GDC

March 20-24, 2023
San Francisco, CA

Reimagining Historical Settings in Game Design

Cole Wehrle (PhD, *You can trust me about this stuff.*)
Creative Director, Leder Games
Co-Founder, Wehrlegig Games

ROOT
A Game of Wo
Oath
GAME BY
Cole Wehrle
ART BY
Kyle Ferrin
CHRONICLES OF EMPIRE & EXILE
Pax Pamir
SECOND EDITION
محاربہ کابل و قندہار
Design by
Cole Wehrle
JOHN COMPANY
John Company
SECOND EDITION
WEHRLEGIG
Design by
Cole Wehrle

What I Hope to Share Today

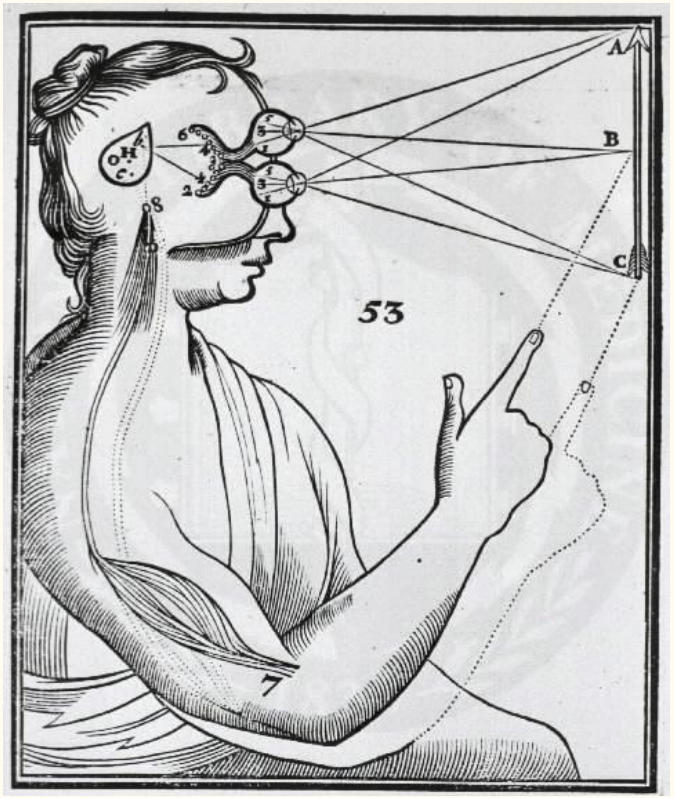
1. Some different ways of understanding theme.

   (Here we might spend too long talking about Catan.)
2. A simple framework for making history games.

   (I'll give you tons of case studies so you can see this framework in action.)
3. What we stand to gain and lose.

   (And why I think it's worth the hard work.)

1. Table Settings



René Descartes

1596-1650, RIP to a Legend

Mind — Body

Mechanics? — Theme?

Theme? — Mechanics?

Linguistic Metaphors

A Game Design as a Grammar

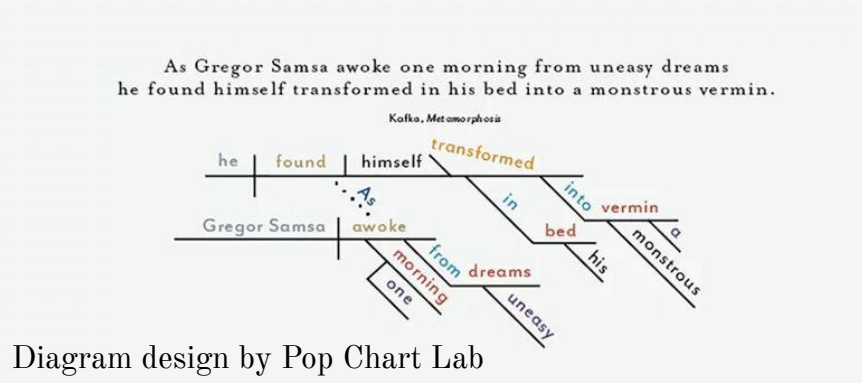


Diagram design by Pop Chart Lab

Theme as Vocabulary

Word Bank

Gregor Samsa, found, himself, transformed, vermin, monstrous, dreams, morning, uneasy, etc.

What are we making:

a creature or a conversation?

2. No Game is an Island

...even if it's about an Island.

Building Costs
Road
Settlement
City
Development Card
Year of Plenty

Catan as a Language

- Catan's Grammar
  a. Spatial Dynamics of the Map
  b. Generation of Resources
  c. Spending of Resources
  d. Trading of Resources

  (Boy, the game cares a lot about resources.)
- Catan's Vocabulary

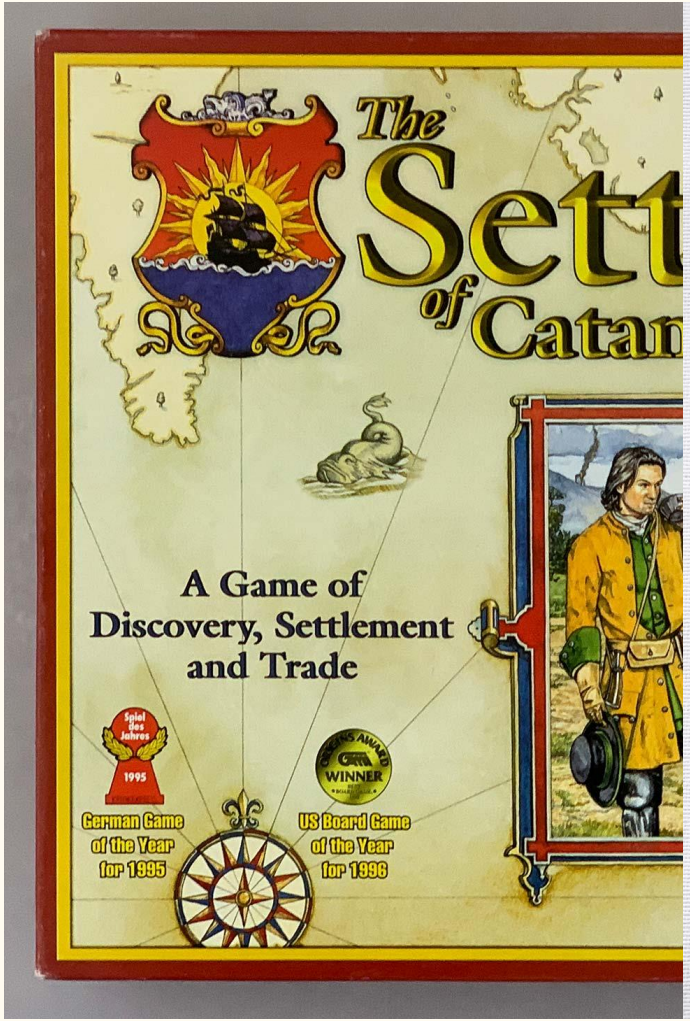
Word Bank

Trade, Build, Wood, Ore, Sheep, Road, Settlement, City, Robber, etc.

