

Poppies (v. 1.2)

A game for one player.

Materials: Board, military gear, poppies, dove, tumbler.

Rules of Play:

Place the military gear inside the tumbler.

Shake the gear around inside the tumbler and then spill it across the field from a height of at least several inches. You cannot move the gear once it has landed and if gear falls off the map, you cannot move it: the gear lands where it lands.

Place a dove at any square at the exterior of the field.

The dove 'flies' about the board in an 'L' shape, like the knight in chess: the dove lands at a spot that is either two spaces horizontal and one space vertical from where he or she last landed or two spaces vertical and one space horizontal from said position.

When the dove moves from a space, sprinkle the sequins (poppies) onto that space. The dove cannot land on a space that already has poppies on it.

If the poppies fall onto adjacent spaces, do not move them: the poppies land where they land.

Optional rule: Sprinkle the red sequins (poppies) onto every space the dove moves over.

Optional rule: The dove cannot move over a space that already has poppies on it.

The dove obliterates the weapons and symbols of war so they may no longer be used to harm anyone ever again, removing them from the field and replacing them with peace and remembrance. When the dove lands on a space containing military equipment, remove the equipment from the board. You should remove the equipment even if part of it is on an adjacent space, but you cannot remove equipment that is not at least partially on the space in which you landed.

Try to remove all the equipment so the poppies may grow. Each poppy will help us remember those who have died in war.

When the dove can no longer move, or all the poppies are placed, or all the gear is removed from the board, the game ends.

Can you fill the field completely with poppies?

Red corn poppies (Papaver rhoeas) are a traditional flower of wartime remembrance in Britain and Canada. They are commonly worn or placed on soldier's graves and memorials during Remembrance Day, November 11. Poppies are also used as emblems on tombstones to symbolize eternal sleep. The symbol of the red poppies as a memorial day icon seems to come primarily from the poem "Flanders Fields" by John McCrae, though the poem appears to be closer to propaganda, of continuing 'the good fight' than of silent remembrance as in Eric Bogle's "The Green Fields of France." White poppies are a symbol of the peace movement, representing not only remembrance but also peace and a call to end all war.

Commentary

Poppies was the second major paper-based antiwar game I developed. The game was designed as a response to images of the military cemeteries of the First World War with their countless white crosses and fields of red poppies.¹ In Britain and Canada, the corn poppy is used a symbol of remembrance for the war dead, particularly those of the First World War. The symbol was popularized in the poem “In Flanders Fields,” written by John McCrae, which describes poppies growing in the military graveyards of Belgium. However, the poem has an underlying patriotic pro-war theme where the reader is encouraged to follow in the footsteps of those who died before so that ‘they shall not have died in vain’ (despite the fact that this was exactly what they were doing), thus arguing for a continuation of the long, pointless, and bloody conflict. Poppies retains the sense of loss and remembrance initially suggested by the poem and the images of military graveyards, retaining imagery more in line with Eric Bogle’s “The Green Fields of France.”

In the game’s design, the battlefield is an empty grid on a green board, filled only with the discarded military equipment. There are no gravestones here, no bodies of the dead, only the material that was left behind, suggesting the memory and trauma of war. The player’s role is to remove the gear of war from the battlefield and replace them with poppies as symbols of peace and remembrance. It is notable that the player removes the equipment of both sides of the conflict, equipment that is more or less undifferentiated as both sides use the same weapons.

The poppies are represented by small, bright red sequins. The sequins stand out on the dark green of the game board, creating a beautiful mix of colors. Because the sequins are so small and light, they are not only difficult to pick up but can also easily be blown away by the player’s breath, suggesting both the frailty of human life and the fragility of memory and remembrance: the poppies are something to be cared for, to not be roughly treated or forgotten as they can easily be lost or destroyed and are difficult to recollect. In addition, the placing of the poppies follows a system of meditation and remembrance – it is calming to drop the poppies onto the game board, and the game’s slow pace prevents a feeling of urgency that would shatter the experience.²

In the game rules, the player adds the military equipment to the game board. For the prototype, pirate Legos were used, with rifles, pistols, swords, hats, and knapsacks. When the pieces are added to the board, they are dropped from a height onto its surface, making them spread out randomly. As a result, some equipment can fall off the edge of the board – should this happen, it will be impossible for the player to collect them. These pieces will not only suggest that the battlefield extends in all directions but also suggests the impossibility of completely retaining memory and remembrance for the victims of all wars and our focus on merely a small number of individuals in memorial ceremonies. This is further reinforced by the possibility that it may be impossible for the player to solve particular layouts and remove all of the equipment from the board.

