

# IS THERE A METHOD ACTOR IN THE HOUSE?

## Motivations and Player Roles in *Conquistador!*

by Jonathan Southard

This article deals with a subject near to my heart and (apparently) far from the minds of most war game designers. That is: the point of view or "voice" of the game. Who does the Player represent and how does that affect the design and play of the game and its simulational qualities? Not nearly enough attention has been paid to this aspect of design. Most players are totally unquestioning when it comes to *how* or *why* they can have such absolute directorial power over the forces they control in any game. —RAS

Very few games can approach Richard Berg's *Conquistador* for entertainment value. The exploitation of a new continent is a tremendously attractive game situation, and the game mechanics are dynamic and free-wheeling. In many ways the game accurately recreates the problems of settling the New World.

However, the game is less successful, as a simulation, in two important respects. First, it does not reproduce, in the player's mind, the actual motivations which drove the Europeans to do what they did. Thus it offers only limited insight into their actions. Second, the game casts the player in a role which did not exist historically — i.e., that of some person or agency controlling and directing as a co-ordinated whole all the people and materials involved in exploration. The actual operations were not nearly so well-planned or controlled, and to cast the player in this role denies him much understanding of the events which took place.

*Conquistador's* weaknesses do not arise, however, from poor design work or

faulty research. Indeed, *Conquistador* is a splendid design and, as the accompanying article in *S&T* shows, was quite thoroughly researched. The problems lie in the nature of the sort of games most of us play, i.e., competitive boardgames in which each player represents a nation or army.

To understand the above generalizations it will first be instructive to consider what the actual Age of Exploration would look like on the *Conquistador* map.

On Game-Turns 1 and 2, Columbus sailed to all the Caribbean islands, Venezuela, and Guinea, planting a colony at Santo Domingo. Pinzon also sailed to Guinea and Venezuela, and the conquistador Ojeda led an expedition to Nicaragua. On Game-Turn 4, Solis explored the Rio del Plate and Ponce de Leon went to Florida. On Game-Turn 5, while Balboa was wiping out the natives in Panama and building settlements there, Magellan circumnavigated the world. (He took five ships and threw two fives for naval attrition.) In short, the first phase of exploration was quite aimless in game terms, and very few of the moves which took place (the Rio del Plate and Panama expeditions come to mind) would ever be made by a player in the game.

On Game-Turns 4 and 5 Cortes, having sailed from bases in Cuba, conquered Mexico (requiring one Game-Turn to do so) and started looting. He also had to deal with the forces of the Governor of Cuba who, after having fitted out the expedition, was neatly cut out of any share in the profits through Cortes' machinations. A force was sent to

the Mayan Empire on Game-Turn 6, but needed two Game-Turns to reduce the natives there. With great good luck (which Cortes had), the player can duplicate the speed of these conquests; the game will never, however, allow Cortes to act as a free agent, and the player would never have to send a force to bring him back into line, as the governor did. (Cortes did some fast talking and convinced these troops to join him instead for the assault on Tenochtitlan.)

On Game-Turn 8, Pizarro marched into the Incan Empire. He eliminated the Indians there in two Game-Turns, but civil wars among the various factions lasted until Game-Turn 11. In the course of these wars, both Pizarro and his chief rival Almagro were killed. Such strife was probably inevitable, because the conquistadors were violent, aggressive, independent characters trying to divide up a huge amount of wealth. Unfortunately all this is missing from the game.

By the middle of the game, British privateers were starting to operate in the Caribbean against the Spanish treasure ships coming from Panama. They bribed Spanish officials and used Spanish ports. On Game-Turn 15, the Spanish sent a loyal fleet which caught Drake and Hawkins in hex 2226 (Veracruz) and sank three English ships.

The French and English did very little colonizing. These two powers were interested primarily in bases from which they could prey on Spanish shipping; it was not until the century was nearly out that they considered trying to exploit the New World for them-

Pizarro exhorting his band at Gallo.



selves. In addition, the French were hampered by at least four Costly European Wars and one Civil War at home.

The French and English did, however, want to find a route to the East Indies and Spice Islands where the Portuguese, and later the Spanish, were doing a roaring trade in valuable spices. To this end a lot of fruitless expeditions were made to the Hudson's Bay area, and Drake sailed around the world on Game-Turn 17.

Obviously the historical Age of Exploration was quite different from anything that would occur in the game. The reasons for this are not simple and in fact lie in the nature and limitations of conventional wargaming as presently practiced. There are two basic difficulties, which may be termed the problem of motivations and the problem of player roles.

Like many games, *Conquistador* simulates mechanics quite well, but recreates actual motivations much less successfully. Consider the initial phase of exploration. In the game, players already know where things are in the New World, so they send expeditions directly (and ahistorically) to the best regions, incidentally picking up points for being the first to reach Central America, the St. Lawrence River, etc., as they go. The actual explorers were confronted with quite a different problem. They had to reconnoiter two whole new continents. For this reason many expeditions did nothing but traverse coastline, and were reluctant to plant colonies in areas about which they knew nothing.

