PREMIERE ISSUE!

Levy mechanics
How far back does the medieval mischief go?

The Historical Gaming Renaissance
Is it real? Analysis of the industry says consims are here to stay

The house that Molly built

Joseph Kelly An interview with the designer of Molly House
From the editor

The Heart of a Volunteer

The SDHistCon team is proud to welcome you to this first issue of Conflicts of Interest Magazine. When we began these pages for ourselves, our team saw this work as an homage of sorts to the fan-based, printed “zines” of old. But it became more. Much more.

I returned to the boardgaming hobby after a hiatus of nearly 30 years, having abandoned it for what my peers told me at the time was the “real world”. All at once, so many frayed boxes, maps and their cardboard denizens (usually of division-scale or larger) were purged, considered entirely irrelevant to my future. The message—at least for me—couldn’t be more clear: boardgames were a type of toy you put away in order to grow up, to get behind you, to get with the program. My peers couldn’t have been more wrong.

Upon returning to the boardgaming hobby, I encountered a completely different world. I played games that struck me like lightning and left me on fire. I played games which re-created entire civilizations with their citizens, their soldiers, their politics and religions, their climate. More than anything, it came to love the endless train of fellow historical boardgamers, not only because they talked (ceaselessly) about the hobby, but also because they embodied what I held in high regard. Designers, game convention instructors, content creators, forum participants..., they all helped bring a love of history and boardgaming back to me as well as countless others. And they did so selflessly.

This magazine which you hold in your (digital) hand is a project born of the joy of giving back to this same community. The contributors herein have volunteered their time and energy, and I am much in awe of their collective grace. We start this issue off with an illuminating conversation between designers Joseph Kelly and Cole Wehrle on the design of Molly House, a bold game on a part of history too long ignored. Harold Buchanan considers the renaissance we’re experiencing in historical boardgaming, while the scholarly Riccardo Masini explains the medieval roots of modern simulation games. Professional wargamer Sally Davis discusses the Derby House Principles and the women who have fought on the battlefield of discrimination and triumphed. Veteran wargamer Edgar Milli pondered the “levy mechanic” in games from the last 30 years, while designer Mark Greenwald introduces us to the new designers building upon Volto Rubin’s Levy & Campaign system. And you’ll find plenty more in these pages.

The SDHistCon team hopes you enjoy reading Conflicts of Interest Magazine #1, and we look forward to bringing you more in our next issue!

— Harold Buchanan, Matthias Cramer
MOLLY HOUSE

THE HOUSE THAT MOLLY BUILT

A conversation with Joseph Kelly, the designer of Molly House

Molly House was an eye-opener for historical boardgamers last year, not only for its unique theme, but also as a deft exploration of LGBTQIA history through the eyes of its principal actors: gender-defying queers living in the oppressive atmosphere of 18th century England.

AN EVOLVING GENRE

What does it mean to call oneself a historical boardgamer? More often than not, fans of the genre have widely varying opinions on just what constitutes a fitting boardgame in that category. Yet there is great evidence that the historical boardgaming community is changing many of its internal definitions and the results are more than noteworthy.

In short, the past decade has massively expanded what we think of when we say “historical board games”. The term is no longer limited to “wargames” or “conflict simulations” which tend to view history through a predominantly military lens. Instead, we are now seeing the release of exciting and innovative games that look at human history and its many conflicts through much broader lenses, encompassing viewpoints that have historically been under-represented in our corner of the boardgaming hobby.

A great example of these changes is the recent Zenobia Award, which encouraged game submissions by people from traditionally marginalized groups with the ultimate goal of giving them mentorship from established designers as well as help navigating the game publication process. You can read more about the Zenobia finalists here.

MOLLY HOUSE EMERGES

One of the unique games that developed out of this award process was Zenobia Award finalist Molly House, designed by Joseph Kelly. In Molly House, players work collaboratively as gender-defying queers who secretly meet in London’s “molly houses” of the early 18th century, where they plan together and create joy in the face of opposition by the Societies for the Reformation of Manners, informers, and the real risk of arrest and death. Historically, Molly Houses were meeting places such as taverns, public houses, and coffeehouses where queer men could meet and socialize in private. “Molly” was a widely-used slang term defining an effeminate, or queer, man.

During the awards process, Zenobia judges noted that “This is a very different subject and expands the coverage of LGBTQIA history in a novel direction. It’s a successful model for the activity and history. There is a rich amount of work that is obvious in the card details and map. We learned something about the subculture playing.”

“It is in the nature of barriers that they fall.”

> Quentin Crisp, The Naked Civil Servant

> Insert: A Molly House as depicted in the TV series, Taboo
needs (represented by your Personal Joy, with the needs of the Molly House community, represented by Collective Joy).

The Components

The game board is laid out as a map of London, with an actions box to show which actions are available, and cruising grounds showing where mollies are cruising and constables are on patrol.

The Molly House board shows the Collective Joy in the Molly House, created by the festivities that the players put on throughout the game. Player boards show which festivities are at risk of raids by the undercover constables who are always on patrol. The Community offers additional abilities and Collective Joy to players, as well as two witness tokens, which give players a better chance at trial.

Player boards record each Molly's character, standing, and relationships. Pawns are used to perform actions and track the relationships between Mollies and cruising activities. Promises are used in negotiations. Screens keep players' esteem secret from each other.

Cubes in the game represent Joy (the game's major currency), which can be either personal or collective, and Esteem, which represents how well respected each Molly is in the Molly House wherein they interact.

Cards are an integral part of the game and come in three different standard types: Mollies, Fate, and Action cards, and three types of smaller cards: Awards, Regulars, and Resources.

What follows is a conversation between Molly House designer Joseph Kelly and Cole Wehrle, the award-winning designer of Pox Pox (Wehrle Games, 2019) and Prow (Leder Games, 2018).

“I thought it important to leave the concept of identity open.”

COLE: “I think that there are political and cultural reasons why it might be happening now, but there’s also an archival reason, which is that queer history, especially before the 20th century, is so fragmented and difficult to track. And if you look in the usual Hind of places, you often times don’t find queer histories unless you know how to look. But if you start looking in the right way, you see these amazing queer texts in (existing histories about completely different subjects). And it’s all so moving because these are places you can be living in and walking through and find a queer history without realizing it.

But all of this points to this tricky challenge as a designer, which is when you go into a subject, you need primary text, or good secondary text if you’re making a historical game. Can you talk a little bit about your research practice in finding the sort of texts that you used in Molly House?”

JOSEPH: “I’m not a historian, but the first port of call I looked at was Mother Clap’s Molly House (Rictor Norton, 1992). It’s very accessible, but it’s also got some problems. It’s very influenced by the fact that it was written in the early nineties. I think there are lots of things that people who are thinking about queer history now would disagree with. For example, there’s a big insistence on it being about a gay history specifically, and not about a trans history.”

The Molly House

“Molly house” was a term used in 18th- and 19th-century Britain for a meeting place for homosexual men. The meeting places were generally taverns, public houses, coffeehouses or even private rooms where men could either socialise or meet possible sexual partners.

From 1533 onwards, homosexual relations and sexual activities remained illegal and were frequently prosecuted, with homosexual sexual activities being included in the offence categories of buggery and sodomy (the terms which were often used interchangeably). They remained capital offences until 1861. From the 18th century onwards until 1861, particularly during the 1720s, molly houses came to be the scenes of raids and arrests, and their customers frequently became targets for blackmail.
Rictor Norton’s book also pushes back against the idea that all Mollies were effeminate. Yet a big part of Molly culture involved dressing up in ball gowns and exploring femininity, which is backed up by more recent writings such as The Making of the Modern Self (Wahrmann, 2004).

I think there are some more important and interesting sources such as the primary material you can read in the Proceedings of the Old Bailey which are all archived online and free for anyone to delve into.

At the Old Bailey, you can search by what kind of crime was being tried. If you use “sodomy” as the keyword, you’ll find a lot of its history as a criminally-prosecutable offense, making it a primary source for research on Molly Houses. For other primary sources, there are numerous articles written around the time that were later reproduced in books, but few contain material relevant to Molly House the game.

“So, Joy was always an integral part of the design space.”

Joseph Kelly, designer of Molly House

For instance, an 18th century journalist named Edward Ward wrote his Satirical Reflections on Clubs (1710), a sort of anthology about the social clubs of his time. But just one entry mentions a Molly House.

COLE: “One thing that you touched on in several of your readings on the sources is that every historical text is as much about the present as it is about its own subject. You simply can’t avoid it, and I think that becomes a particularly fraught area when dealing with different kinds of queer histories.

For instance, how do you approach the subject of identity? It seems to me that one could very easily look back at the past and attempt to make the records we have conform to our modern understanding. On the other hand, there’s another approach that would avoid these kinds of categories and preserve the degree to which our sense of identity might change over time.”

JOSEPH: “I feel like the important thing for interpreting queer history is that identities of people then and now won’t necessarily map onto each other one-to-one. In Molly House, I thought it important to leave open. I didn’t think it would be particularly useful to use the words “gay”, “trans” or any other modern terminology within the game itself. There are subtleties in attitudes to gender, sexuality, and the mutability of identity in the early 18th century that complication, and I think the differences to today’s attitudes are as important as the similarities.”

QUEER HISTORY

COLE: “What is a game about queer history? This is not The Princes of Florence re-stuffed; this is a completely different game with a different set of priorities and subjects. Can you talk a little bit about why the choice of topic was compelling to you?”

JOSEPH: “When I was thinking about queer settings for a game, a lot of the ideas that were coming to my head were US-centric. Stonewall was an obvious option; that’s what people think of when they think about queer history because it was such a big shift in where we are with queer rights today.

But I was thinking hard about what I could specifically say. And it was important to me to think about UK history. What is particularly interesting about Molly Houses is that they happened hundreds of years ago.

There’s an element of bringing awareness to this fascinating bit of history that I think a lot of people miss. My original intent was to create a two-player game with one playing the role of the Molly House who must put on all these festivities for the mollies and make them as happy as possible. So, joy was always an integral part of the design space. But then the other player would be playing the Society.

And I think that can be a very reasonable thing to do, but you must always ask yourself what is the story I am trying to tell and what kind of injection does that story make? I’ll give a small example from my own work, and then relate it to Molly House.”

LESSONS FROM AN INFAMOUS TRAFFIC

COLE: “When I was working on An Infamous Traffic (Hollandspiele, 2016), a game about the Opium Wars, I had originally imagined it as an asymmetric game. With three players, one as a British merchant, another as a small Chinese smuggling company, and one as the Chinese government. Because to me, the conflict between these three major parties explained why the Opium Wars happened the way they did. What I found was that players kept misunderstanding how the game worked when they played it. And, as a result, they misunderstood the story the game was telling. The British player would either act too reticent or too evil. And the different Chinese players were hind of occupier-like caricatures. Now they hadn’t meant to. And I don’t know that these characters were necessarily racially charged, but the player positions were becoming charged.

And I thought ‘Okay, this is not working at all.’ So instead, I shifted the game’s terms to put all the players on a plane of moral equivalence. And then this led to a very tricky position of selection. Put simply, if I make a game about the British in China, then I’m really not making a game about the
opium-smuggling families, nor about the problems of the Chinese government officials who are trying to sort this out. And so I ended up deciding to use the British as the vantage point for An Infamous Traffic because this was the area of expertise I had. But also, quite often in the board game space, players are playing muscled achieve top-hatted titans of industry, but they don’t have a lot of experience seeing their player positions as being the “bad guys”. I wanted to use that level to upset some of our misinterpretations about the true nature of the work and the context. And I knew that the players would have more familiarity with this kind of position. Which is a little bit of the same trick that happens in John Company (Wehrleig Games, 2022) where they’re going to unravel a society without fully realizing what they’re doing until the game is over.

And then at the end, it’s a bit like a magic trick where you pull down the curtain; look at this mess you’ve made, and players can let that sit in them.

Though I totally agree that Molly House would work as a two-player game, what I loved about your adjustment is that it looked at the story that was the least represented. And you found a way to elevate that and to have players understand it. If, as designers, we are spending the sympathy of our players, we must spend it in ways that highlight its use of verbs and the careful and deliberate about the context. And I knew that the players would not want to see a queer black person having a property to use as a Molly House.”

COLE: “The game is so careful and deliberate about its use of verbs and the things that it highlights, as well as the kinds of challenges presented to players. You don’t need to know a lot about the background to be immediately grounded.

I’ve been fortunate to be your mentor during the Zenobia process, which was wonderful. I tell people that I do game design for a living, which means I play games that don’t work as a living. Once they start working, I must stop playing them. One of the things that was remarkable is that early versions of a design are always going to fail. But even when Molly House failed, it still worked. Even when the actual wheels were falling off the cart and something was out of balance, the game mechanically was so transporting, and that’s a rare thing in design. Usually what that means is that the fundamental story that the game is trying to tell is powerful; it’s gripping.

JOSEPH: “There was an early version of the game where players ran through mollies quite quickly; mechanically, because actions were so dangerous that Mollies would die, forcing players to pick yet another one. That quick turnover rarely allowed players to develop a relationship with the Molly they were inhabiting, so I needed to balance the risk-taking with that crucial relationship.

I thought that an important part of the game was to have this card in front of you, and that the character on the card is who you are in the game. Once I had achieved some of that risk/relationship balance and players started forming attachments to their characters, getting upset when they died or were arrested or became overjoyed when they put on a really good festivity... I think that’s when the game really started to work.

It’s such a tragic history, but it’s also steeped in joy. So, achieving a balance between those two contradictory things – tragedy and joy – and getting players to feel those two emotions while playing...”

> Cole Wehrle, designer of John Company

“Police apparatuses look kind of the same at lots of points in history.”

> Molly House: Planning

The Drag Ball

One of the footnotes accountable during the Planning Phase in Molly House. This particular festivity is one in which “mollies” (player pawns) express their femininity by wearing dresses of the latest fashions and hold a ball wherein they dance and sing.

> Molly House: Planning

The Masquerade

In order to generate joy, players in Molly House must plan festivities such as the ubiquitous Masquerade in which mollies costume themselves to disguise their identities. In order to hold such a party, players must combine resources to effect it.

> Molly House: Combining Resources

JOSEPH: “In this setting you’ve got the different kinds of ‘cruising’ grounds, which represent this growing metropolis that London is at the time. The fact that these same grounds are becoming known as queer hotspots is quite interesting. The emblematic features of these kinds of time in history. The christening ceremony is consecrated with gin. It feels like quite a specific part of that history.

Another interesting figure is Julius Caesar Taylor, a black man living in London in the 1720s and the proprietor of a Molly House. I think that most people wouldn’t expect to see a queer black person having a property to use as a Molly House.”

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is really important."

COLE: “So not only are you designing a historical game, but you’re also designing a game about an incredibly sad topic. I wonder where you take liberties in your story. Because all history games are adaptations, you must always make choices about the things you want to highlight and the things you want to push down.

Can you talk a little bit about what informs the liberties you might take with Molly House’s history as well as the liberties you feel you can’t?”

JOSEPH: “When I think about Molly House’s history, it’s difficult because the records we have are pretty much confined to the people who were tried and punished for what much of 18th century society viewed as criminal acts. These were people who were punished by pillory, prison, and even sentenced to death, merely for acts of intimacy and love. It was an exceptionally dangerous time to be queer in England. But those were the people who got caught, and it seems there were probably more molly houses that didn’t get harassed by the Society for the Reformation of Manners than the ones that did. I think resources for enforcement weren’t organized enough to visit and investigate every molly house.

So, there are these kinds of stories out there of mollies who had potentially great lives and were never harassed at all. I think there is room in Molly House for a wide variety of stories; they could all potentially be outcomes that people had at the time.

In a recent interview, I was asked I didn’t simply make Molly House a celebration of joy? Why did the danger have to be there? Why did the constables have to be there?

But I felt it would be disingenuous not to include that risk. The danger felt quite important to the story.

Essentially, Molly House is a game that celebrates queerness, but it’s also a game about oppression, much of which is still present today in many parts of the world. I think it’s important that sense of oppression and injustice is there in the game. I wanted players to ruminate on that and then draw parallels that might still be in their own worlds today.”

— Chris Bennett and Cole Wehrle were mentors and judges for the Zenobia Award.

“Molly House is a game that celebrates queerness.”

> Joseph Kelly, designer of Molly House

The First Society for the Reformation of Manners was founded in 1691 by Angli- can men of “good stand- ing” in London. They were concerned with the spread of vice in the rapidly expanding city, and sought to stamp it out by creating one of the first paid law enforcement groups in London.

Among their targets were ‘sodomites’ or ‘mollies’. ‘Molly’ is very much a term of its time, like concepts of LGBTQ+ people and culture are very much of our time, but mollies might now be considered a group of queer men, trans women and gender non-conforming people.

Molly House depicts many of the risks the mollies faced, but also celebrates the undocumented mollies who avoided notice. In doing so, this game hopes to shine a light on an often overlooked period of UK queer and trans history by putting queer people at the centre of a historical game, celebrating queer pioneers, and making people aware of how far back modern queer history can be traced.
Special feature
by: Sally Davis

THE DERBY HOUSE PRINCIPLES

What they are and why they’re so important

Sally Davis initiated and led the creation of The Derby House Principles to promote diversity and inclusion in professional Wargaming. The principles were created in response to abusive online behaviours towards minorities within the professional Wargaming community.

