

OPERATIONAL ANALYSIS: CONQUISTADOR!

by David R. Grant

Conquistador! threatens to join the exclusive ranks of the much played and discussed multi-player eco-political "war" games such as Russian Civil War and Diplomacy. In terms of intensity and density, I find much in Conq. that is similar in my own recent game, After the Holocaust. Although the rules and play are very different, the same kind of planning and dealing are necessary in both. But please, don't anyone send me a "link" variant article for MOVES.

If you liked the financial challenge of Monopoly, but felt it lacked the combat element of the local branch of the mob; if you liked the player interaction of Pit, but were too sophisticated for its boisterousness; if you liked the combat of Chickamauga, but missed the feel of cold(?) cash; if you enjoyed the maneuvering of Chess, but missed that element provided by the spotted cube; if you like redoing history without the sweat, you will want to play *Conquistador*.

Conquistador is the economic-political-military simulation of the dawning (with all due apologies to the Vikings) of the Age of Exploration. It covers the efforts of European nations from 1492-1600 to discover, exploit, and gain control of the new world. The game system comes complete with the perverse vicissitudes of that era which accurately simulate its hazards, low life-expectancy, and potential for gold and glory.

A first glance at the attrition, combat, and political events tables may lead one to over-balance the effect of the die on the outcome. But, although one will probably not see victory over the system, through judicious use of his ducats, colonists, and exploring personnel he can amass more gold and glory than his opponents who have to put up with the same obstacles. *Conquistador*, therefore, becomes an exercise in how to minimize losses to the game system, outwit your opponents, and finish the marathon with the most victory points. The remainder of this article will be an analysis of just how to accomplish this feat.

OFFERINGS TO THE GODS— BEATING THE ATTRITION TABLES

Although the European explorers were anything but pagan, the *Conquistador* game system seems to have taken a page from the priest's manuals of Tenochtitlan or Chichen Itza. With great regularity the attrition tables demand sacrifices of soldiers, colonists, or ships for living in certain areas or traveling by sea. Keeping on the low end of the land and naval attrition tables is one of the keys to success in *Conquistador*.

The *land attrition table* is probably a fairly accurate simulation of the life expectancy of Europeans in various parts of the new world.

Each area is assigned an attrition level, reflecting the difficulty of remaining alive there. Likewise, each type of terrain will either raise that level (in case of jungle or rough) or lower it (in case of a partial water hex). The attrition level ranges from 1 (a one-in-six chance of losing a colonist) to 5 (a one-in-six chance of not losing anything. Anything but a one removes some type of land unit).

A key to beating land attrition is to settle those areas low in attrition which also have other advantages (proximity to Europe, abundant resources, and available gold). A second key is when possible, to keep colonists and soldiers in partial sea, lake, or river hexes, thus reducing the attrition level and lowering overall losses. Stacking will also lower losses by reducing the number of hexes in which attrition is checked (be careful to stack no more than 5 colonists per hex as only 5 will collect resources). Rough hexes should be avoided except when mining for gold—a case in which the Spanish player can lower his attrition losses by keeping a conquistador present. It is extremely frustrating to discover gold only to lose your miners during the attrition segment. In a high attrition hex, two to three colonists should always be present to insure a continued production of gold in case the elements (attrition) get to one of them (and they probably will, if the natives don't gobble them up first).

Naval attrition is a whole new ball game. There is really no way to beat this table, as sailing (especially long voyages) is very hard on the constitution of Europeans. The best one can do is to minimize losses while realizing that, for most trips longer than three bounds, a player will have to toss a Jonah overboard to appease the attrition table. Even then it may ask for a whole ship. On any trip of seven bounds or more there is an automatic loss if the units called for are present in the expedition. It is wise to plan for losses. On any longer expedition, take an empty caravel (cheaper to build than a carrack) and an extra soldier unit to offer. Since colonist units cannot be purchased, one can only grin and bear those losses. Be sure to list the contents of each ship in case of losses.

One tool to lower attrition level (and bounds purchased) is to stop in the last hex of the area one bound short of your destination, disembark your land units, and during the land movement segment, use their movement allowance to move on to the next area. For instance, suppose one wants to settle the Deep South (4 bounds). By moving to hex 1719 in the transoceanic segment, the player lowers his bounds to 3 and the possibility of attrition losses by 1/3. The units are within 4 hexes of every Deep South hex. For every bound a trip

is lowered, from seven to four bounds, the probability of losses is lowered 16%.