WOOD
For

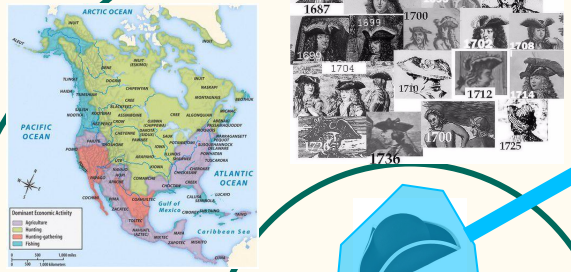
Left photo by Crosis2369 (BGG)
Right photo by Pasi Ääpälä (BGG)

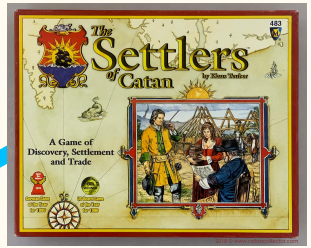
The Set
Klaus Teuber
MAYFAIR GAMES
The Settlers
Made in the U.S.A.
© 1996 Mayfair Games. All rights reserved.
483
5641 W. Howard Street
Niles, IL 60714
847/647-9650
mayfair@aol.com
www.coolgames.com
RETAIN THIS PACKAGE FOR FUTURE REFERENCE.
ISBN 1-56905-091-0
079683MFG3500
Road Building
Place 2 new roads as if you had just built them.
Monopoly
When you play this card, announce one type of resource. All other players must give you all their resource cards of that type.
Discovery
Take any 2 resource cards from the bank and add them to your hand. These can be two different resources or two of the same resource. These may immediately be used to build.
Knight
Move the robber and steal one resource from an adjacent player.
Tower
1
victory point
Cathedral
1
victory point
University
1
victory point
Court
1
victory point
Temple
1
victory point
Capital
1
victory point
Library
1
victory point
2018 © www.catancollector.com

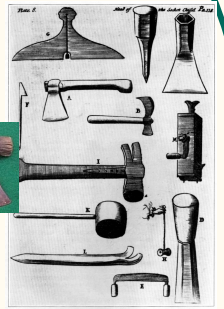

The Sett
of Catan
A Game of
Discovery, Settlement
and Trade
Spiel des Jahres
1995
German Game
of the Year
for 1995
WINNER
US Board Game
of the Year
for 1996

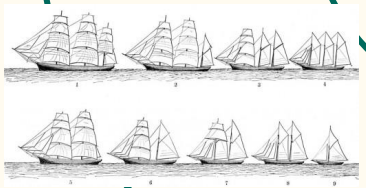
Road Building
Place 2 new roads as if you had just built them.
Monopoly
When you play this card, announce one type of resource. All other players must give you all their resource cards of that type.
Year of Plenty
Take any 2 resource cards from the bank and add them to your hand. They can be two different resources or two of the same resource. They may immediately be used to build.
Soldier
Move the robber. Steal one resource card from the owner of an adjacent settlement or city.
Chapel
1 victory point!
University of Catan
1 victory point!
Governor's House
1 victory point!
Market
1 victory point!
Library
1 victory point!

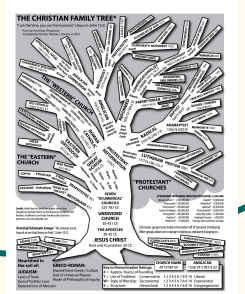
Contextualizing Settings with a Knowledge Map

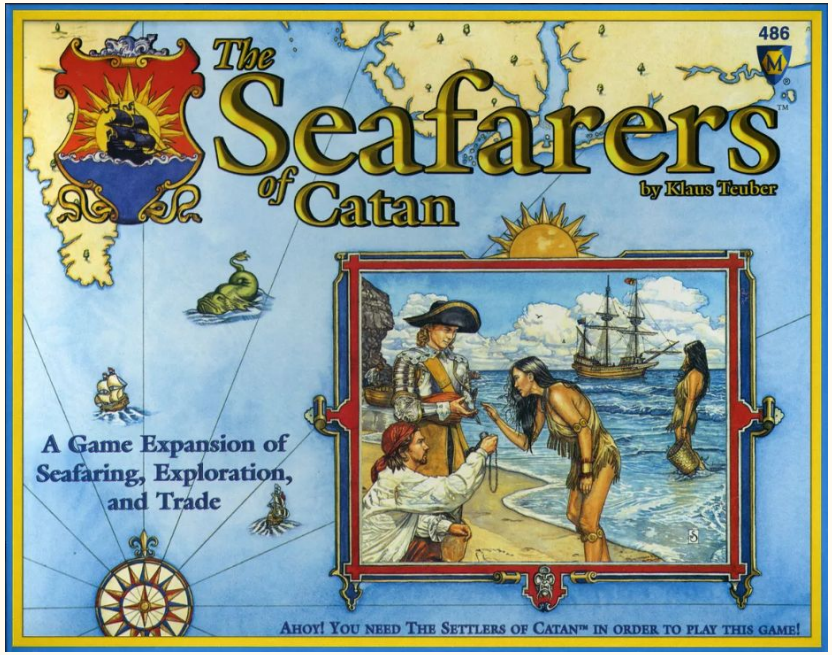








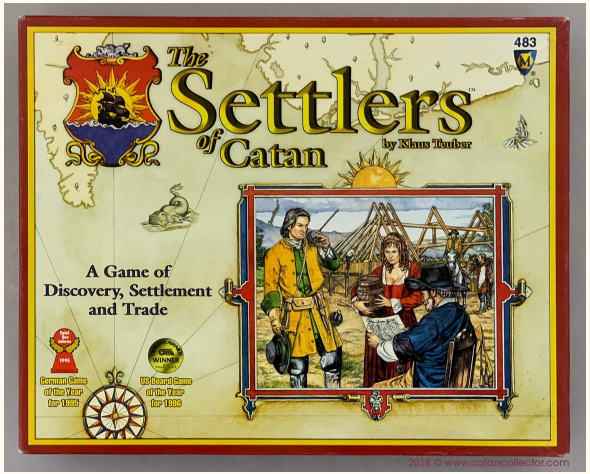




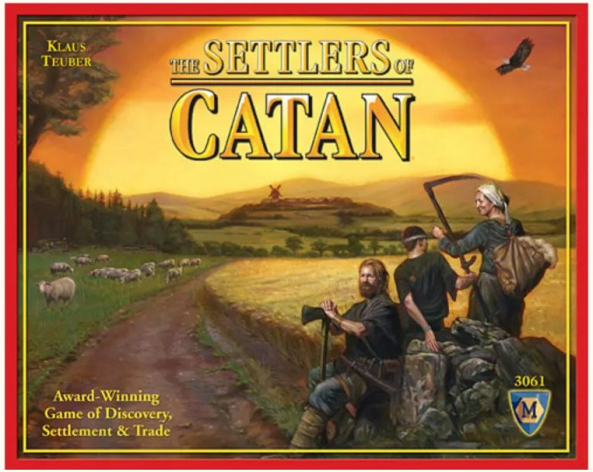
An 1872 representation of "American Progress" associated with the Frontier Myth. Public Domain.

