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The American Frontier as Displayed by European Designer Board Games

The myth of the American Frontier has gripped the imaginations of Americans ever since Frederick Jackson Turner declared the Frontier closed in his 1893 essay “The Significance of the Frontier in American History.” Myth shouldn’t necessarily be interpreted as meaning false; rather, it serves as a way to bring meaning to the past. As Robert Hine and John Mack Faragher write, “Myth, like history, interprets and attempts to find meaning in past events” (475). Some have argued that the present American identity is founded in the Frontier myths of its past (Slatta 82). Certainly, books, paintings, films, and TV shows have served as a source of entertainment, but they have also powerfully shaped our present beliefs about the history of the Frontier. Deborah Carmichael, in an article about how the American West is presented in TV and Film, writes “...the fact remains that the Western narrative from dime novel to made-for-TV movie, still resonates as an embodiment of national identity” (6). Because of its popularity, the narrative form of the Western began to be replicated in hundreds of dime novels, films, and other works of art. These works often followed a formula, one that Americans grew to anticipate and judge based on its perceived authenticity. Jefferson Slagle writes about the importance of perceived authenticity as he analyzes dime novels and the way they shaped American history and identity. He argues that “post-bellum America became increasingly obsessed with the culture of the spectacle, and western dime-novel authors negotiated this debate in a culture that produced

westerns in a variety of media” (122). It is this narrative that has left Americans believing in rugged, heroic white settlers and cowboys who had to fight against savage.

Books, visual arts, and motion pictures are not the only art form to advance the myths of history. Beginning in the early twentieth century, game designers started making games based on classic abstract strategy games (i.e., Chess and Go), but with historical themes. One of the most significant works in the past century is *Diplomacy* by Allan B. Calhamer (Parlett 362).

Developed in 1954 and then finalized in 1958, *Diplomacy* is a game designed for seven players that simulates early twentieth century Europe. Each player attempts to “emerge as the dominant power [in Europe] by knocking out all the others” (Parlett 361). Board games with historical themes have continued to be produced through the present day. Starting in about the mid-1990s, the world has entered into a board game renaissance. To give perspective, in October of 2016, 781 new games were released at the *Internationale Spieltage* in Essen, Germany (Martin). A handful of games released each year are based upon some historical event or setting.

In general, board games present a powerful way to explore history, and they offer another voice to the myths of the history. Brenda Romero, an award-winning game designer and speaker, articulates the power of games as part of a learning experience. She writes:

Much like photographs, paintings, literature and music are capable of transmitting the full range of the human experience from one human to another, so too can games. Due to their interactivity, the installation suggests that games are capable of a higher form of communication, one which actively engages the participant and makes them a part of the experience rather than a passive observer. (Romero)

Similar to Romero, authors Christopher Harris, Dr. Patricia Harris and Brian Mayer advocate using games inside the classroom. They write, “To play through history within a defined role is

to experience the joys and tragedies firsthand, rather than as dry facts and dates in a text book” (Harris, “Teaching the Underground” viii). While Harris, Harris, and Mayer recognize the growing popularity of computer and video games, they argue that tabletop games, or “analog games” as they call it, are still a powerful tool in learning. “Given the increased openness possible when humans bring natural flexibility to the implementation of an analog rule set as opposed to the rigidity of a computer, games are an especially powerful way to explore historical and military scenarios” (Harris, “Teaching the American” vii).

In preparation for this paper, I reached out to several designers who created board games with American Frontier themes. These games are ones that I have previously played or ones that came highly recommended to me, and I subsequently played them. Of the six designers I reached out to, four of them responded to my request for an interview. It should be noted that all four designers happened to be European. To be fair, five of the six designers I reached out to were European, so there was a certainty that the subject would have a majority European perspective. The fact that this perspective is Euro-centric should not be alarming to the reader, however. In the present day, a majority of modern designer board games that have a historical basis come from European sources, especially from Germany. The style of game, making its way around the world since the mid-1990’s, has been affectionately referred to as “Eurogames” or “European-style” board games (Mayer 3). Compared to “American-style” board games, which tend to primarily employ mechanisms of luck (rolling dice, drawing cards, etc.), Eurogames share a series of characteristics that aren’t quite as luck based. According to Brian Mayer and Christopher Harris, these characteristics include information-rich environments, open-ended decisions, end of game scoring, and a balance of theme and mechanics (Mayer 4-10). Though European designers dominate the genre, American designers are increasingly adding their own

voice to the “Eurogame” style of designs. Some American Frontier themed games created by American designers exist; unfortunately, they will not be represented in this paper.

