

Area Control



War-gaming is a thread that runs through much of board game design, and indeed, modeling conflicts through games remains a popular genre. At the center of games of conflict is the notion of controlling an area.

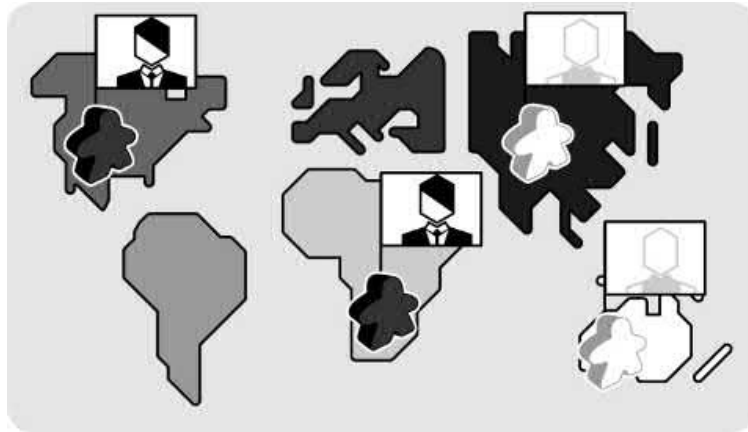
How a game represents this idea is tied to the overall scope of the conflict depicted. Theater-level games that deal with continents and countries tend to be more binary and abstract about control, while individual and squad-level games may not even define it, though the force projection capabilities of units will nonetheless enforce control over different parts of the board.

Area control games are more common in the American design school, but over time, European designers have brought indirect conflict and rapid resolution concepts into the space.

The term area majority is sometimes used in place of area control, and another term area influence is also used. There isn't a reliable definition for any of these terms. But here's one way to think of them: Area Influence is the highest-level category, which would cover all types of relationships between players, their tokens, and the specific areas they inhabit. Area Majority and Area Control would be two sub-branches of Area Influence. In practice, however, Area Majority and Area Control are the dominant mechanical forms we observe in games, and the distinction between the two is often ignored. Thus, we've chosen the name Area Control to stand for all the various mechanisms of control and influence that we'll discuss.

Many of the mechanisms discussed here are a subset of Chapter 10, "Movement." However, their use is specialized and common enough to warrant a chapter of their own.

ARC-01 Absolute Control



Description

One player has Absolute Control of an area.

Discussion

Absolute Control games, which are frequently referred to as Area Control games, have territories with a binary character: controlled by a single player or uncontrolled. Controlled territories typically only contain one player's units, and other players are barred from co-existing in that territory. This type of control can be seen in *Risk*, where attempting to move into enemy-occupied territories triggers a battle. This is as distinct from games like *Chess* or *Onitama*, where a piece might project force across other spaces but can never protect the space it occupies itself and is simply captured when another piece enters its space. This is further distinct from games in which multiple factions can share a territory without triggering a confrontation, like *Root*.

This observation leads us to another element of an area more generally, which is that it's important to know who controls the space, because the space occupied provides benefits, gives access to certain abilities, or produces resources. The reason to occupy the space is not simply tactical and positional. In *Axis & Allies*, spaces produce industrial production credits that can be used to buy new units. In *Small World*, territories may have different features like hills or mines, which may trigger specific effects or abilities, including bonus scoring.

Many games allow players to control a territory even though they have evacuated the units within it. Typically, these are marked with a “control

token” or something similar to indicate ownership of the area, like *Axis & Allies*. However, some games, like *Diplomacy*, do not do this but rely on the players to remember which spaces are controlled. In *Diplomacy*, this is not much of a hardship because control only matters to special Supply Center spaces, and there are few of those. The last player to control a non-Supply Center space has no impact on the game.

Another consideration is how areas change control. The most common is occupation by units. However, some games allow control to transfer without units, such as through diplomacy actions in *Pax Britannica* and *Divine Right*. In the latter, neutral countries (composed of many spaces) may be persuaded to join a player’s side, in which case, all the areas pass to the control of that player. Similarly, they can revert to neutral status or control of another player. *Diplomacy* only allows Supply Centers to change control every second turn, which gives players more time and space to maneuver.