Settlers of Catan, both by its title and its thematic elements, situates itself as a game about settling new land. While the game does not root itself in any historical reality, playing it in the U.S. creates a link to the real historical settlement and concurrent genocide of indigenous peoples. Consider the "frontier myth," a phrase that describes the work of Frederick Turner Jackson, whose 1893 essay "The Significance of the Frontier in American History" attributes the rapid development of the U.S. in the late 19th century, and the specificity of the U.S. American character, to mystical forces contained in the "empty" and thus edenic American West.[3] *Settlers of Catan*, by allowing its settlers to find the island of Catan in a similarly edenic state, reifies this myth, which helped to render American Indians invisible. Thus, *Settlers of Catan*, when played in the U.S., is complicit in continuing to make indigenous communities invisible. Primarily in order to counter this troubling aspect of *Settlers of Catan*, and to create a game that I feel comfortable playing, I have designed a variant of *Settlers of Catan* titled *First Nations of Catan*.

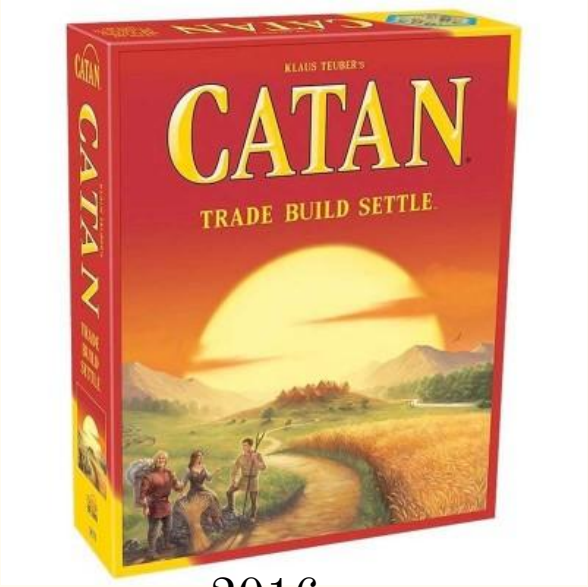
Greg Loring-Albright,
"First Nations of Catan: Practices in Critical Modification" (2015)



1997



2007



2016

CURRENCY

THE MAN WHO BUILT CATAN

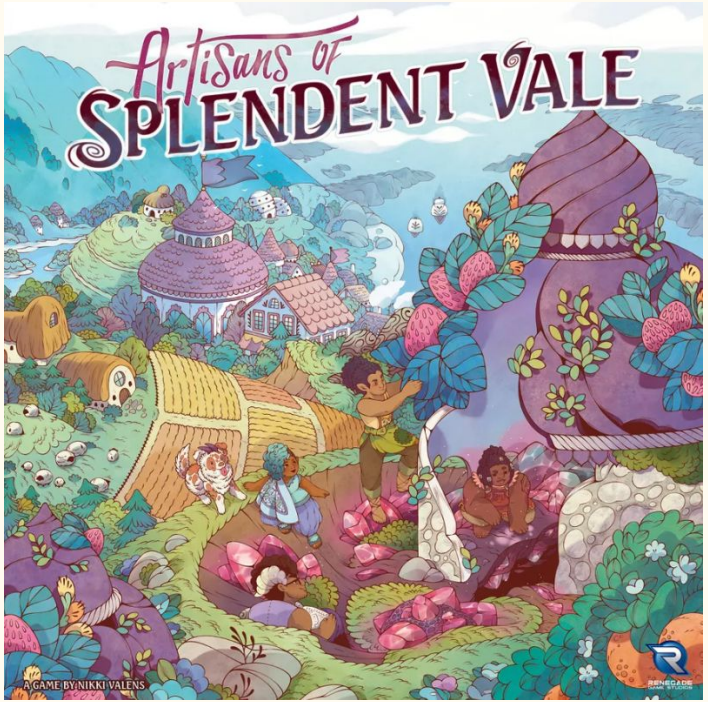
By Adrienne Raphel

February 12, 2014

After Barbarossa, Teuber designed several other games and won two more Spiel des Jahres awards, but he was still working fourteen-hour days in the dental lab. In 1991, after reading histories of Viking life, he became fascinated with Iceland and the age of discovery. "What was it like when they reached this virgin island?" he said. "I wanted to find out." He tinkered with an island-settling game for four years, testing versions on his wife and children every weekend. Initially, the instructions included lots of complicated mechanics—for example, if you had enough cities and settlements in a cluster, you could create a metropole—but eventually, Teuber said, "I cooked it to the heart of the game." A breakthrough moment came when Teuber experimented with using hexagonal tiles instead of squares for his board. He said he had a dream that he remembered having once before, the last time he won the Spiel des Jahres: "I was standing on the shore of a pond and saw very big fish, and I angled the biggest of them."

An Obvious Sidenote

1989



2022

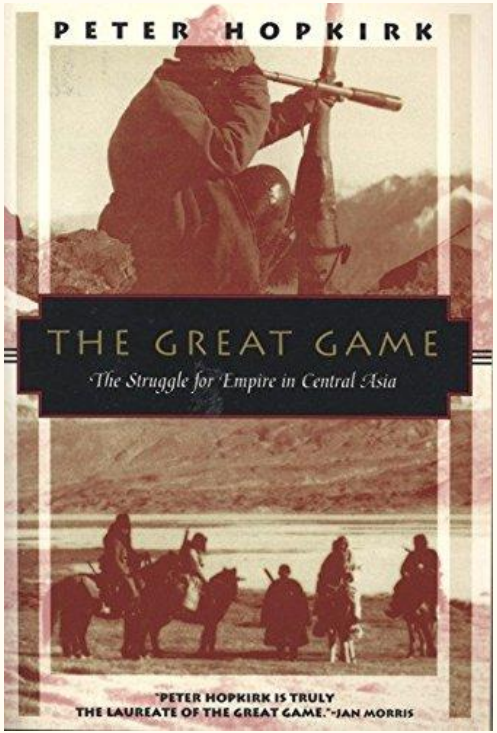
3. Agents and Anxieties

So, you want to make a game set in the past?

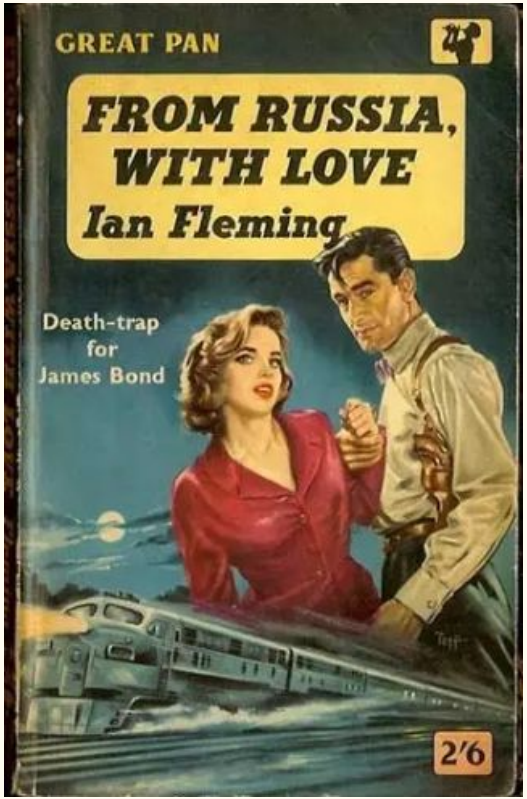
- Who has agency?
- What do they care about?