The four games to be explored are *A Few Acres of Snow* by British designer, Martin Wallace, *Lewis & Clark* by French designer, Cédric Chaboussit, *Sutter’s Mill* by German designer, Marco Teubner, and *Great Western Trail* by Austrian designer, Alexander Pfister. These designers’ stories about creating their games and my reflections about the games’ historicity of the American Frontier are the basis of this paper. These four games help players understand historical themes of the American Frontier, gain knowledge about the geography of the Frontier, and offer an alternative voice to the myths about Native Americans on the Frontier.

American Frontier themed games help players understand historical themes of the American Frontier. *A Few Acres of Snow* is a two-player game about the culmination of the decades-long conflict between the British and French Empires known as the “Seven Years War” or the “French and Indian War.” Each player takes the side of one these empires and plays until the British player successfully lays siege to Quebec or the French player successfully lays siege to Boston or New York. If no siege is successful by the end of the game, either player can win by having the most settlement dominance on the map (Wallace). As Martin Wallace was conversing with his historian friend, John Ellis, he realized how much of the fighting was dominated by rivers and waterways. Wallace writes, “Armies in the French Indian Wars rarely cut across land, so generally moved between already existing locations by water, either sea or river” (Saunders, “A Few”). Wallace was also inspired by a relatively new game mechanism called “deck building” that was introduced by a game called *Dominion*. In this mechanism, players acquire cards that have actions on them, but they are not available until the discard pile is reshuffled into

a new draw pile. Wallace saw the potential for how this mechanism could emulate the long delays between the requests and deliveries for supplies or reinforcements. He writes,

This was the perfect mechanic for the game, as it elegantly simulated the time-lag between asking for something and receiving it. You could ask London for more ships but when they turned up was another matter. It also allowed me to simulate the problems of planning – you need the right cards in your hand to carry out specific actions. (Saunders, “A Few”)

Wallace also created asymmetry in the game. Each player has a different set of starting cards that allow for differing abilities. His goal was to show how the French Empire was motivated by commerce, making money off of trading furs, while the British Empire was motivated by colonization (Saunders, “A Few”).

In *Lewis & Clark*, up to five players take on the role of expedition leaders who set out from St. Louis to explore the recently acquired Louisiana Territory that was purchased on April 30, 1803. Throughout the game, players play cards to manage resources of wood, fur, food, and equipment in order to use horses and canoes to move along the rivers and through the mountains. The game is essentially a competitive race game, and this is where the game makes a slight break from history. As Cédric Chaboussit notes about designing the game, “The only discrepancy we had to leave was [that] 1 expedition of 30 characters historically [was] replaced by 2 to 5 expeditions of 6 characters” (Saunders, “Lewis”). Instead of working cooperatively along the journey, players compete to be the first party to find the Pacific. The competitive element is, in deed, what brings a sense of fun to the game, but the game doesn’t abandon all historicity of the expedition. The game contains cards featuring 84 historical characters who assisted the party along their trek. The game’s rulebook contains a short biography of each of these characters, and

their special abilities in the game are designed to reflect their historical roles (Chaboussit 10). In making this game Chaboussit wanted players to experience other historical aspects of the expedition including “the necessity of collaborating with the natives, the need to rest, the difficulty to move forward and also the beauty of the landscapes and people” (Saunders, “Lewis”). According to Chaboussit, the story of Lewis and Clark is not well known in Europe, and he sees his game as an opportunity to retell an historical event he has grown to love (Saunders, “Lewis”).

Sutter's Mill is an action selection and resource management game for two to four players who take on the role of being prospectors in the mining town of Coloma, California during the gold rush of 1849. In the game, players experience both the sudden rise and sudden decline of the town (Teubner 2). This is emulated as each player makes a choice at some point during the game to switch from “Build Up” actions to “Tear Down” actions. Marco Teubner describes that he “wanted to create a kind of game, where you build up something and then find the right time to deconstruct the progress and bring all back to the beginning. This timing, to find the right moment to switch from building up to bringing down, was the main focus of the game developing progress” (Saunders, “Sutter's”). The game's system is built so that players experience the agony of deciding how long to stick it out. At some point, players will need to tear down so they won't be caught as one of the few left behind in Coloma. Gold is the only currency of the game, and its system is made to illustrate how difficult it was to make a profit as a prospector. In the rulebook, Teubner writes, “Clever businessmen saw their chance and offered their goods at horrendous prices...The prospectors, digging from sunrise to dawn, were not the true winners of the gold rush, but the persons supplying them were” (8).

