Pax Exasperation

Patrick Rael, Professor of History, Bowdoin College, 2019[1]

> *"The aim of argument, or of discussion, should not be victory, but progress."*
> - French Philosophe Joseph Joubert

Contents

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[1] This essay reflects my personal opinions, and is meant as scholarly evaluation.

Introduction

Years ago my college's educational information technology department helped me and my students build an online simulation of the fugitive slave experience. Users took on the roles of fugitives from slavery, trying to collect family members and flee to Canada. At each point along the way, they encountered passages from actual antebellum slave narratives. Middle and high school teachers used it, sometimes communicating with me about it, usually to let me know a server had died. I got one letter, though, from a class of elementary schools students, likely inspired by a well-meaning teacher. They thoughtfully questioned whether it was appropriate to make a game of the fugitive slave experience, fearing the trivialization of so important and sensitive a historical topic.
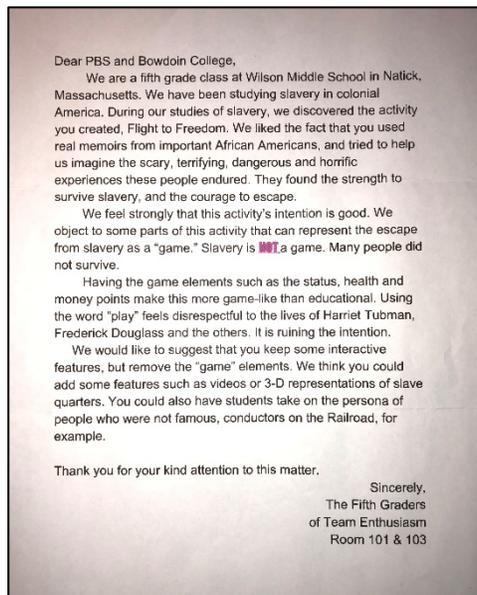

Dear PBS and Bowdoin College,

    We are a fifth grade class at Wilson Middle School in Natick, Massachusetts. We have been studying slavery in colonial America. During our studies of slavery, we discovered the activity you created, Flight to Freedom. We liked the fact that you used real memoirs from important African Americans, and tried to help us imagine the scary, terrifying, dangerous and horrific experiences these people endured. They found the strength to survive slavery, and the courage to escape.

    We feel strongly that this activity's intention is good. We object to some parts of this activity that can represent the escape from slavery as a "game." Slavery is **NOT** a game. Many people did not survive.

    Having the game elements such as the status, health and money points make this more game-like than educational. Using the word "play" feels disrespectful to the lives of Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and the others. It is ruining the intention.

    We would like to suggest that you keep some interactive features, but remove the "game" elements. We think you could add some features such as videos or 3-D representations of slave quarters. You could also have students take on the persona of people who were not famous, conductors on the Railroad, for example.

Thank you for your kind attention to this matter.

          Sincerely,
          The Fifth Graders
          of Team Enthusiasm
          Room 101 & 103

Figure 1: Intrepid 5th graders wrote to me, concerned with the presentation of slavery as a game

I understand this concern. Games do have associations with trivial pursuits, of course, and the history of our popular culture is replete with inaccurate or hostile depictions of slavery and those who suffered under it. Too often, those who enjoy games respond with some version of 'it's only a game'. Not only is that kind of the point (games can trivialize serious topics), it's also sometimes wrong. Games can do nasty cultural work, and games can do very serious work.[2]

This essay explores the possibilities for doing serious history with boardgames through an interesting recent example. I want to be clear at the outset that I've not written so many words about one game simply because of the game. Rather, my hope is that in the

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[2] For those interested, I've written on this issue here and here.

doing of this we may reflect on what may be necessary for boardgames to make historical arguments and teach history at a high level.

Slavery in games

Our current Golden Age of Board Games is remarkable in many respects, but not least for the emergence of a new generation of tabletop games that stretch the boundaries of what we think games can be. As a college educator excited to leverage the power of games in history classrooms, I am intrigued by a new generation of games that might help teach difficult subjects, like the history of slavery and its abolition. Slavery is a playable option in many historically-themed games, such as Endeavor, Struggle of Empires, or Colonial, but these can produce a social problem for players understandably reticent to engage in slavery even through imaginative play. It therefore presents a well-founded design challenge, for the use of games to teach slavery has featured some notable gaffes. Just imagine how poorly educators received the 'Slave Tetris' module of an educational computer game on the Atlantic Slave Trade, in which players were asked to efficiently arrange human captives in the cargo holds of ships.
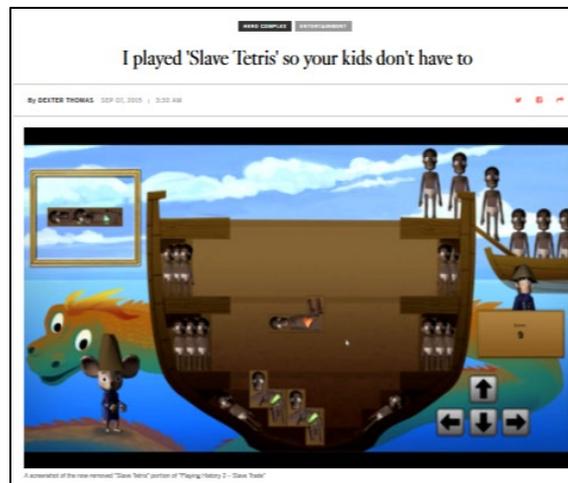

Figure 2: Incorporating slavery into games can easily go wrong.

Such issues were clearly in mind for Tom Russell, designer of the newly released game This Guilty Land, which examines the political struggle over slavery in U.S. politics. In a thoughtful blog post, Russell speaks to this, suggesting that whereas most games ask players to tightly identify with their game roles, his game actually seeks to create 'distance between player and role to avoid this problem. In this two-player game, one player assumes the role of 'Oppression', but not lightly (the other plays 'Justice'. In effect, the game self-consciously problematizes players' complicity with the difficult history it depicts, making it difficult to play without thinking widely about what it means to play.

Abstraction is not the only means of coping with this concern. Another response is to re-think these games' *metaphors*, or the role a game asks players to assume. Unlike games that ask players to engage in slavery, Brian Mayer's Freedom: The Underground Railroad asks them to help end it. Players assume roles as antislavery activists, working to help transport fugitive slaves to Canada and raise financial support for the abolitionist movement. Although the game does create challenging moral choices, success never depends on engaging in slavery. The game is a remarkable teacher of history, though I've wondered if using antislavery activists as player avatars tends to undermine the agency of the slaves themselves, who are literally pawns. Perhaps this is an interesting instance of the 'distance' Russell discusses.

Figure 3: Designed by Brian Mayer and published by Academy Games, Freedom ranks among the best ludic representations of slavery available.

In any case, *Freedom* epitomizes games touting a meaning that transcends the game's actual play. Indeed, Mayer himself is a library professional who designed the game to teach, and even helped design a curriculum around it. In games like *This Guilty Land* and *Freedom*, designers work extra hard to explain what they're doing, lest anyone misunderstand their purpose and think – like the concerned students who wrote to me – they are trivializing, or even stereotyping, the painful experience of slavery. In essence, for players to understand the full meaning of these games requires designers (and their surrogates) to make special efforts to explain what the mechanics in their games mean.

Didactic games

This is unusual these days. Many historically-themed Eurogames don't care much about explaining themselves, content as they are to focus on their actual game play. Games like Amun-Re and Ra are classic Euros designed by Reiner Knizia, both set in ancient

Egypt; but apart from brief introductory paragraphs the rulebook don't bother discussing the game's deep historical background, let alone what players should make of it. Knizia's name often arises when discussing 'pasted-on themes'; Knizia games such as Circus Flohcati, Lost Cities, and Colossal Arena all feeling sufficiently abstract to take on a wide range of settings. His vaguely Alexandrian Battle Line is the same as his vaguely Scottish Schotten-Totten, while *Keltis* is very similar to *Lost Cities: The Board Game*.

Nor is a deep connection between theme and mechanics necessary to appreciate these excellent games. Theme here is really just an aid for helping players immerse themselves in play; many of these games could be themed in a range of ways. The medieval-themed Dominion began life as a space-themed game, the Roman-set Vinci turned into the fantasy-themed Small World, and Wallenstein became Shogun. Acquire has undergone several theme revisions over the years, acquiring new titles along the way, such as *Cartel*, *Trust*, and *Investor*. Games can still be great even though their themes can feel a little thin. Bohnanza's case for a bean theme is pretty weak, and Balloon Cup's pick-up-and-deliver rationale never made much sense to me. Both are fine games, however.

But for designs such as *Freedom* and *This Guilty Land*, which risk placing players in uncomfortable positions simply in playing, explaining intent and goals is critical. The basic message behind these games is clear: slavery is bad, and not even games should ask players to engage in it trivially. Indeed, *Freedom* and *This Guilty Land* seek to leverage the engaging, immersive qualities of play to permit exploration of a difficult historical subject.

This places these modern, ludic representations of slavery on the edge of a long tradition of *didactic games* designed to teach lessons of an ethical or moral variety. Examples of such games stretch from William Caxton's use of Chess as a mirror of medieval English society in the first English-language book printed on a press with movable type (1474), to Milton Bradley's The Checkered Game of Life (1860), the boringly moralistic precursor to the modern family classic Game of Life.[3] Thankfully, modern tabletop game design makes both *Freedom* and *This Guilty Land* infinitely more engaging than such earlier predecessors, a clear necessity in the age of irreverent games like Cards against Humanity. But simply playing these games is insufficient to truly understand their purpose and meaning. Learning their mechanics is not enough to get

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[3] For more, see Jill Lepore, "The Meaning of Life: What Milton Bradley Started," American Chronicles, *The New Yorker* (May 21, 2007), online; Christopher Rovee, "The New Game of Human Life, 1790," *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History* (March 2015), online; Alex Andriesse, "Progress in Play: Board Games and the Meaning of History," *The Public Domain Review* (February 21, 2019), online.

their messages; we also need to read a lot around the game,[4] to discover what our playing is supposed to mean. Let's take a classic example, The New Game of Human Life, a spiral race game published in London in 1790. A seminal version of later family games, this one offers parents the following advice:

> If parents who take upon themselves the pleasing task of instructing their children (or others to whom that important trust may be delegated) will cause them to stop at each character and request their attention to a few moral and judicious observations, explanatory of each character as they proceed and contrast the happiness of a virtuous and well spent life with the fatal consequences arising from vicious and immoral pursuits, this game may be rendered the most useful and amusing of any that has hitherto been offered to the public.

Didactic games rely heavily on reading *words* – in rulebooks, on game bits, and maybe even in blog posts and on forum threads – that are not necessary to actually play the game. Instead, the purpose of these words is to explain what the experience of play is intended to mean.

Figure 4: The New Game of Human Life (London: Elizabeth Newberry, 1790) epitomized a new era of didactic games, which relied on discursive rhetoric to teach their lessons.

