticipated action or event, not as an input, but to assess its effects on the game's variables.

Most of my games have random event tables and where it's workable, I incorporate as much hidden information and deception between players as possible, so they can, within the parameters of the game system, spring these kinds of surprises on each other.

I like to put a lot of asymmetry into a game's structure. I like the notion that the players might be sharing the same map, and moving their portions of the game's counters, but they are in effect playing different games. In an internal war situation, you cannot have the Rebel player's goals be the simple antithesis of the Government player's objectives. Well, you could, but that would be missing the point; conflict is never so simple a zero-sum game.

I like fog of war, because one of the great drawbacks of civilian wargames is that they are very nearly perfect-information exercises. Some players feel the need for a very great amount of control over their own forces, and for information about the enemy they face. Well, so did the historical counterparts whose roles the players are playing, but they didn't have it, did they? One feeling I only rarely get from a wargame is that stepping-off-a-cliff, plunging-ahead-into-the-mist moment, and I would like to be able to put more of that into my games.

I also like randomness and the unexpected. Causes are never tied nice and neatly to effects and certainly, what I find most challenging and at the same time the most liberating about designing games on these kinds of conflicts. Right now I'm also interested in modelling the concepts of "cascading effects," where a change in one part of a system will have unanticipated results in unexpected other parts, and the idea of the "black swan" event, as discussed by Nassim Nicholas Taleb in his book of the same name. Again, this does not sit well with some civilian players, who in my view often tend to treat wargames as mathematical minimax exercises or as intricate puzzles to be broken. In my view, these people should be playing nice, safe, predictable chess.

Peter Perla, a fine wargaming mind and *C3i Contributing Editor* who wrote *The Art of Wargaming* and who lives at the Center for Naval Analysis, says the best way to deal with the unexpected and complex future is to practice dealing with lots of unexpected and complex situations of all sorts, through interactive simulations and games—and then, most importantly reflect on what happened to you, and how you could do better. I think that's a good lesson to close on.

C3i: Going back to the American Civil War, the U.S. military has emphasized the use of overwhelming firepower to defeat the enemy. In COIN games involving U.S. forces, game designer Ted Raicer says the system, "...assumes that we could overcome that culture with the right leadership (the player). In that sense I consider it misleading, more alt-history than history. We could win only if we stopped being who we are." In light of Ted's observation, what are your thoughts

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around both U.S. use of COIN and your use of the COIN game system?

BT: U.S. military doctrine has always given primacy to the use of absolute and overwhelming firepower to destroy and defeat the enemy. But the U.S. military has spent more time (though certainly not more lives) in fighting irregular wars and campaigns in the years since the Civil War than it has in *conventional wars*. The former are no less violent, at least at the tactical level, but many of them relied more on maneuver and mobility than sheer firepower.

Ted says, “We could win only if we stopped being who we are.” So, perhaps he is speaking not about American doctrine but about American culture: “Git ‘Er Done”, in a big overwhelming way, in a big hurry, to a quick and final end so you don’t have to *git ‘er done* again later. Initially the operations in Afghanistan and Iraq looked this way, and they certainly got something done quickly; but then the U.S. decided to hang around, and suddenly they were playing a different game with very different rules, where firepower could not be depended upon in the same way.

Maybe the United States military could have “won” if it had stopped being one way and became something different—but then you have to ask yourself what “winning” would mean, and whether the changes required to win that way were worth the effort, or even possible. Institutional change is a fascinating subject, and institutional change in the military can have some very interesting social and political ramifications. Two really good books about this are Andrew Krepinevich’s *The Army and Vietnam* and John Nagl’s *Learning to Eat Soup With A Knife*.

Now, as for the COIN Game system, this system, unlike so many other wargames, is not based on firepower, or even maneuver. It’s at a level of abstraction where the kinetic (*bomby-shooty*) part of operations is just one feature of all that is going on in a particular operation being undertaken by a player. Firepower is only indirectly reflected in such things as an assumed lower ratio of U.S. troops per cube (though a cube does not and never has represented any fixed number of troops or police; if anything it reflects something like the collected military potential ability in an area—the “P sub E” rather than the “K sub E”, if you remember Physics class) or the Attrition rule in *Fire in the Lake* where insurgents engaging U.S. forces always take casualties by the assumed heavy return fire.

C3i: Does COIN in military operations and consim design assume too readily that the actors are willing to serve a greater good rather than act to advance narrow self interest?