Great Western Trail places two to four players into the role of cattle ranchers who drive cattle from Texas up to Kansas City where they are sold and shipped via railroad. Players take turns moving their parties along the trail, navigating through various hazards, and advancing at a speed of their choice and along various branches of the route. Alexander Pfister's idea was to create a game where "you could control your speed but have an incentive not to move too fast nor too slow" (Saunders, "Great"). In addition to moving their party along the trail, players work to develop the trail, develop the railroad, and hire additional cowboys (Pfister 2). As they develop the trail, they construct various buildings that help them gain extra income or extra abilities. As they develop the railroad, they create an ability to transport cattle to places farther away. And as they hire additional cowboys, they gain an ability to strengthen their herd. Each time a player's party arrives at Kansas City, the player's herd is evaluated based on the hand of cards that each player manages, sold, and shipped for money and victory points. Throughout the game, players experience the interconnectedness between the western ranges and the railway industry.

While American Frontier themed games help players understand themes found in Frontier history, these games also help players grasp a sense of geography for the Frontier. Martin Wallace wrote, "Just playing over a map familiarizes people with geography and locations" (Saunders, "A Few"). *A Few Acres of Snow* presents a fascinating map on its game board. Instead of the traditional north-is-up orientation, the map is presented in such a way that the British player faces West and the French player faces East. The reorientation of the map in this 90° angle shifts the players' perspective from our modern "global view" to a view of the territory similar to how colonists saw it. Martin Wallace makes a special note of the map:

At the time that North America was being colonized by the British and French there were very few maps available. It was only when the first accurate map was produced in the mid 1700s...that the British could see that the French were in danger of surrounding them by connecting the Quebec with New Orleans. Until then the place was too large to have a picture of what was going on. Once it was known what the French were up to then steps were taken (Braddock's campaign) to try to stop this. I just find it interesting that we now take a global view for granted, but actually it is a very recent thing. (Saunders, "A Few")

In addition to the East-West layout of the map, Wallace highlights the waterways and Indian trails that are used for movement in the game. As was noted above, players move from point to point by using these waterways because it was how movement occurred in this time period. Overland movement can only occur by using the few Indian trails noted on the board. Creating the game this way, Wallace wanted to stress "the importance of transport links and how difficult it is to move your armies around" (Saunders, "A Few").

Cédric Chabboussit's *Lewis & Clark* features a map of the United States where the waterway and over mountain movement spaces are disproportionately enlarged. This serves to allow players' to track their positions along the path with a scout pawn and encampment token. The rest of the map featuring territories not relevant to the game (such as the Eastern seaboard and the Southwest) contain action spaces players use to gain resources or acquire new expedition members. The layout of the board is illustrated in order to give focus to the route of the expedition. The route contains three waterways and two mountain ranges. The waterways and mountain ranges are not named, highlighting the fact that this was territory yet to be explored by the Americans. As players encounter the game, they will realize difficulty and inefficiency when

transitioning from waterway movement to mountain movement and back. This mechanism cleverly uses geography to mimic the difficulties of traversing the land.

Sutter's Mill features a game board with geographic features of a river, hillside, and mining region surrounding an area where the town of Coloma will be built. Compared to the other three games in this assessment, the *Sutter's Mill* map features the most zoomed in of views. Whereas the other maps cover landmasses the size of multiple states, the map of this game only covers the small town of Coloma, California. Marco Teubner's game makes no claim to accurately represent the layout of the town of Coloma; however, the geographic features on the board represent the American River (though unnamed) and the surrounding hillside. As players place their prospector pawns into the town, players can begin to feel just how crowded the town became during the months of the Gold Rush. This is especially true in a four-player game when up to 20 prospector pawns will be on the board at one time. As players continue through the game, the method of extracting gold switches. Teubner writes about the development of this idea, "First you had your pan and shovel, then more or less the whole mountain slope was washed off before they started to build mines. I found out that I could use this information for my mechanics" (Saunders, "Sutter's"). This element mimics the historical progression of the Gold Rush from panning to digging to mining to leaving.