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[4] I'm still looking for a good term to describe the discursive space around games. I tried "ludumarea" here, but it feels clunky. Suggestions?
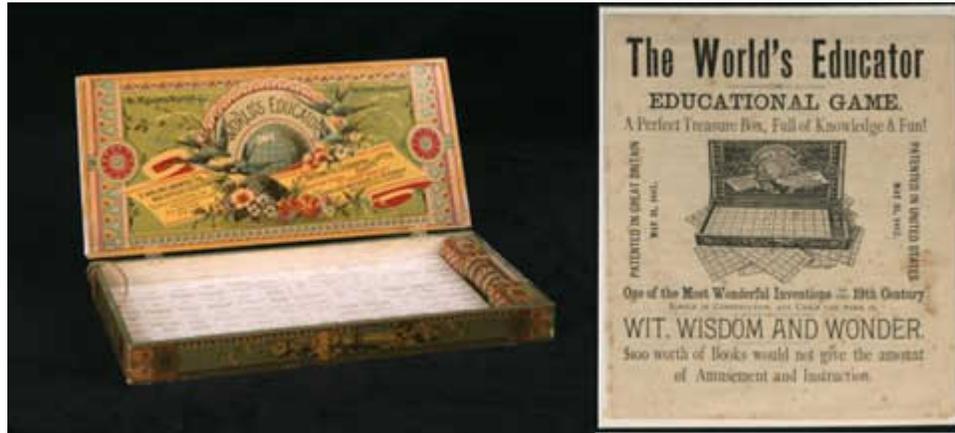
Figure 5: The World's Educator (Leominster, MA: W.S Reed Toy Co., 1887). Another good example of a didactic game from the late Victorian era. Courtesy New York Historical Society.

Pax Emancipation

Into this mix comes Pax Emancipation, a game released in 2018 by designer Phil Eklund, which is by far the most ambitious of these provocative new titles on slavery. In this game, players take on roles as colonial agents representing the state, evangelical missionaries, and the merchant-philanthropists who funded the antislavery movement. By activating matrices of Idea cards, player seek to build action engines that undermine slavery in various ways: attacking slavers on the high seas, emancipating enslaved people, and removing barriers to the success of Western ideals of individual freedom. The game can be both cooperative (all players working together) and competitive (all playing against each other). All have an interest in destroying slavery by crossing thresholds of antislavery accomplishment; those who succeed enter a post-revolutionary era of abolitionism, competing to do the most to effect the goal of ending slavery throughout the world.[5]

In today's political climate, it's hard to imagine anyone wading lightly into these waters. Eklund plunges in with gusto. *Pax Emancipation* is *Freedom* and *This Guilty Land* on steroids, both historically and mechanically. Its geographic expanse extends beyond the United States to encompass the entire world. It's a complicated game with many interacting systems (in game terms, 'heavy'), requiring a considerable investment to learn and play. Most of all, it exceeds its predecessors in eliciting moral quandaries and historical lessons. This is evident in its remarkable rulebook, which contains 125 footnotes, a glossary, and appendices, all dedicated to elucidating the designer's thinking behind the game and its connection to the past. This is a complex game design, as notable for its ingenious mechanics as for its richly developed and controversial

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[5] I will survey the game play below, but I've prepared an extended description here.

argument. Among commercial games intended for an evening's worth of play, it's hard to imagine a better example of a serious history game intended to teach serious historical matters.

This is the kind of game his many fans have come to expect from Phil Eklund, who designs explicitly to explore complicated scientific and historical issues. Eklund is an aerospace engineer who has become something of a 'cult celebrity' in game design circles—not simply for making good games, but for loading them with his own unique takes on the science and sociology underlying them. Consider this description of one of his games:

> In *Bios: Genesis*, one to four players start as organic compounds shortly after Earth's formation, represented by up to three Biont tokens. The Amino Acids command Metabolism, the lipids create cells, the pigments control energy absorption and storage, and the nucleic acids control templated replication. Their goal is a double origin of life: first as Autocatalytic Life (a metabolic cycle reproducing, yet not replicating, its own constituents), and the second as Darwinian Life (an Organism using a template to replicate in an RNA world).

This is not *Apples to Apples*. In addition to considering more traditional historical and science fiction themes, his games are populated by insects, amino acids, Zeppelins, Neanderthals, and trilobites.

The key is that Eklund's game are designed to make complicated arguments about complicated subjects. Most Eurogames don't worry about this too much. Puerto Rico isn't really about the island's history, after all; that's just a setting for its mechanics. Subjecting it to intense historical scrutiny is not worth the time, for the game makes little pretense at teaching actual history.[6] While many modern tabletop games use history as an entertaining theme or 'skin,' few purport to make complex arguments grounded in scholarship. This is not true of Eklund games. Stone Age is not like his Neanderthal, Medici is not like his Pax Renaissance, and Galaxy Trucker is not like his High Frontier. Get into Eklund games and you'll find yourself arguing about anything from climate change to Jaynesian bicameralism to Ayn Rand's Objectivism.

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[6] I say *historical* scrutiny, not scrutiny of other sorts. It might be useful to explore the actual history of Puerto Rican plantations, but it's doubtful that designer Andreas Seyfarth ever did that research. His point was not to model Puerto Rico's plantation past but to make a great worker placement game. Eurogames' propensity for thinly skinning mechanics with historical theme certainly requires analysis. But because these games don't purport to make strong historical arguments, they are better studied as cultural products that make historical representations.
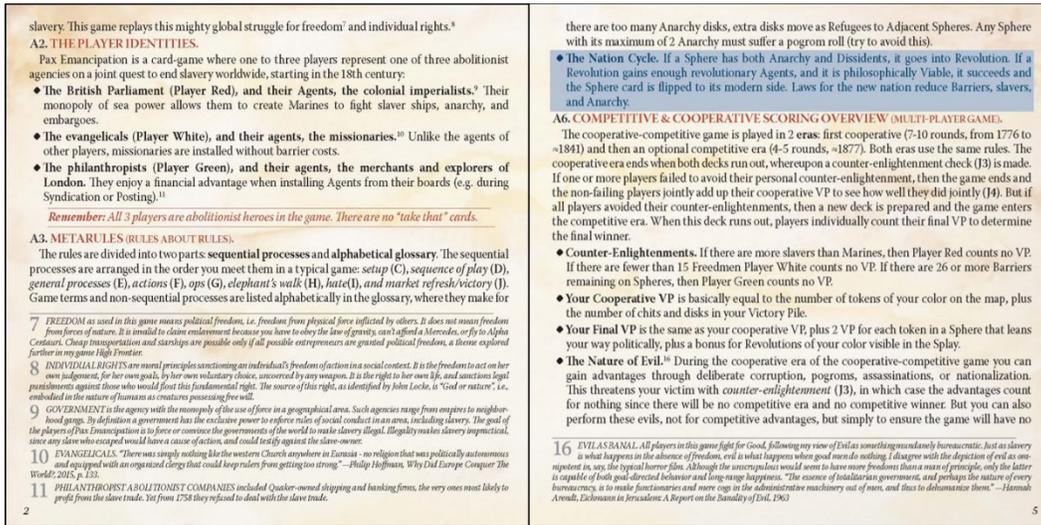
slavery. This game replays this mighty global struggle for freedom[7] and individual rights.[8]

A2. THE PLAYER IDENTITIES.

Pax Emancipation is a card-game where one to three players represent one of three abolitionist agencies on a joint quest to end slavery worldwide, starting in the 18th century:

- ◆ **The British Parliament (Player Red), and their agents, the colonial imperialists.**[9] Their monopoly of sea power allows them to create Marines to fight slaver ships, anarchy, and embargoes.
- ◆ **The evangelicals (Player White), and their agents, the missionaries.**[10] Unlike the agents of other players, missionaries are installed without barrier costs.
- ◆ **The philanthropists (Player Green), and their agents, the merchants and explorers of London.** They enjoy a financial advantage when installing Agents from their boards (e.g. during Syndication or Posting).[11]

Remember: All 3 players are abolitionist heroes in the game. There are no "take that" cards.

A3. METARULES (RULES ABOUT RULES).

The rules are divided into two parts: **sequential processes** and **alphabetical glossary**. The sequential processes are arranged in the order you meet them in a typical game: *setup (C), sequence of play (D), general processes (E), actions (F), ops (G), elephant's walk (H), hate(I), and market refresh/victory (J).* Game terms and non-sequential processes are listed alphabetically in the glossary, where they make for

7 *FREEDOM as used in this game means political freedom, i.e. freedom from physical force inflicted by others. It does not mean freedom from forces of nature. It is invalid to claim enslavement because you have to obey the law of gravity, can't afford a Mercedes, or fly to Alpha Centauri. Cheap transportation and starships are possible only if all possible entrepreneurs are granted political freedom, a theme explored further in my game High Frontier.*

8 *INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS are moral principles sanctioning an individual's freedom of action in a social context. It is the freedom to act on her own judgement, for her own goals, by her own voluntary choice, uncoerced by any weapon. It is the right to her own life, and sanctions legal punishments against those who would flout this fundamental right. The source of this right, as identified by John Locke, is "God or nature", i.e., embodied in the nature of humans as creatures possessing free will.*

9 *GOVERNMENT is the agency with the monopoly of the use of force in a geographical area. Such agencies range from empires to neighborhood gangs. By definition a government has the exclusive power to enforce rules of social conduct in an area, including slavery. The goal of the players of Pax Emancipation is to force or convince the governments of the world to make slavery illegal. Illegality makes slavery impractical, since any slave who escaped would have a cause of action, and could testify against the slave-owner.*

10 *EVANGELICALS. "There was simply nothing like the western Church anywhere in Eurasia - no religion that was politically autonomous and equipped with an organized clergy that could keep rulers from getting too strong."—Philip Hoffman, Why Did Europe Conquer The World? 2015, p. 133.*

11 *PHILANTHROPIST ABOLITIONIST COMPANIES included Quaker-owned shipping and banking firms, the very ones most likely to profit from the slave trade. Yet from 1758 they refused to deal with the slave trade.*

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there are too many Anarchy disks, extra disks move as Refugees to Adjacent Spheres. Any Sphere with its maximum of 2 Anarchy must suffer a pogrom roll (try to avoid this).

- ◆ **The Nation Cycle.** If a Sphere has both Anarchy and Dissidents, it goes into Revolution. If a Revolution gains enough revolutionary Agents, and it is philosophically Viable, it succeeds and the Sphere card is flipped to its modern side. Laws for the new nation reduce Barriers, slavers, and Anarchy.

A6. COMPETITIVE & COOPERATIVE SCORING OVERVIEW (MULTI-PLAYER GAME).

The cooperative-competitive game is played in 2 **eras**: first cooperative (7-10 rounds, from 1776 to ≈1841) and then an optional competitive era (4-5 rounds, ≈1877). Both eras use the same rules. The cooperative era ends when both decks run out, whereupon a counter-enlightenment check (J3) is made. If one or more players failed to avoid their personal counter-enlightenment, then the game ends and the non-failing players jointly add up their cooperative VP to see how well they did jointly (J4). But if all players avoided their counter-enlightenments, then a new deck is prepared and the game enters the competitive era. When this deck runs out, players individually count their final VP to determine the final winner.