Why Derby House?
The Derby House Principles are named for the building in Liverpool, England, that housed the Western Approaches Tactical Unit. WATU conducted some of the most consequential wargaming in history. Formed in February 1942, at the height of Allied shipping losses in the Battle of the Atlantic, they were tasked personally by Churchill to find out what was happening in the Atlantic, to find ways of sinking U-boats, and get Allied shipping through. After all, the situation was dire: Britain stood alone in Europe, and at the rate of losses in the Atlantic, was on-course to be starved out of the war in three months if nothing changed.

WATU was staffed almost entirely by women, and men unfit for duty at sea due to illness and injury. The women came from every walk of life: school leavers, housewives, university graduates in maths and social science, nurses, performing arts students, private secretaries, and experienced WRNS plotters and staff officers from Western Approaches Command.

continued
They were gay and straight, working class to daughters of Barons, there were refugees from occupied Europe, women from across the (then) British Empire, women with English as a second language. There were Christians, Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims. They were white and black and brown. Between them was the breadth of technical, cultural, and social skills necessary to speak to everyone in the Allied navy and be heard.

Why the principles?
An overwhelming amount of science backs the value of diversity for better problem solving, decision-making, and avoiding groupthink. More than that, “red-reaming” is an exercise in perspective-taking. As a culture of red-reamers, what are we doing if we’re not seeing out new perspectives?

As of this year (2022), the Derby House Principles have been embraced by professional wargaming across the globe: in industry, academia, government, military as well as hobbyist organizations. The principles – as well as the change they have inspired in the UK Ministry of Defence – have been recognised by the Chief Scientific Advisor’s Commandant.

Everyone has a place in history
History is not just about the heros of straight, white non-disabled men. Of the WATU staff, those who went on to the most stellar careers barely feature in the popular Gilbert Roberts as “singular genius” narrative. Syed Ahsan became the Commander-in-Chief of the Pakistan Navy and held political office, Roberts didn’t make it past Captain.

Leading Wren June Duncan was a career woman at a time when women were expected to marry, have children, and make the home. She married, continued to work, and kept her own name. She was a fiercely independent and capable woman, perhaps best illustrated by her relentless determination to join the WRNS in 1940. After being rejected as underweight, she returned at the next opportunity with coins sewn into the hems of her clothes.

When we talk about barriers to entry—to hobby and professional wargaming—this is what we mean. June Duncan had to go above and beyond to be allowed a seat at the table, and still she’s celebrated for her looks as a Vogue fashion model, yet not for her stunning career or as one of the most influential wargamers of modern times.

No article on wargaming is complete without a quote from Von Clausewitz—Marie Von Clausewitz, of course. She did half the research, all the editing and publica-
tion! Karl was, after all, dead, and penned many of “his” most famous phrases, including “war is politics by other means.” Women and marginalised people have always been a part of wargaming.

“Women and marginalized people have always been a part of wargaming.”

Comments? Join the conversation on our Conflicts of Interest Discord Server!

Derby House Principles
We believe that promoting diversity and inclusion is the right thing to do. Diversity and inclusion are more than just words for us. They are the hard-and-fast principles guiding how we will build our teams, cultivate leaders and create a community that supports everyone in it. No one should ever feel excluded or less welcome because of gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, or background. Experience and social science have shown that diversity can generate better results, in analysis, insight, and professional decision-making.

As professional gamers we are committed to the Derby House Principles:

1. Promoting inclusion and diversity in professional wargaming, through the standards we set, the opportunities we offer, and access to activities we organise.
2. Making clear our opposition to sexism, racism, homophobia, and other forms of discrimination across the board, as well as in wargaming.
3. Encouraging a greater role and higher profile for colleagues from underrepresented groups in our professional activities.
4. Seeking out and listening to the concerns and suggestions of our colleagues as to how our commitment to diversity and inclusion could be enhanced.
5. Demonstrating our commitment to diversity and inclusion through ongoing assessment of progress made and discussion of future steps.

Comments? Join the conversation on our Conflicts of Interest Discord Server!
WHEN THE LEVY BREAKS

THE MEDIEVAL LEVY in boardgaming

The release of Volko Ruhnke’s Nevsky: Teutons and Rus in Collision 1240-1242 (2019) prompted further designs in GMT Games’ up-and-coming Levy & Campaign system. L&C expert Edgar Milik finds that — while historical boardgamers are now happily delving into medieval operations and logistics — the ‘levy’ mechanic isn’t completely new to the genre.

A university lecturer once summed up the medieval army mustering process to me as being nothing like our modern notions and most like a late night phone call from a friend: “Hey, I need you to help me move tomorrow, bring your truck, I’ll owe you a beer”.

A medieval army often operated on nothing more than a combination of obligations, personal dynamics, promises, and some carts and donkeys. Historical board games have traditionally skipped this organizational process, by either focusing solely on battles, or zooming out to a grand-strategic level; but the recent Levy & Campaign series by Volko Ruhnke puts all of these logistical details at the forefront.

However, that isn’t to say there haven’t been any titles which tackled the subject in varying amounts of detail, and this article aims to catalog several of these approaches and how the limitations of levy and supply were previously modeled in historical gaming.

The Levy - What Is It?

Let’s start with some basic concepts about the medieval levy. Generally speaking, a monarch would be directly in charge of only a small part of what’s thought of as ‘their lands’, with the rest of the kingdom under the control of various vassal lords who swore fealty to that monarch. If forced to raise troops, a vassal lord might call for a levy. In response, the various local rulers under that lord would send armed fighters, often according to strictly enumerated expectations and with a similar expectation of a time limit on their service.

Simply put, while there was a ruling class for whom fighting was a large part of their time and purpose, there wasn’t much in the way of conscripted or “professional” troops which we’ve come to associate with modern war.

People would be summoned from across a ruler’s domain for a specific military venture, setting forth for that task often bringing only the military gear they

LORDS & VASSALS
A most tenuous feudal bond tied ranks of the nobility as they vied for territorial gains and honor.

“HISTORICAL BOARD GAMES SHOULD NEVER ADD DETAIL JUST FOR THE SAKE OF DETAIL.”

Visit the Discord Server!
The Levy Breaks

When the Levy Breaks

These organic limitations of the rules and bookkeeping overhead. A historical game should never add lives and professions. Of course, supply is a tricky thing to model. At their worst, supply rules can actively take away from the game by requiring players to keep detailed notes or utilize many counters/markers that sometimes have little impact on the game itself. Most commonly they act as a way to add detail to combat planning, providing a tactical advantage to the players who can isolate some of their opponent’s units. But at their best, supply rules can provide a full alternative path to victory: one of denying combat completely and, instead, allowing a logistically overextended opponent to advance until their own collapse.

In short, good levy and supply rules provide alternate ways to win the game that leverage the requirements of your opponent lord’s bonds to their vassals and the limitations of on their ability to feed and pay their armies in the field. From Gaza to Granada

A good place to start looking at implementations of the levy mechanic is Richard Berg’s The Crusades: Western Invasions of the Holy Land 1097-1191 A.D. (1978, SPI). This game, set during the 1st and 3rd Crusades, uses a pretty common model for supply in games from this era: units must trace “lines of communication” or take attrition if they cannot, a system lifted almost completely from previously modeled World War II games. Interestingly, while supply is composed of very simple abstract lines, the rules track the collection and movement of gold as counters stacked with leaders on the board. These leaders can then use that gold to prevent losses for units, pay bribes, or for other utilitarian purposes. This gold can also fall into the hands of your opponent if a fight goes poorly. Berg’s The Crusades also has a rather “70s” approach to Levy troops.

We previously mentioned that the vassal/lord relationship is one based on bonds of loyalty, and there is a compelling mechanic in Malcho Nakaizama’s and Adam Starbuck’s Warriors of God: The Wars of England & France, 1135-1153 (2008, Multi-Man Publishing) that focuses on these bonds. The game covers the Hundred Years’ War between England and France where, historically, the loyalty of any lord might be stronger to a cultural identity (such as a Burgundian or Occitan) than to their respective crowns and nominal rulers.

In Warriors of God the players levy troops automatically, with the rules making it very clear that they will often appear in provinces which might not be on the “ruling” player’s plans. And since these troops are not automatically bound to leaders when levied and stay on the map if not collected, these new recruits might be picked up by the opposing player instead (with the rules requiring the seizing player to “taunt their opponent mercilessly” upon accomplishing this steal). In principle this represents the fickle loyalty of some feudal lords and how showing up with a more powerful army (or more chests of gold) was often sufficient enough to convince them to support a different cause.

Because of its longer time frame, Warriors of God also includes an “aging” mechanic for leaders on the map, in brief, no matter their valorous exploits or powerful charisma, all leaders age and become more vulnerable as a result; in fact, they must eventually die and quite often do when the player least expects it. This often leads to a more “personitized” relationship with those leaders. And since players are informed which leaders are about to “age out” of the game, they might choose to take greater risks with the older ones, knowing they will be out of play at the end of turn regardless. Leagues are a way to extend the life of these leaders, allowing them to continue to play a significant part in the game, even if they are getting farther away from the time frame. We included a model of the English predecessor of the levy, the fyrd. When an invasion occurs close to a city where at least one lord is present, the game automatically “levies” a small peasant army and gives them...
WHEN THE LEVY BREAKS

When the Levy Breaks

Sterling S. Hart's

Armada: The War With Spain 1585-1604 (1978, SPI) models the conflicts between Spain and England that historically culminated in the destruction of the Spanish Armada, Spain's catastrophic defeat, and England's dominance of the seas.

Armada has a complex system for tracking economic costs (arguably too complex), but those costs aren't simply an arbitrary limit on what actions can be taken in the game. Indeed, the game absolutely allows players to overspend in building their militaries. However, they are then also committed to paying "maintenance" costs turn after turn, leading to situations wherein a too-early buildup of forces leads inevitably to bankruptcy. For instance, a perfectly valid strategy for Spain would be tricking England into an early defeat, and England's catastrophic debts, causing a deactivation of one-third of their units and incurring a hefty victory point penalty.

A 40-year Span

It's worth mentioning that – while the above summarizes a wide range of medieval levy approaches and models – it was necessary to pull board games from over a 40-year span.

While there are literally thousands of games which focus on the Middle Ages, the medieval operational scale simply has not been a popular topic in historical gaming (relatively speaking). Yet it is this writer's hope that the ever increasing interest in the GMT Games' Levy & Campaign series will lead to many more games which feature operational-scale supply and logistics for the period.

This is especially true for those of us who enjoy spending their evenings counting miniature barrels of warm ale and writing simulated letters to the many stubborn barons who once again failed to show up and help us move."

"The author of the article would like to thank Volko Ruhnke for the generosity he has shown with his time in the conversations that helped this article take form."

The dawn of Nevsky

GMT Games' Levy & Campaign Series that Nevsky inaugurates seeks to explore the dynamics of medieval warfare at the operational level. That is, the game system does not concern itself much with the higher strategic diplomacy that created wars. Nor does it delve into the details of battlefield maneuver or tactics. Rather, Levy & Campaign focuses on several aspects of medieval military art in between those higher and lower levels of examination:

• LEVY: The mobilization of men and material for war, especially in the political context of feudalism.

• COMMAND: The direction of multiple lords' moves and troops will serve.

• SUPPLY: The provisioning of armies, especially across minimally passable landscape and in seasonal or other climatic extremes.

• DISBAND: The limits of time during which leaders and troops will serve.

Within those realms, the system naturally includes portrayal of the actual fighting—battles, siege and storm of strongholds, and ravaging of enemy territory.

To the player for the duration of exactly one fight. The end result is a very clean and simple model illustrating just how limited the obligation of troops to the ruler are in this early period.

The games we've talked about so far have had limited, if any, fog of war. In historical boardgames a player often has a perfect understanding of where their opponent's armies are and, in most cases, their strengths. This transparent modeling is specifically challenged in Granada: Last Stand of the Moors by Jose Antonio Rivero (2021, Compass Games). The game, based on Matthew Calhoun's immensely popular Seihigahara: The Unification of Japan (2011, GMT Games), uses a similar mechanic where an army is represented by a stack of blocks, but cannot be used in combat without a matching card being played from the player's hand. Sometimes that impressive stack of blocks looks like a powerful army, but might just turn out to be a brazen bluff if the player has no cards to activate them. In Seihigahara, this models the fickle loyalty of the lords fighting alongside the player, but in Granada it's something a bit more abstract.

Cards in Granada represent a combination of logistics, allegiance, and strategic might. In essence your opponent's blocks represent the potential of an army to be present at a given location (i.e., they are more like circulating rumors of where your opponent really is, rather than an absolutely certain deployment), but it's the play of cards that converts these rumors into an actual army that is loyal to the liege, has shown up for the levy, and has the supply needed for the fight. Both in Granada and Seihigahara the tension comes not just from trying to predict your opponent's future moves, but also in reading the present board state.

The Armada Model and the Future

The final game I want to touch on is set in 1586 and technically is outside the scope of "medieval games," but is an interesting example of supply nevertheless. Sterling S. Hart's Armada: The War With Spain 1585-1604

“GOOD LEVY AND SUPPLY RULES PROVIDE ALTERNATE WAYS TO WIN THE GAME.”

EDGAR MUK
SDHISTCON TEAM

Comments? Join the conversation on our Conflicts of Interest Discord Server!

*Volko Ruhnke
The SDHistCon team is already gaga over Volko Ruhnke’s Levy & Campaign system and the latest release, *Almoravid* (2022, GMT Games), is at the top of our list this issue.

If the nuances of resolving wars between Teutons and Rus in the 13th century (i.e., Nevsky) has left you wanting more medieval mischief, you’ll very likely love *Almoravid* as well. As Alfonso VI would readily tell you, al-Andalus most certainly isn’t Russia. Better weather, yes, but much stronger (and more numerous) fortifications. And Volko has sprinkled in the subtleties of taifa politics, an Iberian layer of subtlety which will challenge your wits in its ever-shifting political geography.

Have you made your tribute payments on time? Why is el Cid so damn greedy? What’s with all the mules? You’ll answer all these questions once you get your hands on a copy of *Almoravid*!

#1 ALMORAVID

**Looking for something new?...**

Play, listen, read, watch.

#2 C3i #35 BY RBM STUDIOS

The literal holy grail of wargaming magazines and one we never go without. If you didn’t already know, this issue includes an amazing standalone game, *Burma* (by Mark Herman) based on the *Empire of the Sun* system!

**Price:** $45.00

**More Information:** RBM Studio’s C3i Magazine #35

#3 BEYOND SOLITAIRE

Liz Davidson’s media content is second to none and her YouTube interviews, reviews and commentary are absolute gold. Liz gets to the heart of some of the most important issues in our hobby. If you haven’t subscribed, it’s time!

**Price:** Free

**More Information:** Beyond Solitaire on YouTube

#4 NICAEA

Emperor Constantine is decidedly on your case in Amabel Holland’s *Nicaea* (Hollandspiele), a game we consider both highly historical and ribald in equal measures! A 4-6 player study in emergent alliances and not to be missed!

**Price:** $50.00

**More Information:** Nicaea (2021, Hollandspiele)

#5 CDG SOLO SYSTEM

Having been long-time fans of Stuka Joe’s solitaire system for card-driven games, we’re so happy GMT Games has taken the system, enhanced it, and even made templates for many of their CDG games. Solitaire fan? Get it!

**Price:** $20.00

**More Information:** CDG Solo System (GMT Games)

#6 THE LONG ROAD


**Price:** $100.00

**More Information:** Mark Walker’s *The Long Road*

#7 MAKING GAY HISTORY

If the history of gay rights is your blindside, let LGBTQ+ historian Eric Marcus take you on an awe-inspiring journey from the early days of gay activism in the USA to Stonewall and the AIDS crisis. An amazing podcast!

**Price:** Free

**More Information:** The Making Gay History Podcast

#8 SWORDS AROUND THE THRONE

Renaud Verlaque’s palimpsest to his Age of Napoleon. We think this grand-strategic treatment of the Napoleonic Wars even better than its predecessor! Not too complex and solo-able to boot.

**Price:** $50.00

**More Information:** Swords Around The Throne (GC)

#9 NO ENEMIES HERE

For over 5 years, maestro Daniel Pancaldi has been delivering news about the wargaming hobby every Saturday morning. Dan’s content is unique, whimsical and literally wargaming comfort food for the eyes and ears. Subscribe now!

**Price:** Free

**More Information:** No Enemies Here on YouTube
What if I told you that you could play a game about the entire eastern front of World War II in a long weekend? And that it preserved the traditional character of the campaign, with all of the advances, reversals, shifting equilibrium and operational dilemmas that you need to get from a game like this to make it feel authentic?

Well... You’d likely tell me to go back to 2008, which is when Victory Point Games published Carl Paradis’ *No Retreat: The Russian Front 1941-44*. That revolutionary design proved that your Eastern Front game didn’t have to be a “proud monster” to do the theater justice. Transferring important historical events to cards, coupled with an ingenious counterblow mechanic that ameliorated the main problems with the skeletonization of a titanic order of battle, turned a traditionally complex slog into a brisk back-and-forth that preserved most of the historical flavor while not requiring tweezers and a ping-pong table. GMT republished the game in 2011 and it has now gone through three separate printings. It is on most people’s short list of best games on the subject.

