

EMPIRES OF THE MIDDLE AGES

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Whatever else it is, Empires is certainly a welcome change from SPI's habit of doing endless re-runs of successful game systems. Not only has it an unusual theme, depicting the rise and fall of Mediaeval empires on a time scale of five years a turn, but it uses highly unusual play mechanisms to simulate it. To begin with, the map has not a hex in sight. Play takes place in a series of boxes representing provinces of Europe and the routes between them. Each box has displays that gives the area's religion, language and social state (more about this later). As usual, Redmond Simonsen has performed an extremely skilled job in reducing a great deal of information to a format which is easy to understand.

The next surprise comes when one looks at the counter mix. The counters do not represent military forces, they do not move or fight each other but are simply devices used to mark the changing status of the different areas. In fact, the heart of the game is the two sets of cards, year cards & event cards, which will be described later. These cards look quite striking, bearing a Durer knight and the same artist's Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse on the rear. Unfortunately though, these images evoke the 16th century much more than the earlier era the game deals with.

Turning to the rules, we find that each player represents one of the major powers of Mediaeval Europe and that the game embraces not only war and conquest but, in a somewhat abstract manner covers most of the major activities of government in the Middle Ages. To begin with, each turn the players must raise money to finance their activities. This is done by taxation. Each area that makes up a state has a social level, ranging from -3 (the Russian Steppes) to +3 (Constantinople) which represents the number of taxation points that may be extorted from an area. However, any attempt to raise money by taxation creates the risk of creating unrest, which may later erupt into rebellion. The only way to raise money from areas with negative social values is by straightforward plunder which is unpredictable, certain to cause unrest and will depress the social level still further.

Having raised their money the players may use it to finance the activities they are carrying out. Briefly the possible activities are as follows:

- (1) Conquest. The annexation of other provinces.
- (2) Pillage. A raid into another player's province which will depress its social state and possibly produce some loot for the treasury.
- (3) Fortification. Building a castle in a province. This defends an area from enemy conquest and makes internal unrest and revolt less likely.
- (4) Ruling. This represents attempts by the ruler to encourage trade and industry. If successful it will increase the social level of an area and allow more taxes to be collected.
- (5) Diplomacy. This is rather more complicated. Attempts at diplomacy may either result in outright annexation of the area concerned or the formation of a diplomatic tie, which may lead to annexation later. In addition diplomacy may be used to increase the possibility of unrest in another player's or to lower it in one's own.

The success or failure of each of these activities is determined with the aid of cards. Rulers are numerically rated for their ability in different fields and when they attempt to carry out activities their ratings are modified by various factors (for instance it is more difficult to rule an area whose religion or language is different from a ruler's whereas the expenditure of additional money on an activity increases the chance of success). A card is then drawn which indicates the level of rating needed to make the activity successful.

Another set of cards indicates the effect of external events on the fortunes of the players. Years of plenty or famine may increase or decrease social levels; the Black Death may ravage Europe; heresy may erupt leading to widespread revolt if it is not crushed, a player's leader may die heirless, meaning that a new ruler appears whose ability is determined by random die rolls while unrest sweeps the nation.

Other rules allow for the appearance of invaders such as Vikings, Mongols and Moslem pirates who ravaged Europe at different periods. These appear at specific times and attempt to conquer fixed areas unless resisted by the players.

The game is arranged in scenarios each representing about a century covering different periods in

Mediaeval history from the eighth to fifteenth centuries. It is also possible to play the whole of the Middle Ages from beginning to end but since this would last over 100 turns it is hard to imagine many people being prepared to undertake this epic.