- ◆ **Counter-Enlightenments.** If there are more slavers than Marines, then Player Red counts no VP. If there are fewer than 15 Freedmen Player White counts no VP. If there are 26 or more Barriers remaining on Spheres, then Player Green counts no VP.
- ◆ **Your Cooperative VP** is basically equal to the number of tokens of your color on the map, plus the number of chits and disks in your Victory Pile.
- ◆ **Your Final VP** is the same as your cooperative VP, plus 2 VP for each token in a Sphere that leans your way politically, plus a bonus for Revolutions of your color visible in the Splay.
- ◆ **The Nature of Evil.**[16] During the cooperative era of the cooperative-competitive game you can gain advantages through deliberate corruption, pogroms, assassinations, or nationalization. This threatens your victim with *counter-enlightenment* (J3), in which case the advantages count for nothing since there will be no competitive era and no competitive winner. But you can also perform these evils, not for competitive advantages, but simply to ensure the game will have no

16 *EVIL AS BANAL. All players in this game fight for Good, following my view of Evil as something mundanely bureaucratic. Just as slavery is what happens in the absence of freedom, evil is what happens when good men do nothing. I disagree with the depiction of evil as omnipotent in, say, the typical horror film. Although the unscrupulous would seem to have more freedoms than a man of principle, only the latter is capable of both goal-directed behavior and long-range happiness. "The essence of totalitarian government, and perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men, and thus to dehumanize them."—Hannah Arendt, Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil, 1963*

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Figure 6: Phil Eklund's rulebooks are chock full of footnotes, appendices, and asides that explain the meaning of its mechanics.

Pax Emancipation is but the latest in a series of other Pax games. Publisher Sierra Madre Games began the series with Pax Porfiriana, a game Eklund co-designed in which players compete to build business empires in Mexico during the long tenure of President Porfirio Dias, who promoted political, economic, and social stability (the 'Pax Porfiriana'). The later games in this series likewise eschewed themes of military conflict, thus justifying the 'Pax' that begins each title. Eklund games such as these have acquired a dedicated niche audience. Those attracted to intricate, procedure-heavy games enjoy tinkering with his creations. For some, his penchant for incorporating his own strong takes on academic questions makes his designs more appealing, for others less. Regardless, because Eklund games do make serious scholarly claims, any comprehensive evaluation of them requires us to engage those arguments. This seems fair, and I hope the point is obvious beyond belaboring: games that claim to be historical arguments deserve more scrutiny of those arguments than games that do not.

Suitable for teaching?

As a long-time board game enthusiast and a history professor at a liberal arts college who has written on slavery's end, I have a particular interest in games that might help me teach. There's another essay to be written about the potential of board games in college classrooms; for now, suffice to say that games appear on every level of Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning, and may have unique capacities for exercising meta-cognitive skills. Their inherent counter-factuality helps us deconstruct historical methodology, and as significant representations of the past they may be fruitfully subjected to cultural analysis. In short, bringing games into the classroom is not only fun, it's beneficial.

But there is a broad universe of tabletop games, and I can only work with a slice. I look for games that are simple enough for time-crushed students to learn, yet are complex enough to sustain a statement worth analyzing. I craft bi-weekly units for each game, with weekly evening game labs sandwiched between two weekly 85-minute meetings. And since I teach history, I'm interested in historically-themed games, especially those in my area of specialization. It's fine if these are commercial products intended for family or mass audiences; that tends to make them playable, and excellent fodder for cultural analysis.

I ask my students to consider historically-themed board games as cultural objects, akin to historically-themed Hollywood feature films, like *The Patriot* or *Gangs of New York*. It's not that we expect such movies to actually teach history, it's that the discussion, research, and analysis around the film can be pedagogically productive. After all, you can't evaluate the accuracy of such a film, let alone consider its broader possible cultural meanings, without knowing something about both history as a discipline and film as a medium. That makes for exciting work in the classroom, with a relevance that spills over into 'real life'. Most people learn about our history more from popular culture than from history classes anyway. We are exposed to historical interpretations all the time -- from trivia contests to policy debates. How useful, then, to have a language and a few methods to discuss these different forms or historical representation, whether they are films, fiction, Broadway shows, or board games.

So when *Pax Emancipation* came along, you can imagine my enthusiasm. It's heavy for my students, but they've coped well with COIN games such as Liberty or Death, so *Pax Emancipation* is possible for them. Otherwise, it's just the kind of game I'm looking for: it's in my teaching areas, it's playable in an evening, and it's deeply steeped in an explicit historical argument.

Pax Emancipation's argument

Conceptual framework: discursive vs. ludic rhetoric

The task of evaluating a game rich in both play value and history is best divided into two general realms: the game's *discursive rhetoric*, and its *ludic rhetoric*. These are concepts I've discussed in an earlier essay, but they boil down to this: Discursive rhetoric describes the way a game makes its argument through words unrelated to how you actually play. Think of the introduction to the rulebook, or informational appendices, or flavor text on cards – all of which help players understand the in-game meaning of what they are doing, but are not required to actually play. In *Monopoly*, it takes the discursive to tell us that those four spots in the middle of each row represent railroads, or that the $200 we collect when passing 'Go' represents payday. In *Pandemic*, the discursive tells players that cubes mean diseases, and explains what your avatar's special game abilities are meant to simulate 'in real life'. Games use discursive rhetoric to

develop their themes, which are little more than explanations of what a game is intended to mean or represent.

In contrast, ludic rhetoric describes the argument made by the actual play procedures the game asks you to undertake. Here, words function simply to describe procedures that games ask players to undertake. W*hat are we supposed to do? Work together? Memorize things? Accuse each other? Take risks? Keep secrets? Determine odds? Evaluate opportunity costs? Bluff? Recognize patterns?* Procedures can constitute powerful statements that help a game make its point. It's no coincidence that games about collecting art often have auctions involved, for example. Game artist Brenda Romero expresses this in a useful phrase: 'the mechanic is the message'.
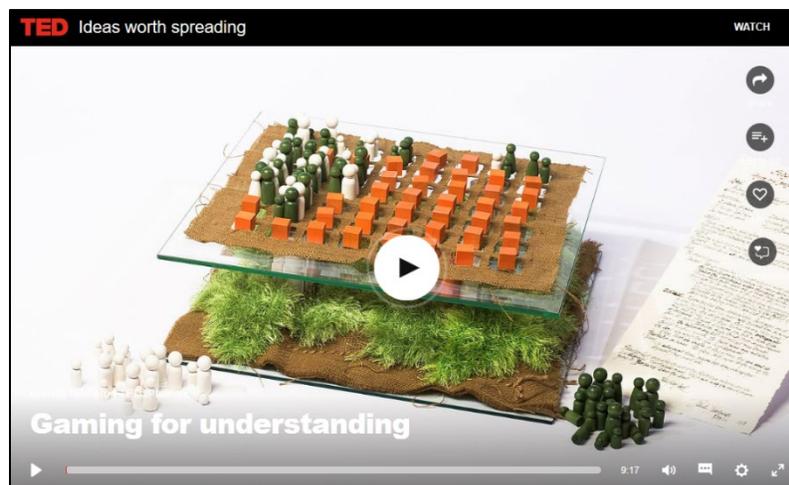
Figure 7: Video game designer Brenda Romero has demonstrated that board games can become works of art that explore socially difficult themes.

Games can vary in how they balance their discursive and ludic rhetorics. *Trivial Pursuit* is not mechanically complex but offers a wealth of discursive information. In contrast, Go became so abstracted from its original metaphor of war that it carries virtually no discursive weight, and makes its statements largely through its mechanics (though, to be sure, discussions about and around the game are highly discursive). As a genre, Eurogames highlight their mechanics and worry less about making discursive arguments than, say, role-playing games. RPGs lean toward the discursive, hiding their mechanics -- sometimes literally behind GM screens -- to focus on immersive experiences. You get it.[7]

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[7] If you don't, that's great – tell me! I'm still developing my understandings of these matters, and invite all perspectives.

Pax Emancipation is uniquely heavy in both discursive and ludic rhetoric. That is, the game conveys a lot of meaning in both what it says it's about, and in what it asks you to actually do. Let's start with the realm of the discursive. After all, it makes sense that we should understand the game on the designer's terms before analyzing its play. This is all the more important with a highly didactic game about a very sensitive historical subject. The didactic qualities of games emerge from their discursive rhetoric. Whether we're talking about medieval Chess or Victorian family games, the moral lessons are delivered largely through their non-ludic elements, whether through extensive commentary in an accompanying book, or just text on board spaces explaining the moral significance of moving two spaces back or three forward. When the new antislavery games' designers take the words to explain what they are doing, they are engaging in discursive (as opposed to ludic) rhetoric.

The game's discursive argument

Pax Emancipation emerged from ideas Eklund has been considering for some time. In the rulebook to Pax Pamir, a game in which "players assume the role of Afghan tribal leaders navigating the winds of colonial power in 'The Great Game,'" Eklund published a short but controversial essay titled 'A Defense of British Colonialism'. Here's the gist:

> The rush to condemn colonialism ignores the illiteracy, tribal slavery and warlord anarchies that the colonies replaced. Slave conditions would have lasted for centuries until indigenous literacy or Enlightenment values were independently discovered. Whatever vices and abuses occurred under the name of Western imperialism, it was the only tortuous path to freedom.

This is a perspective repeated word for word in *Pax Emancipation* (n. 19).

A fair evaluation of the full argument behind it is challenging, though, for two reasons. First, while Eklund makes a huge discursive case, it exists only as footnotes, glossary entries, rulebook appendices, and flavor text distributed throughout the game. It's impossible to reconstruct it into a coherent whole without engaging in unwarranted acts of interpretation and translation. Because the argument is presented piecemeal, we are compelled to respond piecemeal. I have undertaken some of this process elsewhere. For now, I can only suggest that there is a lesson in this: the conventions of historical writing exist not for their own sake, but for the sake of making and evaluating arguments fairly. Eklund does his argument a disservice in presenting it in scattershot fashion, and burdening his players with constructing his case for him from its parts.

The other barrier to understanding the argument is that Eklund himself does not seem clear on what it is. He announces a different 'thesis' in two separate places. These do not closely align with each other, nor with the thrust of his other claims. Is the game's thesis that "the Enlightenment provided the reason-based premises and ideas enabling anti-slavery activism" (n. 100), or that "morality should be excluded from a democracy,

otherwise a tyranny of the majority occurs, with the minority being forced to accept the moral standards of the majority" (n. 68)? Despite that both are announced as such, neither one seems to be the game's actual thesis.