Et tu, *No Retreat*?

So when Carl Paradis announced another game about the Eastern Front, which was billed as “low complexity,” I was intrigued. It was inevitably going to be compared to his previous game: same scale, same card-assisted mechanics, same designer? Yet I had to believe it would be an entirely new take on the subject. Why would an artist go back and re-do a masterpiece? I mean, I know Rainbow released a second album, but still....

Indeed, after multiple playings, I still don’t have an answer. *Absolute War* is absolutely a re-imaging of *No Retreat: The Russian Front*, even though it approaches it from a mechanically distinct viewpoint. But like a customer of a chef who perfects one cuisine only to open a new restaurant with a high-concept fusion style, I’m left wondering why we couldn’t have just kept the same menu in the first place.

To his credit, Paradis has truly re-imagined the eastern front in a way that you have almost certainly not seen before. Using almost exactly the same order of battle
as No Retreat! The Russian Front, he creates a completely different interpretation of how the forces interacted. Absolute War may remind you in some ways of No Retreat! The Russian Front simply by the size of the map [same size, different orientation], the fact that the units are mostly the same, and that it uses similar-looking cards for historical leverage. But it blazes a new trail by making two fundamental changes: using area movement, and a combat results table with 13 different combat results.

That’s right. THIRTEEN. He accomplishes this by melting the card deck both the CRT and the die roll, and thus each card has an outcome for all the possible combat differentials (no odds here). This allows for incremental results that govern exactly when attacking units can enter an enemy area, and it’s the basis for the entire way the game unfolds. Instead of combat values, units have “stars” of different colors which determine how much strength a unit has to attach, or support, or just defend. The game’s stacking rules ensure that units get spread out, and that attaches are coordinated between areas. Procedurally, it can get fairly involved.

One reason is that many of the things that were delegated to cardplay in No Retreat! The Russian Front now appear as standalone mechanics. There are air units. There is industrial capacity. There is Lend-Lease. Attack and support. Who is mobile? There is a lot of placing counters, flipping counters, and removing counters. It adds up to significant procedural overhead, which is the main difference between it and No Retreat! The Russian Front.

Everything that was one step there is two or three steps here, with questionable benefit. There is even an element of card counting, since the combat results table is on the cards, and your chances of getting a certain result on a given differential column can be markedly different if you’re holding a couple of the good results in your hand.

Mechanical Ostentation?

One thing that Absolute War’s mechanical orientation does do is allow a sort of discrete granularity. The thirteen combat results are actually not very different from the No Retreat! The Russian Front results. Units are still shattered, destroyed, or surrendered (now called “captured”). The real nuance is around the way in which areas can be defended by one or two stacks, and the way that one (or both) of those stacks can be made to retreat, and the attacker can advance into the enemy area to make it contested, which changes the movement mechanics and gives the game a lot of its subtlety.

From a historical standpoint, the increased granularity allows the Soviet player to use the historical counterattacks that were so important in creating the friction that wore down the panzer armies, but which disappear in corps/ army level games like The Russian Campaign because the time scale is too long. Area movement would seem to reduce this even further by consolidating hexes into larger areas, but paradoxically, it’s the way this works with a combat system that allows for far subtler representation of battle zones. The old zone-of-control rubric breaks down somewhat at the army/front level, as it gives the forces involved the appearance of more cohesion than really existed. It’s hard to show the encirclement of part of a Soviet front when that front is one unit. What are you going to do? Cut the counter into pieces?

Now, with units able to share areas, and a further mechanic that allows you to place “pocket” markers with proper use of armor, you can recreate the encirclements that, probably more than anything else, are associated with this campaign in a way that No Retreat! The Russian Front really wasn’t able to. Once a pocket marker is placed, the Soviets can rescue it by contesting the area. But since you can’t move into a solely enemy-occupied area save by combat result, this recreates the furious battles to encircle or break out that characterized the first six months on the Eastern Front. All other games at this scale (and many at smaller scales) fail to convey this. From a historical perspective, it’s a big addition.

Unfortunately, from an actual play perspective, I’m not sure the complication is worth it. The placing of pocket markers seems neat, but you have to put a lot of other markers in an area (attach, support, disrupted, piners, armor, etc.) as part of the combat sequence, so that in the end, the payoff seems low. Gone is the incredibly simple and effective designate/cardplay/attach sequence of No Retreat! The Russian Front. It feels like a 48-speed bicycle: you have all these gears, but in the end, you’re still riding a bicycle.

The ‘Offensives’ Mechanic

The tradeoff in all this is not always historically positive. Paradis’ Offensives mechanic does a great job recreating the historical commanders’ focus on operational objectives, by rewarding your success in achieving pre-announced objectives on a given turn with victory points.

Except that this kind of operational myopia, far from bringing success in the campaign, is what current historiography blames—at least in part—for the
eventual German failure. No Retreat! The Russian Front made victory dependent upon clear objectives that reflected the likelihood of a Soviet collapse, with a neat "high tide" mechanic which encouraged the German player to push as far as possible. Contrastingly, Absolute War encourages the kind of strategically empty environsments that time and again convinced the German High Command that it was winning, simply because they kept closing pockets. The increased complexity in victory determination (albeit for some reason called War Status Points—not to be confused with any number of other terms that proliferate along with the game mechanics) serves no purpose, in my opinion, and seems fairly ahistorical.

A Word on the Finns
The Absolute War also gets rid of one of the best treatments of Finnish involvement I have seen in a game: the Finnish fortress. Finland had all manner of constraints on its war effort, and at one point permanently demolished its army in response to manpower shortages in the Finnish economy. Malting Finland a single fortress with no offensive capability in No Retreat! elegantly reflected both the military and political realities of that front. Absolute War goes back to the bog-standard two Finnish units, forever stuck in Finland, with no purpose except to mangle some ancillary attacks. It’s an insult to say, in my opinion.

The Cleverness Quagmire
Everything seems too clever by half. It seems like the German player to push as far as possible. Contrastingly, Absolute War encourages the kind of strategically empty environsments that time and again convinced the German High Command that it was winning, simply because they kept closing pockets. The increased complexity in victory determination (albeit for some reason called War Status Points—not to be confused with any number of other terms that proliferate along with the game mechanics) serves no purpose, in my opinion, and seems fairly ahistorical.

"From an actual play perspective, I’m not sure the complication is worth it."

players who treat the advanced rules as a sovereign requirement; but this is one rule I believe could simply be deleted from the game. In short, such a rule is emblematic of the way the game tends to wrap itself in a myriad of mechanics without a commensurate payoff. It’s as if Stefan Feld had decided to make a point-salad Eastern Front game. At least there is no mancala.

Now, Absolute War does do some impressive things. There are war crimes sites depicted on the map (Extermination Camps for the Germans, Katyn and the Gulags for the Soviets) which yield War Status Points for the other side when they are captured (but otherwise have no game effect). Similarly, the Germans permanently lose one of their attach markers after the first turn in order to represent the expenditure of military effort on population eradication. It’s a simple but effective way of introducing some of the realities of the Eastern Front that have previously been absent without turning the game into a polemic. It feels as if games are becoming more sophisticated in their historical approach, which is heartily welcomed.

But the game is still the game, and at the end of the day, it’s a lot of procedural investment for what is still a pretty abstract depiction of this titanic theater. Despite being at the same scale, along with the same sized map, Absolute War takes much longer to play than No Retreat! The Russian Front. In fact, everything is more: more combat results, more victory points, more counters, more counting. Yet in the end, it doesn’t really feel any more satisfying. It was the brilliance of No Retreat! that was its major attraction. And, unfortunately, it’s missing from Absolute War, and I don’t see what there is to replace it.

In the end, with both games being so similar in scope, the question will always come down to which one to play. I can see myself playing No Retreat! The Russian Front for many more years, until the counters finally wear out. But I don’t see myself pulling out Absolute War again. Because I usually hold on to all my eastern front games out of a collecting impulse, it means that for all those years, it is No Retreat! that will come off the shelf again and again, while Absolute War sits there forlornly. I hope it doesn’t get jealous and do something rash.

Nicely done review! I don’t agree that some of the features decreed by the reviewer are problematic; rather, I see them more as advantages. Thus, I don’t intend to argue about these preferences as it would be a bore. Instead, I’ll answer the question about “why this game,” and cover topics that were ignored in Bruce’s admittedly well-thought analysis.

Oh, why this game?
By player demand, I started working on it over 10 years ago, following GMT’s release of No Retreat! The Russian Front (Deluxe Edition). We noted that some customers simply wanted more “stuff”, while others wanted an even simpler game (1). I tried to cater to both crowds.

This was an unusual approach for me as I’m a gamer first and a designer second. And so I normally mangle games for my own selfish needs, and if players like my work, then it’s a win-win for everyone.

What I think is lacking in the review
Not a word is spoken about the introductory “Basic” Absolute War rules, with most of it covered by a simple 4-page leaflet; it has less of everything: less counters, less game-turns, no card events, simple victory conditions, etc. It comprises all the things Bruce Geryk seems to want in Absolute War. Really, he should try it.

In my humble opinion, the more involved “Regular” rules in Absolute War – even if more meaty than its No Retreat predecessor – are easier to play in the long run (no hexes, no odds to compute, no dice, etc.). Yes, the first few games will take longer to play as much of Absolute War contains a completely novel system. But once you get the hang of it, it’s a fast and pretty much hassle-free experience. Incidentally, I do intend to streamline a few of the less-useful features in the next titles in the series, too.

And what about…?
Other topics not covered in Bruce’s review are the game’s graphics and components and the Playbook. I made an extra effort to add comprehensive examples of play in the game (over 14 pages of them). It’s also chock-full of historical and gameplay notes, and tons of easy set-up scenario maps. I really feel this should have been mentioned. Additionally, the counters, event cards and map are MUCH better than their counterparts in No Retreat!, making Absolute War even more historically immersive. Go check these out on GMT’s game page, you’ll like what you see.

Needless to say, with these two titles in your possession, you’ll be able to cover all Eastern Front bases, since both games complement each other very well in terms of complexity and gameplay ladders. Some will prefer one, some both, and perhaps a few lost souls will like none (sigh).

A treat for No Retreaters
Of note for the No Retreat! Crowd: the upcoming No Retreat! revamp solitaire module and extra scenarios. Heck, even the map will be double-sided, with the reverse side showcasing the first 2008 edition map layout and rules, allowing you to play the original ultra-simple game.

So what’s next in the Absolute War game system? For starters, WWII World War II (including Italy) 1939-1945, WWI North Africa (including Tunisia) 1940-43. And, heck, maybe even a trip to the Pacific.

No Retreat, my friends!
Carl Paradis
Québec, Canada.

Carl kindly responds to Bruce Geryk’s review of Absolute War (pages 26-30)
Suddenly, this eagerly-populated Discord server began to bear fruit. With the familiarity of their Levy & Campaign forbears, games brimming with ubiquitous Carts, Boats and Ships began developing, but now there were War Wagons, Galleys, Elite Crossbowmen and other medieval weapons and entities. As we waited patiently for the release of Almoravid and for Inferno and Plantagenet to cross the development finish-line, several of us found some free time to discuss our varied backgrounds. It also gave us an opportunity to explain why we were choosing to be designers as well as the reasons we had chosen a specific medieval period to focus on in our respective games.

The following comprises a bit of our mutual stories.

**BACKGROUNDS**

**ANTOINE MCNICHOLL**

_HAUITEVILLE, The Norman Conquest of Apulia & Calabria, 1049-1053_

I am quite a new inductee in the wargaming world. Born and raised in the frozen city of Quebec, I always had a thing for political and war history. In general, living on a former battlefield helped quite a lot with that. I always loved board game, but never really played any “wargames” except for Memoir ’44. My introduction to more complex historical boardgames began in April 2018 when I entered my friendly local game store and purchased GMT Games’ _Time of Crisis_. The Imperial Roman crisis in the third century always fascinated me, but this game became an even greater gateway to a wider world: the _GMTverse_. Jumping forward to early January 2020, I decided to purchase a new title everyone was raving about in GMT’s Facebook group. Its title was _Nevsky_.

Well, _Nevsky_ was a mechanical eye-opener: roll for armor and not for hits? Medieval logistics and operations? Whiny, complaining lords to pay/bribe? Innovative card play? Actual castles cooler than Chateau Frontenac? This game had it all! Unfortunately, two months later, Quebec entered the COVID-19 vortex.

“Nevsky was a brilliant revelation that inspired me.”

—Justin Fassino, designer of _SELJUQ_
Nevsky, Teutons and Bus in Collision, 1240-1242. Designed by Volko Ruhnke, Nevsky was the first in a series of operational games set in the Middle Ages. Nevsky details the storied clash between Latin Teutonic and Orthodox Russian powers along the Baltic frontier of the mid-13th-Century.

This first game in the Levy 6 Campaign series set the standard for further designs, and there was ample room for online skirmishing on eras and battles beyond Nevsky’s frozen wastes.

All games in the series use similar mechanics: players raise and equip their armies, then provision and maneuver them to invade or conquer enemy territory or defeat enemy forces in battle. footage politics obliged an array of lords and vassals to serve on campaign— but only for limited periods.

face-to-face matches. Fast forward again to May 2021 when I read in GMT’s official production update that Volko was seeking playtesters on a special Discord server. Naturally, I was eager to join. Almost immediately, I stumbled into a playtest of Francisco Gradalle’s Planciagenet, and was surprised how relatively easy – given the proper support and enthusiasm – it was to simply sit down and design my own game. And as I began to gain a lot of expertise playing Nevsky, and other Levy 6 Campaign games in development, I thought to myself: “why should I wait a number of years before some enterprising designer finally chose the medieval period I was most interested in and design a game around it?” Gathering my courage, (very humbly) I proposed an ad-hoc game concept to Volko Ruhnke. To my surprise, he encouraged me to go forward with it.

MARK GREENWALD
LAURA: War of the Sicilian Vespers, 1282-1284
I started playing historical wargames over 40 years ago. First with board games and then in the early 90s I got into miniatures (my first was a 5mm Carthaginian army). When Settlers of Calan appeared in the 1990s, I started down the Euro game path too. I think that’s where I get my affinity for wooden pieces.

I sold most of my game collection in the late 90s since moving around a lot (my wife is active-duty US Air Force) wasn’t very compatible with collecting. Recently, I started collecting a few more as retirement looms closer and a permanent gaming room looks more promising (I can dream right?).

About halfway into the pandemic, I was looking for an operational medieval history game. We were living in Europe and I had some free time on my hands. I was playing a euro-style operational Napoleonic game and wondered if a similar system would work for the late medieval period. I knew one group (7mmn army for Venice, so I already had some interest in the period. Also, the Italian Wars seemed like fertile ground for a game. I didn’t expect finding any games that really fit what I was looking for until I came across Nevsky.

After a few plays, I fell in love with the LBC system and started looking for more. Upon reviewing the GMT website, I noticed that Almoravids needed a bit of proofreading. I had the time, so I began a round of editing. After catching a few typos, I was invited to join the LBC Discord server and ended up doing some proofreading for Ingero as well. I started looking at all the other interesting ideas starting on the Discord server and tried my best to offer helpful suggestions to the other designers.

At the same time, I was looking to expand the naval side of LBC. My initial thoughts were around the conflict between Venice and Genoa. But then someone suggested the War of the Sicilian Vespers might make an interesting game too. Since I had already experimented with the era using another miniature medieval army – Peter III the Great of Aragon – I didn’t need much of a push to start my own game channel. The result, Laura, is currently in progress.

I am not sure designing a game is something most people start out to accomplish. Why would you spend your time designing if you could be playing? My only answer is because the game I really want to play does not exist. I think that’s where I get my affinity for wooden pieces.

The primary component that keeps you design going forward.

J U S T I N F A S S I N O
SELJUK: Byzantium Besieged, 1068-1071
I’m from the cloudy and wet environs of Seattle. I am a 16-year veteran of the video game industry, so you could say gaming is one of my life passions (and one I was lucky enough to forge into a career). But it was not until 2013 that I accidentally stumbled down the wargaming rabbit hole after watching a YouTube review of Andean Alpacas. Coming from the Ameritrash tabletop world, I remember thinking to myself: “What an intriguing, off-the-beaten-path theme to make a board game about!”

Shortly thereafter I bought a copy of A Distant Plain to dip my toes in and have been continuing to fall into historical boardgaming ever since (and falling in love with history along the way). Parts of my history lost more like a wargame retail store, and I have played a LOT of wargames over the last decade. But when Nevsky came out a couple of years ago, it was such a brilliant revelation that it finally inspired me to try my hand at design.

G A R R E T T M O N A G H A N
MONTFORT: The Albigensian Crusade, 1210-1213
I was introduced to wargaming at a very young age, mostly via a collection of old SPI and Avalon Hill games (I am looking at you, Kingmaker) which left me with a lifelong love of history and an appreciation for gaming as a storytelling medium. While I did not much time for gaming in high school or college, I got sucked back into it in my late twenties when I picked up The War of the Ring (2nd ed.) at my local game store. A Disciple of Chaos and Twilight’s Brood followed shortly thereafter, and my journey to the dark side was started in earnest.

