

Lords of the Renaissance

A Review by Rick Heli (heli@netcom.com) 06/20/96

Facts:

Lords of the Renaissance brought to us by Sierra Madre Games, explores the question of how far a game can go on atmosphere. More on that later.

First the facts: Full color map, 18"x25", stretching from England to the Levant 316 single color counters (must be cut out) 238 single color cards (must be cut out) 12 playing mats on ordinary paper 23 pages of rules including historical background (5 pages), index and example of play For 2-12 players \$30 suggested retail in zip-loc bag (for more info see <http://www.io.com/~wasson/smg.html>)

The area map is printed on heavy paper and serviceable apart from the small areas, especially in France, where it can sometimes be tricky to clarify which area an army is in, especially when there is a city within the area. Counters are printed on thin cardboard. It can sometimes be difficult to distinguish red from orange counters.

Object:

The time period is 1460 to 1499. Each player starts as the Duke of his European duchy, operating a Bank or merchant company speculating in the silk trade and acting as a military or financial advisor to one of the great empires (England, Aragon, Papal States, Holy Roman, France, or Ottoman). The point is to get silk, from its depot at Azov on the Black Sea in the corner of the map, to your Bank which is somewhere in Europe, not necessarily in your home duchy. With money thus earned, the player may fund new ventures, the eventual object being to have the most money in personal treasury by the end of the game. The game ends at a predetermined time or for players who wish to avoid the famous "End-of-the-World Syndrome", an optional rules provides for a dice roll to check for a variable ending. Most games seem to run three or four hours, though diehards could probably easily go on for twelve.

Setup:

Your starting duchy is dealt randomly from one of seventeen possibles and each one is quite different. You could be Genoa or Venice which have certain natural advantages such as pirate fleets and strategic ports or you could be the Duke of York, with a Bank impossibly far away from the silk source. There are even a couple of duchies which do not have Banks, namely the magnates who control the supplies of silk and spice. If you end up playing one of these, your game experience will probably be quite different from that of other players, but certainly no less interesting.

The designer deserves praise for taking this daring step in a game of this type, where usually every side is completely identical. This is one of those games which, like SPI's Crusades, makes you wish you really could get enough gamers in the room to have every position played. If for no other reason than just to witness the ensuing historical chaos and dissension. Unfortunately five is the maximum number of players we've been able to come up with so far. But then, five is more than enough to get some interesting interactions going.

Flow of the Game:

After each player finds out where they are, they get to choose which empire to align with. With six players or less, they control both the commercial and military resources of the empire.

With more, and this must get very tricky, they control either one or the other, but not both, which must lead to plenty of competitive cooperation, or is that cooperative competition?

Since empires control all the fleets and trade caravans, the strategy of choosing an empire mostly revolves around which one can help you get silk back to your Bank.

In the early stages of the game, the Papal States, with its large fleet, is a good choice as is the Holy Roman Empire, which has many caravans.

The Ottoman Empire, in a position to control most of the route to the silk, is formidable indeed and France, although it is further away, also has several caravans and makes for a good fourth-best choice.

England is very far removed and Aragon's revenues are lacking.

On the first turn, it is generally true that no one player can command the transport necessary to deliver silk to his Bank.

To do so, caravans and/or ships must be established in a contiguous path to construct a trade route.

A negotiation round typically ensues, perhaps playing out something like this:

Venice/Papacy: OK, Genoa, with my 4 Papal fleets, your Pirate fleet and my Pirate fleet, we can bring silk as far as Taranto.

Genoa/France: OK, in return for your help with fleets, I will use France's caravans to bring the silk overland from there to our Banks and we'll each earn 3 gold per year.

Antwerp/HRE: You have a problem though -- your caravans won't reach in time, but mine could. Tell you what, in exchange for me providing the caravans, how about if you use France's caravans to also bring silk to Antwerp?

Genoa/France: Done.

Russia/Ottoman: Not so fast -- no one takes any silk out of Russia without my say so.

Each of you pays me one gold. And next turn I'll have an army at Istanbul capable of closing the straits to trade. To ensure that I don't, I require that your fleets trade and pay customs duty at Ottoman ports wherever feasible (earning 3 gold per year from the game bank for the Ottoman empire).

Others: (General grumbling) Agreed.

In future turns, as they make money, players will try to escape their obligations by use of their own empire's forces and thus realize greater profits for their personal duchies.

At the same time, their empires will probably acquire independent lands giving them a greater stranglehold on trade and more profits.

An important point is that imperial treasuries may not be shared with personal treasuries, although players will find ways of using the empire to enhance their own profits.

Turns are seasonal. Navies move during Spring and Summer turns while armies and caravans operate during Summer and Fall. Nothing moves during the Winter. But during each season, a card is turned up and placed up for auction to all duchies. Cards represent princesses, spies, pirates, assassins, painters, engineers, reformation leaders, heretics, explorers, and most importantly, new ventures, including voyages of exploration.

Handled abstractly, players may discover India and the New World which provide new sources of silk, spice and gold. More mundane ventures include mines, plantations and predominantly, Edifices, such as libraries, printers and other money-making activities.

These items need 6 gold plus two years to develop and a trade route to the proper supply, but thereafter bring in 3 gold per year.