If there's a commanding argument to this game, it has to be Eklund's repeated claim that "the greatest political achievement in history" (n. 1) was "making slavery everywhere illegal" (p. 63). For Eklund, "The freeing of the slaves was the world's greatest accomplishment" (p. 62), and it was achieved by colonizing Enlightenment ideas overseas. Few would debate that abolition was a great achievement, but in Eklund's work what should be a cliché becomes complicated. This is because the game's secondary thesis is Eklund's assertion of a uniquely broad definition of 'slavery'. *Pax Emancipation*'s discursive argument is that we should think of "slavery" as far more than the chattel variety with which we are familiar.

Eklund's definition of slavery is truly capacious, encompassing an extraordinarily wide range of human associations. He defines a slave as "any person under initiatory force or bondage to serve the interests of another" (n. 13). The phrase 'initiatory force' describes the violence or threat of violence that compels one to act against their will. Some libertarians pose this as the fundamental violation of a just social order. Search on the phrase and you'll find essays from *The Journal of Ayn Rand Studies*, books by those such as Stuart Hayashi, and more than a few webpages dedicated to radical libertarianism and anarcho-capitalism. The term appears in a footnote to *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Criminal Law* (n. 79), but I've yet to find law review essays that reference it. This is not mainstream stuff.

The idea seems to be that no action can be moral that compels another to do something out of the threat or use of physical violence. In this view, most exercises of state power contradict natural law. The concept raises interesting questions, such as whether one can violate natural law by failing to intervene in a catastrophe, or whether blackmail is immoral since it involves no threat or reality of physical violence. It thus seems to discount entire categories of compulsion that many would consider powerful, destructive, and unjust. (Think price gouging during times of want, refusal to prevent needless famine, or collusion between employers to exploit labor.) Because the only coercion that matters is physical violence, Eklund deems all other associations just. He thus concedes, in a unique acknowledgment, that *Pax Emancipation* "was produced in a Chinese sweatshop, under a government with a long history of resisting Western freedoms." However, he says, "each sweatshop employee who worked to produce this game did so voluntarily, for his or her own benefit and livelihood" (p. 59). I admire his candor, but I suspect that not all of those workers shared his admiration for their labor market.

Those outside Eklund's intellectual circles will find much of concern in this expansive understanding of enslavement. For example, in asking "Is socialism slavery?" (p. 59), Eklund, apparently convinced that Nazis and Socialists were the same, answers affirmatively by quoting Joseph Goebbels: "Socialism is sacrificing the individual to society" (p. 59). Relatedly, he makes Hegel a representative of "national socialism," which differs from "class socialism" in that "one's mind" rather than one's labor is state-owned (p. 59). For Eklund, chattel slavery differs from "leftist socialism" only in that "the owner is a lord and master rather than a societal representative" (n. 22). But then again Eklund also asserts that "conscription," "duty," "corruption," and "walls" are slavery, so lots and lots of things seem to count. In one instance, he concludes that OSHA (the U.S. government's Occupational Safety and Health Administration) constitutes "a typical example of a tyranny," which has levied an "economic toll … proportional to the human sufferings, ruined careers, and massive delays on technology and progress [it has] inflicted" (n. 49). The horror.

A libertarian take on abolition

Where does all this come from? The rulebook contains no bibliography, but Eklund's citations reinforce the libertarianism that his footnotes and glossary proudly proclaim. He does cite several historians known for their work on the history of abolition: W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (1896); Robert Conrad, *The Destruction of Brazilian Slavery: 1850-1888* (1972); David Brion Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution, 1770-1823* (1975); R.W. Beachy, *The Slave Trade of Eastern Africa* (1976); Orlando Patterson, *Freedom: Volume I: Freedom In The Making Of Western Culture* (1991); and Martin A. Klein, *Breaking the Chains* (1993). Other mainstream works referenced include E.P. Thompson, *Whigs and Hunters* (1975); Deborah E. Harkness, *The Jewel House* (2007); and Philip Hoffman, *Why Did Europe Conquer the World?* (2015). But one searches in vain for classic or recent works by innumerable well-known figures in the field.[8]

In contrast, George Reisman, an economic theorist who builds on the libertarian-friendly Austrian School, gets four citations (n. 33, n. 111, n. 123, p. 58). Other Eklund

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[8] Names such as Roger Anstey, Hillary Beckles, Ira Berlin, Robin Blackburn, Richard Blackett, Holly Brewer, Christopher Leslie Brown, Stephanie Camp, Emilia da Costa, Michael Craton, Laurent DuBois, David Eltis, Stanley Engerman, Douglas Egerton, Ada Ferrer, Barbara Fields, Paul Finkleman, Betty Fladeland, Eric Foner, George Fredrickson, Malick Ghachem, Eugene Genovese, Paul Gilroy, Greg Grandin, Thomas Haskell, Adam Hochschild, Thomas Holt, James and Lois Horton, Maurice Jackson, C.L.R. James, Julie Roy Jeffrey, C.L.R. James, Jessica Johnson, Winthrop Jordan, Joanne Melish, Clare Midgley, Joseph Miller, Richard Newman, Markus Rediker, Junius Rodriguez, Edward Rugemer, Rebecca Scott, James Sidbury, Manisha Sinha, Jean Soderlund, James Stewart, Rachel Sturman, Howard Temperley, Hugh Thomas, David Waldstreicher, James Walvin, and a host of others who have made fundamental contributions to understanding these questions.

favorites include Thomas Sowell (*Conquests and Cultures*, 1998; and *On the Real History of Slavery and Racism*, 2005); Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (Viking, 2011); and Isaiah Berlin, who gave us the notion of the counter-Enlightenment (*Liberty*, 1969) that appears in Eklund's sources. Others include Julian Haynes, Matt Ridley, Gordon Lloyd, Nicholas Capaldi, and Luke Muehlhauser. Ayn Rand and David Nolan get shoutouts.

Such sources lead Eklund to make some decidedly unconventional claims. Following Thomas DiLorenzo's widely criticized *The Real Lincoln* (2002), Eklund calls Abraham Lincoln a "great dictator" who "perpetrated widespread unconstitutional acts" and imprisoned "virtually everybody who disagreed with his radical views" (n. 101). In another footnote he declares that "skin color is not in this game because it has nought to do with slavery" (n. 107), and that only "historical accident" led Europeans to enslave Africans (n. 56). In yet another he concludes that "the religious right came to lead abolitionism" (n. 27), a formulation that would make both Transcendentalists and Biblical proslavery ideologues blanch.[9]

This libertarian perspective raises questions. If worldwide abolition of slavery was history's greatest accomplishment, why does Eklund seem so interested in asserting its persistence into our own day? We are told that "The gulf between 'slave' and 'near-slave' is huge" (n. 56), but we're also told that those who live under modern socialist regimes are in fact enslaved, as are those subject to standard government regulation. If any compulsion from 'initiatory force' constitutes 'slavery', then the institution is alive and well, and Eklund has no business explaining its ending. The best I can figure is that despite his blanket assertions about 'absolutes', Eklund actually views 'slavery' as a matter of degree, with perhaps chattel slavery as but one extreme, and those enslaved to OSHA perhaps on the other. I've found nothing in the rulebook that speaks to this point, and my requests for clarification from the designer have been fruitless. But this is the only point on which I can imagine his case being salvaged.

By my reading of its discursive argument, this is not first a game about emancipating slaves held in chattel bondage. Instead, it's a game about spreading Western ideas of liberty across a benighted globe, in the process 'liberating' a range of people held in various forms of thralldom by the threat of 'initiatory force'. The game thus reflects not an exploration of possible interpretations, but an assertion of a position its designer fiercely holds. In at least one instance Eklund takes clear sides in a debate (the

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[9] In online essays I have scrutinized two specific claims in the rulebook, and explicitly defended by Eklund in online discussions. One asserts that English colonizers inherited slavery from pre-existing forms rather than erected new laws sui generis on American soil. Another is Eklund's rather remarkable insistence that "the Enlighteners" discovered natural truths about what is morally right and wrong.

Drescher-Williams controversy addressed below), but it is rare for the game consider alternative interpretations. Occasional phrases such as "in the rush to condemn colonialism" suggest an awareness of rival positions, but often ones made only of straw ("rush"??).

By and large, however, *Pax Emancipation* views history not as a realm of interpretation and contention but as settled (indeed, natural) law. Eklund's version of history is not one among many potentially defensible ones, it is The Truth. While he genuinely invites corrections on details, he seems incapable of debating the larger assumptions on which those details rest. This is evident in his propensity for enormous claims not simply about what happened, but about the moral significance of what happened, as in: "the Enlightenment-Industrial Revolution was the only significant event in the history of Earth, if human life is the measure of value."

That is my best understanding of the game's discursive argument – that is, the one explicitly stated through the non-procedural game materials. It seems that Eklund has made a game to illustrate his view of the Enlightenment, which takes the already-suspect arguments of libertarian thinkers to extremes. Anyone hoping to use *Pax Emancipation* to teach the history of abolitionism must first work through this unconventional and frequently indefensible take on history.

Of course *Pax Emancipation* makes a ludic argument as well -- the one that emerges from the procedures the game asks us to undertake. What does that claim? Is it as extreme as the argument Eklund sets forth in the footnotes and glossary? To what degree do the game's mechanics mirror its discursive argument? Where are the moments of greatest divergence and convergence, and what do they mean?

The ludic argument

The game's ludic rhetoric bears notable resemblances to its discursive rhetoric, effectively functioning as a game version of the claims made in the rulebook. The game itself also makes grand assertions about the nature of slavery and the spread of abolitionism, but it does manage to find degrees of variance where Eklund himself emphasizes black and white. Because I've taken space elsewhere to extensively describe the game's play, I won't here belabor the details here. Instead, let's quickly outline what the game asks you to do.

In *Pax Emancipation*, three players represent different British antislavery institutions as they struggle to liberate the world from slavery and other forms of unfreedom. The game argues that the Enlightenment generated antislavery ideas, which then spread across the globe through the processes of colonization and revolution. It offers players a chance to participate in what it declares to be the greatest accomplishment in human history, the process of outlawing slavery. Red plays Parliament (the forces of state

colonial agents), green plays Philanthropists ("the merchants and explorers of London"), and white plays Evangelicals (missionaries). In the first part of the game, players work cooperatively; if they achieve their individual goals for this part of the game, they avoid 'counter-Enlightenment' and enter a second era, in which they compete for the title of greatest abolitionist.

The game uses a card-made mapboad to represent the world. Each card is a 'sphere' containing space for workers representing colonial offices ('Admins'), as well as for meeples representing liberated slaves and political dissidents. You can also place naval forces in seas between the map cards, which permits actions that make collecting and placing victory points easier.

Figure 8: At the start of the game, red Admins govern the 13 Colonies and Europe. As home to the movement, Europe begins with three slaves already free. White spaces on cards accept Dissidents, which help spark revolution.

