

Lords of the Spanish Main

Phil Eklund for Sierra Madre Games

Many years ago I wrote a positive, even effusive, review of [Lords of the Sierra Madre](#), an outstanding game that set out Phil Eklund's stall as a talented designer and as a man who will pump in history until it oozes from your ears. His delivery vehicle is unusual, the rules are interestingly done, and the game is anything but typical, so there was in fairness always a degree of confusion as a result. Those gamers that persisted were rewarded with a singularly positive experience.

Nothing much changes. Lords of the Spanish Main takes us back to the year 1600, with the Spanish overlords looting Central and South America for whatever they can get their hands on. Every ten years a treasure fleet sails back to the home country in Europe. Such magnificent wealth predictably draws attention from the poorer, and unscrupulous, individuals known as privateers. Now privateers can exist on trading quite happily, sailing very close to the law and extracting a living here and there, but when they cross the line they become pirates, and that is a career for life.

The basic Eklund game structure applies. Your role is one of the famous sailors or movers of the age – Sir Francis Drake, Walter Raleigh, Cardinal Richelieu, The Duke of Lerma or even Ganga Zumba, chief of the escaped slaves in Brazil. You start with very little cash and you will never have too much, but you do have a ship that can trade, or carry enough crew to be a useful privateer. Each turn you choose trading, or privateer status. These should both generate a small income, which you will invest into various schemes, business opportunities or bribes. Later on you will upgrade your ships, gain allies, and perhaps attain a position of power to rival even the Spanish. Over the long term, you aim to make your fortune.

Each turn, representing a year, just one card is turned up which triggers an event. It is then auctioned amongst the players. This might be a new colony, a better ship, a powerful character, the loyalty of a local tribe, or perhaps a favour from The Pope. You set your price and buy if you think the card's powers can assist your cause. Some cards give instant benefits, others require delayed investment to bring them into operation. Some are powerful, others weak. Sometimes, they are sweet spot perfect and will change the game and your fortunes if you get hold of it.

It is through these clever cards that Mr Eklund injects a large dose of history, and it

is my contention that as each card appears, the game balance and situation changes subtly and appealingly. Almost always. In case you were worried, there are an awful lot of cards and not all are used, so each game will be different. The cards include such titles as Tortuga Pirates, the House of Stuart, Oliver Cromwell, the Puritan Pilgrims, and the Swedish East India Company. Other cards trigger wars, or dramatic events, hostile tribes, or ravaging plagues. More mundane, but important, are the various plantations and silver mines. You can build forts, you can install garrisons, you can raid and plunder. Predictably, there is a comet card.

Lords of the Spanish Main differs from earlier games in two key areas. Firstly, the game is asymmetrical. One of the players takes the role of the Spanish Governor of the West Indies. This is a rich and powerful man, who not only takes the lion's share of any transactions in the region, but also supplies new ships and gets a handsome cut from the treasure ships. In general, everything goes his way. He has the only trading port for some time, and he will make a lot of money. Your job is to reduce that income and divert it to your pockets.

This works in a very clever way, and it is the core of the game. While the cards deliver basic power, skills and opportunities, they and the players interact through negotiation. For instance, each turn a colony might be able to trade with three privateers. Each privateer makes one gold, and the colony owner makes three. But what happens if there is a fourth privateer? He has to make a case to trade with him rather than the others or he starves. Perhaps he will offer a non-aggression deal, or work for the Spanish somehow. Perhaps he will just demand protection money. Perhaps all the privateers hold out on the colony and refuse to trade. Short of trading your soul, you can do anything that you think will give you a headstart. The beauty in the game is how the dynamic at the table changes each turn, sometimes each minute. It shifts completely again when the treasure ships sail, but I won't spoil that experience for you. Perhaps I can make a telling point by recounting that in the second game, no one even became a privateer, let alone a pirate, for the first decade.