BT: Games are played by human beings, and the tension between working for the

greater good and advancing your narrow interest (or petty thirst for revenge) is what makes for a good multiplayer game. As for this tension in reality, it’s far more complex. No one joins the military, or willingly becomes involved in a conflict, for reasons that are entirely selfish or entirely selfless.

C3i: Given the constraints that “real-life” imposes, do you think it’s easier to design a COIN game in a sci-fi setting, similar to the way the late Lynn Willis created *Bloodtree Rebellion* (GDW, 1979) loosely based on Vietnam?

BT: Actually, Lynn Willis started with a Vietnam game and on submitting it was told by GDW (think it was Marc Miller, but I could be wrong) to rework it as a SF game, for political and social acceptability—this was the late 1970s after all. When it was published, people immediately saw what had been substituted for what—they knew what they were playing. Sometimes it works the other way round too—the old SPI game *Freedom in the Galaxy* (1979), a thinly disguised ripoff of *Star Wars*, is actually a pretty good game about counterinsurgency!

If you have something to say about the world you live in, I think it’s important to come right out and say it, and take the consequences. People thought we were variously brave, foolish, or crass to come out with a game on Afghanistan before the war was even over: the moment that *A Distant Plain* was announced for P500 pre-orders on *Boardgamegeek*, in the absence of any factual information about the game, a thread that petered out after about four days, and 150 posts, had people accusing us of all kinds of things (also, because it was *Boardgamegeek*, about 2/3 of the way through someone posted specifically

to tell us all that he had no experience of what we were discussing, no interest in Afghanistan, and had no intention to buy the game) – but I think we were right to publish the game.

It’s apparent that even after decades of militarizing influences at work in American popular culture (or perhaps because of them), there is a generalized unwillingness among the general public to come to grips with the complexity of current conflicts beyond a superficial level. It’s interesting to note that even after 9/11/01, with the explosion of books, magazine articles, blogs and websites devoted to counterinsurgency and terrorism, there has been no parallel great increase in popular demand for intellectually demanding games on this subject—popular interest has been mostly confined to modifications of tactical-scale, first-person shooter computer games that for the most part fail to convey the background and complexity of these conflicts. A small but notable exception is *Spec Ops: The Line*, a 2012 video game that tackled the corrosive moral and psychological effects of irregular warfare as the players become complicit in war crimes and lose their sanity, events forced on them by the game’s linear structure and lack of choices—which itself is a criticism of both the unimaginative design of most “shooter” games, and the unquestioning bellicosity and shallow sense of morality shown by the players of these games. Times are changing, and there are other examples, too.

C3i: In November 2014, video game creator 11 bit studios released the intriguing *This War of Mine*. It is presented from the perspective of a civilian trying to survive the Siege of Sarajevo during the Bosnian War. Are you interested in war from the civilian’s perspective?



A *Distant Plain* game designers Brian Train (left) and Volko Ruhnke (right).

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BT: I don't play video games, but I read an extensive review of this game by the brilliant James Sterrett on my friend Rex Brynen's blog *Paxsims* (see: <https://paxsims.wordpress.com/2014/11/27/review-this-war-of-mine/>). Towards the end, he says: "... continued survival depends on a social network, fragile though it may be. Neighbors you helped may still help you. People whom you have established trading relations with will still be there, and the time I succeeded in surviving the game, it was trading that got me through. In this subtle way, **This War of Mine** reinforces the importance of cooperation with groups outside your own, and mingles a slight note of hope into its overall tone of desperation." I found this the most interesting point of all.

Of course I am interested in war from the civilian's perspective; anyone who studies military history without a conscious awareness of the defenceless people that War tramples is oblivious of the point, in the most infantile way—like those people who collect Third Reich daggers, or fret about how many porcelain figurines were destroyed in the firebombing of Dresden. This is even more important today, since in many so-called "wars" in recent memory effectively only one side has shown up with guns.

C3i: You once mentioned that you've been criticized for a perceived left-wing bias in your designs. What are your views on a designer's role?

BT: This is something that's been levelled against me only a few times. I'll admit that some of my game designs treatment of some radical political subjects, for example, the Battle of Seattle, the Chinese Cultural Revolution, and games on leftist guerrilla movements. And I'll also admit that my personal politics tend left rather than right. I am also not an American, which places my mental frame of reference a little out of skew with the numerical majority of board wargamers. But as for bias, my having designed games on the Tupamaros and Sendero Luminoso doesn't make me a Marxist any more than designing a game on the Battle of the Bulge makes me a closet Nazi.