The game is largely about using your colonial agents to attack spheres of slavery in order to liberate and ultimately modernize them. You do this through actions that let you emancipate slaves, create dissidents, and remove barriers to liberty. At the same time you're trying to liberate slaves, you're also trying to stir up enough dissent to trigger revolutions, which can become tricky to control. Beware, though, for when provoked the forces of oppression fight back hard. Succeeding will effectively lock the sphere into modernity, securing bonus actions and victory points for the players who worked to liberate it. It's easy to lose control of the consequences of your efforts. Carelessly angering tyrants can generate anarchy, which spreads across the globe like a virus, and can end your game early.

Figure 9: India contains seven slave spaces to emancipate; Eastern Africa only two. Red, white, and purple barrier tokens are worth points if collected, and fight back if not.

Throughout your endeavor, you'll be able to extend your actions by supporting individuals who represent different ideas, which are cards displayed in a literal marketplace of ideas. If you succeed in 'globalizing' these ideas into international law, you'll receive even more bonus actions. This shapes the international legal regime (another card display) in ways that then make it easier for you to control which revolutions (a special kind of idea card) can succeed. Some revolutions may remain purely local affairs, while others may be absorbed into the global idea regime. The game is thus about building efficient action chains that let you get the most out of your Agents.

In the long cooperative stage of the game you'll have to work together to secure the individual goals that let you avoid 'counter-Enlightenment' and play on into the final competitive phase. At the same time you're working collectively to abolish slavery, the game rewards each player-position with a distinct set of end-game objectives, as well as special scoring mechanisms. The competitive game thus becomes not only about modernizing the world, but also about mad scrambles – to industrialize and cure the diseases this permits, to finish revolutions so others can't benefit from them, and to fight over the barriers that will remain in a modernized sphere.

Pax Emancipation ~ Philanthropists
Goal: <26 Barriers on the Map

- 1 VP for Barrier, Slaver, Anarchy collected
- 1 VP for each Freedman/Admin/Marine
- 3 VP for each Disease disc
- Factory VP = adjacent Ships
- VP from globalized Revolutions

Player turn order:

CAPITAL

1. May divest Agent(s) to Wealth
2. Collateral
For each capital Agent moved to Wealth, move one from Debt to Wealth

I. Action phase (F): Take two Actions

Fundraise (F1)	Raise gold (divest, collateral, capital) Red: possible **Maritime Op** =
Syndicate (F2) — Market + Agent	Place Agent on Idea card
Shipbuilding (F3) — 3G (2G w/Factory)	Build ship, +1 Agent to debt. Red may install 1 Marine =
Post Agent (F4)	Place Agent on Admin; displaced Agents Martyred (become Dissidents). Barrier (free for White)
Legislate (F5)	Globalize viable Idea, divest Agents, Impacts (+ **Manifesto** if Revolution becomes viable)
Join Revolution (F6) — Revolutionary	May flip Revolution for opponent's Dissidents

II. Ops phase (G): One for each syndicated Agent

Maritime (G1)	Activate Marines + . Red may install Marine =
Manumission (G2) — Barrier	Liberate slave
Westernize (G3)	Liberate slave if your admin / no red barriers / Underground Railroad
Suffrage (G4) — Slavers	Claim barrier if port majority / red Admin / no write barriers / Underground Railroad
Literacy (G5)	Create dissident if your Admin. If full +1 Anarchy
Lawsuit (G6) — Agent	Globalize into Bill of Rights. Bonus petition (+ Manifesto?)
Plebiscite (G7) — Agent	Globalize into General Will. Bonus petition (+ Manifesto?)
III. Elephant phase (H)	Roll for Elephant Move (if). Card removed from Market (if)
IV. Hate rolls (I1)	# dice = uncovered spaces in Elephant's port (up to 4)
V. Pogrom roll (I4)	Each sphere 2= Anarchy, <5 Barriers 1=W, 2=R,3=G,4 6= +1 Anarchy
VI. Revolution phase (K)	Launches w'th 1= Dissident, 1+ Anarchy. Resolve if viable and full, Agents take laws
VII. Market refresh phase (J)	New West card if gap created (Dusk if West deck exhausted)

WEALTH

3. Capital Accumulation
Move all Agents from Wealth to Capital

▼ Victory pile ▼ *Keep collected Anarchy, Barriers, Slavers*

IMPACTS

	Syndication (M1)	Free Syndication (may conduct Op)
	Post (M2)	New Admin from pool to specified port
	Wealth (M3)	New Agent from pool to Wealth
	Revolutionary (M4)	New Revolutionary from pool
	Merchantman (M5)	New ship =
	Claim barrier (M6)	Claim barrier of specified color

OTHER SYMBOLS

	Elephant (H1)	Performing action moves Elephant to port (all subsequent actions taken there)
	Cultural diffusion (H3)	During wars, if card in West discarded, instead displace card in East
	Firebrand rating (K1)	Launched Revolution reduces Idea w/ lowest # (in West/East)
	Gunboat diplomacy (E5) — Dice (up to 6)	Claim Anarchy/Embargo/Slaver. Proxy: Success Troll = adjacent Slaves
	Costly action	Barrier, Market, Dice, Slavers/Agent/Revolutionary/Dissident
		Red/Green/White state roll hit kills Freedman or Agent matching colored die —reinstated here on "bloody" (collared) die +1 Anarchy (if >2 spreads adjacently) Purple Embargo kills adjacent Merchantman

DEBT

Privatized debt (E2)
Shipbuilding: add Agent to debt (F3)

FREQUENTLY CHAINED ACTIONS

Bonus petition (L1)	After: Lawsuit, Plebiscite. Fundraise / red Nationalize (E2) / black Legislate
Manifesto (K3)	Any globalization that makes a Revolution viable. Add Agent to Revolution (no cost, no limit)
Laws for Victorious Revolutions (K6) *After successful Revolution, each Revolutionary Agent takes one (L, R)*	Each Revolution takes one: • Claim Barrier / Anarchy / Slaver • Regress Barrier • +1 Freedman • Post Revolutionary Agent as Admin • Build Factory — Sphere of Revolution

■ **Philanthropists** ■

Create Republic: 0 barriers
○ 1 VP for each Freedman/Agent/Factory in sphere

• When installing Agents to Mao or Market, may use any Agent from Finance board

Figure 10: My homemade player aid for Pax Emancipation may convey some sense of the game's mechanics and complexity.

This brief overview does no justice to the design engineering behind the game. *Pax Emancipation* offers a rich bundle of nicely intertwined systems. Eklund is brilliant at compressing familiar game systems into small packages, only to repurpose them with new functions. For example, as a worker placement game *Pax Emancipation* limits your actions by the number of workers you have. These Agents represent your entire productive capacity, and can function not simply as workers that take actions, but also Admins on the board, revolutionary agents, and financial capacity. Every time you gain action capacity by syndicating an Agent, you're depriving yourself of other capacities. Every game system is like this. Each turn you'll have way more to do than you possibly can. Calculating opportunity costs and determining the most efficient path forward is deliciously complex.

Figure 11: Set up and ready for play.

But the most notable feature of the system is the way it melds discursive and ludic rhetorics. Because it is built on procedures customized to the game, you can't learn to play without imbibing, adopting, and deploying Eklund's explanations. Of course the rules are jammed with footnotes explaining what everything is intended to mean. But even the descriptions of procedures are saturated with Eklund's vocabulary and concepts. Players find themselves sounding like parodies of intense gamers in television shows like *Parks and Rec* or *Big Bang Theory*:

> *Ok, if I can globalize Josiah Wedgwood's 'Marketing' idea into the global Bill of Rights, it will have the impact of ridding the sphere of Imbangala slavers. It will also move forward Paul Cuffee's quest for Liberian independence, as its support of the concept of militant activism makes his West African revolution viable. This grants me a bonus petition that raises me some much-needed funds. I've already dedicated some agents to the Liberian Revolution, and now, because I made it viable for globalization, I also have a manifesto that lets me add another. The Liberian Revolution will thus be complete, liberating all of West Africa. Because my agents helped, I will be able to put some anarchy to rest, manumit some slaves, and build the factory I need to help eradicate disease in other spheres. The sphere becomes modern with no barriers to freedom, making it a Republic.*

In *Pax Emancipation*, discursive and ludic rhetorics so thoroughly meld that you cannot even learn the game without encountering Eklund's argument. Of course it's normal for games to label procedures to enhance theme; *Pax Emancipation*'s money raising action is appropriately titled 'fundraising'. But even small or obscure mechanics receive labels in this game. Anarchy spreading to new spheres represents 'refugees', while an involuntarily removed Admin becomes a 'martyr'. When too many ideas find their way into the General Will, the 'tyranny of the majority' eliminates the oldest. This is a game that cannot be experienced without deeply imbibing its designer's ideas about what the game is supposed to mean.

The game as a whole

The argument that results from this combination of ludic and discursive rhetoric suggests something interesting: while nominally the game is about legally abolishing the institution of slavery, it's really about advancing the broad set of ideas from which antislavery sprang. This makes it as much about the spread of 'Enlightenment' ideas (actually, it's an even broader tradition of liberal thinking about rights) as about antislavery. The game's actual narrative is about your efforts to 'colonize' the western liberal tradition (as Eklund conceives it) by spreading revolutions across the globe, creating the pax emancipation.

Some defend Eklund's extreme positions by arguing that the game's ludic argument is less extreme than its discursive one – that the game isn't as radical as the rulebook. But in most ways the game accurately reflects, and even expands on, Eklund's discursive case. Everything starts in Britain, where antislavery agents syndicate various ideas of liberty to free slaves and inspire revolutions. This focus on revolution is notably more evident in the game itself, but the game equally envisions Eastern spheres as particularly enslaved, and views colonialism as only a good.

Mainly, though, the game itself models ideas more thoroughly, and far more systematically, than does Eklund's discursive text. The advanced game's globalized idea splays introduce a whole new level of highly thematic mechanics, which offer your best chances for chaining precious actions. The intellectual diffusion of the discursive argument is literally built into the game, for some Western ideas will "diffuse" to the East rather than simply fade away – an important consideration when you're trying to keep a revolution afloat. And as in the discursive argument, the ludic version also favors some kinds of ideas over others. Among sixty-six Western ideologues, the game slights three who offer neither Ops nor impacts. These are Hume, Kant, and Hegel – all of whom Eklund, in his discursive case, reviles as figures of the counter-Enlightenment.

There is but one aspect of the game that truly renders its ludic argument more flexible than its discursive one. For a designer whose rulebooks express such strong opinions about what should have happened, Eklund has crafted a game that permits a rich set of meaningful alternative outcomes. In the cooperative game it may not even be possible for players to avoid the forces of counter-Enlightenment and make it to the competitive game. And the competitive game permits a fascinating array of possible end states, induced by the game's scoring system.

Eklund's discursive argument laments the degrees to which 'slavery' persists in the form of government regulation and socialist states, but the game actually encourages such possibilities throughout. Consider the system of 'barriers', which present obstacles to liberty in each sphere that can be overcome. Philanthropists benefit from having all barriers in a sphere gone (a Republic), but the other positions do not; Parliament

benefits if a Democracy is created (red barriers only), and Evangelicals benefit if a Theocracy of white barriers is created.