The following schematic of the various supplier relationships indicates the extent and variety of the different cards available:

(note that previous upstream steps do not have to be operating and connected for the latest one to do so, for example, a Goldsmiths Guild connected to a Mine will produce regardless even if no Slaves are being provided to the Mine)

Silk -----> BankSlaves ---> Shipbuilding GuildSlaves----> Mine ---> Goldsmiths,
Silversmiths, Metalworkers, or Arms & Armor GuildsSlaves-----> Alum ---> Textile Guild
Spice ---> Edifice ---> Glassmakers or Woolworkers Guild Slaves----> Sugar ---> Edifice ---
> Glassmakers or Woolworkers Guild

The fact that the locations of these ventures is fixed as printed on the cards leads to further negotiations as the most efficient trade route must sometimes pass through the empires of one or more other players.

The rules require that a player may not use his own safe, circuitous route if a shorter one is available using another player's pieces. Again, chiefly at issue are the customs duties paid to each city, and thus to the empire, along the route.

Empires also earn revenue from taxes levied on each city for the first few turns or so, thus encouraging empires to expand their borders.

Even allowing for the fact that this was the period of consolidation for empires, this seems too easy to do.

Unless a neutral city happens to have money, which is quite unlikely, an empire swallows it up without a fight. Combat: Combat works simply enough and conflicts tend either to be short and sharp, unless a large enough force can get into a city under siege. Each attacking army is composed of two steps and makes a "to hit" roll, destroying a step in the enemy force with 50% probability. Ownership of certain cards improves the chances. Sieges are similar, but probabilities are much lower and thus tend to take longer. All armies are more or less the same, the only difference being whether they are Imperial or mercenary forces.

With navies, an empire has an interesting choice between Round Ships which cost more, need not end in port and can be used for explorations, and galleys, which are twice as good in combat. Thus, the details of combat itself are not all that interesting. What remains is the question of to what use to put the army. Or actually, the two armies as each player controls both an Imperial and a personal one. Imperial armies generally go about gobbling up all the neutral duchies in sight, particularly in France as much of the country was not yet under direct royal control.

Similarly, the Holy Roman Empire tends to take over the Church Lands lying in its territory and the Ottoman Empire uses its wealth to take control of the the Balkans, thus controlling the land as well as the sea route to silk. Admittedly, most of this consolidation is fairly historical, but it does seem rather too easy to accomplish. Usually when fighting a neutral duchy, there is no chance of anything unpleasant or unpredictable occurring.

In fact, the only possible deterrent to conquering every neutral in sight appears to be that while the Emperor is off conquering, another emperor may strike at his capital.

On the other hand, to do so, a player would need to be positioned to strike as well as to have the ability to move at the right time (initiative varies depending on card acquisitions). But even if all can be arranged, it is doubtful just what can be accomplished.

While the second emperor is attacking the first's capital, he may find his own under attack. And if the risk is high, the reward is generally low.

Any new lands gained are added to the conquering empire and new monies are earned, but this probably means little to the empire which has probably run out of useful countermeasures already anyway.

And such a double empire is sure to come under attack by all the remaining ones.

Finally, the player holding such an empire becomes the leading target for Disalignment cards which dissolve a duke's link with an empire and put it for auction among all players.

More useful for players will be to try to increase the power and treasury of their personal duke. Rather than using an empire to attack another, if a player can gain enough followers to improve his stature, he can attempt replace an emperor to whose throne he himself has a claim, and take it for himself, mixing the empire's taxes and treasury with his own and absolutely preventing disalignment.

Once a player can accomplish this, he seems to have a very good chance of winning, and as this can be difficult for other players to prevent -- especially if the empire under attack is the player's own -- the game tends to become a race to see who can be the first to manage it.

Some Conclusions: In a way, however, this is almost anathema to the game system as the way players accomplish this is not closely tied to their other activities, i.e. moneymaking through trade and new projects.

Thus players are forced to play two very different types of games within a single one, and carefully judge the best time to switch from the trade game to the conquest game.

I am unsure of the effect of this on the game's reception.

Over many years of gaming, I've noticed that game players tend to come in one variety or the other and it may be a fairly rare player who seems to enjoy both types of challenges. In particular, it may be a disappointing game for the player who has been the best trader the entire game to discover that he has been defeated by someone with enough soldiers and the daring to use them who snatches victory at the last moment. On the other hand, this does offer a pretty atmospheric view of life in the Renaissance. In fact, historicity pervades this game.

The variety of cards is immense and only a small fraction will ever be turned up in a single sitting, leading to lifelike unpredictability. All the resource and edifice locations are historical and extensive background notes are included. And, just like in real life, in this game, sometimes very good or very bad things can happen. It should be pointed out, that the breaks, good or bad, are usually not severe nor common, rather more of an occasional thing.

Whole games can be played without any such occurrence, but then, the possibility is always there, lurking.

What designer Phil Eklund has given us is a view, albeit abbreviated, into Renaissance life itself. Sure you might start the game as the hapless Duke of York or get wiped out by the Black Plague, but then, history was like that sometimes. Players who want everything to be equal and fair might want to take another look at chess. As for me, whenever I want to imagine the feel of salt spray from the prow of a swift galley, sniff baskets of exotic spices or intrigue to dislodge an emperor from his throne, I'll break out Lords of the Renaissance. In fact, this game is almost as good as reading a novel and about how many games can you say that?

Lords of the Renaissance is available for \$30, plus \$4 shipping, from:
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<http://www.io.com/~wasson/smg.html>