STRIKING IT RICH

Making your investments, expeditions, and settlements pay off is the object of the game. This demands a careful study of the best areas for settling.

The quickest way to strike it rich is by looting treasure cities (Cuzco, Tenochtitlan, and Chichen Itza) and mining for gold. Treasure cities can be looted as soon as the native level is reduced to zero. This means that enough soldier units must be transported to the area to insure lowering the native level (usually five detachments—20 ducats—are sufficient, giving a 5 in 6 chance of lowering and a 50% chance of lowering the level by two or more). Conquistadors are used to lower the die roll and increase native losses. The decision that has to be made is which city to go for. Chichen Itza and Tenochtitlan are both closer than Cuzco, but they produce less gold per turn. Chichen Itza is in an area with lower native and attrition levels than the other two and is in a partial sea hex (lowering attrition even further, but making it vulnerable to naval invasion). Cuzco puts out 100 ducats a turn and may be the best bet if opponents are elbowing one another over the two closer cities. Cuzco can best be reached through Rio del Plate.

Gold mines are scattered throughout the map. They maintain an advantage over the treasure cities in that there is less chance of depletion after mining begins. The factors to be weighed in deciding where to mine are: 1) distance in bounds and the consequent expense of transportation; 2) attrition level and risk of losing colonists; 3) the number of mines in the area or nearby, effecting the output-per-turn and the profitability of transportation. An area three or four bounds from Europe with an attrition level of 1 or 2, and with 2 or 3 mines in it is ideal (see Gold and Resources Chart). California is ideal in number of mines available and attrition level, but it would cost 28 ducats just to buy the bounds to get the gold to Europe, providing one beats the attrition tables. Perhaps the best thing to do for distant gold mining areas is to store the gold for several turns until enough is collected for profitable transportation. Be sure to guard it with soldier units.

Resources are the third way of striking it rich, and they become especially important after Turn 13 when the resource level triples. Certain areas (8 of them) have their resources doubled and are especially valuable. Of these areas, those which are closest to Europe and have a low attrition level are obvious targets since the life expectancy of colonists will be

longer and will provide more return for your ducat (see The Gold and Resource Chart for best targets).

GOLD AND RESOURCE CHART

BEST AREAS FOR:

Gold Mining	Resources
1. Caribbean	1. Caribbean
2. Midwest Plateau	2. Rio del Plate
3. Panama	3. Atlantic Coast
4. Brazil	4. California
5. California	5. East Coast
6. Sonora	6. Deep South
	7. Great Lakes
	8. Brazil

SLUGGING IT OUT

There are four kinds of combat to deal with in *Conquistador*. *Native uprisings* and *native combat* are handled abstractly by the respective tables. As has already been mentioned, the best chance for success in native combat depends on having five soldier detachments in the area. The only way to avoid uprisings is by maintaining more soldier detachments than colonists in an area or by eliminating the natives. Spanish players can use minus-rated missionaries to help ward off uprisings, but it is usually cheaper in ducats to move in the soldiers, eliminate the native population, and then either move the soldiers on to another area to work on those natives, keep them around for protection, or refuse to maintain them and let them be eliminated.

Naval combat occurs when ships occupy the same hex and either player wants to start something. The combat strength points of soldier detachments can be added to the combat strength of ships. If one is expecting some naval action, he can double the strength by packing the ships with soldiers. This precaution may backfire and double losses (in ducats) if you lose a ship in combat or attrition. The only time ships should use soldiers for naval combat is when they are transporting them for later land use or when a naval invasion is planned. Naval combat should be avoided at less than 2-1 odds. 3-1 odds give a 100% chance of inflicting even or greater losses on the defender as well as a 33% chance of taking a prize ship. Attaining 3-1 odds can be expensive, perhaps more expensive than it is worth (to attack a three carrack expedition at 3-1 odds would cost 72 ducats just for ships or soldiers).