Eklund tends to state his arguments in absolutes, but the game itself largely hinges on the gradations of liberty resulting from the formation of the modern world. Players work generally to modernize spheres, but will always want to modernize in their own interests, which often means leaving some barriers to freedom in place. Thus Europe might wind up a right-wing Theocracy while Africa is a Republic; China may have modernized through revolution, but North America may remain European colonies. And the constellation of ideas comprising the international legal order may wind up being thick or thin, and inflected in a wide variety of ways – from right-wing economic activism, to supernatural religious morals. This is cleverly consistent with Eklund's latent argument that in some form or degree 'slavery' persists into the present, which he understands to be an unfortunate rejection of known truths. The ludic argument is thus far more variable, and flexible, than the discursive argument.

This is built-in to the medium Eklund has chosen to make his case. After all, historically-themed games by their nature must permit a range of possible outcomes. This is the principle of counterfactualism, of course, or 'alternate histories'. Historians tend to disdain explicitly counterfactual history, often dismissing it as a "parlor trick."[10] By this standard, historically-themed games must make for bad history, because they by definition do not narrate the actual story of the past. After all, there's very little market for games that play the same way every time.

In truth, though, counterfactualism is built into the historical enterprise. Historians couldn't pose questions without counterfactual thinking. You can't ask 'why did that happen?' if you can't imagine that something else might have been possible, right? And what better technique for understanding the forces that led the past to turn out the way it did? Counterfactual history helps us understand the centrality of contingency in history. Things did not have to happen as they did. So what a fascinating contrast this game presents. On the one hand we have a designer known for his absolutist stances;

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[10] The original formulation of the quotation is from Edward H. Carr, *What is History?* (London: Macmillan, 1961), 91. The original context of this oft-cited passage is worth noting. Carr's critics accused him of insufficiently exploring alternative causes and outcomes to the Russian Revolution, an event they still very much regretted. "Suppose, it is said, that … Russia had not gone to war, perhaps the revolution would not have occurred…. These suppositions are theoretically conceivable; and one can always play a parlour game with the might-have-beens of history. But they have nothing … to do with history." In other words, Carr was saying two things: first, 'don't shoot the messenger', and second, historians' task is to explain what happened, not what might have happened. Neither rejects the basic principle of counterfactual thinking.

on the other, his medium has a formal requirement that it must permit multiple permutations of history.

We must remember, though, that while there can be much pedagogical value in thinking counterfactually, not all counterfactual thinking is effective. *What if Lincoln had lived?* is a more plausible counterfactual than *What if Lee had had tanks?* because of course Lincoln's death might have been averted, while tanks were unlikely to appear at Gettysburg. The problem with Eklund's counterfactual is that it's premised on many assumptions that need challenging: that ideas divorced from material interests largely drove the antislavery movement; or that we can best understand abolition as the work of well-meaning metropolitan representatives with little role for the slaves themselves; or that it's useful to think of hard distinctions between Western and Eastern intellectual traditions, and between Enlightenment and so-called 'counter-Enlightenment' ideals.

Perhaps of greatest concern, the game permits none of the terror and violence that characterized European colonialism. In Eklund's past, there is no way for a King Leopold II of Belgium to mutilate and butcher millions of Africans in the Congo Free State. Nor is it possible for British administrators to permit twelve- to thirty-million deaths in India (an event Winston Churchill blamed on Indians themselves, for "breeding like rabbits"). Boers cannot be put into concentration camps, and Australian aboriginals cannot be genocidally massacred. Remember: useful counterfactuals don't let us assert that an improbable antecedent (a benign colonialism) as actual historical truth.

At the same time, counterfactualism is the saving grace for Eklund's argument, for varied outcomes permit a nuance absent in the rulebook. Because its final state can vary in so many ways, the game permits a degree of possibility Eklund himself seems to deny. The game tells us that there were many possible paths to modernity. It gives us a chance to shape those outcomes, and it does this far more clearly than does Eklund himself. Its great paradox is that while its designer insists on defending absolutes, the game itself yields only gradations.

What's more, these are (to designer Eklund) invariably imperfect outcomes: the game offers an ideal to which players may only aspire, with historical reality almost always falling short in various degrees in various places. This is in fact the point. Ultimately, *Pax Emancipation* offers a tragic narrative of incomplete modernization, lamenting a modern world fallen in its willful rejection of Eklund's ideal order. One imagines his ideal end game state as one where all revolutions have succeeded and no barriers to liberty remain (essentially, the Philanthropist/Republican ideal). But of course this did not happen in the fallen world, and is nearly as unlikely in the game world he creates.

That's a fascinating argument, but it's made primarily in the game rather than the explanation. In words, Eklund eschews nuance. He dismisses challenges to his ideal as remnants of Eastern mysticism or counter-Enlightenment modernity. He poses issues in absolutes rather than gradations. Nor does he seem personally willing to engage in the give-and-take required to clarify and defend his ideas, preferring instead to retreat into his footnotes and definitions.

It's fascinating: in discursive argument he cannot play – as if the stakes are too high for him to ever be wrong. He seems too serious, too fragilely wedded to his concepts, to actually have fun with his critics.[11] But he does leave room for play – in the game itself, and the counterfactual possibilities it offers. In this game, the designer's ideas have actually found more defensible expression through mechanics than through words. For Phil Eklund, mechanics may be a more fluent language for making arguments than English. Maybe 'game' is his first language.

History and historiography

Taken together, the ludic and discursive arguments of *Pax Emancipation* make powerful but troublesome claims. Let's explore these under two rubrics: the actual historical argument Eklund makes, and the place of these arguments in the tradition of historical writing ('historiography') on the subject.

Historical critique

Eklund conceives of slavery as an ancient and worldwide phenomenon, with Atlantic slavery merely another form "inherited" from previous iterations. This downplays the unique qualities of Atlantic slavery, crediting the British for ending the institution but not for promoting it. Eklund calls Atlantic slavery "the painful first step for freedom," neatly dismissing its novelty as a strange irony he does not explain. In the process, he misses the centrality of Atlantic *slavery* in creating Atlantic *antislavery*. After all, abolitionists didn't start with Russian serfdom. They attacked the system they saw— the system their nation had built, the system that was producing evidence of its own barbarism.

For many historians, the story of abolitionism is the story of how capitalism gave birth first to a plantation economy that demanded African slaves, only to grow into an industrial form that through complex ideological processes spawned antislavery. But for Eklund, the story of abolitionism is the story of how those in the Enlightenment

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[11] In an online exchange, I asked Eklund if any bit of new historical information would cause him to re-examine his claims. His response: "I would re-examine this conclusion if a violation of natural law was ever observed, anywhere in the universe. So far, however, every claim to the supernatural has turned out to be either mistaken, or Newton's formulation of natural law needed adjusting." In other words, it would literally take hell to freeze over.

discovered that all forms of coercive violence violate natural law and are thus errors. Atlantic slavery being a nearby example of this, it just happened to fall first.

Indeed, the game itself plays out across a global stage, with opportunities for emancipation overwhelmingly skewed toward the East, clearly a sign that this is where the real work was needed. The map card for North America begins with three slave spaces awaiting liberation, while that for India has seven. The card for South America has but one, despite that Brazil absorbed 40 percent of the Atlantic slave trade. In contrast, the card for China has eleven.

That maps onto Eklund's broad notion of slavery, but it's also highly Eurocentric. As Eklund plainly explains, "By 'Western thought', I mean an epistemology that upholds reason (i.e., observation and logic) as man's means of knowledge. By 'Eastern thought', I mean a reliance on mystical sources of knowledge." That's pretty much the definition of 'orientalism', Edward Said's now-standard term describing the ways western culture-makers have applied patronizing stereotypes to represent Asian societies as the antithesis of western rationalism. For example, when the game permits the appearance of 'occult fads' such as Mesmerism in the Western idea market, it explains these as instances of 'eastern mysticism counterflow', which is the resurgence of primitive ideas in the West after the 'discovery' of Enlightenment values of liberty and reason (n. 84).

Eklund does offer 'Eastern' thinkers on Idea cards, but these are the ones who adopted Enlightenment ideas. He acknowledges challenges to the Enlightenment from within the tradition itself, but he either dismisses these as 'counterflow' (see above), or as in the case of Romanticism and German Idealism, considers them regressions. His is an idealized Enlightenment halted in 1789, beset by forces inhibiting it from without and within, from which we have unfortunately declined. Ultimately, though, we owe to it all of modernity and its myriad benefits. Eklund quotes Luke Muehlhauser to this effect: "Everything was awful for a very long time, and then the Industrial Revolution happened" (n. 199). Many would have disagreed, among them the millions of slaves born to grow the cotton those British mills demanded.

The game is thus explicitly premised on Western exceptionalism and Western chauvinism. It extolls a western legal and constitutional tradition said to uniquely privilege individual liberty, participatory democracy, and the minimal state. It claims that, writ large as 'The Enlightenment' (it actually encompasses an even broader tradition of liberal thinking about rights), that body of ideas claimed to have found immutable 'natural truths' about the nature of humanity and its values. Abolition was thus predicated on the 'discovery' of the objective reality that slavery was a moral evil because it violated natural law. Eliding the Enlightenment's own skepticism, Eklund offers this assessment as an objective truth, and not simply the 'Enlighteners'' aspiration. And he laments that there have always been forces of 'counter-

Enlightenment', which regress us back toward notions of moral relativism and collectivism.[12]

In distinguishing these views from modern academic standards, it's hard to know where to start. Most obviously, antislavery resulted not from the 'discovery' of natural truths but from the emergence of new ideas that came to define slavery as the chief of all moral evils. Eklund correctly suggests that this was a new idea. But because he accepts 'Enlighteners' on their own terms, he cannot critique them for their many failings.

The Enlightenment itself bred its own critics, who established philosophical and ideological traditions much alive in the present. Some of these insights help us understand the Enlightenment's ordering of the natural and human worlds into artificial hierarchies not as objective natural truths, but as culturally bound constructions created by humans to describe objective reality. It turns out that even people who pose themselves as rational and objective observers of natural phenomena sometimes have trouble filtering out their own latent cultural and ideological predispositions.

The truth is that while the Enlightenment did foster notions of universal liberty, it also offered a science from which emerged major categories of difference that were used then and later to define the boundaries of civic communities. In short, scientific racism came from the Enlightenment. And of course colonialism was not the antidote to slavery, it was the great engine that drove slavery. Enlightenment thinking promoted colonization by proffering standards and hierarchies of "civilization" against which, unsurprisingly, non-Europeans always seemed to fare poorly. For English explorer John Lok, Africans were "a people of beastly living, without God, law, religion or commonwealth"; David Hume suspected that blacks "to be naturally inferior to the whites," for "there never was any civilization nation of any other complection than white." Thomas Jefferson himself, the man who penned 'all men are created equal', concluded that Africans were "inferior to the whites in the endowments both of body and mind." According to Enlightenment science, non-Europeans were superstitious, irrational, and inferior—all qualities which made them suitable for enslavement and colonial domination, all justified by the mission to 'civilize' inferior peoples.[13]

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[12] It should also be noted that, unlike the abolitionists themselves, who credited their successes to divine will (these appear in the game as Evangelicals), Eklund views history in entirely atheistic terms.