STANFORD'S MAP OF WESTERN ASIA.
RUSSIAN EMPIRE
BLACK SEA
SEA OF AZOV
CASPIAN SEA
ARAL SEA
Trans-Caspian
TURKESTAN
Desert of Khiva or Karakum
CYPRUS
TURKISH EMPIRE
PERSIA
KHORASAN
AFGHANISTAN
KERMAN
BELUCHISTAN
GULF OF OMAN
Tropic of Cancer
English Stat. Miles
London: Edward Stanford 55 Charing Cross S.W. April 8th 1885.
Map Division
5 FEB 1961
Library of Congress

Agents for a game about the Great Game?

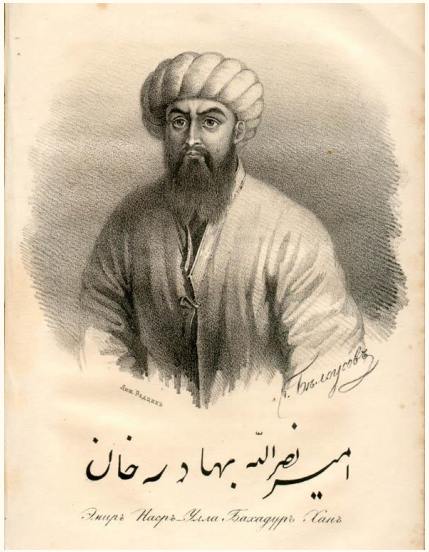


(1994)



Adventures in Missing the Point

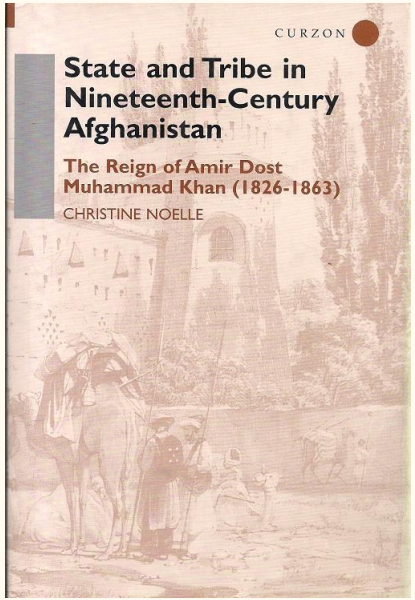
Charles Stoddart
1806-1842



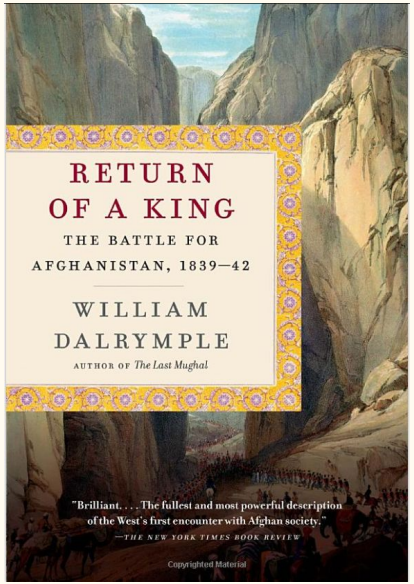
Nasrullah Khan
1806-1860

Arthur Conolly
1807-1842

Joseph Wolff
1795-1862



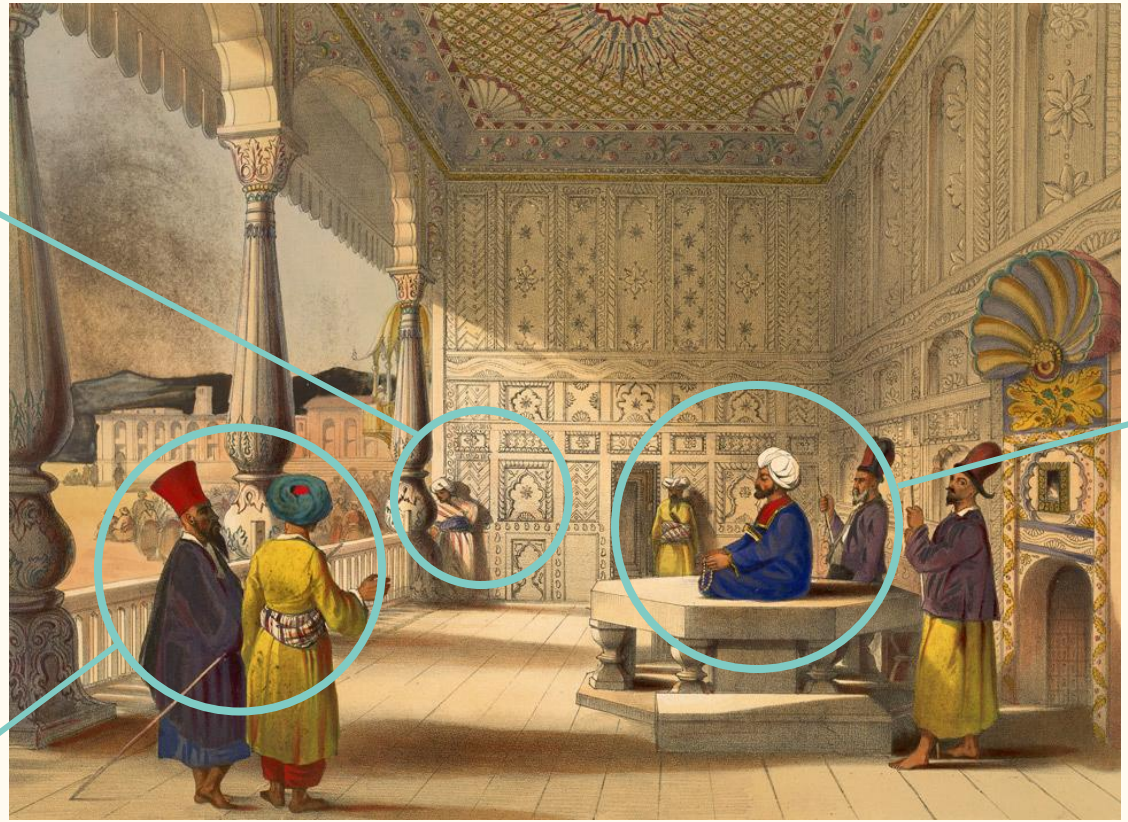
(1997)



(2014)

Sirāj al-Tawārīkh
(1912)

Those silly intelligence agents.