For future versions, I am considering the use of silver sequins to represent the white poppy movement

¹ This theme was further explored in Commandopede.

² It was also strangely meditative to collect the red sequins from a large pile of multi-colored sequins. The process took a long time, and only provided a relatively small number of sequins, though it was a calming experience.

and the use of a green felt or cloth game board for easier transportation.

Design Problem 1: The Player's Avatar

The primary design problem central to this game is the depiction of the player's avatar. In the test prototype, the character was an androgynous Lego pirate with a thick beard, a woman's bodice, a hook, and a wooden leg. Though the character design serves to undermine the traditional masculine imagery of war and is a comical character, it fails to produce a convincing argument.

As a result, I have considered using other imagery such as a child, though when a child is used, several problems arise. First, the child's appearance will hinder the game's universality. For example, if the child is white, this foregrounds a discussion of the experience of black or Asian soldiers. The same is true if the child were to be male or female: gender issues would become foregrounded. The advantage to using a child though is that it suggests hope for a new generation, though another disadvantage is that a child running around a battlefield introduces a morbid scenario.

I eventually settled on the use of the dove, a characters who can represent the propagation of the poppies but also the symbolism of peace. It also solves a problem involving the symbolism of how pieces were removed from the game board, as illustrated below. Birds also have the advantage of not having to worry about stepping on land mines – something an adult or child would certainly have to deal with.

Design Problem 2: Symbolism of 'Collection'

In the original game rules, there was no description of what happened to the war gear after it has been removed from the board. As a result, this ambiguity invites the player to create his or her own interpretation: as one play tester put it, is the character collecting the weapons, perhaps so he can use them in combat elsewhere?

This illustrated for me the inherent ambiguity in the symbolism of game rules. A simple act of removing a piece from the game board may suggest a wide range of possibilities such as death, capture, collection, removal, transportation, or eating (think *Pac-Man* or *Hungry, Hungry Hippos*). In its most abstract form, the piece that is removed from the board may be considered as being moved from one location to another and/or from one state (of being) to another. The action gains its specific interpretation from its surrounding context of rules and visual and narrative representation.

As a result, the rules were modified to make this relationship much more clear through narrative symbolism and by changing the player's avatar. The dove will remove and obliterate the symbols and elements of war so they may not be used again.

Digital Poppies

A digital version of Poppies is in development for Stagecast Creator. The game contains the same rules as the physical version. Here, the poppies will gradually grow over time. When the game is completed,

the poppies will finally fully mature in an animation based on the order in which the poppies were placed. This design was accidentally discovered through a flaw in the prototype's programming, where characters such as the poppies will perform the animation in the order in which they were placed onto the game space, rather than all of them together simultaneously. This has been incorporated as a 'cutscene' in which the player views the results of his or her play experience through an animation that covers all the places he or she has visited.

Though the rules of the game are fairly complete, the largest barrier that remains is to finish the art assets, which demand a great deal of care and detail. Once basic animations are finished, more experimental gameplay may be explored, such as making the game a freeform puzzle that provides variety and obstacles to movement but also retains the meditative and slow-paced feel of the original.³

3 This has been partially inspired by the puzzle game *Bloxorz* (<http://www.itsjustabitoffun.com/date/2007/8/7>) as well as Ian Bogost's article on Video Game Zen (http://www.gamasutra.com/view/feature/2585/persuasive_games_video_game_zen.php) which argues that frustration and exciting visual imagery remove players from the meditative state particular games claim to put their players into. Such a task will involve further exploration of the kinds of games Bogost mentions (as well as others he does not, like *Pikmin*) and the experiences and emotions they *do* produce.