Naval invasion of ports can net a bag of gold if it is there. But such an operation can be super-expensive to effect, as offensive strength must be purchased in sufficient quantity to eliminate enemy ships in the hex and then defeat the land enemy that is doubled in strength. This tactic would best be saved for the turn in which a pile of gold is waiting for shipment, a port is foolishly left unguarded, or when eliminating a port would drastically hinder an opponent who has no explorers for

reestablishing the port that or the next turn (You might rent him one for a bundle). An important tactic, then, is to protect key ports with a galleon fleet (which cannot be attacked), several ships, or enough soldiers to make the invasion cost prohibitive.

Land combat is a little easier to handle. 2-1 odds will defeat any enemy and make him retreat. The only time higher odds would be desirable would be when losses would leave the attacker vulnerable for attack by a player in the same or next turn before he can get away with the loot. Land combat is valuable for profiting from the fruit of other players' mining labors, for crippling colonizing efforts, or for gaining political control of areas in the rock-em, sock-em end game. Key areas and hexes can be protected by a ring of soldier detachments, obliging the attacker to break through the protective screen before he can reach the valuable hex. The delay will give a player time to bring in reinforcements.

SAVING DUCATS

Investment vs. Return: The one problem with the *Conquistador* system is that everything one does is expensive. Unwise planning will cost a player more than his expeditions return. A player can run up a high expense going 7-14 bounds round trip for 25 ducats of gold when he only breaks even by going a round trip total of ten bounds (accounting for maintenance costs). It is wiser to store gold for several turns and guard it with soldier units until transportation is profitable. Combat is also expensive, and the player must calculate whether his gains vis a vis his opponent's losses produce a favorable net gain. Through miscalculation he could win the war and bust his bank. In the end game, when players are vying for political control of an area, it may become profitable to spend money on a war. Each area is worth 150 Victory Points but will only bring a profit if no more than 75 ducats are spent to obtain it (one ducat is worth 2 VP). If the defender is the closest competitor, it may be worth 150 ducats (75 of yours and 75 of his) to take control of an area. If the German banker option is being used, great care must be taken or the German will win his technical victory by having a treasury larger than the total of any two other players.

Galloping Maintenance: The last phase of each game turn demands that players pay a fee for each colonist, soldier, missionary, and ship that he wants to keep in play for the next turn. Colonists should almost always be first to be maintained (except for Spanish missionaries which are first by the rules), since it is hard enough to keep them living despite attrition, and they can return up to 10 ducats each per turn in the later turns. One good attitude to take is that maintenance buys units at one quarter the cost. If units really are not needed for several turns, save the maintenance and rebuild later. Figure that what is saved on maintenance will be used for purchasing in later turns. Plan to use the land movement allowance of soldiers to get them from one area to another to save on transportation costs. It may take two turns to get there, but it's cheaper in ducats.

Initiative: Initiative is determined by the product of the monarch-multiplier and the treasury level. The advantage of initiative is particularly manifest when trying to get credit for discoveries as the first discoverer to reach Europe gets the credit. On all turns, initiative gives the player the advantage of being the first one to perform combat, and he is able to pick and choose his opponents. The player who ranks further down in the initiative sequence might be able to clean up on those who have decimated their ranks in their own turns. Thus, the last one to move may grab the gold.

Gold vs. Resources: At some point in the game a player may decide it will be more profitable to stop working gold mines and use his colonists to collect resources. This will be determined by the number of colonists in the area, the number of mines being worked, the resource level for that turn, whether or not the area has its resources doubled, and the costs of transporting the gold to Europe. The Resource vs. Gold chart shows when the mining should stop if only one mine is being worked in an area with doubled resources. If more than one mine is being worked, or resources are not doubled, the number of colonists needed per area to make the cessation of mining profitable is doubled.

RESOURCES VS. GOLD CHART

Resource Level	Colonists		Turn	Resource Output
	Needed	in area*		
1	12		1	24 duc.
2	6		7	24 duc.
3	4		13	24 duc.
4	3		17	24 duc.
5	3		20	30 duc.

