Word War

A card-based RPG by Axiel Cazeneuve

"Language is neither reactionary nor progressive; it is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech."

-Roland Barthes

Foreword

Word War was published as part as an antifascist RPG charity zine, *Postcards from Cable Street.* If you can, please consider buying the PDF version on itch.io or the paper zine from Rook's Press.

Concept

Word War is a short card-based RPG for approx. 3 to 5 players. It is inspired by Roland Barthes' statement that language is fascist. Because its structures pervade and determine our every thought and the possibility to communicate, language is oppressive and serves a certain power. In Barthes' opinion, the only way to make language *anarchist* – literally, without power or command – is through literature: by playing with language and changing its meanings.

The dynamic around language in political activism is similar to this, as we fight for intelligibility or appropriate stigmas. This is why this RPG places the anti-fascist (or, at the very least, anti-authoritarian) struggle in the field of language. In this game, two parties, the Activists and the System, fight by removing and appropriating words from each other, until one party is not able to express its core ideology anymore.

Word War is preceded by **workshops**, during which players define their **word pool**, from which they are able to draw during the game to defend their ideas or enact laws. They also define their **ideology** through key measures they want to enforce and causes they fight for. A small number of **action cards** played each turn add a risk-management component.

It is not a fair game: the System, although in minority, is favored (as in life).

The Game

Practicalities

The game is designed for **3 to 5 players** (adding players is possible but might make the game too long), divided in two teams: **the System** and **the Activists**. There should be fewer people playing the System (ex: 3 Activists, 1 System).

The duration of the game largely depends on the number of players, the duration of workshops, and how at-ease they are with making speeches. However, it is not a short game: you can expect it to last from half an hour to three hours. Workshops might take up to an hour for five players.

To play this game, you need:

- Printed **Action cards** (one of each per corresponding player), or blank pieces of paper on which to write the actions;
- 15-30 blank pieces of paper per player and a couple pens;
- A piece of paper each on which to write **measures** they want to enact (System) and **causes** to fight for (Activists). This is their core **ideology**.

Game space:

- Two distinct word piles (randomized each turn);
- Separate Action cards for each player;
- The statements, face down;
- A Discard pile.

Workshops

Workshops help define the game world, ideology, and word pool. You may take some time prior to the workshops to discuss what kind of System and Activism you want to portray (although the Activists will have to adapt to the System's worldviews, as their own ideology is defined in opposition).

1) Word pool

The **word pool** is the vocabulary from which players will draw from during the game to defend their ideology. **It is definite:** for example, if the word "homophobia" doesn't appear in their word pool, Activists will not be able to use it to denounce discriminatory measures against gay and lesbian people.

Alternatively, you can download pre-made decks from the author's website here: https://larpinprogress.com/en/games/wordwar/

2) Game world

Activists each ask **up to 10 questions** to the System (if there are three activists or more, consider making it shorter). The questions should help outline the society they live in: ask at least about **social, economical and political** aspects.

Take turns asking questions and answering them (if there's more than one System player), or collaborate fully (doing so lasts longer, but improves consistency). It is possible to divide aspects between activists to focus the questions.

For each question, **the System writes down one or two key words** (or phrases) on a blank piece of paper and adds it to their **word pool**. In reaction, **Activists may add one key word** to their word pool. The party asking questions merely **rephrases, in their own words and according to their views,** what was said: in this phase, they don't define their own ideology (ex: if the System writes "national preference", Activists should not answer "internationalism", as it is a completely different thing, but instead maybe "xenophobia" or something that might designate the same phenomenon within a different set of values).

Example:

> Activist: What's your position on immigration?
>
> System: It must be limited to those deserving of our country.
>
> System writes down "Merit". Activists write down "Ethnocentrism".

Change positions; the System now interrogates Activists. If there's only one System player, the System should ask **up to 15 questions**.

Add roughly **10% of blank papers** to each party to allow them to adapt during the game (if you draw a blank card, you're free to write down a new word – basically a joker). Mark all System word cards with an S, Activists' with an A. Shuffle each word pool and make piles.