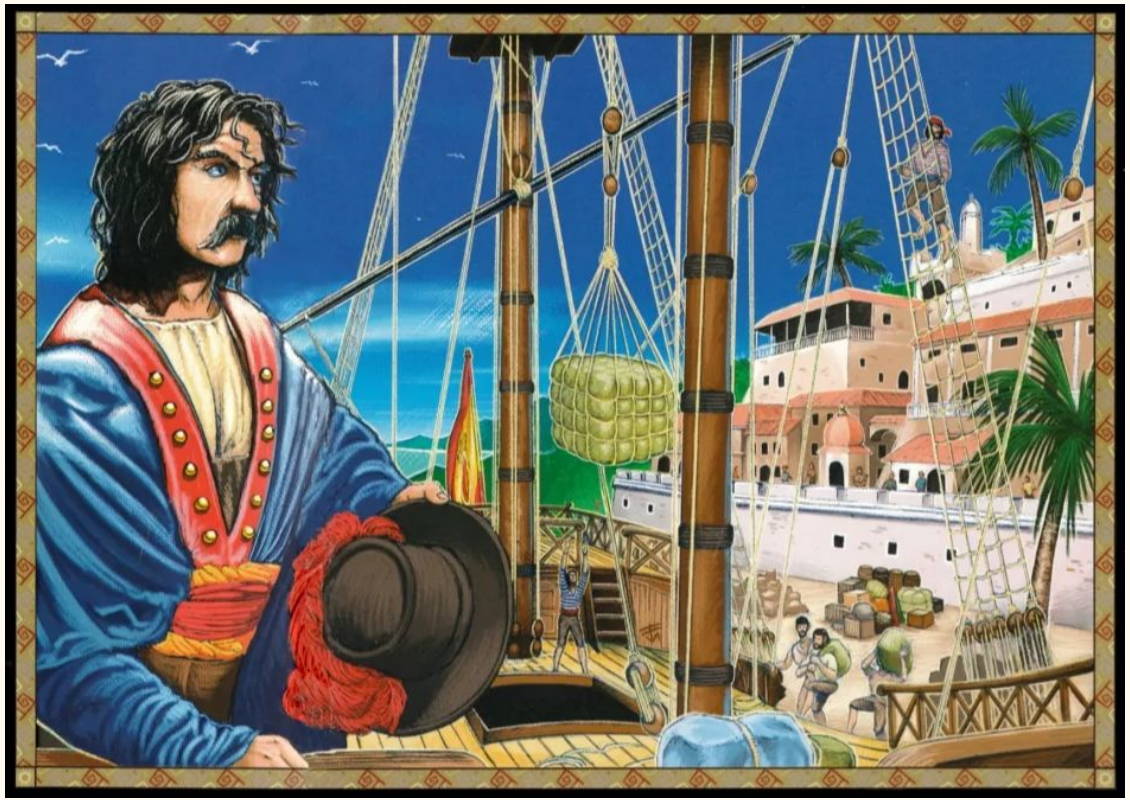
Political Actors

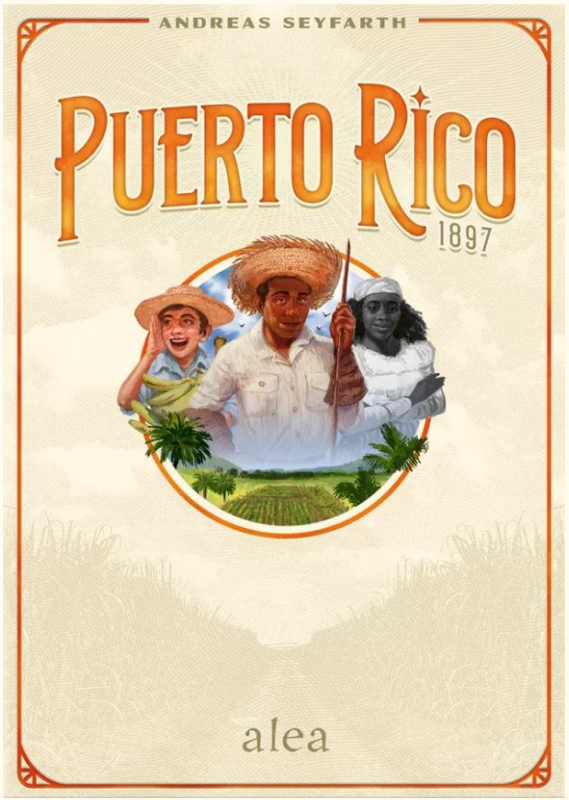
Players as Power Brokers

Transcaspia
Kabul
Punjab
Herat
Kandahar
Persia
TRANSCASPIA
Supplies from Orenburg
PUNJAB
Hari Singh Nalwa
KABUL
Ghilzai Nomads

4. Spots of Time

Renegotiating our Settings





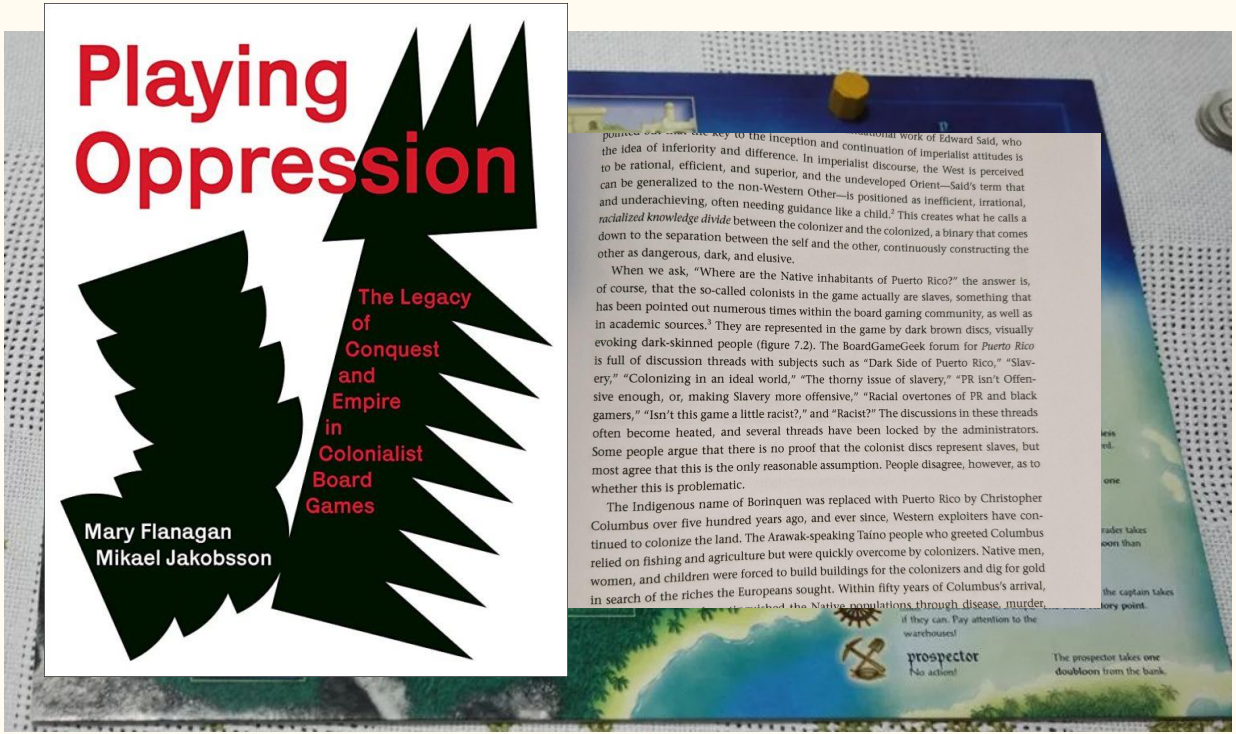
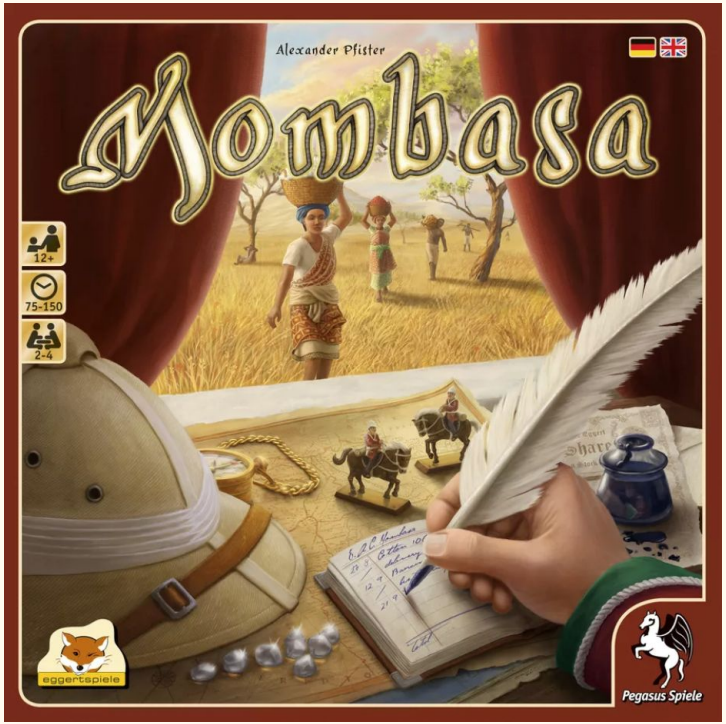