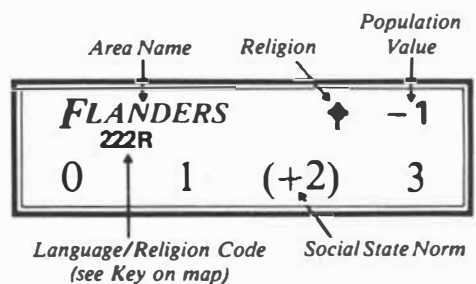
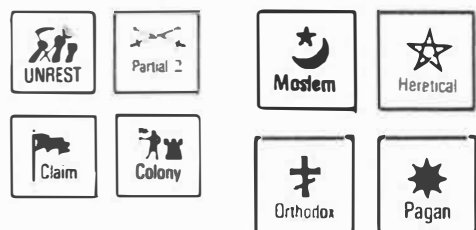
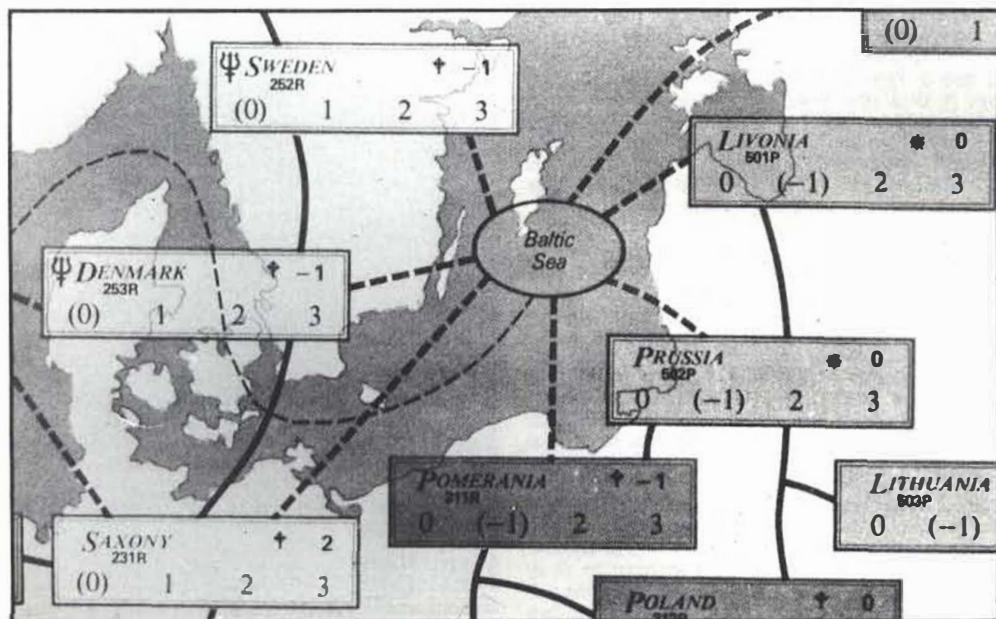
As a simulation, "Empires" makes its points quite effectively. It shows that Mediaeval states bore little resemblance to modern ones, united by language and national consciousness but were often little more than fluctuating collections of provinces brought together by conquest and inheritance. (It was, for instance not uncommon for areas to change hands as part of a marriage dowry).

In these circumstances, and in view of the primitive nature of the machinery of government, the ability or otherwise of the individual ruler was very important in holding a realm together. This too is accurately simulated in the game and players who have an able ruler may make grandiose plans only to find themselves frustrated by the death of their ruler and the appearance of a mediocre or worse replacement.

In default of national consciousness or a modern state machine a ruler's domains would be held together by a network of more immediate loyalties. Peasants owed their loyalty to the local noble who might owe loyalty to a more powerful noble or directly to the monarch. The resulting network of obligations could be extremely complicated and was a frequent source of disputes. For example the cause of the Hundred Years War lay in disputes over the way in which the English Kings who ruled Gascony only did so with the King of France as their overlord. Although the full complexities of this system are beyond a game of this nature the rules concerning claims give some idea of the importance of this aspect of Mediaeval history.

The main problem "Empires" has as a simulation is that it gives little sense of the historical changes taking place in the period it depicts. The game is subtitled "a dynamic simulation of Mediaeval Europe" but, in fact, the picture the different scenarios give is static, not dynamic, since each one contains little to indicate how one period of the Middle Ages differed from another. For example the final scenario is called "The Twilight of the Middle Ages 1386-1465" but gives no indication of the forces that were disrupting the Mediaeval world at that time such as the invention of gunpowder and the rise of the merchant class.

Nor does the game take much account of differing styles of government from country to country. For instance, the English nobility was rather less powerful vis a vis the monarch than the French. The Byzantine Empire, which plays an important part in the game, was never based on the network of feudal loyalties described earlier but, unlike the rest of Mediaeval Europe, possessed a centralised government and professional army. It would have been nice to see the game taking account of these differences (as, for example, "Conquistador"



depicted the difference between Spanish and English colonisation of America.)

However what many people will be more interested to know is how the game plays. Well, it is really intended as a multi-player game and offers all the chances for double dealing that most of these games do plus, since money is involved, the chance for blackmail and bribery. In addition there are rules to simulate the role of the Church in diplomacy which add an interesting touch to bargaining.

These rules allow for the players to vote to excommunicate one of their number. An excommunicated player will find himself unable to lay claim to any areas and will face a serious danger of revolt while levying taxes. Excommunication can only be performed as a punishment for certain specified acts such as breaking a solemn oath made to another player. Although fun to operate, these rules are historically somewhat dubious since they give the impression that the Mediaeval Church figured as a sort of referee who penalised foul play, rather than as a powerful force with its own political ends. (It would have been interesting to see the Papacy as an independent player governed by slightly different rules from the others and with its own victory conditions).