I live in Columbus, Ohio with my long-suffering wife, our two semi-feral toddlers, and entirely too many books. When I’m not delving into the finer points of medieval siege warfare or the clan structure of late 20th century Ireland, I enjoy reading, cooking, Krav Maga, and pining up new hobbies faster than I can master them.

F R A N C I S C O G R A D A I L L E
PLANTAGENET: Counsell’s War for England 1459-85
I’m a mathematician working in finance and have been an RPG player (and GM) for more than 30 years. When I see a game, I see the historical part, but I always see the mathematical models that hide behind it too. I’m also a narrative geek, so I try to understand the story the designer is trying to tell me with his/her design. I, too, want to tell the players something with my games. I am fascinated by the stories players create when playing a game. In my opinion, wargames create the some of the best stories. A conflict always lays at the center of a story; thus, conflict simulation games are fertile ground for this kind of experience.

As a GM, my focus has been always on designing an experience, and my mathematical background influences my thinking. I am aware of this combinatorial process and embrace it fully. My goal is creating a set of tools that allow others to have fun, develop relationships, and enjoy a good story. And since I have been designing games for my RPG group for more than 20 years, the natural next step for me was to expand that field and design games for commercial publishing.

So, I chose one of my favorite subjects, the Thirty Years War, for the first one (Curious Regio: The Thirty Years War) is now on P500). My second favorite subject is The Wars of the Roses. The scale of this “Counsell’s War” and its operational timeline

> Mark Greenwald, designer of LAURA

> Petr Mojžíš

> Francisco Gradaille

> Laura: The Thirty Years War

> L&C: Catan
is the perfect one for my Levy & Campaign title. In brief, it has a scope large enough to encompass the entire conflict and, at the same time, lets you play with the relevant characters of the time who have direct influence on the board state. In my opinion, including these larger-than-life historical figures serves to create empathy on the part of the player which, in turn, develops a unique story each time it is played.

**PETR MOŽIŠ**

ZIŽKA: Reformation and Crusade in Hussite Bohemia, 1420-1421

First off, Zízka is not my first design work. The man who pulled me into this wonderful world of creating history on the table is Lee Brimmicombe-Wood. Several years ago, he published a booklet about how-to-design scenarios for his great Wing Leader series. Since there were some air battles I wanted to play, but no one had designed scenarios for them, I tried myself. Later, Lee decided to publish some of my scenarios in various packages in the Wing Leader series. I found that I really enjoyed the design process. I decided to take the plunge and design my first game, The Bell of Treason for GMT Games (currently on P500); it is currently in the final stages of playtesting.

"When Nevsky came out, ... it all clicked!"

> Petr Možiš, designer of ZIŽKA

Aside from the Munich Crisis (i.e., subject of The Bell of Treason), I always wanted to play a game about the Bohemian Hussites, but I struggled with how to design it. The leading Hussite general, Jan Zížka, presented a major problem. Zížka was one of the few army leaders in history who was never defeated in battle. How could I model that and also make it interesting in a game? Both players will presumably he is nearly unbeatable, so any opponent will try to avoid fighting him. But when Nevsky came out I immediately played it and when it clicked! By hiding Lords and forces behind a screen, along with modifiable capabilities and some special events in hand, I knew the experience fighting as Zížka or against Zížka would be an enjoyable one.

**THE DESIGNS**

**ANTOINE MCNICHOLL**

Designing LAURIA...

I was always interested in the Norman Dynasty - most especially William the Conqueror, the Hauteville family in Italy, and Bohémond of Antioch. When I decided to join the Levy & Campaign designer’s group, I knew I wanted a game set in 11th century Italy. I spent a week or two reading scientific papers and books. Fortunately for me, French historians have a near-unhealthy interest in Apulia and Calabria. English literature was more focused on the events and the politics. By reading about the latest developments in Southern Italy, I noted several challenges to an LBC design. Notably, the myriad political entities and forces involved as well as the persistent political inactivity I settled my choice on Civitate, because it was a turning point that led to the Sicilian Campaign.

A major key point was that the Byzantines and Papacy had troubles coordinating their forces to crush the Norman, so I decided to separate those factions into two different players against a Norman opponent. Then, to even the odds and introduce a new style of dynamics, I created a second “Norman” player as the Lombard Principality of Salerno. This Principality was the prime mover behind the Norman presence and thus had an agenda of its own. The 4-player LBC Hauteville was born! Of course, going from two players to four is much harder than I expected. Everything I design must be doubled: four Arts of War instead of two, 20 Lords versus 12, and more!

Once the initial design was done, I created a Tabletop Simulator module for testing. Having a virtual version is an advantage for me: I am far away from any GMT conventions and the ease of replacing components without the costs of printing is welcome. However, with an "official" playtest in November with Volto, I feel Hauteville is finally ready to see a

place on a real (playtest) table instead of a virtual one.

Creating a game is not an easy task. It is akin to an iceberg: there are multiple dimensions to consider and learn while designing the game. I am not sure I am mastering it all. For example, graphic and art design aren’t exactly my forte and you have to design everything! The language barrier (I speak French) is also a thing. It is also enormously time consuming. The reward is the intense feeling of happiness in creating something that many others will appreciate and love. A passion for history and games (and coffee!) is the fuel that keeps you going and grants you this mass of energy to spend on your dream.

**MARK GREENWALD**

Designing LAURIA...

Prior to beginning work on Lauria, I knew the general history of the War of the Sicilian Vespers, but most of my knowledge was contextual around building a miniatures army. Diving into the design of the actual LBC game involved much more research.

My first task was to decide how much “action” occurred during the conflict and whether or not it was enough to generate enough in-game excitement. If there is little action, you end up with a different problem to solve. Similarly, I asked myself if there was a strong, interesting story to tell. Fortunately, once I researched the naval campaigns of Roger of Lauria, I knew there was enough action to make it interesting and it fulfilled my original desire to expand the naval aspect of the LBC series.

I continued researching galley warfare during the period, but centered my focus on this particular war. As I filled out the game’s timeline, I had to make some decisions on what new differences Lauria would bring to the table. For this task, the LBC Discord server was extraordinarily helpful. My fellow designers share many solid ideas for solving problems arising from creating a cogent historical narrative. These dialogues have helped me realize some of my design goals while keeping the series’ game mechanics consistent.

Once my basic ideas solidified (i.e., the Lords, vassals, and map), I began building the naval concepts. I was conscious that I might be creating concepts in my LBC game that might later be a part of another title; in other words, I want to make it not only interesting to players, but also understandable enough to port over into another game without too much rules overhead. After writing up rules for the additional naval components and incorporating feedback, I built a physical set to test, primarily to see if there was a plausible medieval campaign here. In January, I took my prototype to BelltoftCon22 in Badajoz Spain. Players tried out my design, asked questions and offered many excellent suggestions, both historical and mechanical.

I am currently in the process of designing the scenarios for Lauria and updating the game after more playtesting. For me, having a physical set allows me to tinker with the components and new rules until they match my intent. However, the creation of both Vassal and Tabletop Simulator modules have really accelerated playtesting.

Overall, all these details are what energize me about the design process. Essentially, I get to share with others my own journey through history. My ultimate goal is that I successfully communicate my enthusiasm for Lauria to players, and provide an enjoyable game too!

**JUSTIN FASSINO**

Designing SELJUK...

My design, Seljuk: Byzantium Besieged, chronicles the four-year reign of Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes (that’s pronounced ‘thee-oh-yeen-is’ for my fellow non-Greek speakers out there) which culminated in the disaster that was the Battle of Manzikert and the eventual conquest of much of the Anatolian peninsula by the Seljuk Turks. Using Volto’s brilliantly expanded LBC rules from Almoroïd, I am trying to bring the heavily asymmetric military and political considerations between the Eastern Roman Empire and Seljuk Sultanate to life on the table, with all of the unique twists and turns that reflect the doctrine and history of the period.

The key word there is “trying”! As any of the LBC designers would tell you, designing a historical game...
is challenging! You have to follow a script that produces historically plausible results while also making sure that players have a fun and engaging time in the hours they spend in-game. These dual guardrails really provide a confined, thought-provoking space for creativity and fun, by turns competing against and working with one another.

At all turns during the process, I have to understand all of the historical details inside and out in order to make the player’s experience a valid one. Learning how to pronounce Greek and Turkish names, triangulating medieval Asian places (sometimes only alluded to in historical texts with no modern associated location) to produce an accurate map... there’s so much to do!

I often wonder whether I should have re-thought about tackling Turky in the Middle Ages without sources and scholarship range from obscure or untranslated to nonexistent—as subject matter for my first serious design effort. Truthfully, it has been an intensely rewarding journey over the last two years, and one in which I feel I have done enough reading for many college-level history classes (and learned some incredible lessons about game design from some very talented individuals to boot).

In the end, my hope is to put a game into the world that brings players joy, and also teach them something. Hopefully, this grossly distorted map of a much larger and longer conflict, with one that I believe presents an interesting choice, and I have learned the truth of this statement throughout the design process. Choosing the historical themes and people you want to focus on, setting guidelines for yourself around the time and space you want to represent, and figuring out which mechanics work (and can’t work) within your game makes for an extremely fascinating and complex puzzle. I am continually working to retain a solid grasp on what I’m creating.

Fortunately, it is also very fun, rewarding, and a great excuse to continue filling up my office with ponderous tomes on obscure pieces of medieval history! Honestly, I am loving every minute of this process so far (except for all those hours Adobe Illustrator takes to have back) and — as crazy as it sounds — I have plenty of other ideas after Montfort is finished. I hope to see many players on the P500!

“MONTFORT...”

DESIGNING PLANTAGENET.

When designing a game, the first thing I do is design a model... simulation of the historical period as well as the overall story I am trying to tell. First, I do this in a abstract form. My theory is that, if I can get a model that when played on an abstract map, I can tell and the subject, it should “click” in her head that it feels right.

I often find it awkward if I manage to get all the pieces of the game [map, lords, etc.] perfectly accurate at inception. Then if something goes wrong, it’s difficult to see if the problem arises from the system or from the geography, leaders’ states, et al. Often times, it is the “chrome” that makes the game, but I have to be sparing with it. My method seeks to produce a model that — if it is good enough — translates to the real world and produces the kind of movements, maneuvers, and situations that are historically plausible.

Finally, I make it a point to treat map data as critical. I will intensively review all map data and heraldry before any art. The final art design is specifically performed to improve upon the game rather than driving it.

This may not be the most common method of game design, but I enjoy sharing my methodology, especially since it’s performed just the opposite way many designers do.

PETR MOJIŠ

Designing ZUŽA...

During this period, a great number of cataclysmic things were happening at once. The Hussite Wars were the first of the many European Wars of Religion (i.e., an attempt to reform the Church). They were also a very bloody civil war waged by lesser gentry, townsfolk, and peasants who used many new military tactics, all played out on a battlefield with no clear lines between friend and foe.

For instance, Hussite War Wagons were a match for any knights when employed properly. In Zúža, they perform double duty and can serve in both a combat role as well as the infamous Levy & Campaign Supply Carts. Equally, the rise of gunpowder during this period completely altered the character of medieval warfare as portrayed in the first Levy & Campaign games.

During this period (1420-1421), two huge crusades (much bigger than those in Nevsky) were launched against the Hussites. Additionally, Bohemia was a kingdom without a king. The rightful heir, Sigismund, was also ‘King of the Romans’ and as such the Papal States, the Church, was rejected by the Hussites. Players playing the Catholic side will have some hard choices. They need to control the countryside and not destroy it (Ravage), but some of their Lords (electors) will have a very different opinion.

Finally, politics is one aspect of the L6C series that is often overlooked. For this game, players have multiple tools (Events, Capabilities, Service, Call-to-Arms, etc.) to maximize its potential.

My design approach is to focus on every scenario in detail before giving it to play testers. I have access to Czech sources, I can walk many of the battlefields and a passion to make Zúža as true to history as I can. Initial playtesting has revealed many unique aspects to this L6C title and I have endeavored to make it as interesting as possible for both sides. I hope you enjoy it as much as I have enjoyed designing it!

“MONFOR...”

DESIGNING MONTFORT.

Montfort... The Albigensian Crusade (1201-1213) covers the first four years of the conflict covered by the Catholic Church’s attempt to crush the Cathars of Languedoc through military force. It is a very small slice of a much larger and longer conflict, but one that I believe presents an opportunity to do some fun things with the Levy & Campaign system.
VASSAL, the cross-platform software, has become a mainstay of live online and asynchronous play-by-email (PBEM) gaming. Although nothing beats the majesty of a four-mapper laid out in all its glory, VASSAL has the distinct advantage of being able to handle large stacks of virtual counters without fear of fat fingers toppling your game into a disorganized mess. And one hidden keyboard shortcut can turn this advantage into a superpower.

As in many wargames, location in a stack may have meaning, particularly status markers, which may apply to some but not all counters in a stack. Figure 1A shows a stack of counters on the left. Hovering the cursor over the stack shows you the what’s in the hex, from bottom to top, left to right. As you can see, the half-squad with the MMG is ‘pinned’, along with an ‘unpinned’ full squad with an LMG. We now bring the stack on the right into the first stack’s hex as seen in Figure 1B. By default, the new stack ends up on top.

Now... what if we want to move counters around within the stack? Easy!

**Figure 2A** shows our stack, double-clicked, so that it is expanded. Now let’s say we want to move the full squad with the LMG (currently in the middle) to some other location in the stack. We follow these steps: (1) Double-click on the stack to expand it. (2) Click away from the map on some empty spot so that nothing in the stack is selected (i.e., no dark black outline on any counter). (3) Now return to your stack and click on the counter you want to move. If you want to move more than one counter – in our case the full squad and the LMG – hold down the Shift key and select the counters you want.

Now use your arrow keys to move those selected counters within the stack. Move the selected counters to the top of the stack by using the Up-arrow (**Figure 2B**), to the bottom of the stack by using the Down-arrow (**Figure 2C**). Now for the real fancy move: Move the selected counters below only the next lower counter in the stack by using the Left-arrow (**Figure 2D**), and similarly, move them above only the next higher counter by using the Right-arrow (**Figure 2E**).

Now you can be the master of large stacks that will never topple, and shift counters within those stacks with effortless precision!

**PRATIK’S PRO-TIPS**

*You can’t go wrong with...*

**WELCOME to Pratik’s Pro-Tips, making wargaming easier for all**

Musicians practice their instruments. Athletes practice sports skills. The same should go for wargaming. It’s often difficult to wrap your head around some concepts in wargaming and the hobby requires a lot of mental hurdles. I hope these tips offer some helpful suggestions to both newcomers and veterans alike.

**HOW TO HANDLE STACKS IN VASSAL**

VASSAL, the cross-platform software, has become a mainstay of live online and asynchronous play-by-email (PBEM) gaming. Although nothing beats the majesty of a four-mapper laid out in all its glory, VASSAL has the distinct advantage of being able to handle large stacks of virtual counters without fear of fat fingers toppling your game into a disorganized mess. And one hidden keyboard shortcut can turn this advantage into a superpower.

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**VASSAL FIGURE 1A - 1B**

**VASSAL FIGURE 2A - 2E**

**Got VASSAL?**

For those who don’t know Vassal is a free online game engine. With its thousands of mods, players can recreate most board and tabletop games online. This can be done either in real-time or through play-by-email systems. Pretty much every major wargame has been recreated in Vassal. Vassal is used by a huge community of players and, aside from simple casual games, you can often find large campaigns or tournaments being run.
CRITICAL DATES

CRITICAL GAME DATES

LOOKING FOR AN IDEA ON WHAT TO PLAY?

JUNE 1ST (1533)
QUEEN BOLEYN
On 1st June 1533, Whitsun, Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn, was crowned queen at Westminster Abbey by her good friend Archbishop Thomas Cranmer. Good times ahead for Anne.
GAME REC: Here I Stand
MORE INFORMATION: Anne Boleyn, Queen of England

JUNE 4TH (1942)
BATTLE OF MIDWAY
The Battle of Midway was a major naval battle in the Pacific Theater of World War II that took place on 4–7 June 1942, six months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The Battle of Midway was a major naval battle in the Pacific Theater of World War II.
GAME REC: Fury at Midway
MORE INFORMATION: Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

JUNE 6TH (1959)
FIDEL CASTRO SWORN IN
In Havana, revolutionary leader Fidel Castro is sworn in as prime minister of Cuba after leading a guerrilla campaign that forced right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista into exile.
GAME REC: Castro's Insurgency

JUNE 9TH (1945)
FURRY AT MIDWAY
Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor.