Photo by DanielCG (BGG)

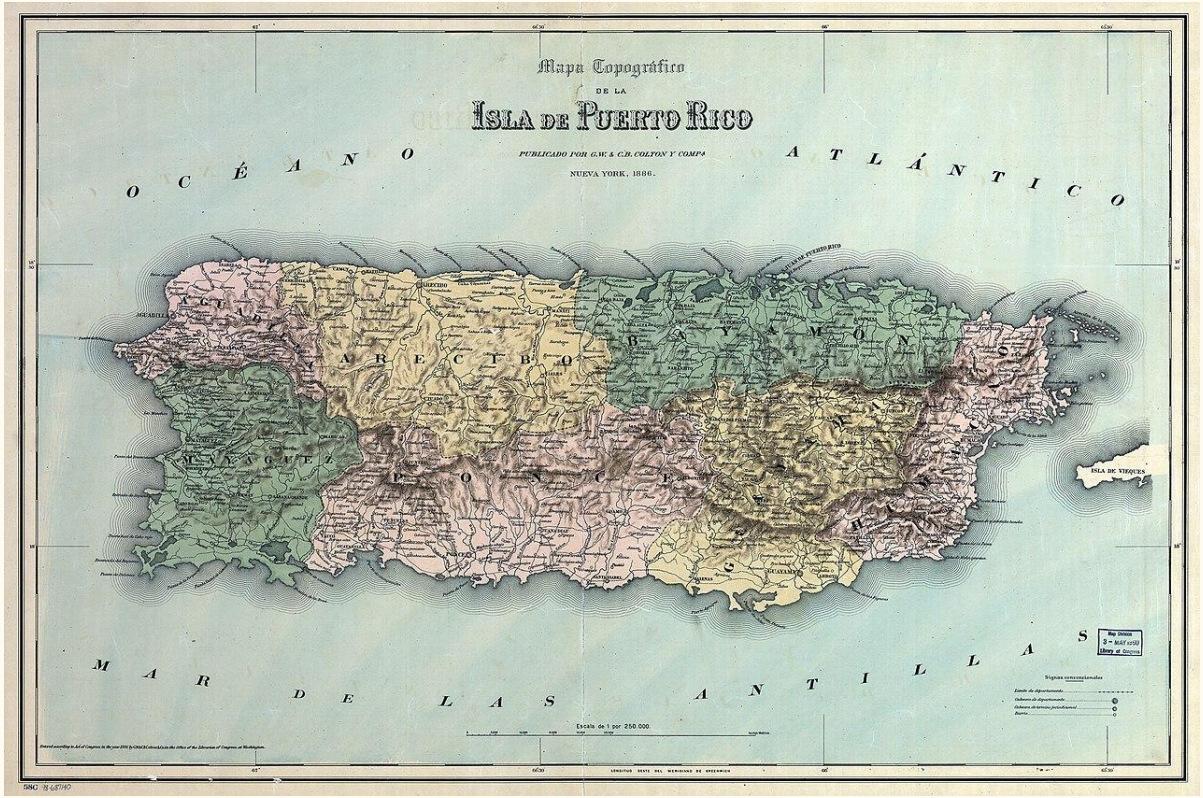

Alexander Pfister
Mombasa
12+
75-150
2-4
eggertspiele
Pegasus Spiele

(2015)

ALEXANDER PFISTER
VIKTOR KOBILKE
SKYMINES
12+
75-150
1-4
DEEP PRINT GAMES
JAVIER INKGOLEM
Pegasus Spiele

(2022)