If it isn't clear by now, I absolutely revel in the possibilities we see here. I have played the Spanish twice, and Peter Stuyvesant once. I loved every single minute of the seven hours the games took. Hopefully, you will see why when you play. It is a negotiation game, it is an auction game, it is a business game, it is a wargame, it has oodles of period flavour, and almost as an afterthought, you can be a pirate and fight sea battles or charge up a cobbled street to the governor's mansion. You see

from the map why Tortuga was a key port, what the pirates did to trade, why the trade winds were vital, and how the delicate balance of the area was maintained. To portray all this, so well, through a multi-player game is nothing short of brilliant design work by Phil Eklund.

I end on a warning, or two. Despite my fulsome praise, LotSM will not be for everyone. I think we are averaging a 50% enthusiasm rate on exit polls! Because the game is essentially 99% pure negotiation, many will not find this to their taste. As one friend said to me, he has left negotiation games far behind. Oddly, so had I, but such is the quality, appeal and fascination of this one, I didn't hesitate to make an exception.

As there is a lot of chat and deal making, time flies right along. LotSM could easily take you six hours to play to completion. It could just as easily take two. This is because, to an extent, the game experience is transient. You can quite happily join in if you arrive late, and leave if you have to go early. The game doesn't suffer greatly. The end point is not that important really, more is gained from the participation turn to turn. We have played with 4, 5 and 6, and the more the merrier because of the interactions, but time does escalate a little with more. You can also play to a time limit, and we find that two hours is more than enough to get a strong feel either way – vital when some of the players may not be enjoying their game.

Next, there is the unfamiliarity aspect. The game is unusual and Phil has a unique way with rule writing.... Seriously, this set of rules is much, much better than his earlier sets, and everything is there somewhere. Organisation is not optimal, but it is workable. What trips us up are the card effects, which can change the rules, or bring in a new rules section at a stroke. What can this hill tribe do for me? Why would I buy them? What is their strength? Can they attack that port? Can they march to Brazil? To an extent, all that needs to be pre-understood. It helps a lot to have a player who has done it all before. And then there is basic stuff like the map being covered with colonies and flags, but it takes a while to work out that only one colony is active at the start. And guess what, the Spaniard lives there.

What the game needs is an overview sheet: you are poor. You will remain poor. Turns move quickly. The Spanish bloke is fat and smug. Increase your ship size. Trade. Take opportunities where you can. Cards sometimes change everything, like in Magic. Read them carefully. Deal on anything. Always make a counter offer. Everything is negotiable. Take a loan from someone. Joint bid. Lend them your soldiers. Steal, bully, beg. Anything goes. The Spaniard seems powerful, but he has

definite weaknesses. He also has the chance to escalate his power. If he gets a fleet of his own, you will see why and how.

Also strange is that there are lots of players, one of whom is a powerful and dominant force from the start. The other players must eke out a living, and pull the balance of power their way. It should be clear that I love everything about this structure, but it has caused problems for some – it is just unfamiliar. I see that as a good thing. But the key issue with Eklund games is that very little happens in a turn unless it needs to. So it is absolutely vital to keep the pace of play high. Turn the card, check for interest, sell it, move on. If you don't, two hours will go by with perhaps just fifteen years resolved. You need a pacemaker, and your experience will be greatly enhanced.

Because of the time of year, the need and desire to play it again and again, and because I want to catch your attention now, I am writing a shortish review of LotSM. Indeed, much shorter than Imperial's, above. That is no reflection on the game, which I feel is simply brilliant. 9/10, possible top ten all time material. Yes, that good. Well designed, cleverly balanced, inexpensive, flavoursome and an absolute joy to play, or even just sample for an hour or two. I recommend it very highly. I will return to it next time with some after action reports, and thoughts on how Lords of the Spanish Main became my favourite game of 2006.

For more information, see Rick Heli's excellent overview at <http://spotlightongames.com/> or Sierra Madre's website.

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