* resources doubled in area

Exploring: Victory points achieved for various discoveries usually take a back seat to more profitable ventures. The discoveries of smaller value (North, South, and Central America, Rio del Plate, Hudson Bay, St. Lawrence, Great Lakes) can usually be picked up while settling those areas. The two river expeditions (Mississippi and Amazon) can be profitable if one has soldier units close to that area to use. Discovery of the Pacific and Circumnavigation are more risky. Remember that a discovery's respective worth in victory points should be converted to ducats (divide by two) and compared to the expense demanded to achieve discovery. For example, circumnavigation looks valuable since it is worth 175 VPs. Converted to ducats it is worth 87½. The 30 bounds for the trip will cost 60 ducats. Since attrition demands two rolls at 9+, one must plan to take 5 caravels (20 ducats) and 2 explorers just in case he rolls 2 fives (eliminating four ships) or a two, eliminating an explorer. And surely one of those rolls will be a six—wiping out the whole thing as you watch your 80 ducats go down the

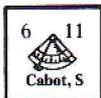
drain. At best the trip is worth a net gain of 7½ ducats; at worst, a loss of 80. Discovery just for discovery's sake is usually an unwise investment.

Random Political Events: These contingencies yield colonists, taxes, and more troubles than blessings.

UNITS USED BY ALL



Ships: *Caravels* are cheaper than other ships and are stronger on defense than on offense. They have the disadvantage of very limited cargo space, carrying only five ducats of gold, plus one colonist or soldier detachment. Caravels are ideal for expeditions limited to discovery where cargo capacity is not important, or to accompany other expeditions for attrition or combat fodder. *Carracks* cost twice as much as caravels to purchase and maintain, but they have the advantages of defense, and they can carry twice the colonists or soldiers (2) and five times the amount of gold. *Galleon fleets* are five times costlier to build and maintain than carracks, but have the advantages of: 1) unlimited cargo space for gold; 2) immunity to attrition; 3) immunity to attack; and 4) impregnability in protecting ports from naval invasion. Their disadvantages are: 1) high building and maintenance cost; 2) inability to transport land units; and 3) confinement to use solely in the Atlantic.



Explorers are historical persons whose advantages are: 1) ability to effect landing at hexes that are not friendly ports, thus opening up new areas to colonies or reopening areas that have lost the colonies through combat or attrition; 2) rental capability, useful in raising ducats; and 3) ability to garner discovery credits. Their weaknesses are: 1) susceptibility to elimination by attrition or combat; 2) rapid mortality rate; and 3) potential for being captured and ransomed.



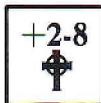
Soldiers can be used for combat, transporting gold, discovering gold (although the cannot mine it), and looting treasure cities. Their movement allowance of 8 makes them quite mobile. They cost one ducat per turn to maintain.



Colonists are the productive units in the game. They establish ports, mine, and can transport gold. They collect resources and are

required for gaining political control of areas. They have a defense strength of 1. Their disadvantage is that they cost two ducats per turn to maintain, which means that, for half the game, they barely return their own maintenance cost in resources.

STRATEGY FOR EACH NATION



Spain has the advantage of two special units, missionaries and conquistadors. *Missionaries* are of two kinds, rated on the two differing philosophies in the Catholic Church on how to convert the natives. The plus-rated missionaries are useful in combat against natives, but help trigger uprisings. Minus-rated missionaries can help avoid uprisings, but have no effect on native combat. One disadvantage is that missionaries *must* be maintained. To avoid excess missionaries, consider marching them from an area where natives have been converted (eliminated) to an area that is currently being settled.



Conquistadors are the hardy Spanish land explorers who are able to accomplish near superhuman feats. They are useful in land combat to lower Spanish losses and increase enemy losses. They raise native losses when involved in combat against natives (or prevent loss of soldier units). They are especially useful for lowering land attrition losses in mine hexes located in the rough. In the last two game turns, they should be used in land combat to gain political control over areas. With a view toward these units and the extra explorers in the first turns, the Spanish player should aim for as many treasure cities and areas rich in gold mines as possible. He should budget his initial treasury level over three turns as that is probably how long it will take to prime a treasure city for looting. He may need to borrow from France (especially if the wrong random political event strikes) or trade an extra explorer for some needed ducats. He should mine like crazy until at least turn 13 and hope that treasure cities and mines are not depleted. Thereafter he should consider moving in with ports and settlements on the areas with doubled resources, planning how to gain political control in the late game turns. Converting emphasis from gold to resources on turn 13-14 also prevents English privateers from cleaning up on unprotected ports. Of course, if the treasure cities have not been depleted, he will want to continue his looting pleasures.