Players may take a moment to clarify things before moving to the next workshop.

3) Ideology

When the game world is defined, each party secretly writes down up to **five statements.**

For the System, statements are **measures** they mean to enact.

For Activists, they are **causes** they fight for.

One statement corresponds to one round, so you may want to adapt the number of statements to the number of participants.

In game, **statements must be defended using available words.** However, while writing statements they may use words that haven't yet been written on cards.

Action cards

Each round, each player plays **one action card, face down.** Each player has one blank card in case they want to do nothing (so the other players can't know before it is revealed).

Action cards are played secretly and players must not communicate about it.

Action cards for Activists are:

- **Strike** — *Workers cease production to gain leverage against the System*
- **Protest** — *Activists march or use direct action to make their claims heard*
- **Blank card**

Actions cards for the System are:

- **Repression** — *the System sends the police or the army to repress Activists.*
- **Blank card**

1) Strike

The Strike card aims to **delete cards** from the System's word pool.

If **all Activists play "Strike" at the same round,** the number of deleted cards equals *[number of activists + number of activists/2]*.

If **at least one but not all Activists play "Strike"**:

- If the System played **"Repression"**, the System removes **one extra card per Activist** *not* **on Strike this turn.**
- If the System didn't use Repression, **delete one card per Activist on Strike.**

Repression has no effect in case of general strike.

2) Protest

The Protest card aims to **retrieve cards** from those discarded by the System.

For each Protest card played this turn, Activists browse the Discard pile and pick **one word card**.

Repression cancels the Protest and allows the System to pick one discarded pile.

3) Repression

The Repression card is useful to defend the System against Activists, but it must be used wisely.

Repression must be played by a majority of System players to be successful (if only one out of two System players play Repression, it has no effect).

If it is played against nothing, each Activist **randomly removes one card** from each System player who played the card.

Speech

Speeches are made using words drawn from the word pool each turn. It's okay to add verbs and content to fill in of course, but **no key word or concept should be used outside of the available word pool.** It is meant to simulate the difficulty to express a different ideology through language, as it is tailored to the needs of the dominants.

Even when there is no way to "win" or "lose" the round, try to be on point and not just make random sentences!

Round Breakdown

There are as many **rounds** as **statements** written during the **workshops**, plus the **introduction round** in which players present their **ideology**.

Introduction round

Drawing from their whole word pool, the Activists then the System introduce their ideology. They can reveal as much of it as they want, but not precisely divulgate the statements previously written. White lies are allowed (how would the System do otherwise?) but the introduction must provide a good base for later interaction.

Speech time is divided among the players in each team. They may take some time to discuss it and calibrate who says what.

Following rounds

1) Players each secretly draw **10 cards** (or until there's none left) from their word pool.
2) The System randomly **draws 3 cards** from each Activist's word pool, and **replaces** one in each with one of their own. They may then **remove** each

replaced card, or **add them** to their hand. They then complete their hand up to 10 cards, drawing from their word pool.

3) Without consulting each other, each player plays an Action card, **face down**, on the table. It is immediately revealed and acted upon.

4) One **statement** is revealed (alternatively by the Activists and the System, starting with the System).

5) A player from the relevant party makes the first **speech**. It can be completed by other members. Players within a party can consult each other before deciding who goes first.

6) Players from the opposite party **object** to the statement..

7) Players from the proposing party conclude the round. All players must have spoken for a round to end.

Removed or deleted cards go to the **Discard Pile.**

Action cards are not spent (the players get them back each round).

To win or not to win

During testing, it was found that the game was fun to play without needing to decide who "won". However, if you like to have conditions of victory, here are a few suggestions:

- Collectively decide which group was most convincing each round.
- If available words don't allow you to defend your statement, the round is lost.
- Play through the game and count how many (or what percentage) words in each pile are the party's (ex: Activists have only 40% of Activist vocabulary in the end, while the System has 70%).
- An outside referee decides who was most convincing each round.
- etc.