[13] Jordan, White over Black; Dain, Hideous Monster of the Mind.
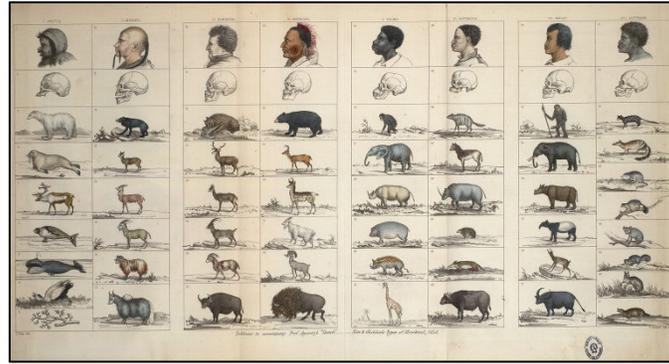
Figure 12: The Enlightenment bequeathed us the foundations of modern biological sciences; unfortunately it was suffused with racist presuppositions that continue to poison modern discussions of race. "Tableau to accompany Prof. Agassiz's 'Sketch", Nott & Gliddon's Types of Mankind, 1854," in Types of Mankind: Or, Ethnological Researches (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo and Co., 1854).

These insights, grown from historical methods and knowledge systems much-beholden to the Enlightenment, asks us to set aside the very prejudices *Pax Emancipation* reproduces. We have grown past the point when we ordered other cultures and political systems on hierarchies (e.g., Western v. Eastern) just as potent as race. The current academic mood is more aptly represented by Princeton philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah, who challenges the very concept of 'Western Civilization' that *Pax Emancipation* extolls: "The very notion of something called 'western culture' is a modern invention," he writes, for "the values of liberty, tolerance and rational inquiry are not the birthright of a single culture."

But for Eklund the post-Enlightenment era devolved into relativism, so perhaps all such challenges can be dismissed as counter-Enlightenment or 'Eastern mystical counterflow'. The logic becomes impregnable, but only because the argument is circular: *we know the Enlightenment wasn't Eurocentric because by its own definitions it wasn't.* This kind of historical thinking cannot help but produce inaccurate representations of the past. Eklund treats history not as a complex field of human interplay, but as a laboratory meant to reveal objective natural truths. This means that *Pax Emancipation* cannot view the Enlightenment through anything but the Enlightenment's own prejudices.

Eklund reifies the Enlightenment, transforming it from a loose network of often conflicting ideas into an internally coherent and objectively evident formal system of belief. He is right to suggest that the notion of abolishing slavery was largely unthinkable before the emergence of antislavery sentiment among the dissenting sects in the late seventeenth century. And he is right to note that the Bible seems to permit a loose definition of 'slavery' throughout. But a triumphalist interpretation in which

secular rationality dispels the darkness of superstition elevates "Enlightenment principles" to a status no serious scholar of the era would assert.

Besides the obvious problem that this is simply not how ideas in history work, it is a view at variance with the moral complexity of the Enlightenment legacy. Many thinkers associated with the Enlightenment espoused great confidence in reason and its possibilities. For example, James Madison delighted "to see the standard of reason at length erected, after so many ages during which the human mind has been held in vassalage by kings, priests, and nobbles." Yet not even the Philosophes were as confident as Eklund seems to be in their findings. Even a cursory glance at modern scholarship on the Enlightenment reveals how far outside the mainstream his idealist, positivist take is.

Eklund might respond that these departures from the course of liberty came not from the Enlightenment but from the counter-Enlightenment. He fails to define this concept, but clearly he references ideas derived from Isaiah Berlin, Steven Pinker, and others writing in their vein. In an appendix entry asking "can civilization survive the fall of the age of reason?" Eklund rejects intellectual trends from Romanticism on for challenging the notion of absolute truth. For him, the only alternative to absolute truth is mere opinion, which effectively constitutes an attack on reason, truth, and morality.

Needless to say, this is not a widely accepted approach to the history of ideas. In Eklund's hands the trope of counter-Enlightenment serves as a rhetorical dumping ground for ideas that don't fit his model. Such, for example, is the fate of poor Hume, the Enlightenment skeptic who concluded that "all knowledge degenerates into probability" (*Treatise*, I.iv.i). Hume argued that statements about what is are of a variety distinct from those about what ought to be; that is, understanding objective reality can never tell us with certitude what is morally right and wrong (a concept known as 'Hume's Gap'). So here we have a quintessential figure of the Enlightenment, indeed one of the most famous philosophers in the western tradition, whose central ideas seem to undercut the whole notion of Enlightenment positivism that Eklund extols. In an entry titled "The Downfall of Absolutes," Eklund states that "this trend, started by Hume, Hegel and Kant (all philosophers in this game), overthrew the Enlightenment views that had discovered that the universe and its inhabitants ran according to absolute laws of nature." This extends to questions of morality as well, which Eklund insists "is a cold, hard, scientific fact, provable in a social laboratory or by any study of history."

But of course the moral questions were never as clear as Eklund would like. His heroes were not even always heroes. British abolitionists let many of those Revolutionary American slaves who chose British freedom over American slavery die in Sierra Leone, victims of underfunded dreams and incompetent administration. Even modern movements for human rights have been attacked – from a right which deplores implicit

notions of equality, but also from the left, because philanthropy has been implicated in imposing unwanted forms of rule (after all, how can it be liberty if it is forced upon you?). Gunboats in *Pax Emancipation* are meant to represent the Royal Navy's West Africa Squadron, which interdicted suspected slave traders on the high seas. In historical reality, though, British gunboats did not make Chinese people free, but were instead used to enslave them – to opium addiction. Read about any aspect of the Enlightenment that Eklund extolls, and you find deep moral questions that unfailingly darken his optimistic view.

Ultimately, the game reflects and reinforces a very old way of understanding the history of the West, which understands 'progress' in the Enlightenment's own Whiggish terms. In embracing the 'Enlighteners'' own thinking, though, Eklund inherits all of their problems as well. Like them, he cannot ultimately explain the sources of abolitionism, let alone liberty. Like them, he cannot view history as the product of anything other than natural forces and laws, which always seem to stubbornly defy elucidation. Except perhaps for its reliance on libertarian sources, there's nothing new in Eklund's understanding of abolitionism, the Enlightenment, and 'the West'. Critiques of the traditional model he endorses read like veritable descriptions of *Pax Emancipation*. Ellen Meiksins Wood, a historian of capitalism, critiques these views thus:

> Together, they give an account of historical development in which the emergence and growth to maturity of capitalism were already prefigured in the earliest manifestations of human rationality, in the technological advances that began when homo sapiens first wielded a tool, and in the acts of exchange human beings have practiced since time immemorial. History's journey to 'commercial society' or capitalism, has, they admit, been long and arduous, and many obstacles have stood in its way. But its progress has nonetheless been natural and inevitable. Nothing more is required, then, to explain the 'rise of capitalism' than an account of how many obstacles to its forward movement have been lifted—sometimes gradually, sometimes suddenly, with revolutionary violence…. One way or another, capitalism more or less naturally appears when and where expanding markets and technological development reach the right level. Many Marxist explanations are fundamentally the same—with the addition of bourgeois revolutions to help break the fetters.[14]

It's all here: the progress-driven teleology, the 'arduous' road to modernity, the recourse to evasive natural laws, and even the literal 'obstacles' to freedom. The game thus does reflect something about the scholarship: it is in fact the interpretation that most historians argue *against*, and the one they must struggle to have students un-learn before they can begin to represent the field accurately.

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[14] Ellen Meiksins Hood, *The Origin of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1999), 3-4.

Historiographic connections

For its myriad problems, *Pax Emancipation* may still be placed amidst major debates on abolitionism, the Enlightenment, liberalism, and industrialization. Like the historiography of abolition itself, Eklund's central claims seek to weave together large and complex historical processes with only qualified success.

Intellectual diffusion

Eklund seems to appreciate that colonization, slavery, industrialization, and abolition are connected, but as an idealist he rejects most materialist (and hence all Marxian) explanations for it. In this sense he fits best within a strain of abolitionist historiography that Howard Temperley calls the "intellectual diffusionist" approach.[15] This view, which began with the abolitionists themselves, posits that slavery ended through the flow of ideas, which began as small trickles of antislavery ideas gathered into ever-growing streams. These then converged into rivers, "swelling the torrent which swept away the slave trade," as British abolitionist Thomas Clarkson put it. What better ludic example of this than *Pax Emancipation*'s idea system, in which connected ideas literally spread into the globalized idea splays.
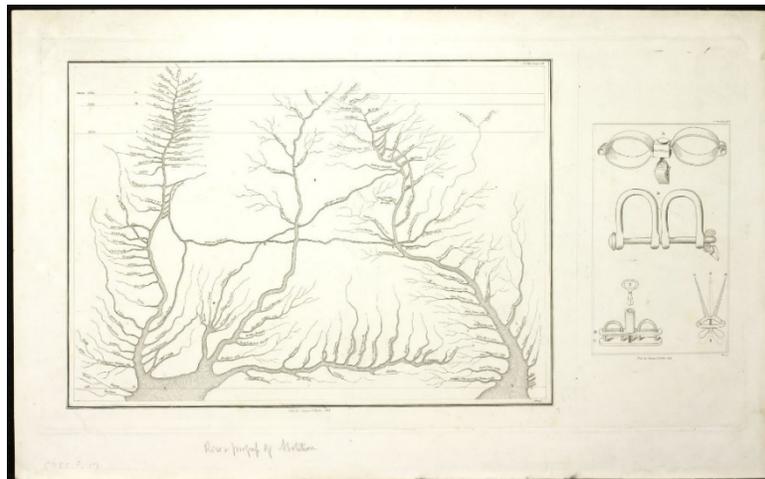
Figure 13: Images such as this reflect the abolitionists' own view of their movement, as the spreading of antislavery ideas as rivers and streams. William Kneass, Rise and Progress of Abolition (Philadelphia: J.P. Parke, 1808).

But this approach presents problems. For one, it is effectively tautological; it can explain why ideas killed slavery, but not where those ideas came from. Eklund latently presents the process as an accumulation of ideas that finally reach a threshold that somehow produces abolition. The nearest we get to an explanation that considers change over time is this appendix entry:

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[15] See Eklund's reference to "cultural diffusion" in n. 70.

WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG? Why did even the concept of abolition, attacking slavery as an institution, take tens of thousands of years? The concept of freedom as an universal value required language (paleolithic), logic and Reason (ancient Greece), and the rise of capitalism and non-force-dominated transactions (Renaissance Europe). And finally it required the rise of science (Enlightenment Europe), a methodology using logic, Reason, and observation to explain everything that exists, including crucially mankind and his machinations and morality.