As a whole the game plays well. It moves reasonably quickly and the eternal problems that beset each nation mean that it is not simply a game of attempting to conquer everything in sight. It is also quite playable by two players or even as a solitaire game for one country.

There are only two fairly minor drawbacks to "Empires" as a game. Firstly there can be periods of very little player interaction in which gamers have their work cut out maintaining the internal affairs of their country. Secondly, the type of leader assigned can sometimes leave players with little chance to make decisions for themselves. For example, if one's leader has a high combat rating but little ruling or diplomatic ability one has little option but to embark on a military campaign however pacific one's own feelings may be.

Overall, "Empires" has a great deal of originality and succeeds at the task it has set itself. However I do feel that, to some extent, an attempt has been made to put too much into one package and one set of rules and that the game might have benefited from attempting to look at a more restricted area, either historically or geographically. In spite of this criticism, "Empires" is certainly preferable to the number of unoriginal spin-offs that seem to form so much of the current SPI output.



ORIGINS 81 REPORT



A personal view from Stephen Doidg

This year's Origins convention was held in San Mateo, California, which is situated to the south of San Francisco. Origins was attended by upwards of 4,000 people, which at £5-£6 per head for the entrance fee must have left someone smiling, regardless of sundry expenses or damages!

Unfortunately, the overall organisation of this event left something to be desired. Firstly, the hotel was overbooked by 40 rooms or so, secondly, there was some confusion during the weekend over last minute changes of game venues and thirdly, a proportion of the official "Origins Security" staff consisted of under 16's.

The Yaquinto team said that they would not be attending another Origins convention unless they were convinced that the organisation would be substantially improved. This dissatisfaction was also echoed by several other companies.

I SPI

The latest additions to the ever fluctuating SPI lists are: Jackson at the Crossroads/The Battle of Corinth, a double ACW package in one box, The Frontiers of Alusia, a new DragonQuest campaign map, Alamo, a tactical level game of those foolish Texicans, Universe, the sci-fi role playing system which is the flip-side of DragonQuest (as Sword and the Stars is to Empires of the Middle Ages), Dawn of the Dead, simulating Ray Smith's daily awakening! (It's hard to be serious with such a title but that's as close as I could get!). Undoubtedly, the biggest push was reserved for Spies! This multi-player game covers the efforts of the five major European nations (England, France, Germany, Italy & Russia.) prior to the start of WW2 to purloin the state secrets of the opposition while protecting their own with the likes of Scotland Yard and the Gestapo! The map is attractive but hexless and the rulebook is an overwhelming three pages long! The game lasts for seven turns from 1933-39, the outcome of the game depending upon the skillful play of action chits and event tiles. (None of yer dice 'ere mate!). Despite its relative simplicity, it provides a very interesting game. A 'Spies' tournament was held at Origins, with the winner collecting £500!; Spy Ring was never like this!

Chocs Away -- At last!

Yaquinto have finally released their long awaited WWI air combat game, Wings. It appears to have a good counter-mix, including Zeppelins, and has three levels of complexity. It could well be a deadly blow to AH's dated Richthofen's War. Unfortunately, it will cost as least £16 when it reaches our sacred shores. Three new album (Not LP's) releases are of the introductory level: Apache, The Fall of South Vietnam & Superiority, the latter being a modern hypothetical battle situation. There are two other album releases: Adventurer, which is Swashbuckler gone spacey, the cover art reminds me of the Cantina in Star Wars! and Raider, (Which Doug mentioned in P31, as Ghost Cruisers.) which appears to be an excellent value game, crammed full of rules and other goodies, depicting German raiders in the Indian Ocean in WW2. Craig Taylor informs me that they do not plan to release any further Napoleonic games in the foreseeable future. However, they are working on a game with an unusual subject: the French-Indian wars! Finally, a word of advice, should you ever require to direct an unpleasant remark towards a Yaquinto member of staff, the ultimate curse is "Fast Attack Boats"!

Last Post

System 7 Napoleonic are dead! GDW have already halted all production of these remarkable sets, poor sales has been blamed for this withdrawal. It was inferred that they may start these lines up again in a few years time but I'll be amazed if they ever see a GDW production line again. A seminar was held on S7 Napoleonic by the designers, Banner & Harshman (Why a seminar should be held on a defunct product is beyond my comprehension!). The Napoleonic knowledge displayed by these chaps was incredible! When asked if they could recommend a book on Napoleonic tactics, by a new Napoleonic gamer, they could not! "Chandler isn't very good", was all they could muster! (Chandler, Petre, Rothenberg, Weller, forgive them, they know not what they say!). Furthermore, another chap was told by the dynamic duo that "Highland infantry charged the