JUNE 12TH (1893)
JULY 28TH (1919)
WORLD WAR I BEGINS
The war pitted the Central Powers—mainly Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Turkey—against the Allies—mainly France, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Japan, and, from 1917, the United States.
GAME REC: Paths of Glory
MORE INFORMATION: Battle of Midway, 1942

JUNE 14TH (1533)
BATTLE OF OCKHAM
The Battle of Ockham was fought on 14 June 1533, between the Scottish army commanded by King James V of Scotland and the English army under the Earl of Oxford. The English army was victorious.
GAME REC: Ockham
MORE INFORMATION: Battle of Ockham

JUNE 16TH (1959)
FIDEL CASTRO'S SWORN IN
In Havana, revolutionary leader Fidel Castro is sworn in as prime minister of Cuba after leading a guerrilla campaign that forced right-wing dictator Fulgencio Batista into exile.
GAME REC: Cuba Libre, Castro's Insurgency

JUNE 16TH (1993)
MADAM GANDHI
Mohandas Gandhi, then a young Indian lawyer recently arrived in South Africa, carried out his first act of civil disobedience. He would become a leader of the Indian independence movement.
GAME REC: Gandhi

JUNE 18TH (1793)
SUSAN B. ANTHONY ARRESTED FOR VOTING IN ROCHESTER
Susan B. Anthony devoted more than 50 years of her life to the cause of women’s suffrage. After casting her ballot in the 1872 Presidential election in the hometown of Rochester, NY, she was arrested, tried, and convicted for voting illegally. Following the 2-day trial in June 1873, which she lost, Anthony was sentenced to pay a fine of $100 and court costs.
GAME REC: The Trial of Susan B. Anthony
MORE INFORMATION: Susan B. Anthony

JUNE 18TH (1793)
TREATY OF VERSAILLES
The Treaty of Versailles was signed at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris, France. The treaty was one of several that officially ended five years of conflict known as the Great War (World War I).
GAME REC: No Retreat: The Russian Front

JUNE 19TH (1944)
INVINCIBLE: WORLD WAR II
At the Allied invasion of Italy begun with an attack on the island of Sicily. General Dwight D. Eisenhower labeled the invasion the “first page in the liberation of the European Continent.”
GAME REC: The Invasion of Sicily

JUNE 22ND (1944)
OPERATION: BARBAROSSA
Over 3.8 million personnel of the Axis powers—the largest invasion force in the history of warfare—invaded the western Soviet Union along an 800-mile front. The offensive marked a massive escalation of World War II, both geographically and in the formation of the Allied coalition including the Soviet Union.
GAME REC: No Retreat: The Russian Front
MORE INFORMATION: Operation Barbarossa, June 22, 1941

JUNE 23RD (1842)
ARMS CISTERN, FORMALLY ENDING THE KOREAN WAR
The Korean War was fought between North Korea and South Korea from 1950 to 1953. The war began on 25 June 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea following clashes along the border and rebellions in South Korea. The armistice, while it stopped hostilities, was not a permanent peace treaty between nations. The three-year conflict claimed the lives of millions of soldiers and civilians.
GAME REC: The Siege of Jerusalem
MORE INFORMATION: The Armistice of 1953

JULY 9TH (1943)
INVADERS OF SICILY
The Allied invasion of Italy began with an attack on the island of Sicily. General Dwight D. Eisenhower labeled the invasion the “first page in the liberation of the European Continent.”
GAME REC: Sicily II

JULY 15TH (1999)
JERUSALEM PLUNDERED
The Siege of Jerusalem begins and the city is captured and plundered by Christian forces during the First Crusade. The capture laid the foundation for the Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem, which lasted almost two centuries. The aftermath of the siege led to the mass slaughter of thousands of Muslims and Jews who conspired by suggestion was savage and widespread.
GAME REC: Kingdom of Heaven
MORE INFORMATION: The Siege of Jerusalem

JULY 22ND (1994)
VOTES FOR WOMEN
Here I Stand

JULY 22ND (1951)
THE CRUSADES
LIKE MOST AMATEUR HISTORIANS, WE ALL HAVE FAVORITE ERAS, BATTLES, REVOLUTIONS AND UPRHEAVALS THAT IGNITE OUR PASSION FOR HISTORICAL MEMORY. LIKE MOST AMATEUR HISTORIANS, WE ALL HAVE FAVORITE ERAS, BATTLES, REVOLUTIONS AND UPRHEAVALS THAT IGNITE OUR PASSION FOR HISTORICAL MEMORY. LIKE MOST AMATEUR HISTORIANS, WE ALL HAVE FAVORITE ERAS, BATTLES, REVOLUTIONS AND UPRHEAVALS THAT IGNITE OUR PASSION FOR HISTORICAL MEMORY...

JULY 27TH (1973)
ARMISTICE SIGNED, FORMALLY ENDING THE KOREAN WAR
The Korean War was fought between North Korea and South Korea from 1950 to 1953. The war began on 25 June 1950 when North Korea invaded South Korea following clashes along the border and rebellions in South Korea. The armistice, while it stopped hostilities, was not a permanent peace treaty between nations. The three-year conflict claimed the lives of millions of soldiers and civilians.
GAME REC: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom
MORE INFORMATION: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

AUGUST 7TH (1964)
RESOLUTION APPROVED: GULF OF TONKIN RESOLUTION
Following an attack on two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin, the United States.
GAME REC: Paths of Glory
MORE INFORMATION: Operation Margaret Chase Smith

AUGUST 8TH (1964)
THE KOREAN WAR SIGNED, FOR GOOD TIMES AHEAD:
The Great March was held in Washington, D.C., on Aug 28, 1963. The purpose of the march was to advocate for the civil and economic rights of African Americans. At the march, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial, delivered his historic “I Have a Dream” speech in which he called for an end to racism.
GAME REC: I Have a Dream
MORE INFORMATION: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

AUGUST 10TH (1943)
EFFECTIVE AT NOON, RICHARD M.
NIXON RESIGNS
Effective at noon, Richard M. Nixon resigned the presidency as a result of the Watergate scandal. Facing possible impeachment by the U.S. Congress, he became the only American President ever to resign from office.
GAME REC: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

AUGUST 26TH (1971)
THE CONGRESS APPROVES THE GULF OF TONKIN RESOLUTION
Following an attack on two U.S. destroyers in the Gulf of Tonkin off North Vietnam, the U.S. Congress approved the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, granting President Lyndon B. Johnson authority “to take all necessary measures to repel any armed attack against the forces of the United States and to prevent further aggression.”
GAME REC: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom
MORE INFORMATION: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

AUGUST 28TH (1963)
MARCH ON WASHINGTON
The Roman conquest of Britain commenced in the year AD 43.
GAME REC: I Have a Dream
MORE INFORMATION: The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom

AUGUST 28TH (1963)
THE KOREAN WAR:
THE GREAT MARCH WAS HELD IN WASHINGTON, D.C., ON AUG 28, 1963. THE PURPOSE OF THE MARCH WAS TO ADVOCATE FOR THE CONFLICT: THE SIEGE OF JERUSALEM:

September 17, 1776

The Treaty of Versailles was signed at the Palace of Versailles outside Paris, France. The treaty was one of several that officially ended five years of conflict known as the Great War (World War I).
GAME REC: The Armistice of 1953
MORE INFORMATION: The Treaty of Versailles

October 31, 1776

The Battle of Gettysburg was fought July 1–3, 1863, in and around the town of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, by Union and Confederate forces during the American Civil War. It marked the turning point of the Civil War. With more than 50,000 estimated Casualties, the three-day engage-
Disclosure:
The Renaissance is Here

In our premier issue of Conflicts of Interest, we bring you this first DISCLOSURE column by game designer Harold Buchanan, a lifelong boardgamer and hobby advocate. In this issue, Harold discusses how an overt renaissance in historical board gaming has been in progress for decades and that there are no signs of decline.

Since the tragic death of my first two loves, Avalon Hill and SPI, I have been on the lookout for the decline of the historical game hobby. Yet, despite my fears, we are in the midst of a historical gaming renaissance! But, from where I sit today, I have come to appreciate the incredible developments in historical games over the last 40 years.

Content creators continually post new and useful content while traditional print media continues to flow. Social media pulls us together like never before and gaming platforms allow us to play with online friends across the world. And the proverbial spice continues to flow with new and ever-evolving historical games published at an unprecedented pace. All this while new, diverse and interesting gamers enter the hobby from adjacent spaces to celebrate the renaissance.

Intellectual Property
I recently spoke with designers Jack Green and Charles Vasey about the good old days of hobby newsletters. Jack has written articles for countless publications and Charles produced an extraordinarily witty (if you know Charles you know that goes without saying) newsletter entitled Perfidious Albion. We reminisced about the many excellent reviews and commentary in those old hobby newsletters, but also discussed how hard they were to produce and distribute. Of course we also had the original Strategy and Tactics (SPI, 1969-1982) and The General (Avalon Hill, 1964-1998) magazines.

Both Green and Vasey were prolific writers back in the day. Beginning in the mid-1970s, Vasey selflessly produced hundreds of issues of his iconic ‘zine’, Perfidious Albion, a two-time winner of the Charles S. Roberts Award. Between the 1960s and 1990s, Jack wrote nearly 100 pieces for numerous newsletters, Diplomacy magazines and some of the better known magazines of the day including Conflict, Campaign (and its earlier Panzerfaust), Strategy & Tactics, Moves, Fire & Movement, The General, Yaquinto’s newsletter, Perfidious Albion (published by Charles Vasey), The Wargamer, Grenadier (GDN), Tactics and Japanese Command, Command (XTT), and The Broadside.

“\textit{I have come to appreciate the incredible development in historical games...}”

“...”

Over the years, historical board- and wargaming pundits have pondered an impending decline of product in the genre, often mulling over the possibility of a complete disappearance. In his premier Disclosure column, designer Harold Buchanan refutes these Cassandras of the hobby.

Comment? Join the conversation on our Conflicts of Interest Discord Server!
The quantity of game releases continues to increase year after year. GMT Games’ co-founder and president, Gene Billingsley, says he often gets complaints that the company is producing too many titles that are not traditional hex-and-counter “wargames”.

According to Gene, though, the industry actually produces more hex-and-counter games than ever before. But it is the explosion of newer styles of historical board games that has dramatically driven its growth. Despite complaints by wargame traditionalists, titles like Twilight Struggle have really allowed GMT Games to grow and, as a result, draw even more fans to the genre.

BoardGameGeek provides a database of published board games and the ability to search by type (e.g., “wargame”) and year. Notwithstanding the inherent limits of a database populated by fans, a search for “wargame” and year. Again, while the data are not perfect, the message is clear. The number of wargames (including the number of hex-and-counter wargames) published has roughly doubled since the 1980s, but the proportion of games outside the hex-and-counter category has also grown during that time. Does this mean the hobby is turning away from hex-and-counter wargames? Not at all. Actually, to the contrary, hex-and-counter wargames significantly increased in number since the 1980s. But it does mean that the hobby is growing in many new and different directions, and that this evolution is a part of a drift benefiting historical gaming in several important ways. Firstly, historical board game designers are adapting mechanisms that have developed in (non-wargame) strategy games: different map fractions, point-to-point, creative sequencing including card-driven mechanics and bidding/trading, and introductions of randomness beyond the dice and players through cards. Secondly, we see more designers drifting toward historical games, no longer inspired by pasted on themes. More and more, first time designers are moved to produce games that reflect history rather than simply “fun” mechanics. Finally – and perhaps most importantly – we are seeing more and more gamers pour into our hobby who are looking to enjoy the deep strategic challenges historical games offer. These new converts may not be driven by the historical subject matter initially, but like many of us, a game purchase hobbyist’s purchasing power.

For example, let us select a game from the heyday of wargames to demonstrate this point: Bloody April (SPI, 1980) was designed by the great Richard Berg and – having followed the giant, detergent box-sized Terrible Swift Sword – fed fans’ desires for sprawling, multi-map and counter-dense American Civil War battles (in the woods). For a modern comparison Into the Woods: The Battle of Shiloh (GMT Games, 2002) designed by Richard Whaler also features multiple large maps and an equally large quantity of counters. (see base data below) Bloody April includes 2 maps, 1,200 counters and in 1980 listed at a price of 327. Into the Woods also includes 2 maps, 1,120 counters and as well as a massive improvement in graphics and is currently (as of this writing) offered for a price of $59. From $27 to $59 in 42 short years, the implied rate of increase in prices (assuming annual compounding) is just under 1.9% per year.
of map colors, and then even more thrilled by counters that introduced a single additional basic color. Today I look back and see just how far the industry has come. Nostalgically, I’m still attracted to those antiquated counters, but you simply can’t beat the clarity of a modern Operational Combat Series (OCS) counter set. Of course, the problem now is that colors are used to designate so many different unit types and the subtleties of hue are often more than my old eyes can discern. But, without a doubt, the quality of today’s components and maps are extraordinary.

Similarly, the quality of print material in the game box continues to increase, along with ample improvement in rules clarity, quality and organization. Historically, rules have been written as reference manuals, but we are seeing the transition to rules as primary teaching tools. Designers like Jeremy White (Emery Coast Ahead, Atlantic Chafe, Shies Above the Reich) continue to innovate and break open more antiquated rules-writing paradigms. Additionally, the inclusion of helpful "playbooks" as large as their accompanying rules sets is also an answer to the rules-as-reference-manual problem and continue to expand with illustrative examples of play and more detailed histories and designer’s notes.

Cards in historical games were marginally present in the early days but have now become a more common key component. We can thank the founders of the Card-Driven Game model – Marh Herman, Ted Racier and Marh Simonitch – for that glorious addition. I remember the early days of games with cards like Kingmaker (1974) and Up Front (1983), both from Avalon Hill. But their cards were punched out of cheap paper stock and, as a result, were terrible. Oddly, we were all so accustomed to standard playing cards with high quality French decks, so I’m not “Opponents Wanted” section.

Turns could take weeks or more to resolve and die rolls were resolved either using the honor system or a quaint method of selecting a future stock price and performing a calculation based upon it. Pre-web participants utilized dial-up bulletin board systems as well as Ljuset and its popular rec.games.board newsgroup. In the early 90’s there was even an AOL chat room dedicated to wargaming and one could troll the halls to see what people were playing. The above were important first attempts to move from the old PBM system to more modern methods with quicker turnaround times.

Today player-to-player connections go much deeper with the help of digital platforms such as GMT Gaming Forums, BoardGameGeek, Facebook, Groups, Discord, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram. We gather in groups with common interests, specific games, systems and eras. We also use these same digital platforms to connect with designers. How great is it that we can contact the designer directly with appreciation for their work (or a dissatisfaction of it)? We can even ask questions about rules interpretations or why designers make certain historical or mechanical decisions, although my personal rule is to never ask designers for advice on strategy for their own games (unless it is Mark Herman). All this serves to pull us together even more, not only broadening our reference group but also increasing our understanding of the games we play. And the boundaries for our community keep expanding.

For example, designers such as Volko Ruhnke continue to push the edge of available technology, helping to launch their own interest groups with Discord servers for the COIN and Levy & Campaign series. There, interested players and would-be designers can trade ideas about all aspects of a game system and, as of this writing, it is absolutely evident that new designs are continually emerging from these thriving sub-communities (e.g., there are another 8 games in the Levy & Campaign system that are nearing completion).

We are connected to bigger networks in so many different ways than just 20 years ago. At the very least, social media platforms make the historical gaming world a much smaller – and therefore more accessible – place. If your preference is for games related to the conflicts of ancient China, you can easily find a group of gamers that shares your enthusiasm. During the pandemic, these online spaces have replaced many of our personal meeting places. As a result, our online communities such as the San Diego Historical Games Convention, Bellota Con and Armchair Dragons Conventions have grown and blossomed. Board gaming groups on all social media platforms have grown as well and help to pull players in from across the country and around the world.

We have also increased our play on a number of electronic platforms such as Twilight Struggle, Labyrinth and Fort Sumter which feature full rules enforcement and stunning graphics. The power of these implementations goes beyond simply facilitating play; they actually make an often complex historical game easier to learn and less intimidating to new players. They are also much easier to set up and clean up when you are finished!

– Harold Buchanan, May 2022

**A PBM advertisement from The General magazine.**
ROMANCI\iNG THE HERMAN

Instead of going directly to Le Bernardin after the polo match, the affable Herman – always the gent – treated me to a casual but effective snifter of his best 40-year. The normal chit-chat ensued. Instead of trading barbs about Erasmus 2.0’s emotional diffidence or the Peloponnesian Bellicosity Index (a particular peeve of mine), Marthy Marth drops an existential hail bomb. In a fit of ennui, his eminence mentions that he is working on a new book! As the 40-year flowed down his mighty trachea, he mentioned it would be “a labor of love.” Could it be another priceless tome detailing his wargaming experience within the Defense établissement? Yay, nay? I couldn’t help feel this Baron of Brooklyn was hedging. I proffered mention of his long-submerged wishes to enter the heady realm of romantic fiction. “Uh, no, dude,” he intoned (and too loudly at that for my taste) with a wink. I knew it. I just knew it. <<

I NEED A NAPPY

More conservative gourmands tell me that Mark McLaughlin knows confit like no other and I’m never quite certain if ‘tis a compliment. Ducks aside, Mark knows that I am a proverbial sucker for all things Napoleon (save the rumored flatulence) and one evening at the Paradise Club, he had me swooning with anticipation in light of two words uttered from that mellifluous mouth: Third Edition. Not just a Third, fellow gossip hounds, but a Third from your dreams. Oh changes, there be changes, my friends, all shepherded in by the Nappy Wars Grand Poobah himself, Gareth O.M.G. Williams. And the hints, dear reader, of so many “new things” in an updated edition. Weep with impatience for this fabled Third, dear reader. But most of all, weep for the horrid confit here at the Paradise Club. <<

B.S.M. BUTTERFIELD

At the most recent GMT Weekend at the Warehouse, I spent an evening with John Butterfield playing a variant of Ted Raicer’s Dark Summer wherein only the Polish, French and Stuttgart Volksturm units could be used during the invasion. You can imagine my surprise when, in the middle of a turn (there is some serious downtime with this variant), John hinted about his new project. “It’s in space, dude,” the Saint of Solitaire uttered between CRT checks. “Was machst du?”, I replied to my hairless friend (John and I share the same hairstyle). “I need 16,000 paragraphs of text, bud, and if I don’t get it, I’m never going to be able to work on Enemy Action: Onomatopoeia.” Befuddled, I asked: “What are you saying, maestro?” “GMT is sending me back to space. I need to be Up Front (!) with you, Bobby.... Remember those old Ares Magazine games?” “Of course, John,” I replied in my best Efrem Zimbalist Jr. voice (John loves it when I do that in-game as long as I’m not obtuse about it). And then he said it: “Ship, voyage, wreckage, exploration, planet to planet, solitaire... it’s happening. And no one can stop it, not even Dan Pancaldi. I mean... the ship’s already built!” “An updated Biological Survey Mission?”, I asked a bit too loudly. “Shhhhhh! Something like that. But with extra radiation.” <<
It’s easy to mod a favorite boardgame. Unhappy King Charles designer Charles Vasey shows how.