Players who engage with *Great Western Trail* will discover a board that features a winding trail from Texas to Kansas. Although the map values function over form and is the most abstracted of the four games, players are able to gather a sense of the geography of the trail based on the artwork, locations, and hazards featured on the map. One other criticism of the game board is that the railroad line progresses from left to right, implying eastward movement when, in fact, the locations, though not listed in a possible connected route, are all west of Kansas City.

Any educator who uses this game in the classroom should point out this detail to students before playing. To be fair, Alexander Pfister admittedly didn't set out to create a historically accurate game. He writes, "this game should not be a simulation or historical lesson, you should have fun playing it" (Saunders, "Great"). If the game were to be reprinted, the railroad should be illustrated as a mirror image of what it is currently.

In addition to helping players understand historical themes and the geography of the American Frontier, these games offer an alternative voice to the myths about Native Americans on the Frontier. Starting with Buffalo Bill's Wild West show and extending through Dime Westerns and motion pictures, the myth of the American Frontier has painted Indians as dangerous and needing to be subdued by heroic cowboys (Slatta 83). European designer games portray Native Americans much differently.

During the French and Indian War, various tribes avoided taking sides between the British and the French. Hine and Faragher write, "Indian diplomats understood that it was in their interest to perpetuate the existing colonial stalemate" (85). In the game, *A Few Acres of Snow*, Martin Wallace recognizes this historical reality and attempts to emulate it. About creating mechanisms using Native Americans he writes, "I would like to think that within *A Few Acres of Snow* that the Native Americans are shown to be neutral, in the sense they will cooperate with either side depending on circumstances" (Saunders, "A Few"). History records that Natives tended to ally themselves with the French. Wallace tries to create that reality in the game. "In general I wanted to show that the French engaged more with the Native Americans and benefitted from alliances with more tribes than the British. The game does not show why this is the case, just reflects the general situation" (Saunders, "A Few"). Wallace's treatment of Native

Americans stands apart from films about the subject, which tend to show Indians as either good or bad depending upon the perspective.

In *Lewis and Clark*, Native Americans play a central role in the game. Cédric Chaboussit writes, “We designed the game trying to be faithful with the official History, emphasizing of the necessary collaboration with the natives. They were the only ones who knew the land and its dangers” (Saunders, “Lewis”). Every action in the game utilizes the assistance of Native Americans. Many of the 84 character cards produced for the game feature historical Native Americans who assisted Lewis and Clark during their journey. Throughout the game, players must plan how to incorporate them into their expedition. Chaboussit explains, “I chose to present the Native Americans and the collaboration with them as the only way to succeed for the expedition” (Saunders, “Lewis”).

Unlike the other three games, *Sutter’s Mill* does not include Native Americans (or any other race) in the game. Each of the four sets of player cards has a picture of a prospector illustrated on the backs. The back of the Green Player’s cards arguably shows a prospector with Hispanic features, but this detail is not explicitly called out anywhere in the game, nor does the historical summary found in the rules make mention of any particular races joining the Gold Rush.

Of all the games highlighted in this study, *Great Western Trail* could be most prone to reinforcing negative stereotypes of Native Americans as this game is set during a historical period when Natives begin to experience flagrant displacement and mistreatment. As Hine and Faragher explain, during this period “cattle replaced buffalo and cowboys replaced Indians” (317). Players who might expect violent conflict in a game about cowboys driving cattle through Native lands may be surprised to find a different, more peaceful interaction. In Alexander

Pfister's game, cowboys interact and trade with the Natives. He writes, "There is no violence, no fighting in Great Western Trail. I think this is a big difference to films and books. It is a game feature, not judging about morality. During the game, you trade with Indians, and this trading brings white men and Indians together" (Saunders, "Great"). Trading with Indians is a way for players to make money and move with greater speed along the trail.

In general, it appears that European designers wish to advance a more peaceful and non-violent look to how Colonists and Americans treated Natives as the Frontier was settled. This should not come as much of a surprise to those who play many Eurogames. While several Eurogames deal with conflict as part of their themes, a typical play style features non-direct conflict and focuses on winning through efficiencies. Non-violent relationship is its own myth, and one not likely to replace the myth of the American Western; however, some players may find the peaceful approach in these games to be refreshing. The educational value in playing these games is mostly found in the geographical contexts and historical themes presented. Players may not walk away from a memorized set of dates, names of wars, and a list of data about the historical events featured in each theme. However, they will encounter an experience that will engage emotions and spark the imagination of what it was like to live through them.

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