Finding the Right Moment

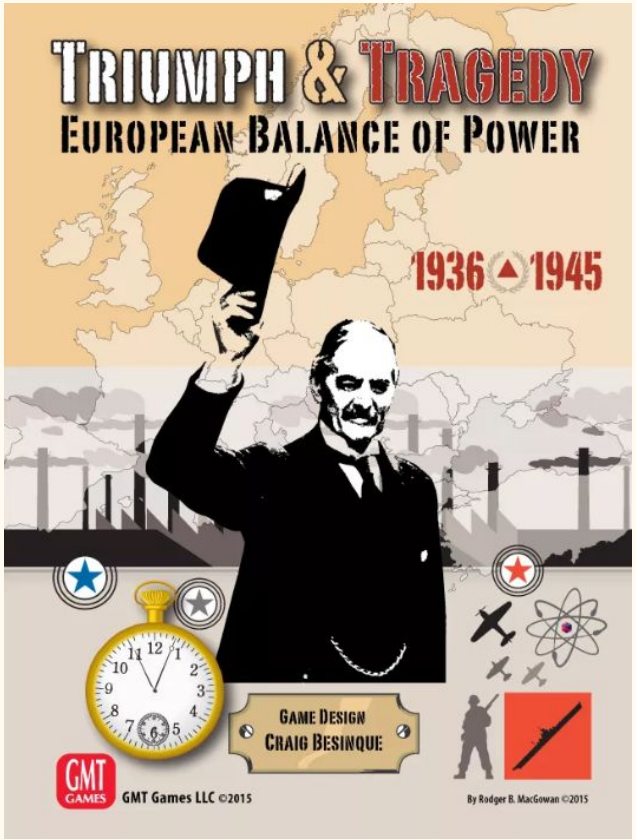


ACTION
ADVANTAGE
PLANTER
Choose one of the face-up Estate tiles and place it on one of your island board's Countryside spaces.
You may choose a Quarry tile instead of an Estate tile.
RECRUITER
Each player, in rotation, takes one worker from the Hiring Hall until all workers are gone.
Take 1 additional worker from the supply pile at the start of the phase.
BUILDER
Buy a Building tile and place it on one of your island board's City spaces.
Pay 1 coin less than the cost of the Building.
PRODUCER
Take goods from the supply.
Take 1 additional barrel, of any of type of good you produce, from the supply.
TRADER
Sell a good in the Trading House and receive money from the bank.
Earn 1 extra coin for the sale of your good.
CAPTAIN
Ship goods, earning 1 VP for each barrel shipped.
Earn 1 VP bonus for the phase (regardless of how many types of goods).
TEMPORARY WORKER
There is no action associated with this role.
Earn 1 coin from the bank.
SMUGGLER
There is no action associated with this role.
Piracy, Plunder, Raid, or Capture

Small Fruit Storage
1
1
Factory
3
7
Hacienda
1
2
Cathedral
4
10
Large Fruit Storage
2
3

And Now for Something Completely Different

Good Agents
Bad Anxieties


TRIUMPH & TRAGEDY
EUROPEAN BALANCE OF POWER
1936 1945
GAME DESIGN
CRAIG BESINQUE
GMT GAMES
GMT Games LLC ©2015
By Rodger B. MacGowan ©2015

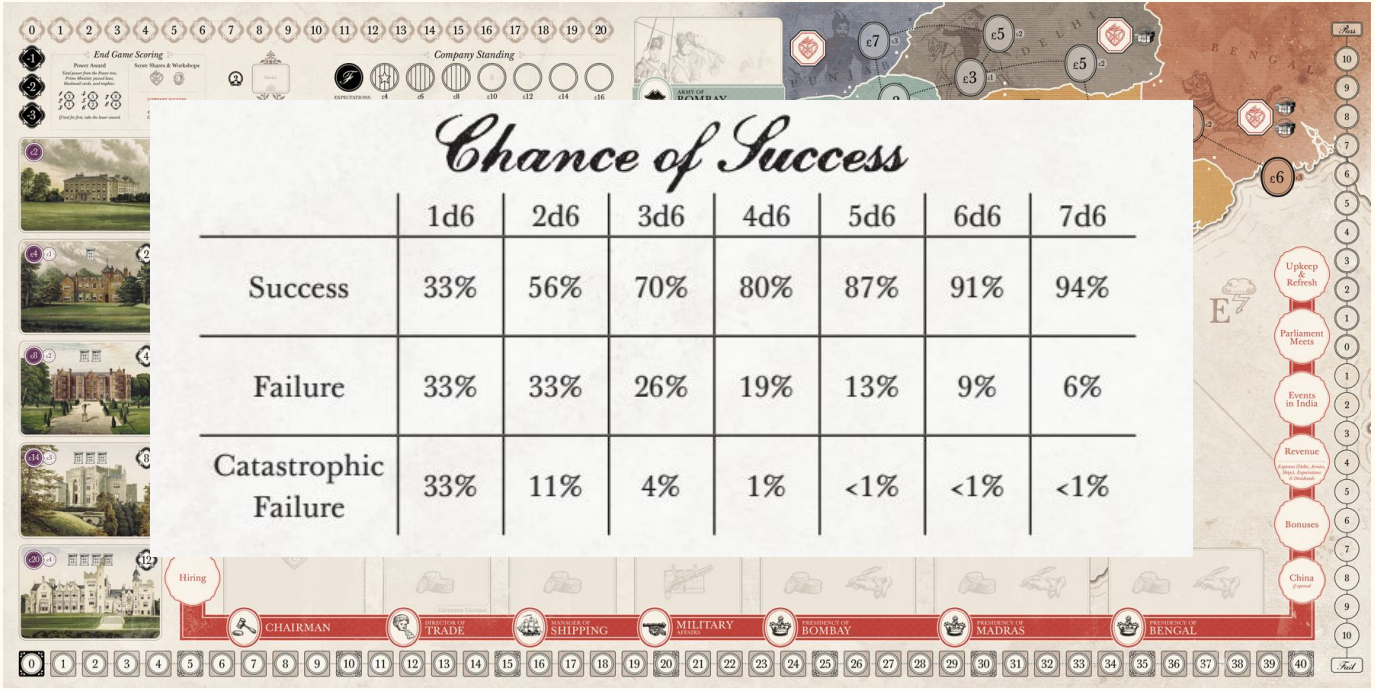
Greenland Sea
Norwegian Sea
North Sea
Dublin
LONDON
English Channel
Bay of Biscay
Gascony
Leon
BARCELONA
SPAIN
Western Mediterranean
Tunisia
Sfax
Tripoli
Malta
Sardinia
Central Mediterranean
Cyrenaica
LIBYA
Adriatic Sea
Aegean Sea
Eastern Mediterranean
Move Combat
A2/N3/G4/S3
A3/N1/G1/S1

5. Atmospheres with Attitude

Better agents and better anxieties
give us better design tools.

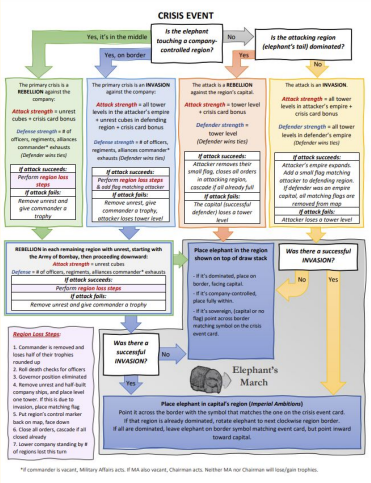
Three Different Registers of John Company

I.
Imperial
Infographics



An Illusion of Control

II.
A Distant India

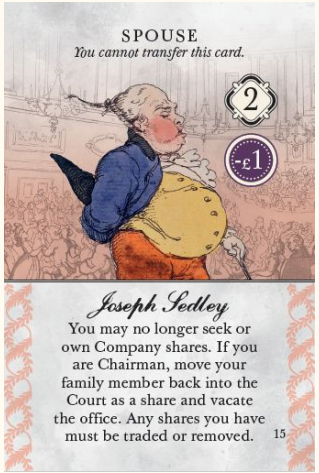


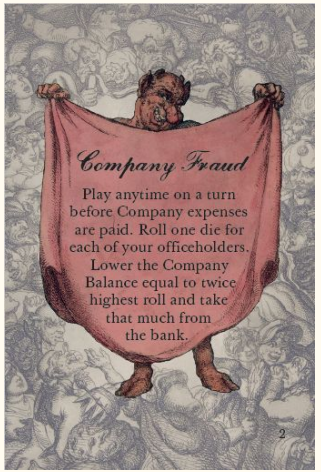
Inscrutable Chaos

Chart by jmoslainte (BGG)