The player also knows from the start that his goal is to settle and exploit the New World. The European explorers had something quite different in mind. It is hard for us, children of the Americas as we are, to understand that for the early sailors, our native continents came as a terrible disappointment. The navigators were trying to find a route to Cathay and the Spice Islands; instead they found a huge hunk of jungle and forest populated largely by half-naked savages. (The highly developed Indian civilizations were not contacted until later.) This is one reason why they spent so much time meandering along the coastline, and why Magellan's circumnavigation, a silly move in game terms, came so early. It was not until later in the century, or in the case of the French, the next century, that the Europeans came to view the New World as something worth exploiting in its own right.

It is of course true, as we all know, that the European governments grossly undervalued the New World and should not have bothered about routes to the East, but instead should have jumped right in and started mining gold. It is also true that players cannot be divested of their knowledge of geography — knowledge which obviates any need to make extensive voyages of reconnaissance. But the game doesn't help the players jump from their own situation to that of the Europeans. The player can go away thinking that the Europeans' moves stemmed from mere "idiocy"

when in fact they were rooted in the situation and the European mind-set of the time.

The motivations of the French and English in *Conquistador* are identical to those of the Spanish. Historically, as mentioned previously, this was not the case; the two nations were more concerned with blocking Spanish efforts than with making any of their own. The English would not have even considered trying to seize one of the treasure cities, something they usually can and should do in the game. This attitude was the chief reason why not one Frenchman or Englishman was a permanent resident of America at the end of the century.

So far we have examined the motivations of the nations involved, but what about those of the personalities on the map — the conquistadors? Their goals and interests were certainly not always aligned with those of the monarchs they were serving, a fact which caused considerable trouble. Fighting in Peru between the faction of the Pizarro brothers and that of the Almagros lasted eleven years, from 1537 to 1548. Cortes in Mexico operated for part of the time as a veritable free agent, acting contrary to the wishes of the Governor of Cuba, his nominal superior, and cutting that unfortunate gentleman out of any share in the profits. Spanish officials lined their pockets by taking bribes from British privateers and allowing them to use Spanish harbors. Many of the explorers, such as Columbus and John Cabot, were foreigners who cared very little about the national fortunes of the countries they served. Emphatically, many of the personalities involved, especially the rough-and-ready conquistadors, were governed more by their own laws (or those of the jungle) than by their countries.

This gives rise to the other principal problem inherent in *Conquistador* and many other games, namely the problem of player roles.

What or whom, actually, does the player in *Conquistador* represent? Is there any one person or group of people of that time whose function corresponds with that of the player? Operations in *Conquistador*, some bad luck and random events notwithstanding, generally proceed as part of one fairly unified whole, one strategy that coordinates the efforts of each nation's forces. But the actual events, as we have seen, were not like this.

This difficulty is that *Conquistador*, like most games, is based on the Clausewitzian concept of politics (or war). Clausewitz saw each nation in the international system as a unit, a unit that for most purposes could be thought of as a person. He believed that nations, like people, operated as co-ordinated entities directed from a single center, the brain or government. Naturally this is ideally suited to a game situation in which the nation is a person, the gamer.

Clausewitz's model is quite satisfactory for representing an army; as a simulation of international politics it has much less utility. Nations are not co-ordinated machines in the way that armies are, and the degree of central

direction their rulers can exercise is much less than that of any army commander. This was particularly true of the nations in the Age of Exploration, because at that time the concept of the nation-state was just beginning to be developed.

Disunity and rivalry among component parts, as has been shown already, were two big problems confronting these nations. Another was sheer distance. Not only did the New World seem unimportant at a range of 4,000 miles; it was also difficult to rule. Most actions, such as the conquest of Mexico and to a certain extent, that of Peru, were undertaken by regional governors without any reference to higher authority. Likewise the subsequent events were governed only by the local power and desires of the men involved.

Of course, how can these factors be incorporated into a *game*? Players expect that they will have a full measure of control over their pieces, except for distinctly minor annoyances such as the Seven Cities of Cibola random event. To depict accurately many aspects of historical situations, such as those discussed above, diminishes the competitive spect of the game.

Nearly every strategic or grand strategic level game takes the Clausewitzian model as its basis. Only a very few games, of which *Russian Civil War* is the best example, use another approach. Another approach is needed, however, if situations such as the Age of Exploration are to be simulated along the lines suggested here. There are some standard ways of attacking the dilemma, such as giving points for merely reconnoitering coastline, or having some sort of command control rule. Solutions of this type are not really satisfactory, however, because although they cause the players to act in the same way as the Europeans did, they do not show the players why the Europeans acted that way, or why events happened as they did.

It might be possible to solve the problem of player roles by including more players and giving each player one faction, one set of like-minded explorers and conquistadors, etc. Then each faction would operate in its own interests, dealing with its own country, or independently, or maybe even striking a deal with foreigners. Of course, if all those players were needed how often would the game be played?

Unfortunately all this probably would not re-create the sixteenth-century mind-set in each of the players, and probably would not accurately show just how much control was exercised over events, and by whom. Nor would it show the players just what the conquistadors faced, and what manner of men they were, possessed of "the spirit of the knight-errant," (to borrow William H. Prescott's phrase) and determined to do or die for God, King, and money. Perhaps a simulation experience of this type is beyond the reach of a game to be played by twentieth-century Americans. Or is it? We await a designer who will break out of the pattern of conventional games and attack the problem in a truly innovative way. ■ ■