So much then for the basic material for re-skinnning. It might be worth considering the characteristics of a good candidate for re-skinnning. I think there are a few basic requirements.

Firstly, the re-skinnning “designer” must see in the base game something that reminds them strongly of the replacement topic. Secondly, the mechanisms should easily direct themselves towards the new topic: in other words, the mechanism should never be shoehorned into the topic. There must be some form of synthesis already present. Thirdly, I believe it is important that the base game’s structure is not abandoned in early re-skinnning. If the original game was balanced, challenging, and interesting it behoves us as re-skinnners not to fiddle around with it in its early stages. Fourthly, we should minimise changes to the essential nature of the game components.

The subject which I chose for re-skinnning was an excellent game called Watergate designed by Matthias Cramer and published in 2019. The topic of the game was the attempt by investigators to link US President Nixon to the Watergate break in. The most striking feature when one opens the game up is the board. It is laid out rather like one of the organograms used in a criminal investigation. In this case, however, rather than the plan being laid out with the Mob Boss at the top and his Captains underneath, a sitting American president was at the centre of the board, assailed in every direction by possible sources of information.

The various cards included events and individuals who are very important in the whole Watergate saga. The effect of these cards was to move evidence tokens onto the board, either moving from the information source to President Nixon or blocking progress where the evidence failed. There was also a Momentum Marker which could drive key events either towards exonerating the President or towards trials hearings and impeachment. The mixture of card play, token placement and such a solid historical theme made this a game I greatly enjoyed.
Reskin the Gate

King Charles I. This was a topic I have often designed on before (Unhappy King Charles, GMT Games, 2008) and which I was working on a higher level political game when I first encountered Watergate. The particular similarity that struck me was that both the President and the King were fallible personalities who tended to make enemies not too wisely but too well. As well as the personalities involved, the structures of the struggle were those of the law, politics, and the views of a fractionalised polity. There was also the similarity of a common English legal tradition. Thus, I had the inspiration, but would I have the mechanisms? Naturally, we would need a name for the game before starting. Given the fatal nature of political failure in England in the 1640s, it seemed to me that it was not Watergate but TraitorsGate, and so a name was born.

Watergate’s structure of map, markers, and cards presented no difficulties whatsoever. It seemed to me that what Watergate called evidence markers or tokens could be best represented in my game as Parliamentary Bills. Watergate’s Momentum mechanic needed no changing at all. It exactly fit the process by which King Charles lost support and then regained it to such a degree that the war became not only possible, but inevitable. It was, therefore, a simple matter to take the central mechanisms of the game and borrow them.

The map board of course needed changing as well as the cards, which would need to be completely revamped. TraitorsGate’s map itself would be very similar to the Watergate map, divided into three parts. In Watergate these parts were represented by (1) the re-election campaign, (2) the physical plan of the Watergate complex and (3) the transcripts of the infamous White House tapes. Each sector of the map linked to potential information sources that could lead the Press player to make the necessary connections to ensnare the President. In the wider world of Stuart London, I decided the three sectors would be titled Religion, Politics and Finance. From each of these sprang the support for or opposition to the King. What surprised me was how quickly the Watergate game led me to this decision, and it was one which would not change throughout the re-skin. A few illustrations were added around the edge of the board together with a board section called the “Tower of London” into which the King’s Servants cards could be placed if defeated.

Now to the cards. I decided that — following my principle of not altering the balance of a game — if I could produce a spreadsheet of the current cards and would then make simple cosmetic adjustments to them. The adjustments would include new illustrations and colour text, but otherwise stick very closely to the original Watergate game. It was clear that the two sides in the game were no longer “President and Press” but “King and People”. Where in Watergate, key informants such as Rose Mary Woods or Alexander Butterfield had occupied the edges of the mapboard, in TraitorsGate I substituted the sources of potential political support. Whereas in Watergate the information sources were made available or not available by the card play of the players, in TraitorsGate these supporters were sought by both sides. This gave a very natural feeling to the struggles that did occur in London in that period.

In the Politics sector, the players sought the loyalty of the two Houses Of Parliament, the House of Commons being represented by Mr. Speaker. The religious divide consisted of three groups, all of which were Protestant factions. The Catholics were brought in via an event card, but lacked the political strength to be a viable source of support during the currency of this game. The three varieties of Protestants were the Anglicans, the Arminians, and the Puritans. And yes, card play could mean the King obtained the support of the Puritans, although by which means the game remains silent. Finance was represented by the key method of coercing money and the Courts Of Law (both the Prerogative Courts and the Royal Courts). This was an area where King Charles’ son James would come unstuck in later years. It was now a simple matter of assigning historically appropriate events to the many cards in the original Watergate deck. For those who attempt to re-skin a game, this is possibly the most enjoyable stage of the process. The original designer has provided you with the effect of the cards; you have but to change the names and find new illustrations. If only boardgame design was this easy all the time!

There was, however, one set of Watergate’s original cards that required a bit more thought: these were the cards that replaced the “Presidential Aides and the Key Journalists”. Here I decided to use the two extremes of Stuart politics: the King’s Servants and the Godly. The latter group may not seem to have much similarity with campaigning journalists, yet much of their time was taken in exactly that role. I therefore chose “Una Pyne” (as his enemies called this great Presbyterian) and William Prynne, notable for losing his ears at the behest of Archbishop Laud (Prynne would later prosecute the impudent cleric). The third card fell not to an individual but to the Scotch Covenanters whose opposition to King Charles led to his failure in two wars and who eventually sold him to Parliament for 30 pieces of silver (or so the Royalists were to claim).

The King’s Servants, were, of course, more numerous. There was Sir Edward Hyde, who was to be the grandfather of Queens Anne and Mary, and the Duke of Buckingham who died at the hands of an assassin after ruining the King’s foreign policy. William Laud, who, as Bishop of London, was of a more moderate disposition but a valuable administrator. William Laud, Archbishop of Canterbury, managed to enrage nearly everybody with his religious policies. Then there was the most dangerous of the King’s Servants — the Earl of Shaftesbury who after had a fashion managed to control Ireland. The illustrious Earl would eventually die beneath the axe. Finally, as with the Godly, there was a group rather than an individual: in this case, the Catholic nobility, whose wealth and loyalty were guaranteed by London. Thus TraitorsGate was born. The names of individual events were chopped, changed and pruned, but overall, similar game effects were easily achieved by reviewing the events chosen by Watergate’s designer and matching them to the bundle of events baking in my head. Again, it is so incredibly easy to design in the wake of a great designer like Matthias Cramer. TraitorsGate worked well both as a game and as a quick recreation of a complex period in English history. Most notably, the new card events created some excellent counterfactuals and parallel histories. I can think of other historical subjects that could use the same process, though always tainting consideration individual trigger areas. For example, the Struggle for Emancipation in the 1960s would make an excellent topic in terms of it, but not one in which most gamers would be willing to play the Segregationists.

“The personal design journey is as enjoyable as the destination.”

> Charles Vasey

I found this re-skin exercise to be great fun and highly recommend trying a variant of your own (especially if you enjoy “Design-Lite” exercises). Such re-skin games are unlikely to see publication because of Intellectual Property concerns; nonetheless, the personal design journey is as enjoyable as the destination.

> Charles Vasey
The first steps of simulation games in the Middle Ages and beyond

The above is the general perception of chess, a quintessential game essentially immutable both in respect to past ages as well as every possible future of humanity.

Perceptions and Beginnings

All of this is at least partly due to the simplicity of chess rules, the many symbolic elements and the depth of its strategy. Its play dynamics lend themselves to all manner of metaphorical and psychological allegory, even in popular culture (from Ingmar Bergman’s The Seventh Seal to Norman Jewison’s The Thomas Crown Affair). Most of all, for its analogy to a linear pitched battle. By dint of its piece names, chess became a game closely associated with strategy in general and the art of war in particular, and not only in the Western world.

But while the above is certainly true, we must not forget that – like most games – chess has undergone an evolution, with origins and variants that look very different compared to its “classical” form to which we are accustomed today. Its rules set were eventually solidified in Europe only during the 15th century. Indeed, it was a pivotal moment in the history of gaming.

Many scholars identify Chess’ oldest ancestor as the Indian game of chaturanga dating as far back as 600 BCE. Its name, roughly translated as “The Game of Four”, likely alludes to the four elements as well to the four classical divisions of the army in ancient India (foot, horse, chariots and elephants). Chaturanga is also a four-player game. The most noteworthy thing is how, far from being only an abstract allegory, chaturanga strives to capture the actual essence and dynamics of a real armed confrontation. Each of its pieces have features directly inspired by their real-world counterparts. Interestingly, the four players can also engage in diplomatic negotiations; even dice are used in some versions of it.

So much of chaturanga alludes to actual war. Seventh century court poet Bāna tells that, in the very peaceful kingdom of Harsha, “only the gameboards remember the positions of the four divisions of the army”. Centuries later, all these similarities with the modern

> Bāna, 7th century Indian poet

Chess is one of the oldest and most popular board games, played by two opponents on a checkered board with specially designed pieces of contrasting colours, commonly white and black. White moves first, after which the players alternate turns in accordance with fixed rules, each player attempting to force the opponent’s principal piece, the King, into checkmate—a position where it is unable to avoid capture.

Chess first appeared in India about the 6th century CE and by the 10th century had spread from Asia to the Middle East and Europe. Since at least the 15th century, chess has been known as the “royal game” because of its popularity among the nobility.

Rules and set design slowly evolved until both reached today’s standard in the early 19th century. Once an intellectual diversion favoured by the upper classes, chess went through an explosive growth in interest during the 20th century as professional and state-sponsored players competed for an officially recognized world championship title and tournament prizes.
concept of simulation games would not be lost on renowned game designer Gary Gross, who identified chaturanga as the true first form of wargame.

Greets and Romans
All was about to change when – possibly thanks to the invasion of India by the armies of Alexander the Great – chess came into contact with Greek culture. It was merged with another popular game, petteia (the “game of soldiers”, assiduously played by common people as well as philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.

While the lower classes played with dice for simple bets or entertained themselves with games like ludus duodecim scriptorium (i.e., game of the Twelve Writers) became the ancestor of what we now know as backgammon. It was said that Emperor Claudius was so fond of the game that he had a personal gameboard engraved inside his personal carriage and allegedly wrote an essay (sadly lost) on game strategy.

In all this, chess continued its evolution. While the Roman Empire began its inexorable decline in the West, other Eastern civilizations continued to play versions of the ancient chaturanga more faithful to the original rules. Thus, in Persia and later in the Arab world came shatranj, then shahmat from whose name would come the term “shahmat” and, eventually, “checkmate”. Thus chess as we know it today was brought to Europe in its near-original form thanks to the first Crusades of the 11th and 12th centuries. It came to be seen as a game full of the prestige of an ancient and noble origin, and one that could withstand the religious and cultural stigma against games of luck, simultaneously considered an artifact of the Devil to tempt the faithful with vain promises of glory, as well as an intellectual shortcut unworthy of a truly rational individual.

The Middle Ages
And so here we come to the Middle Ages, a period very often summarily dubbed “the Dark Ages” but in which game historians might find many moments of dramatic change and evolution. We shall eventually find that the seeds of modern gaming that were planted and bore their first fruits.

One of these surely was one of the greatest essays on games ever written during the period. El Libro de los Juegos (literally, “The Book of Games”) curated by none other than a Spanish monarch, King Alphonse X of Castille, also known as El Savio, the Wise.

There surely had been other written studies about games before that, but in most cases, those were disingenuous works, if not outright condemnations. For instance, in the Knights Templar Rule, written by Bernard of Clairvaux in the first half of 12th century, the author forbade almost any kind of game to the pious warrior monks of the Crusades, with an explicit mention of chess (Rule 317). Such condemnation should come as no surprise considering the medieval practice of turning the ancient game of intellectuals and philosophers into a betting game.

In addition to the many beautiful illustrations of games in Alphonse’s Libro, it is most astonishing to find a depiction of a Knight Templar and an Arab Lord merrily playing together around a chessboard! What could have justified so many violations of cultural, religious, and even political taboos with a game at their centre? Of course, these were weird and complex times for Spain. Those were the days of Tajo, the political divisions among Muslim potentates on the Iberian Peninsula which later led to the final reunification (or Reconquista) of the country under the combined rule of two Christian kingdoms (Castille and Aragon) in 1492 with the fall of the last Arab city of Granada. Even if we can argue that the scene depicted in the Libro is an allegory for the continued challenge to Spanish domination between two representative figures of the two warring faiths, another more interesting interpretation is based on the constant intermingling of traditions, customs, and even familiar ties that characterized this long period. Indeed, it was a mix of military conflict and cultural contamination, perfectly represented by two people peacefully confronting each other in a pleasant game of chess.

The Question of El Libro
Even more interesting is the actual content and final purpose of El Libro. It was a collection of games and variations, presented in a deeply symbolic structure full of mathematical allusions. The numbers 7 and 12, well known to the experts of classical Greco-Roman and Arab numeric symbolism, are prominently referenced throughout. Its standout feature is a philosophical dissertation discussing the kind of game which could be considered most worthy of the learned individual’s attention. Within its text – and not that dissimilar to any Facebook or BoardGameGeek discussion today – some fictional characters debate whether a purely deterministic game without any luck involved (i.e., a “German style” or “Euro” game) or a game heavily based on dice rolling (“Ameritrish”, anyone?), requires deeper strategic thinking. In essence, the time-honored question among modern boardgamers: which one is the game for “more intelligent” people? The answer then as now remains (thankfully) open.

Significantly enough, the main character in El Libro’s dialogue is the King of India (and quite possibly Alphonse himself) who discourses upon the subject with three wise men. The wise men propose three different kinds of games, among which the Libro is divided: the Libro de Ajedrez (the Book of Chess) with games based on pure reason, the Libro de los Dados (the Book of Dice) with dice rolling games involving pure luck, and the Libro de la Tabulas (the Book of Boardgames). It is clear where the favour of the King resides; that is, with the latter.

Within the Libro de la Tabulas can be found games which mediate between the purely deterministic approach of chess and the overwhelming randomness of dice. Essentially, these are games that use a board to recreate the “rational tendencies” of human beings, coupled with the need to control the great strength of chance. They were also games that were commonly found in medieval taverns, houses and even castles, hiding many elements with a great potential in future game design such as resource management, card drafting, tile placement and even more.

Many studies have been made on these humble forebears of modern boardgames. Italian-speaking readers can find very accurate studies and reconstructions of them in the works of Andrea Angiolino and Gian Carlo Cecchi: both of whom are [and by chance] passionate game designers and wargamers.

Alphonse’s point is stressed even further during a dialogue with
the King of India wherein the Ajedrex de los Quatros Tiempos (Chess of the Four Seasons) is discussed. This Ajedrex is a chess variant for four players involving the use of dice and recreating the passage of time in a year. Thus, in yet another way, the ancient chaturanga was still around in the Middle Ages, and just waiting for the right time to reappear under a new and innovative medieval form.

Vilting Chess Variants: An aside

However, parallel to the great work of good King Alphonse, other forces were at work in that period: a real crucible of intellectual research, paving the way for a very new kind of gaming. Some of those forces concentrated on a return to some ancient forms of entertainment, possibly as old or even older than chess itself.

For example, the hnefatafl, the so-called “Viking chess”, which was very different from “classic” chess and not exclusively a “Vilting” variant of the game. In this very intriguing game, the pawns move and capture other pieces like in checkers, except that one of the players controls not so much an army but a hing and his personal guard. The hing’s purpose is to “escape” the board, avoiding the pursuing enemy soldiers.

Asymmetry, direct allusions to raid tactics, maybe a hint of an ancient story about some forgotten lord of a legend or an age-old historical event… all elements that begin to ring bells in the ears of modern-day wargamers.