Sample Games

Axis & Allies (Harris, Jr., 1981)

Chess (Unknown, ~1200)

Diplomacy (Calhamer, 1959)

Divine Right (Rahman and Rahman, 1979)

Onitama (Sato, 2014)

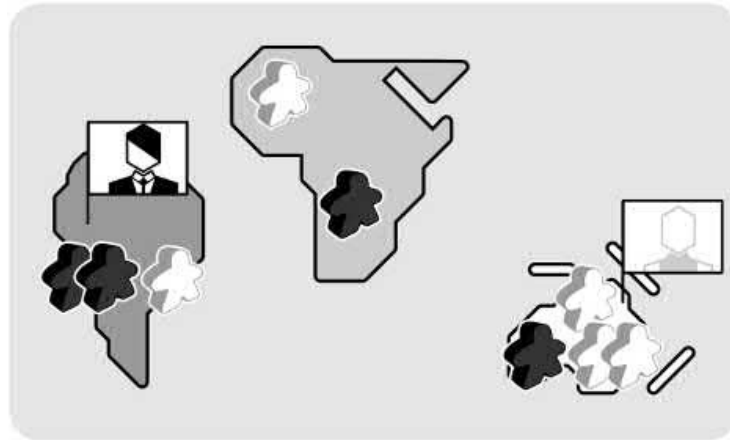
Pax Britannica (Costikyan, 1985)

Risk (Lamorisse and Levin, 1959)

Root (Werle, 2018)

Small World (Keyaerts, 2009)

ARC-02 Area Majority/Influence



Description

Multiple players may occupy a space and gain benefits based on their proportional presence in the space.

Discussion

An elegant example of European design sensibilities applied to American-style conflict games is the area majority mechanism of *El Grande*. Each province is worth a different number of Victory Points (VPs) that will be awarded to the player with the most caballeros (soldiers) present in the province. Points are also awarded to the players with the second- and third-most caballeros in the region. Caballeros do not directly interact, and there is no conflict resolution mechanism of any kind. Instead, the game implements a Multiple-Lot simultaneous Auction (AUC-11) themed as a conflict game. The game is not won with tactical brilliance or a lucky streak of die-rolling but through efficiency in winning auctions for VPs.

This idea of efficiency is clearer in an even older game from the late nineteenth century, *Reversi*. In *Reversi*, both players will, in turn, play 32 double-sided tokens to the board, flipping tokens of their opponent's color when they lie in an orthogonal or diagonal line between the newly placed token and one or more anchoring tokens. The game is only scored after all tokens are laid down, with the player controlling the majority of the 64 spaces on the board being the victor. One could similarly envision *Go* as an area majority game, though it is strategically more of an area Enclosure game (RES-12).

In *Twilight Struggle*, players must not only have a majority of influence in a country in order to obtain control, but they must also have an edge over their opponent equal to the country's stability number. Stable countries with dependable governments, like Japan, have a stability number of 4, while war-torn, weaker nations who were pawns in the global contest, like Lebanon, have a stability number of 1. Controlling a country grants a few benefits, including doubling the cost of your opponent adding influence to the country through normal operations. However, being on the short end of that influence battle isn't all bad. As long as you had a presence in the country, you could spread influence to adjacent countries. This is a good example of how different levels of presence and domination of an area can offer different tactical and strategic advantages.

The notable distinction of Area Majority games is that troops of opposing factions can co-exist in the same territory. In *Inis*, not only can opposing clansmen co-exist in the same space, there is even a victory condition which calls for sharing spaces with factions in six different territories. Relatedly, the combat mechanism of *Inis* allows for players to participate in a round or two of combat and then mutually agree to stop fighting, without withdrawing any troops.

Civilization also allows for units from multiple players to co-exist in the same space as long as the total number of tokens does not exceed the food value. If it does, conflict occurs, but there is ample opportunity for peaceful co-occupation. Unlike *Twilight Struggle* and *El Grande*, there is no inherent benefit from having more tokens in a space in *Civilization*, unless combat breaks out. But it can serve as a base from which to expand.

While some games allow fluidity to the states of control a territory may exhibit, other games have moments where control must crystallize and resolve in some way. While turn-based approaches are common, in which scoring happens at the end of the round or at the end of some specific rounds, other games tie triggering resolution to the size of the forces present in the territory. In *Smash Up*, each base has a trigger number. Once the sum of forces played to that base equals or exceeds the trigger number, the base is scored. Similarly, in *Retreat to Darkmoor*, the legendary hero attacks a line of fleeing villains when the sum of the threat values of the villains breaches the hero's stability number. In *Darkmoor*, only those villains surviving the hero's attack are placed in the haven, whose victory points they will score based on majorities at game-end. For more on this topic, see Chapter 4, "Resolution."

It is worth noting that in a standard Area Majority game, where rewards are granted based on the ownership of a space, ties need to be considered by

the designer. Some games use “friendly” ties, where all players tied for first, for example, receive first-place points. Other use “unfriendly” ties, where players tied for first are awarded second-place points. Other tie-breaking mechanisms (RES-18) are possible, such as priority tokens or simply not allowing players to create a tie.

Sample Games

Civilization (Tresham, 1980)

El Grande (Kramer and Ulrich, 1995)

Go (Unknown, 2200 BCE)

Inis (Martinez, 2016)

Retreat to Darkmoor (Loomis and Shalev, 2016)

Reversi (Mollet and Waterman, 1883)

Smash Up (Peterson, 2012)

Twilight Struggle (Gupta and Matthews, 2005)