Photo by Aceptableloss (BGG)
Paintings by Amita Pai
Sculpts by Amarjeet Bitke

III.
A Cynical Homefront

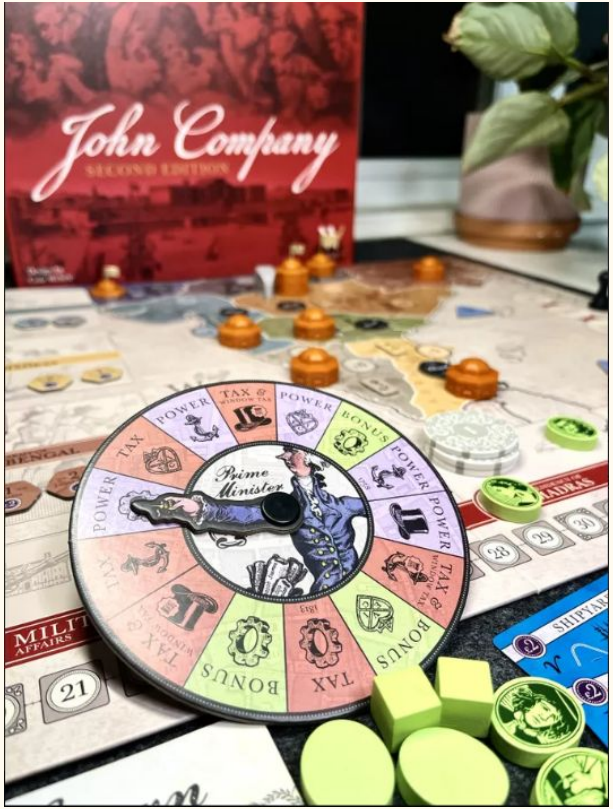




Goals and Gossip

Putting it all Together

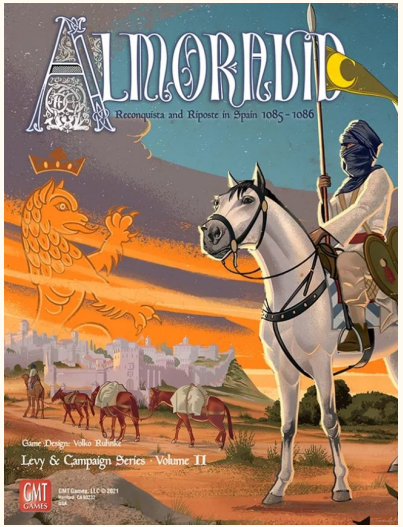
Photos by Dan Thurot



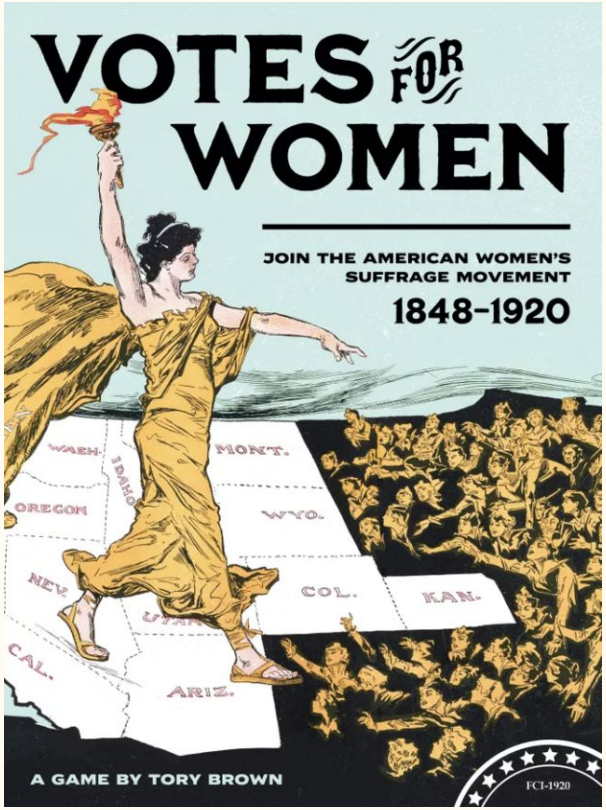
The Lies of John Company?

...or Historical Games as Historical Fiction

Going Beyond Period Art



Photos by Scott Muldoon



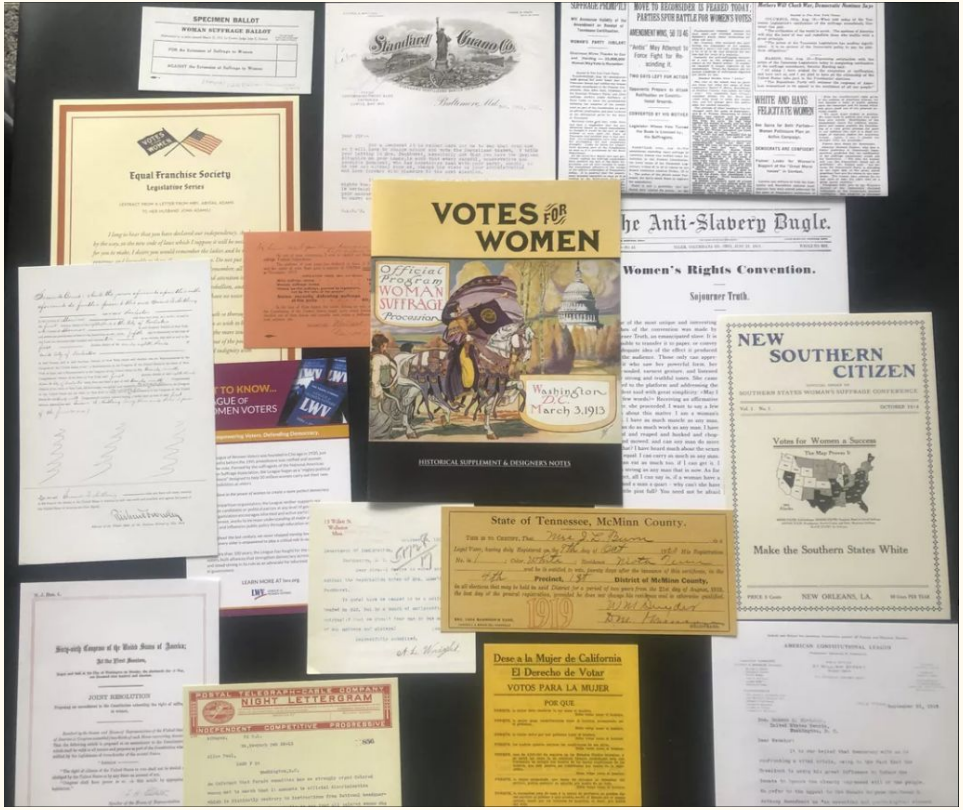


Photo by JoeByer(BGG)

6. No Escape

A Responsibility to Games

Catan by way of Capcom (2002, 2004)

Photos by Dottor_Destino (BGG)

And a Responsibility to Everyone Else

Let's go make *(and play)*
better games about history.

Feel free to reach out:
@colewehrle (Twitter)
cole@ledergames.com
cole@wehrlegig.com