This game is also based on a series of algorithms: once you define a procedure to solve movement or combat, just insert the contingent variables (i.e. movement values and combat ratios), compare them with pre-fixed parameters like TECs, CRTs and ZOCs and here you have a mathematical model allowing you to satisfyingly recreate reality. From algorithms, we garner simulation.

Of course, no one thought about creating an interactive representation of military events based on Al-Khwārizmi’s methods until many centuries after. However, other scholars understood the growing importance of mathematics in the daily life of the Middle Ages, so much that even games based on the relations between numbers became a highly popular form of intellectual entertainment.

There were many variations, from really simple games which lent themselves well to gambling, to much more sophisticated rulesets, and the most sophisticated of them was rythmomachy.

Rythmomachy

Mentioned for the first time in the early 11th century by Benedictine monk Hermann of Reichenau (also known as “Hermannus Contractus”) as a variation of a game supposedly devised by Pythagoras himself (literally, legend), rythmomachy literally means “Battle of the Numbers”, even if sometimes we see it referred as “The Philosopher’s Game”. Following in the steps of Aristotle who mentioned the peteiio in his own works, other great thinkers such as Roger Bacon and Thomas More mentioned rythmomachy in their writings. Indeed, many essays on the game also appear in higher cultural institutions, including various European universities and academies.

The game – richly symbolic during a period when the boundaries between mathematics and esoteric disciplines were quite blurred – can be simply described as a form of “mathematical chess”: all the moves, captures and various victory conditions are based on complex, parallel mathematical relations between the values of single pieces. Of course, the game is totally abstract (no dice, total symmetry, no variations on the board) and finds its greatest value in teaching mathematical functions to its disciples, and sometimes appears even a bit abstruse. This might explain rythmomachy’s abrupt disappearance during the Enlightenment period, when empiricism and observation of reality gained prevalence over absolute theory and abstract symbolism in philosophical studies. Once again, however, we cannot fail to observe how mathematical relations related to position on a predetermined grid still form a fundamental part of what we call today “wargaming”. Force ratios and zones of control, anyone?

Llull’s ‘Universal Method’

A possible link between practical mathematical procedures, abstract arithmetic, higher symbolic meanings and actual representation of reality seemed almost impossible to form… until the appearance in 13th century Spain of Ramon Llull. Again from the land of Spain, standing amid Christian and Muslim heritages, an intellectual endeavored to form a better understanding of mathematical relations and reality itself through a game.

After first having proposed many translations of treaties on logic by previous Muslim scholars, Llull’s game of combinations defined a method to represent reality based on the interaction between differing sets of concepts and relations. The Majorcan philosopher’s “game” utilized 9 absolute predicates, 9 subjects, 9 virtues, and 9 vices. It was described as a complex set of wheels, a logical “machinery” of procedures and subprocedures, capable of forming every possible description of every possible aspect, real or abstract.

It is the ars combinatoria, as defined in his fundamental treaty Ars Generalis Ultima, essentially “The Universal
Method” based on language and its infinite nuances (something that later philosophers like Descartes would use as an important basis for their own studies).

The importance of Liu’s work, notwithstanding its obvious limitations and rigid approach, was the focus on interactions between the single elements as defined both by mathematical and philosophical logic, using the resulting “game” or “interplay” between those static elements as a tool to represent reality: to put it more simply, a simulation game.

Card Game Evolution

Lastly, but by no means of less importance, a final contribution of medieval culture to our modern-day hobby was the evolution of card games. Even if this form of gaming traces its roots back to Roman times, it is in these centuries that it reaches its highest popularity at all social levels. Card games are played both in the noble courts of Europe (with the dangerous tendency of being used for gambling) as well in the humblest taverns of cities and towns, competing with their dice-based counterparts and often surpassing them in popularity. They were easy to manufacture and transport, universally known and extremely versatile, being used for a great number of different games.

One popular variant was tarot, which begins to appear in its first forms during the 13th century in France and Northern Italy, possibly as a by-product of the higher commercial and cultural exchanges with the Middle East (Egypt in particular). Being somewhat similar to trick-taking games like bridge, tarot should not be confused with more recent divinatory uses. One of the first fully formed tarot decks that we have knowledge of is the Visconti Tarot (mid-15th century) and its many variations, were often used to inspire philosophical conversations between nobles and courtiers. Its players formed sentences, verbal declarations and philosophical speculations based on the combination of the cards drawn randomly from the deck (Ramon Llull would certainly have approved). The most striking element of card gaming was how flexible it could be. Every card could have a value, define a relation with other cards, be used in different rulesets and even contain a hidden symbolic meaning. In some ways, this was a more complex gaming system, even if less socially appreciated, in comparison with the abstract and rigid chess. Some authors like Éliphas Lévi have even tried to identify card games as the first true origin of chess itself which was needed to bind them all together into a system not only more organic than isolated allusions and symbolic approaches, but also more adaptable and accessible than rigid mathematical sequences with little or no direct relation to reality.

Leibniz’ Early Wargame

This “something” was slowly taking shape, and we can find traces of its movement in a letter to a friend written by the great mathematician and philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm von Leibniz (1646-1716). In it, this founder of calculus alludes to the possibility of creating – through mathematical operations and probabilistic analogies – a game for “military colonels and captains”, able to recreate “certain battles and skirmishes… both at one’s discretion and from history” in an interactive and open-ended form to be played on something other than a chessboard. This game would be played on a map representing different terrain features, with values for the different units inspired by reasoned assessment of military factors and events. The procedures able to generate random but reasonable consequences for the players’ decisions and interactions. To be fair, Leibniz did not invent the wargame as we know it because (as far as we know) he never actively pursued this intuition, discussing it only as a proof for the value of the probabilistic sciences. But in putting down these words, he defined the very first concepts of modern simulation gaming, also connecting it expressly with the description of military events and dynamics. He could do so because he had at his disposal the different elements already used in games we have seen so far. What he lacked, or was not so interested in applying, were two essential strategic tools, also emerging in those years: scientific topography and accurate military statistics.

These two elements would be at first combined with what was perceived as the strategic game par excellence (i.e., traditional chess) and would lead to the birth of the first forms of so-called military chess. Hybrids were created which included larger boards with different rules for some squares and pieces “inspired by” (real or not) various troop specializations. Along with larger rulesets, these curious experiments exploded in popularity by the mid and late 18th century, only to disappear over the span of a few decades.

“The result of all these game elements would become the Kriegsspiel.”

Once again, a more concrete yet flexible system was needed to create a game truly capable of depicting the many nuances of real-world events in a practical and interactive way. The “game of war” for which so much professional interest was forming, could not be a vague universal metaphor, but a diversified and multi-faceted simulation. In other words, a probabilistic model based on many different elements that could be adapted and modified, based on the particular needs of the moment, but remaining capable of producing an effective and useful simulation with a satisfying level of plausibility.

To reach this objective, the map and statistical data needed to be merged with dice, mathematical evaluations, inter-dependent relations, predetermined combinations, cards or complex random generation systems, and even a bit of old improvisation.

The results of all the gaming elements previously described would eventually be used in the late 18th and early 19th century by Hellwig, Venturini, the two von Reisswitzs, du Vernoy and many others to create in its many evolutions the Kriegsspiel. In other words, the wargame.

Almost every piece of it would depart from rigid deterministic chess. Instead, it would draws inspiration from the evocative poetry of ancient chaturanga with its mix of randomness and strategy, but most of all using to its fullest potential the game elements defined in their essential form during the great cultural crucible and transitional period that we know as the Middle Ages.

Eliphas Lévi. French esotericist, poet, and author.
SDHistCon goes big with its very special award

SDHistCon is very proud to announce our first annual Summit Award, recognizing a historical board game published in the preceding year that most broadened the hobby through its ease of teaching and/or play, uniqueness of topic or novel approach.

Why an award?
Awards can be useful tools to achieve organizational goals, by recognizing achievement or promoting something believed to be scarce. Awards may also be used to counterbalance a negative force or recognize positive outcomes. For the SDHistCon team, the Summit Award is an opportunity for us to recognize the positive impact of a game that broadens the historical gaming hobby by drawing in more players or by introducing a new and unique subject or perspective. Our ultimate hope is that the Summit Award helps foster a discussion amongst players, designers and publishers about new ways to broaden the hobby through teaching, play, topic and approach.

The SDHistCon Mission Statement
The SDHistCon Mission Statement provides firm grounding for creating this special award and it has become the single, essential document that continues to guide the SDHistCon team in all its endeavors. Its most crucial component is the recognition that our hobby must expand by embracing the complex tapestry of human history—not simply as told by generals, field marshals and heads of state—but by the countless diverse and under-represented individuals whose perspectives broaden our collective worldview in ways that would have been unimaginable a scant decade ago. The Statement serves as a constant reminder that we can only move forward when we move beyond entrenched and accepted biases. Therefore, the SDHistCon team values inclusion, diversity and mutual respect as highly as it values historical veracity. This Statement, along with the guidance provided by our incredible Advisory Board (Liz Davidson, Candice Harris, Volko Ruhnke and David Thompson), has been invaluable in keeping us thoughtful, focused and efficient.

“The SDHistCon team values inclusion, diversity and mutual respect as highly as it values historical veracity.”

> From the SDHistCon Mission Statement

Critical Dates

July - 2022
- Summit Award information rolled out to the gaming public
- Acceptance of game title nominations opens
- List of Judges released

September - 2022
- Final selection of 4 Summit Award finalists announced
- Judges begin playing selected game finalists

November - 2022
- Judges select and communicate the SDHistCon Summit Award winner to the public

Comments? Join the conversation on our Conflicts of Interest Discord Server!
As such, we zeroed in very quickly on the question of accessibility to the hobby and, thus, a game that significantly improved accessibility became a critical Summit Award target. Improved accessibility can manifest itself in a number of different ways including ease of instruction, ease of play, a compelling topic or unique approach. We then agree that spotlighting a game which stood out in this category during the preceding calendar year would be the best place to start. Naturally, we needed to set clear guidelines for what qualifies as a historical board game. For Summit Award candidacy, the game must:

- be a manual tabletop game
- have a closed-system ruleset that does not rely on role-play or referee
- simulate an historical setting through specific game mechanics rather than historical themes as an afterthought to game mechanics
- concern political, social, cultural, scientific, economic, military, or any other human affairs

The Judges

The question of who could judge the various nominations would be a critical component of the Summit Award. Our decision was to engage the public for the nominations process but judges would be selected from the following three groups:

- SDHistCon Board
- SDHistCon Advisory Committee
- Any honorary members as agreed to by the SDHistCon Board who could serve as judge for that year’s Award.

Of paramount importance is the engagement of the broader historical board gaming community in the nomination process. This approach achieves several goals:

1. It gives voice to the broader SDHistCon community
2. It generates an ongoing discussion on means to improve access to the historical gaming hobby
3. It ideally draws attention to the Summit Award in social media, related fora, et al.

Currently, we are accepting nominations via a form you can find on Twitter and on our website. Interested gamers should provide a game title and a brief statement on how it advances accessibility in the hobby.

The most popular nomination will become one of the finalists!

Award Criteria

Each judge will nominate 3 games that meet the below criteria, and these will be narrowed down to a group of 4 finalists. This short list will be communicated to the public through email and social media. Judges will also communicate the reasons why each of their nominees qualify under the same criteria.

Ideally, Summit Award judges will then play the 4 finalists. In order to build consensus, judges will discuss only those games they have played. The judges will then meet and collaborate to select a winner. In line with the SDHistCon Mission Statement, we will use this process to amplify games that are designed, developed, published or artistically supported by individuals and groups that are underrepresented in our community. Each judge will evaluate the games played on the following 5 criteria, all seen through the lens of players with limited experience in historical games:

- Ease of Teaching
- Ease of Play
- Novelty/Uniqueness of Topic
- Novelty of Approach
- Effectiveness as a historical game

This is the grand plan for now. We also reserve the right to adjust the process or timing to allow us to better execute the nomination and judging processes. The SDHistCon team hopes this makes you curious about the hobby’s overall accessibility as well as our collective efforts to broaden the hobby. We also hope you consider nominating a game that meets these criteria. It’s going to be a lot of fun and we look forward to lots of debate and discussion as the winner bubbles to the surface!

THE MISSION OF THE SAN DIEGO HISTORICAL GAMES CONVENTION (SDHC) IS:

to create a diverse and supportive gaming community dedicated to playing, discussing, designing, and promoting historically-based board games. Through this commitment, SDHC seeks to serve both the existing historical board gaming community as well as grow it through the addition of new voices and perspectives.

PRINCIPLES

- SDHC was founded around a mutual love of historical board game simulations, a unique amalgamation of world history (from global to local), military conflict, biography, cartography, economics, politics, and hypotheses, all fueled by the camaraderie that such games engender. And while this corner of the larger board-gaming hobby once consisted mainly of hex-and-counter wargames, the idea of what constitutes a historical simulation has grown to encompass a larger, more expansive and inclusive definition, and SDHC fully embraces this view.
- SDHC utilizes all available technologies and communications platforms to organize and moderate both in-person and online events, in order to bring historical board gamers together to have fun and play games with fellow enthusiasts, to gain insights about the hobby and its future directions directly from publishers, and to learn about history and how to model it directly from designers. Through such events, SDHC seeks to both explore the reach of its mission globally but also to bring the community closer together.
- SDHC further strives to continue to innovate so as to keep its mission fresh and relevant to the current and prospective historical board gaming community. This innovation includes expanding the ways we interact, the types of events we sponsor, and also the topics we discuss, with an inclusive bias towards what is worthy of consideration.
- SDHC commits to measuring its success on an ongoing basis, through self-assessment as well as through external feedback and evaluation. One such mechanism is the SDHistCon Board, a body of invited game designers, critics, and content producers, selected to provide advice and underrepresented perspectives to SDHC in furtherance of its mission to create a diverse and supportive historical board gaming community.
- Finally, SDHC dedicates itself to this mission and the necessary work to achieve it purely for the love of the hobby and not for any individual profit or advantage. Any funds raised by SDHC are used to support future activities or are donated to appropriate charities with no compensation to SDHC members or advisors.
FAVORITE CARDS
Which do designers choose?

Welcome to a Conflicts of Interest recurring feature column wherein we ask boardgame designers and luminaries about their favorite cards from games they have played. In this issue, we feature faves by designers Jeff Grossman, Amabel Holland and Jason Matthews.

JEFF GROSSMAN

The image grabbed my attention immediately, two soldiers looking out from the box cover. Jaunty, defiant, and even intimidating, the two Indians – one in traditional clothing and one in a red overcoat – stood below a banner proclaiming ‘Wilderness War’.

The box cover by Rodger MacGowan was inspired by his childhood love of James Fenimore Cooper’s The Last of the Mohicans. Rodger made a great decision in emphasizing the Indian aspect of the game, and it remains one of my favorite covers. I’d been interested in the French and Indian War (1755-60) for many years. A close friend was a reenactor who appeared as an extra in the 1992 film version of Cooper’s book. Despite the amazing cover, I frankly doubted that the game would be worth playing. I thought it would be another battle between white guys in the woods Maybe with some generic Indians around to add variety.

I couldn’t have been more wrong. Mingo, Shawnee, Mohawk, Cherokee, Delaware, Ottawa, Mississauga, Huron, Ojibwa, Potawatomi, Abenaki, Algonquin, Caughnawaga, Seneca, Cayuga, Onondaga, Tuscarora, and Oneida were all represented. Not generic Indians. That was important.

Colleagues and friends – members of different tribes depicted in the game – explained that while “Indian” was acceptable to use as a collective term, the majority prefer the use of their tribal names. Grouped for simulation purposes into Northern, Western, Iroquois, Mohawks, and Cherokees, they represent the tribes which were so vital to success in this war. They comprise the “third faction” in this game about domination of the wilderness, fought between European powers, but using the colonists and tribes to achieve their goals. Obvious from my first play of Wilderness War was that, despite the plans of the French or British commanders, the tribes are playing their own game with their own ends in mind. They may show up in numbers only to melt away. When they muster, they are invaluable scouts and raiders, but both success and failure can lead them to return home. What is the game they are playing? Very simply, they are acting very much like those bands of men did during the war. Warriors fought with either army for their own reasons, primarily plunder (material and captives), status, and to push back the encroachment of colonists. Whether any of the tribes viewed their arrangements with the British or French as an alliance is not certain, but it is safe to say that the majority were motivated by the short-term prospects. Indian warfare was persistent and low level for the tribes depicted in Wilderness War. Raids upon other tribes or colonists were common, as was being raided in turn by other tribes and colonists. Raids were brutal and violent. Adult male captives were tortured and killed – honoring their victims with the chance to redeem their defeat in battle with a brave death. Women and children might have been killed to provoke their enemies (such a foe would be much harder to defeat), but they might also be adopted into the tribe to replace lost family members.

“The Massacre card evokes the imagery of both the fictional and historical war.”

Jeff Grossman, designer of Cuba Libre

> Historical gaming special feature

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As repulsive as the Indian way of war might have seemed to the European mind, the European methods of war likely seemed equally odious to a Huron or Ojibwa (or for that matter, many colonists). Europeans would fight furious battles, but the soldiers captured would receive friendly treatment (disregarding the defeated for even more from an Indian perspective as the prisoner who would have no chance to prove their courage). The Indian allies were then denied scalps, plunder, and captives. If the desire for their promised rewards were thwarted, there was a good chance they would ignore the Europeans’ orders and take what they believed had been promised.

