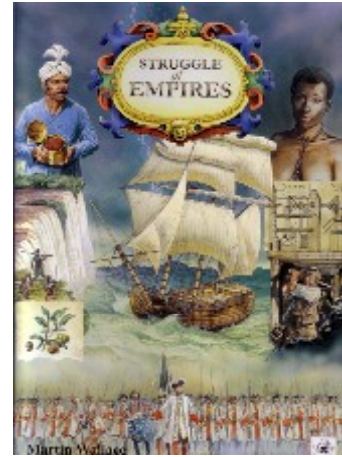


Empire building

Struggle of Empires reviewed by Pevans

It seems to have become a tradition for me to review the new game from Warfrog each year. And I wouldn't want to break with tradition – particularly when the game is as good as *Struggle of Empires*. I have to admit that I was underwhelmed by the game when I first saw it. In part, this was because it seemed rather familiar. The game has been a long time in gestation and designer Martin Wallace has re-used some of his ideas in other games. In particular, *Princes of the Renaissance*, Warfrog's 2003 publication. However, *Struggle of Empires* is a very different – and much better – game.



The game's theme is the rivalry of the major European nations of the 18th century. In particular, it's about their competition to establish control over other parts of the world – both within Europe and on other continents. Instead of a map of the world, however, the board just shows the parts we're interested in. The largest section is Europe, emphasising the areas that aren't themselves nation states – such as the German States and Italy. Other sections of the board show the East Indies, India, West Africa and the Americas. Alongside the map are a number of tracks and tables used to keep track of the game – and the score.

The players are, of course, the major powers. Their objective is to gain influence in the various European and colonial areas. It isn't necessary to dominate. Points are awarded for the players with the most influence markers in a region. The top three in the case of European regions, the top two elsewhere (and all players who are tied score for that position). Points are scored at the end of each of the three "Wars" into which the game is divided. The player with the most points at the end of the third War wins the game. Unless a revolution has overtaken his/her nation.

This is one of the game's ingenious mechanisms. Throughout the game, players need money. They are allowed to take as much as they like. But every two 'gold' they get from the bank gets them an "Unrest" point. Unrest points are also handed out when a player loses a military unit. More than 20 Unrest points at the end of the game and the country revolts. This means a score of zero – not a game-winning position! Otherwise, players lose points according to who has the most Unrest. So you are pulled in two directions during the game. You need gold to build up your position, but the more gold, the more points you need simply to offset what you may lose from Unrest at the end of the game. And take too much gold and Unrest could knock you out of the game entirely. Clever stuff.

But back to those Wars. The significant things that happen at the start of each War are deciding the order of play and whose side the players are on. Apart from being on their own side, each country is part of a grand alliance. The two alliances oppose each other: players can't attack (or be attacked by) members of the same alliance. They can, of course, attack members of the other alliance. And they can support other players in the same alliance. A series of auctions determines which countries will oppose each other (and the order in which they will move). These auctions can be crucial – particularly as the game goes on. You really want the players who can gain most from attacking you to be in the same alliance so that they can't!

One other thing happens at the start of each War. A number of counters are drawn at random and placed in the areas they refer to. Most of these represent the natives of that region. Defeating each of these gives players an influence marker in that area. The other way to gain influence is, of course, to defeat another player who has a marker there. In either case, you need to have some military units. Ideally you want several more than the opposition, as players' combat score is the number of units plus the difference between two dice. Apart from natives, the other markers placed at the beginning of a War also allow players to gain influence, providing they meet the appropriate conditions. (This is where the infamous 'Slaves' comes in: this allows a player with a ship off Africa to gain a marker in the Americas.)

Once the alliances and order of play have been established, the War is played out across a number of rounds (five with 5 or more players, six with fewer). In each round, players carry out two actions – they have six to choose from. One of these is to attack somebody, which costs 2 gold (otherwise known as 1 Unrest). Other actions include building a new military unit, which costs a point of Population and can then be shipped around the world. Or moving a couple of units. Given that you need several units to make a successful attack, it takes a few rounds to build up to an assault. So it's usually obvious what other players are up to – though there may not be anything you can do about it!

The final action available to players is to buy a tile – though only once a round. There are a lot of these available to players. Each does something special, such as providing extra armies or navies, improving combat strength, moving an extra unit, enabling a player to get three gold for each Unrest point and so on. The tiles add to the complexity of the game and give players plenty of options. However, the tiles do not drive the game. Instead, players pick tiles to support their strategy. Probably the most important tile is "Government Reform". Take one of these and you immediately discard two points of Unrest. Sooner or later, somebody will buy a Government Reform tile and this usually starts a rush – nobody wants to get left behind.

Other important tiles include those that provide additional income. These are for a particular region and players gain gold for the influence markers they have in that region – "Tobacco", for example, produces income in North America. If you

want to keep down your Unrest total, this income is very useful – especially if you have a lot of influence in an area. Then there are the Alliance tiles, which gain the player extra military strength in a particular region – for the current War, anyway. These bolster your force without having to move units around. Finally, “Army Training” gives the player +1 in combat – provided they have more Army Training than their opponent. This is always an advantage against natives, but other players can negate it – you can even get an arms race effect as opposed players buy up the tiles available.

At the end of each War players get income in gold, based on their current population and influence markers on the board. However, they then have to pay for the upkeep of their military units. Any shortfall means taking more gold – and more Unrest – from the bank. Finally, players boost their Population, ready for the next War. Three Wars of six rounds with two actions means a total of 36 actions in a game (30 with 5+ players). And you can always do with more.



Struggle of Empires is a complex game that provides players with lots of decisions and plenty of strategic options and tactical niceties. The best way to learn the game is to play it. In fact, I'd say that you need to play it once to learn how to play, as it's the interaction between the players that makes the game what it is. I suggest that your first game involves no more than four players to keep things simpler. There are also some very useful tips on play at the end of the rules, which I recommend beginners take note of. The game seems to play well with any number of players, though I've not tried it two-player.

At the start of the game, players get some influence markers on the board, determined randomly. This probably determines your overall strategy. So, if all (or most) of your influence is in Europe, concentrating on Europe will build on this. Conversely, influence in the colonies suggests a colonial strategy. Then you need to decide how to approach the Unrest problem. At one extreme, you can try to minimise your Unrest by going for income-generating tiles and positions and not expanding aggressively. The other extreme is to burn through lots of money, accepting the Unrest. As having the most Unrest will cost you 7 points at the end of the game, you need to do significantly better than the other players for this strategy to pay off. And getting close to 20 Unrest is very worrying – unexpectedly losing a unit or two can tip you over the edge into the oblivion of 0 points.

This is a subtle, challenging and highly rewarding game. I cannot recommend *Struggle of Empires* highly enough. Though anyone who thinks three hours is too long for a game will not be impressed.

Struggle of Empires is published by Warfrog and was designed by Martin Wallace. It is a strategy board game for 2-7 players, aged 13+, and takes 3-4 hours to play. It is readily available in games shops at around £25.

Pevans rates it 10/10 on his highly subjective scale.

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