Board games are complex cultural artifacts (see the series of thoughtful posts on this by C3i Magazine author Jeremy Antley; <http://www.peasantmuse.com/2010/09/boardgames-as-complex-cultural.html>). This makes them a form of art, and as such they are a product of the mind of the artist, who in turn is the sum of his experiences, knowledge, and beliefs. Therefore, like all human creative endeavors, a wargame is not and cannot be a perfectly neutral object. The designer, through the processes of research, conceptualizing, testing, and production of a game, must make a series of choices of what to include in his design and

what to leave out. As always though, it's more complicated than that.

There is the subject matter itself. Wargames take their place in the continual exercise of historical revision and socially useful amnesia that forms part of mankind's romanticization of war—though wargames do this in a strange Rationalist way: they attempt to portray the species at its most illogical and atavistic, through a rational framework of consistent logical regulations and mathematical modeling and often a prime concern for only what is thought to be *militarily significant*. To carry this further, there is also an expectation of objectivity, since a wargame purports to portray a model of reality—this is one reason why the playbooks in the COIN Series of games are so thick with Designer's Notes, explanations of the historical background of each Event Card, and bibliographies: we want to show our work.

Then there is the nature of the designer's relationship to the marketplace. Because a wargame is a commodity meant to be consumed (that is, bought and played, or at least studied), the game systems, artwork, images, and content are chosen to entice the player/customer. This can involve some self-censoring right out of the gate. And in the end, the designer's attempts to communicate something can be even further frustrated, cancelled, or even reversed by the choices of other people involved in the development and publication of the work, choices over which he has no control (and sometimes not even any knowledge) until it's too late.

C3i: What game projects are brewing in your fertile imagination these days?

BT: A lot of people have been asking me that lately. Lots! In no particular order:

- **Colonial Twilight:** 2-player COIN system game on 1954–62 Algerian War, GMT Games, now in blind playtesting, made the P500 List fairly briskly.

- Re-do of my 1999 **Algeria** game, 140 counters and 17" x 22" map, testing out the changes (rules, counters, scenarios), likely to come out in 2016 as a folio by OSS Games.

- **Winter Thunder: Battle of the Bulge** – This started as a revision of **Autumn Mist**, a Bulge game I did 13 years ago, but I made so many substantial changes that it is essentially a new game; I have a publisher lined up.

- **Binh Dinh '69:** an operational-level COIN in that province of Vietnam. Simpler game, originally designed for a history professor at Nipissing University to use in his class. Likely to be another folio by OSS Games.

- **EOKA (Cyprus 1955–59):** this game has

been ready for a while, just haven't lined up any cover art for it. A detailed study of COIN with some new ideas in it I like, but no one is interested in the topic, except for a couple of people; it's a shame because historically the topic is a very interesting insurgency campaign. Will probably just do it as a BTR Games product.

- **Civil Power**, a redesign of one of the first games I did, tactical game on riot-making and breaking, lots of scenarios and DYO. Artwork needs to be finished by a friend, then some testing for balance. Probable BTR Games product.

- **Caudillo**, an interesting multiplayer card game on negotiating power vacuums in a fictional Latin American state. People like it, but production will be a beast. It really points up tension between common good and self-interest; coups too. It needs cards and wooden cubes, so production is problematic.

- **Palace Coup**, a simple multi-player game on *coups d'état*, cards and counters. Yes, coups again.

- **District Commander:** this is a game system I worked out a couple of years ago for operational (campaign) level COIN. It features hidden information and diceless combat, and some other ideas I really like. Modules complete or under development: generic Red vs. Blue, Kandahar 2009, Algeria 1959, Vietnam 1969. In the end I will probably just do it as a BTR Games product.

- **Thunder Out of China:** a 4-player COIN system game on the 1937–41 Sino-Japanese War. I'm still framing this up, and have yet to work out the Event Deck (lots of strange things happened during this war). GMT Games saw a prototype at the June 2015 Consimworld Expo, but lots of COIN system games are jostling for attention, and there are no Americans involved, hence P500 will likely be slow if it ever got that far. This one will have a quite different focus from the other games in the series—**Andean Abyss** had three insurgent and one government factions; **A Distant Plain** and **Fire in the Lake** had two of each; this one has one insurgent and three sort-of-government factions, but they all hate each other... you might like this one if you have a passive-aggressive streak in you.

C3i: Brian, your intellectual firepower and design approach remind me why I find our hobby and its devotees so intriguing. Thank you for sharing your fascinating insights.

BT: Thanks Sam, it was a pleasure talking with you.

