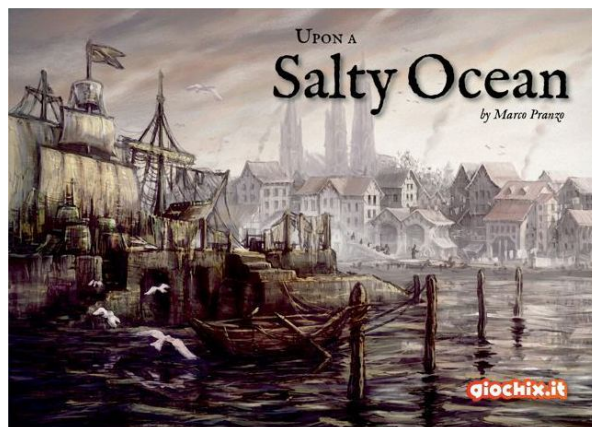


Gone Fishing

Upon a Salty Ocean reviewed by Pevans

I was intrigued by *Upon a Salty Ocean* when I first saw it at Spiel '11. The initial attraction was the good-looking artwork depicting the principal buildings of the French city of Rouen, on the banks of the river Seine, in the 16th century. When I was told it was about developing the city and constructing those buildings, it sounded like my kind of game. I've played it several times over the last few months and thoroughly enjoyed it.



According to the game, Rouen's 16th century wealth came from exploiting the rich fishing grounds off Newfoundland. The players are thus fishing merchants who put their wealth into the city buildings – the great cathedral of Notre Dame in particular. They start with one ship in port, loaded with salt, a small depot and some salt production. The last two are shown by cubes in the players' colours on the tracks at the corresponding buildings. The salt is white cubes on the players' own boards, which have spaces for their warehouse storage and ships' holds.

The game is played over five turns, so you know it's not going to last too long, and the aim is to have the most money. A lot of the buildings provide bonuses at the end of the game, so one reason to invest in them is to get that payout. This is particularly true of the cathedral. The board has a track at the cathedral for each player. Their cube on this shows the increasing amount they will get back as they put more money in. If you can invest cheaply in the cathedral, it's well worth doing – and not too bad even if it costs a bit more.

The other buildings have spaces for players' cubes, too. Most of them just permit one cube per player and many don't have room for all the players, so you need to think about which buildings you need – and which ones other players will be after. All the buildings provide some benefit during the game and/or a bonus at the end. As already mentioned, there are two with tracks as well as the cathedral. The salt works ("Saline") and the depot: players pay to move their cube along and increase their salt production and storage space, respectively.

Also shown on the board is a grid that represents the market. This has columns for each commodity: salt, herring and cod. The rows show the prices and a neutral-coloured cube marks the current price. Prices go down when players sell, but only go up according to the event tile that takes effect at the start of each turn. A tactical point to note is that players can, indeed, sell salt. Since they produce it for free, this can be profitable. However, the selling price for salt can go right down to zero, so it won't work too often.

The event tile is the first thing to deal with each turn. Each tile does two things. The first is to adjust prices. These almost always go up, as they'll go down every time players



sell. The second is to set the conditions for sailing to the New World. Calm seas are fine. Storms damage each ship (reducing its capacity), pirates damage the first ship to sail and poor fishing reduces the size of everybody's catch. Here's where some of the buildings come in: one protects against pirates, another against poor fishing and a third allows players to repair a ship. There's also a building that allows a couple of players to look at the events in advance and one player can even swap two of them.

Once the event tile's been dealt with, the next one is turned over. Thus players can see what's happening next turn and plan for it. The next thing in this turn is to take some actions. As you'd expect in a game with only five turns, players can do a lot of things in a single turn. There is a clever mechanism here to limit players' actions: each costs money. There are four types of action and a cost track for each type. The cost starts at zero and rises each time a player takes that type of action.

This gives a very clear advantage to going first each turn: you can take whatever action you like for free. And you will continue to have a cost advantage through the turn. The obvious option for players later in the turn order is to start with a different action. However, if you need to take an action in the turn, it's cheaper to do so sooner rather than later. This makes for some interesting decisions: cheap action or needed action?

The first action type is sailing: moving your ship(s) to Newfoundland or back to Rouen. When ships arrive in Newfoundland, the salt they're carrying is converted to herring and/or cod, as the player decides. The second type of action is to visit the market. This lets you either buy or sell one commodity. Hence you'll have to pay twice if want to buy **and** sell. Note that any purchases go to your depot, so you need to have the storage space before going on a buying spree.

The third action is buying into a building, which I've already covered. And the fourth action is either buying a new ship (which can only be done once someone's taken a stake

in both the shipyard and the naval academy) or moving goods between your depot and ships. This means that getting more fish takes several actions: move salt from depot to ship, move the ship, bring it back and then you can sell. You don't have to sell immediately, though, and it can be advantageous to wait to sell your fish until next turn – especially if the price is going up by a big step.

The turn ends when everybody passes up their chance to take another action (they get expensive pretty quickly). To wrap up the turn, various buildings do their stuff – in particular players now get their salt production, provided they have enough room in their depot. Players who are overdrawn (you're allowed to spend a certain amount more than you have!), pay interest, which is not onerous.

Finally, the turn order for the next turn is set: this is reverse order of players' cash. Now, going first is a definite advantage, but the only way to make sure of this is to spend yourself out of cash – or at least below anybody else. However, money is what you need to win... You can afford to do this early in the game, but later on it's a much bigger decision. In a way, this is self-adjusting: whoever goes last in a turn is likely to have to spend more. Thus they are likely to have least money at the end of the turn and will thus be first in the next turn.

One of the buildings, the Great Clock, comes in here. It lets a couple of players take two actions at once – at a cost. If all the players in turn load salt, sail their ships, bring them back and sell, the first player gets the advantage of cheaper actions and the highest price when he sells. However, if I can take two actions in one go, I can load and sail as my first action while everybody else just loads. Now I'm ahead of everybody else and get the benefits instead. Other buildings are useful, too, but in my current understanding of the game, the Great Clock is really useful.

What players do in *Upon a Salty Ocean* is pretty straightforward. They must send their ships to bring back fish and make as much money as they can in order to buy into the buildings that they think will win the game. It's then a question of working out which buildings will give you a tactical advantage – often the ones other people haven't gone for yet. However, at some point, everybody will start investing in the cathedral as it's the biggest source of points in the final scoring.

My only issue with the game is just how re-playable it is since the strategy is the same for all the players. I can thus see that it will become repetitive after a while. So far,



Red's player board: two ships are loaded with salt, ready to sail

however, I have thoroughly enjoyed playing Upon a Salty Ocean and look forward to playing it some more.

Upon a Salty Ocean was designed by Marco Pranzo and is published by Giochix (in a multi-lingual edition). It is for 2-4 players, aged 13+ and takes about 100 minutes to play (when you know what you're doing). It gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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