England has the services of special units called *privateers* at turn 14. They have the

advantages of 1) immunity to attrition; 2) ability to influence the odds to their advantage in naval combat; 3) taking as prizes any losses suffered by their opponent; 4) capability to serve as explorers and be rented as such. Their disadvantage is that they carry soldiers who may disembark only for naval invasions. Privateers can well be used to decimate an opponents' ports and fleets, to capture ships carrying gold (if anyone is so unwise as to leave ships in the new world carrying gold), or to strangle opponents' efforts by attacking their colonist-carrying expeditions. A lack of explorers from turn 3-5 hinders English early game efforts. With good fortune he can get one of the treasure cities. He should try to solidify at least two ports on turn 2 with his two explorers, creating bases for potential expansion into adjacent areas. He, too, should budget his initial treasury level over the first three turns to allow for developing gold and transporting it to Europe. His privateers in the late game should pay off in the tussle for political control points by hindering enemy armies in transit.

France has an initial advantage of a high treasury level that can pay off by making loans (if the German banker is not playing) or by providing financing for voyages of discovery which will pay off in victory points. His financial condition might also pay off in the early game by providing an army large enough to take a treasure city away from Spain or England when they are too financially weak to prevent it. He might be able to move in on California with colonists while the other players are moving in on the closer mines. In the later game his lack of explorers will leave him hampered for opening new areas unless he can rent an explorer or two or settle by land movement.

Portugal is blessed with lots of explorers, but bothered by a low initial treasury level and the fact that his explorers run out in game turn 11. Since he cannot use the extra explorers without ducats, he can either try to borrow funds, rent out his explorers, or trade them to England or France in turn for use of an explorer for turn 13 or later. Trading off two or three explorers this way may help Portugal maintain his presence in the late game. Otherwise he will have to be content with building some strong ports in the early game and using them for expansion later overland. If finances permit, he may become aggressive against other players and cut them down to his size.

German banker is an abstract player whose efforts are only financial and diplomatic. He can win by canny investing and by renting his explorers (Spain is a primary target for them). When this option is used, he is the only player who can make loans. Since his ducats are tripled (as opposed to doubled for other players) for victory points, he must keep in mind that what he loans in the later turns is worth more to him than the opponents. His investments can take several forms: 1) Strict loans which yield repayment of the principal and interest per game turn; 2) Investments which yield repayment of the principal and a

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percentage of the profits of a certain area; 3) a combination of 1 and 2; or 4) Investments yielding repayment and a percentage of the financed expedition's profits (especially rewarding when financing gold raids). If the German banker can achieve 50% of the profits from an area, and that player has political control of the area, the 150 VPs (worth 50 ducats to the banker) goes to him at the end of the game. The Banker must remember that this puts him at the mercy of that player, who might lose control of that area on purpose to deny the banker victory points. A penalty clause could be written into

the loan to avoid losing this investment. For example, the loan agreement could say that if political control is not maintained, the player owes the banker 25 or 50 ducats. The banker also needs to be careful of greed. If his rates are too high, the players may do without his help. Besides a profit for himself, the Banker must seek to make borrowing profitable for his clients. Blind loans should be avoided, since bankers always want to know how the loan will be used and may put restrictions on its use to insure success or adjust expected profits.

Agony is fighting one's way through the Inca Empire to Cuzco, only to roll a six on the land

attrition table and lose the entire expedition. Anger comes from watching one's opponent move in on Cuzco and loot the 100 ducats. Misery is having 25 ducats of gold at each of five ports and not enough of a treasury to buy the bounds to get it all. Frustration is borrowing enough to finance the expeditions to get the gold, paying off the loan, and coming home with just a few ducats more than could have been transported without the loan. Ecstasy is loaning to an opponent who cannot afford to get all of his gold, taking your cut of the profits, and saving yourself the expense of a military expedition to capture the gold. FUN—is playing *Conquistador*, a game that should provide hours of keen competition.

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7. *Footnotes*. Short essays of less than 750 words on almost any subject related to gaming in general or specific games.

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