Twitter Thread by Tom and Mary Russell



Tom and Mary Russell
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I have some thoughts re: the responses that @GameMinimalist got yesterday when he expressed his discomfort with history-based conflict games, their Euro-centric nature, and imperialist overtones/undertones. 1/

There are many people who are uncomfortable with wargames (the term I'm going to use as shorthand for "games that attempt to engage seriously with, or to model, some aspect of history in some way"). And that's okay. 2/

If someone is expressing that discomfort, I personally think the first and in some cases only thing one can or should do is *acknowledge* that. Listen to them and their concerns. 3/

If they're misinformed - a lot of folks seem to think that wargames are about gore and violence and bloodlust, that they act as a pressure release for dark impulses, which simply isn't true. I mean, converting numbers to an odds ratio isn't exactly drenched in viscera -- 4/

go ahead and correct that misinformation, while understanding that they might still be uncomfortable with it, and it's perfectly valid for that to be the case.

This reminds me of my grandfather. 5/

My grandfather served in two wars - WW2 and Korea. And when he heard that what I did for a living was making wargames, he was fairly disgusted. "I don't know how you can make a game out of war. There's too much blood." 6/

This wasn't helped by a "helpful" aunt who, trying to get us to "bond" or whatever, kept pestering me to "do a game on that battle grandpa was in" -- Tarawa. 7/

Which I wasn't going to do - that's not really the sort of game I'm interested in, or where I feel like my voice/perspective is useful. Nor was I gonna try to get my grandfather to engage in something he found fundamentally unsavory and distasteful. 8/

I did correct his misconception about what the games where and how they functioned, and he seemed to regard me with less disgust, while we both acknowledged that it wasn't the sort of thing he was interested in. And that's fine. 9/

Wargames, as my friend Cole Wehrle once said, are played from a "privilege of distance". There are folks for whom the topics are too close, either from direct experience of the thing or from direct experience of its repercussions. 10/

It's important to listen to & acknowledge folks who are uncomfortable with wargames, b/c those voices help us interrogate our own unquestioned biases, and help us figure out what the games we're making are saying instead of just what we intend them to say. 11/

My friend @gutterowl wrote about this w/r/t her game Meltwater, where she was very careful that her game about the use of starvation as a deliberate weapon did not accidentally feed into dangerous over-population myths. 12/

(Incidentally, though it in some ways feels like a wargame, I'm pretty sure Erin's never rolled on a CRT or consulted a TEC in her life. Proof that you don't need experience w/ the genre to be a designer, & of the importance of new, distinct, diverse voices.) 13/

My three solitaire games are about a singular historical figure pulling off something remarkable (and also something horrifying, imperialists all), and you could argue they're very "great man of history". Not my intention, but, like, sure, it's there due to my own blind spot. 14/

Part of how I'm approaching my next solo game - about Shackleton & the Endurance - is informed by folks saying "hey, not sure if you know that your game is kinda saying X", so I'm doing a game about how a "great man" almost got everyone killed & 15/

they only got through by the skin of their teeth.

History, and thus historical games, are full of unquestioned assumptions and blinkered blind spots, and it's not "political correctness" or "trolling" when folks point them out. 16/

Like, I personally don't think we need any more games about Brave European Explorers Venturing Into Darkest Africa (blech), and I sure as heck think that if you're gonna do a game like that, you don't wanna lean into it with tone-deaf titles like "Scramble for Africa" or 17/

"Heart of Darkness", titles that fully-embody the imperialist perspective. I don't think the folks behind those designs "intend" the games to come across like that, I think they just aren't aware of their own blind spots. And when people point this stuff out, 18/

either they can listen or they can double-down. And, I mean, no one's stopping them from doing what they want. People expressing their disapprobation at you or boycotting your game isn't "cancel culture". 19/

(And, just so we're clear, if people are angry about your game or statement or whatever, THEY'RE ALLOWED TO BE. They don't have to be "polite" or "respectful". Tone-policing is often a tool used to dismiss marginalized voices; civility, a tool of oppression.) 20/

If wargames as a niche/hobby/what-not is serious about getting more diverse voices into it - voices that will offer new perspectives and help less-marginalized designers recognize and correct for blind-spots - then it needs to accept 21/

that these voices aren't always going to be convenient or deferential (nor should they be), aren't going to tell us what we want to hear, will often tell us what we don't, will have a very different take on what these sorts of games mean and can be. 22/

The whole thing about wanting diverse voices is that they're not gonna sound like the voices you're used to. That's what makes it so important to listen to them, and to acknowledge the validity of their perspective and their discomfort. 23/23