The Massacre card. The chain of events after the surrender of Fort William Henry in 1757 is probably familiar to most gamers as well as those who have read any French and Indian War history or visited the historic sites. When Lieutenant-Colonel George Monro surrendered his force of 2300 men to a French and Indian army under the command of Marquis Louis Joseph de Montcalm-Cazons. The terms agreed by Montcalm allowed Monro “honors of war” which infuriated Montcalm’s tribal allies, who had been promised scalps and plunder. They attacked the column marching out after their surrender. Reports of the massacre soon spread, tarnishing Montcalm’s reputation and inspiring anti-French sentiment in the colonies. Upset at being denied their spoils, many of Montcalm’s Indian allies began returning home or headed off to plunder on their own.

Notable as well, the French and Indian War started with a similar, if much smaller massacre. 22-year-old George Washington was technically on a diplomatic mission, but eager for fame and to establish Virginia’s sentinels (disgracing the French and Indian War, which had begun fortifying the region). He set off into the Ohio Valley accompanied by Tanaghrisson, an Iroquois with an agenda of his own. A French force ostensibly also there on a diplomatic mission was ambushed and massacred. Historians argue whether Washington was a dupe of an Iroquois out to start a war or an inexperienced young gentleman out of his depth. In either case, it serves as a reminder that the culture of war, and the brutality of the conflict echo through history. It tells of a story of six Opinions cards which are used to nudge public support for your cause. Much of the story of woman’s suffrage has been told by white women and centered the efforts of white women. This is not an accurate picture of the struggle, which is reason enough to try to correct it, but the game’s argument is about intersectionality – about how the fight against patriarchy and the fight against white supremacy are the same fight, both coming out of the pre-war abolitionist movement, and about how the victory won by the Nineteenth Amendment, achieved for and by white women by abandoning Black Americans to Jim Crow, was therefore incomplete. And so, it was important to me to give cards to Black suffragists like Sojourner Truth and Ida B. Wells, whose arguments were what we would today call intersectional.

Neither are my favorite card, though! The argument I’m making with the anti-suffrage open as a j-2, I’m intensely aware of how ridicule is used to spread disinformation and create contempt. It’s why I gave Ridicule as one of the cards in The Vote, illustrated with a cartoon of a henpecked husband and the horror of her emancipating wife. This is actually one of the rarer cards of The Vote, others were quite violent. Out of all the cards, this one is the most cogent expression of the fact that it’s the same old bullshit today as it was then. The fight continues.

> Amabel Holland, designer of The Vote

“Popular art is a reflection of the culture that produces it....”

> Jason Matthews, author of This Guilty Land

My favorite card of the CDG genre would have to be “Declaration of Independence,” from Mark Heidler’s The Vote. Of course, the card is a joy to play as the Americans, and a major nuisance to mitigate if you are the British. However, there is another reason why this card not only has an illustration of Mark’s golden insight, which has spawned a whole sub-hobby and a thousand imitators. Prior to The People, most politicians in wargaming was painfully hardwired into the rules or equally as disappointing, the subject of a random events chart. For the first time, we were able to contextualize politics to time, geography and game state without static rules that were easily gamed and manipulated with unintended effects. We the People singlehandedly reinvented my interest in wargaming - at a time when Eurogames were just making their mark on the hobby.

In the late 1980’s wargaming almost committed suicide with a steady diet of increasing rules complexity, and a decreasing audience. When I got this game and this card to the table, there was something magical about it. Like the Euro games coming across the Atlantic, here was tight decision making with an acceptable play time. Here was something fresh, something innovative, something I could teach a player who did not know the nuances of NATO symbology. It was hopeful for the future of my hobby all on this little card. It inspired and informed my own game designs. So I am very grateful for this “Declaration of Independence,” its impact on my thinking, and the world of possibility that it has opened for all game design.

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The wealth of popular depictions sets Vikings apart from less-common game subjects. When designers come up with a Viking game, they know that their audience already has a preconceived notion of what will be featured therein. Of course, one of the most popular conceptions of vikinghood is combat. Because the historical Vikings spent most of their time farming, crafting, trading, raising children and a wealth of other non-violent activities, combat and battle is often blown well out of proportion in popular depictions. Most of these base their interpretation on the frequent Viking raids from which their name is derived: a “Viking”, originally, was the term for the raid rather than for the people who undertook it.

In this article, we’ll examine depictions of Viking combat in five of the most popular board games with a Viking theme. “Combat”, for the purposes of this article, encompasses typical Viking raids, full-blown wars, and other forms of organized struggle by these predominantly Scandinavian seafaring people.

Blood Rage

Let’s begin with the most combat-focused game. In Blood Rage (CMON, 2015), combat is the be-all, end-all of Viking existence. It is an existence whose end is impending, as Ragnarök – the end of the world as imagined in Viking mythology – is raging around the players. Rather than jockeying for material gains, they are vying for a last blaze of glory.

Indeed, glory is what the game calls its victory points – and instead of atypical “action” points, you use rage points. Blood Rage’s basic terminology paints an effective mental image of a berserker seeking a dramatic death whilst taking down a few others in the process.

Dramatic deaths are further incentivized by offering additional glory for the death of the player’s warriors who are then granted access to Valhalla, the Viking’s afterlife for heroes. However, since “lost” warriors in Valhalla become available at the end of each round, there’s not too much of a downside to their deaths. In a sense, Valhalla serves as a catch-up mechanism, providing players who are losing battles and becoming affected by the world’s imminent destruction alternate scoring opportunities.

Raiders of the North Sea

In Raiders of the North Sea (Garphill Games, 2015), combat is not quite as ubiquitous, yet similarly crucial for success. Within the triad of means, ways, and ends (a fruitful concept for strategic analysis as well as game design, as Volko Ruhnke has repeatedly shown), Viking raids comprise the ways. These raids are enabled by the means of village activity, gaining the
resources for the ends of pleasing the local chieftain for victory points. Other ways are derived from the village, but in the end, these are auxiliary methods. In Raiders of the North Sea, victory ultimately derives from the successful raiding of the myriad ports, monasteries, and fortresses on the other side of the North Sea. This is not to say that the popular concept of a glorious Víking death isn’t also employed here. Raiding crew members can, indeed, die if they meet a Víking hero, granting the player precious additional victory points. In Raiders, however, the slain warriors are gone for good, making crew recruitment one of the most challenging aspects of the game. Thus, the decision to seek death in battle is a much harder one to make than in Blood Rage.

Vikings: Invasions of England

As Vikings are so thematically popular, games about them often rely on the shared concept of “vikinghood” without referring to any specific names, places, or times. A notable exception is Víking: Invasions of England (Academy Games, 2017). While one player leads Víking warbands invading England in 878, the other organizes the Anglo-Saxon resistance. That makes it also the rare Viking game in which there is a playable opponent against the Víkins. It also hints as to why eurogamers – notoriously averse to direct inter-player conflict – often prefer combat-heavy Viking-themed games. Players can compete indirectly by conducting raids against a non-player entity, as they do in Raiders of the North Sea as well as in the next game.

A Feast for Odin

A Feast for Odin (Z-Man Games, 2016) is an archetypical eurogame. There’s worker placement, meeples have to be fed, and the game prizes planning over chance. However, there is a group of actions in which luck plays a significant role: Hunting, raiding, and pillaging. Even in the eurogame genre, the game gives a nod to the unpredictability of combat, setting it apart from less adventurous occupations like farming or trading. The raiding and pillaging actions are one way to acquire the goods on which the eventual score depends – yet there are many others ranging from extracting resources from the mountains to exploring faraway lands. Thus, the game uses the term “Víking” in the wider sense of early medieval Norse society which was characterized by a variety of occupations including farming, mining, trading, crafting (in addition to raiding).

Vikings

Finally, Vikings (Z-Man Games, 2007) turns the Víking concept of the previous games on its head. It divides the characteristic combination of the Víking warrior and longship into two distinct functions. Longships are the offensive part, closing rows of tiles for scoring; warriors are the defensive part, negating the effect of ships. In an odd inversion of other games’ mechanics, the Víkins are not hoping to profit from seaborne raids, but rather hoping to avoid being the targets of such raids themselves! There might be a relationship to the game’s publication date: Víking is the oldest of the bunch (2007). The other four, published between 2015 and 2017, are likely to have been influenced by the boom of the Vikings TV series (2013-present), in which combat plays a significant role.

These games offer a variety of depictions of the role of combat in Víking society, ranging from the raison d’être of Víking existence versus its treatment as an instrument of acquisition and, ultimately, to its inversion of Víking warriors defending against raids. It exemplifies the variety of meanings of the term, “Víking” – from the stricter sense of the seaborne raider to the wider Norse culture of the early Middle Ages. The fact that most of the very popular Víking games have been published a few years after the start of the Vikings TV series indicates a lively cross-media discourse of popular conceptions of history – both for the ideas designers have (and publishers accept) and for what board game designers work to buy and play. Finally, while visual representations of the Víkins differ in style, they are in broad agreement about the attributes of the Víking warrior: no raider without axe, shield, and helmet!

SOLO PLAY: FAVOR FOR THE UNDERDOG?

While solo modes for games are becoming more common, for many games there’s still the original, tried-and-true solitary option many wargamers know well: playing both sides.

Yes, you’ll have to find some way to work around hidden information issues, but more importantly, you’ll have to resist the temptation to always root for whichever side is losing at the moment.

Resisting Temptations

How do you do this? The key is to move past the idea that your ego is invested in the game. A favorite trick of mine is mentally assigning “personalities” to each side. For instance, I tell myself: “This game is going to be Gonzo vs Kermit. Gonzo is always seeking the largest possible gamble, while Kermit starts defensively until he loses his cool and then he switches to 100% attack.”

Now, when faced with an in-game decision, the question isn’t “what would I do here?” but “what would Gonzo do here?” “Well,” I then tell myself, “Gonzo would definitely risk it all on this one shot.”

You can assign these personalities randomly using any device that lets you randomize things. Tarot cards, RPG NPC generators, or even a 12-sided die rolled against a horoscope. I especially like this for games where each side represents a group working together, say in a game in which three ships are pitted against an opposing squadron. In this case I might draw one Tarot card per ship and have each do its best to play in a manner reflective of that card’s meaning.

An “oracle” tool (such as a Magic 8-ball) can also be used whenever you run into any decision that’s particularly difficult to try and keep that underdog-bias to a minimum. This has an added bonus of getting you to try new strategies overall and not get stuck in the same approaches each play (always a risk in solitary play).

Solitaire play has a bit of a bad reputation in gaming, but it’s a great way to get some gaming in, and a good exercise in exploring the limits of the self.
From Player to Designer
I started wargaming in the early 1980s when I was 15. My wargame trinity was then Kevin Zucker’s *Napoleon’s Last Battles*, Jim Dunnigan’s *Panzergruppe Guderian* and, of course, John Edwards’ *The Russian Campaign*. These games set the scene for all of my future designs. Like many wargamers, I then migrated from player to player/collector and finally to player/collector/designer in 1994 when I designed a game for *Vae Victis* magazine (Issue #4) entitled *Moscou 1941: Aux portes du Kremlin*. After a long lull and four sons born (was I afraid of not having enough players?), I came back to game design in 2012 with another magazine game for *Vae Victis*, called *La Bataille de Paris*. This time there was no lull: the following year, I started to think about a new Napoleonic system that would sit between OSG’s Library and the long-standing *La Bataille* series. Under the Hexasim banner, we delivered *Waterloo, Fallen Eagles*, just in time for the bicentenary of the battle on June 18th, 2015. I received some incredible feedback from players, and all the information they provided encouraged me to continue the Eagles series and also to create more designs in general. As a result, more titles followed: *Austerlitz, Rising Eagles* in 2016, *Ligny, Last Eagles* in 2017, and most recently, *Quatre Bras, Last Eagles* in 2019, which won the 2019 CSR Awards for Best Napoleonic Wargame.

"I started playing wargames when I was 15."

> Walter Vejdovsky, FSIM Founder

As the founder of Fellowship of Simulations, a France-based publisher of historical board- and wargames, Walter Vejdovsky is no newcomer to the hobby. Like many hobbyists, Walter found that playing wargames ignited a passion for design and, ultimately, launching his own company.

**SPOTLIGHT:**
**FELLOWSHIP OF SIMULATIONS**

FSIM Founder Walter Vejdovsky thinks big about wargames

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A lot of our attention is given to graphics and map art to provide the best visual experience during play to enhance immersion. As any designer will tell you, a bad game will not be saved by graphics, but terrible graphics can kill a good game. After all, board gaming is also very much a visual experience.

I worked an enormous amount on the map illustration to provide the right visual “feel” and hoped players would appreciate it. In Verdun 1916 - Steel Inferno, for example, I was lucky to get permission from the famous cartoon illustrator Tardi to use his illustrations for the game. The game’s reception went far beyond my wildest expectations: two reprints as well as 2020 Charles S. Roberts Awards for Best Wargame and Design Elegance.

Another feature of FSIM is that all games published so far have not only been designed in France, but also manufactured in France. This is intentional, not only to support local businesses and try as much as possible to reduce dependency on China and shipping from there, but also to be more agile in our production process and accurate with publishing timing.

In 2020, and with the great initial momentum of Verdun 1916’s publication, I then published my first “third party” game, Trench War, by designer Florian Corbel. At the time, Florian was a young French first-time designer. The rules of Trench War are very simple and were intended to give even very young players a historically-themed experience. Upon publication, I was ecstatic to hear of schoolteachers buying the game to use with their young students. But Trench War has also resonated with experienced players who find it extremely fun to play.

The Future of the Fellowship

At least for the near future, FSIM will concentrate on two kinds of games. Firstly, what I like to call “bridge” games, which are a mix of wargame and boardgame. These are medium complexity historical boardgames that shorten to average playing times, are mostly card driven, and are eminently playable without prior experience in wargames. Verdun 1916 was the first game in this category. And secondly, “core” wargames: these titles are more akin to classic wargames, have longer playing times but also strive artistically to deliver a beautiful-looking game players will appreciate. Already one such game is in development.

In 2021, FSIM launched a Kickstarter for Russia’s War: Barbarossa Reloaded. This Kickstarter is on its way to的成功 shortly, hitting its $20,000 goal (and greater paying!) job, but given the aforementioned full plate for game design, I might — like so many designers — never really retire.

Napoleon’s Conquests is designed by Bruno Lamotte who lives in Toulon, France (a premier Napoleonic location!).

In 2022, and with the great effort of Simulacrum Games, I hope to publish two new “bridge” games: Dilettante and Invaders of France

"A bad game will not be saved by graphics, but terrible graphics can kill a good game.”

> Walter Vojdovszy hands on with his board game design, Verdun 1916: Steel Inferno.
THREE QUESTIONS

> HB: Watergate was a big hit for you. Did you expect the topical decision matched with compelling game play would be such a big hit? What does it tell you about the current gaming environment?

> MC: I was quite surprised there were so precious few games covering this seminal moment of 20th century political history. Almost everyone knows about the basic elements of the Watergate scandal. Indeed, today, most scandals have the word “-gate” appended to them. Originally, Watergate (Capstone Games, 2019) was originally planned for release in 2020, but the possibility of an impeachment of then President Donald Trump made us publish the game one year earlier. In the current gaming environment, I sense a shift towards topics that were seen as unusual before. It would seem that many gamers who have grown tired of weak-themed euros are looking for more serious subjects — ones that use real history to create immersion. Here in Germany, this development is just beginning and, comparatively speaking, we are a little bit behind.

> HB: Watergate’s success with Weimar - The Fight for Democracy that should be available soon. Could you tell us more about this game?

> MC: Weimar covers the period between the end of WWI and the 1918 Revolution through the seizing of power by the NSDAP in 1933. It is a card-driven game with four asymmetrical factions (Communists, Social Democrats, Conservatives and Nationalists). There is a fight in two dimensions: left vs. right wing and Democratic Parties vs Autocratic ones. The players are taking part in political decisions, gaining power in the streets and positioning themselves in the context of 160 different events. I started Weimar by asking myself how a country could shift from a democratic revolution into the regime that the Nazis created in just 14 years. It is important for me to show that history is not deterministic and that highly disparate developments created the history we all know today. Democracy is still under threat of siege today, so the topic remains both relevant and current.

> HB: What is next for you? Any ideas you can share even if they are early in the process? Do you plan to continue designing historical games?

> MC: My current project is The Promised Land which covers the conflict between Israel and its Arab neighbors during the period between 1950 and 1980. The game mainly takes place at a high political and strategic level. Players make top-level decisions about going to war or negotiating peace. The Promised Land has become more than a game design project to me. It’s led me on an investigative journey about all the historical and existential paths that lead to both war and peace.

MATTHIAS CRAMER has been designing board games since 2010. His ludography includes Helvetia, Rococo, Dynasties, Watergate, Glen More, Weimar and many others.
Conflicts of Interest Magazine is a project created by the San Diego Historical Games Convention team and the outstanding members of the boardgaming community.