Ultimately, Eklund seems to have no clear conception of why antislavery ideas emerged when and where they did. It seems that through a mysterious (perhaps inevitable?) process of accumulation, people in western Europe got smart enough to 'discover' the natural truths by which we ought to live.

The idealist position alone fails to satisfy because it unmoors ideas from the material circumstances in which they operate. As Temperley puts it: "There is something patently unsatisfactory about any explanation of a historical event … as important as the abolition of slavery, which is based on developments in the realm of ideas and which fails, at least in any detailed way, to relate those ideas to the actual lives of people of the period." Ideas do lead to other ideas, but they also converge with circumstance; explanations ungrounded in material realities cannot suffice. This is in fact one of the great debates that have shaped this field: how much did the abolition of Atlantic slavery owe to ideas (an idealist approach), and how much to changes in socio-economic structure (a materialist approach)?[16]
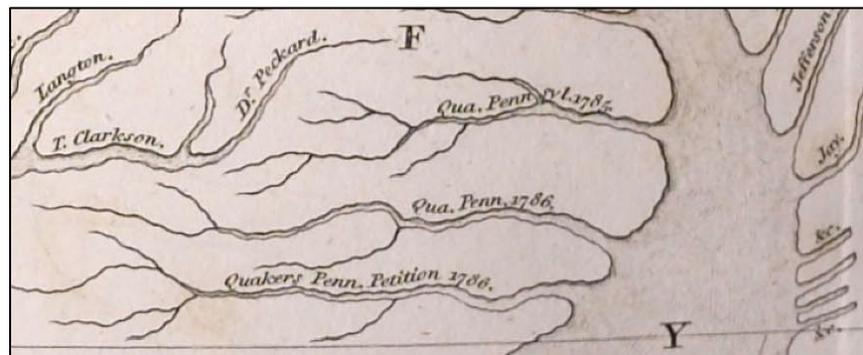
Figure 14: Detail showing how individual tributaries fed larger streams of antislavery thought. William Kneass, Rise and Progress of Abolition (Philadelphia: J.P. Parke, 1808).

Eklund's hold on this question is tenuous. We learn that "the Industrial Revolution could have occurred centuries earlier or later" (n. 93), and likewise abolition, but "it is

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[16] See the complex exchange between John Ashworth, David Brion Davis, and Thomas L. Haskell in Thomas Bender, ed., *The Antislavery Debate: Capitalism and Abolitionism as a Problem in Historical Interpretation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

surely no coincidence that both happened a generation apart on the same small island!" Eklund's meaning here is unclear, but he emphatically rejects the economic determinism of Eric Williams, whose argument he reduces to the simple assertion that "a booming economy requires slavery" (p. 57). Explicitly rejecting an approach that looks to the economic interests of a rising industrial class, he favors Seymour Drescher's thesis that moral imperatives drove the fight against slavery even at the cost of profits.[17] In the very same paragraph, though, he seems to undercut his idealism entirely by arguing that material and ideological interests never diverge:

> But under freedom more fortunes are won than lost, following a stern economic Law of Nature about the value-added in each voluntary transaction and the value subtracted in each force-dominated transaction. There is no dichotomy between "humanitarian" and "self-interest": what is humane is also in your rational self-interest (p. 57).

Would that it had been so evident to enslavers and their defenders.

Moral capital

It shouldn't surprise anyone that a game designer hasn't figured out what generations of historical controversy haven't resolved. But a deeper engagement with debates over antislavery abolitionism would have introduced Eklund to some interesting interlocutors. Consider Christopher Leslie Brown's book, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (2006). Brown, in one of the most influential recent takes on the British antislavery movement, winds up with a case remarkably close to Eklund's.[18]

Like Eklund, Brown focuses on the vital role of revolution – or at least the one that transformed the thirteen colonies into the United States of America. "Without the American Revolution it would have been difficult for an antislavery movement to develop as a national movement," Brown argues (464). Antislavery let Britons pose themselves as morally virtuous alternatives to the slaveholding republicans currently rebelling in the colonies. And, once the colonies were lost, antislavery compensated the empire for its loss of the American colonies; "opposition to slavery" became "proof of collective virtue," Brown writes (153). He terms this 'moral capital', and argues that it served Britons by reinforcing their virtuous self-conceptions. To "people who wished to think of themselves as Christian, moral and free, the abolitionists presented an

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[17] Drescher's later work seeks to explain the material basis of the antislavery sentiment that emerged among Quakers and (as Thomas Holt puts it) a "rearguard of artisans and laborers resisting the making of capitalist labor relations." Seymour Drescher, *Capitalism and Antislavery: British Mobilization in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Oxford, 1986); Thomas Holt, "Explaining Abolition," *Journal of Society History* 24, no. 2 (Winter 1990), 374.
[18] Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006).

opportunity to express their reverence for 'liberty, justice and humanity,' at little cost to themselves" (450).

Most tellingly, Brown argues that moral capital served the empire by justifying colonization as a moral reform. Later in the century, "European governments and adventurers intent on seizing power in Africa … would justify their partition of the continent and its subjection to imperial rule as one aspect of their war on slavery" (457). This is, effectively, *Pax Emancipation*'s argument. For Eklund, it is a good. But for Brown, Eklund's very endorsement of it would constitute evidence of the idea's hegemony. In short, Brown might suggest that Eklund drank the abolitionists' own Kool-Aid. As with his take on the history of capitalism as a whole, Eklund asserts the 'Enlighteners'' own claims with no evident acknowledgment of the very deep critiques long-leveled at positions he holds with certitude.

Slave agency

And what of the enslaved themselves? Perhaps the most significant historiographical issue with *Pax Emancipation* is that while it incorporates many historical people of color, it marginalizes their agency. *Pax Emancipation* presents abolition as a consequence of the emergence of a western legal tradition by heroic Enlightenment. This is a perspective that risks reproducing the white savior trope of the sort we see so often in feature films on slavery. To test this, let's explore the three ways slaves do appear in the game.

The most obvious representation of slaves in the game is found in its bits. Freed slaves are represented by agency-less meeples that do nothing other than fulfill victory conditions. Contrast these with Admins, the state representatives who help perform valuable Ops (Literacy, Suffrage, and Westernize), or even Dissident meeples, which can emigrate and become freedmen elsewhere. Some slave agency – perhaps systems representing slave flight and rebellion – is needed to offset the game's reliance on canonical western ideas, which guarantees a base level of Eurocentrism.[19]

Matters improve with Idea cards. Both Western and Eastern decks feature an impressive array of obscure historical figures drawn from a broad range of peoples and societies. Know much about Rifa'a al-Tahtawi, Kimpa Vita, or Ibrahim Şinasi? Frequently, black figures in the Western deck are slave rebels with low 'firebrand' ratings, which makes them likely to spark revolutions; take for example Samuel Sharpe, who in 1831 inspired the Jamaican slave revolt known as the Baptist War. (Eklund correctly cites these revolts as 'work stoppages', and accurately refers to them as the 'late rebellions', which helped bring about Parliament's abolition of slavery in 1834.)

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[19] 'Underground Railroads' offer the most promising candidate for such a system. In the game these make players' work easier, but how slaves actually interact with them remains abstract and invisible.

This should be acknowledged as a clear example of slave agency in the game: they can start revolutions.

This leads to the third system in *Pax Emancipation* that might be said to represent the enslaved themselves. Two different revolutions are possible in each sphere. The white, 'left-wing' side of a revolution card is its 'civil rights' side; the red, right-wing side is the 'slave revolt' side. South America can thus modernize through either Simon Bolivar's 'Latin American Independence' (white) or the 'Pernambucan Revolts' of northeastern Brazil (red). These cards can thus imagine some sort of revolt of the unfree. This is problematic insofar as it conflates the politically enslaved with the legally enslaved, a formulation that permits no distinction between the leaders of independence movements and the slaves those leaders (such as Thomas Jefferson, Simon Bolivar, and Toussaint Louverture) owned. But, at least in the Atlantic spheres, the revolution cards' linkage of revolution and slave rebellion is not far-fetched.

For example, North America can modernize through either the 'American Revolution' (white for civil rights) or the 'U.S. Civil War' (red for slave revolt). Whether modern slave revolts should be considered 'left' or 'right' is itself an interesting problem, raising questions historians have long asked about the nature of collective slave resistance. Eugene Genovese provocatively argued that slave rebellions, before they could be infused with the liberalism of the revolutionary era, sought to withdraw from the imperial political order into independent maroon communities, and hence can be considered neither revolutionary nor progressive. The Haitian Revolution marked a turning point, at which slave rebellion could begin to imagine the destruction of the slave system itself, and even – as with Haiti – its own emergence into the modern world as an emancipated, independent state.[20] Some reject this formulation because it slights the role slave culture played in resistance while elevating the ideas of an overwhelmingly white metropole. Yet more recent scholars have reinforced the overlap between slave rebellion and modern revolution.[21]

In the context of this debate, *Pax Emancipation* favors an even more central role for Enlightenment ideas than does Genovese. For Eklund, the Enlightenment is all, subsuming within it any meaningful slave rebellion. But the historiographical trend has been to stress rather than minimize the slaves' role in the process. No effective

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[20] Eugene D. Genovese, *From Rebellion to Revolution: Afro-American Slave Revolts in the Making of the Modern World* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979). See also Robert L. Paquette, "Social History Update: Slave Resistance and Society History," *Journal of Social History* 24, no. 3 (Spring 1991): 681-85; A. J. Williams-Myers, "Slavery, Rebellion, and Revolution in the Americas: A Historiographical Scenario on the Theses of Genovese and Others," *Journal of Black Studies* 26, no. 4 (March 1996): 381-400.
[21] See for example the work of Robin Blackburn and Laurent DuBois.

interpretation of abolitionism can ignore what the enslaved themselves did to secure their liberation, as Genovese acknowledged. After all, even the most ardent abolitionist couldn't free a single slave without evidence that the slaves themselves rejected the institution.

This may seem an obvious point, but it was hardly so in the day. Images of content slaves bombarded antebellum Americans. White performers in blackface founded the country's first popular entertainment form by portraying enslaved characters happy with their lot. "We care not what de white folks say," ran the lines of one song, "Dey can't get us to run away." Meanwhile, southern writers reassured readers that "no tribe of people have ever passed from barbarism to civilization" without better care than the slaves of Virginia. Poets penned lines like this:

> And yet the life, so unassailed by care,
> So blest with moderate word, with ample fare,
> With all the good the starting paupers needs,
> The happier Slave on each plantation leads;
> Safe from harassing doubts and annual fears,
> He dreads no famine, in unfruitful years.

Apologists for slavery such as George Fitzhugh elevated paternalism into a political defense of the South against the North: "The competitive system is a system of antagonism and war; ours of peace and fraternity. The first is the system of free society; the other that of slave society."

Figure 15: T.D. Rice's minstrel character 'Jim Crow' sought to convince viewers that slaves were happy with their lot.

The abolitionist movement challenged this defense of slavery with the words of slaves themselves. Slaves told their tales in print, providing first-hand accounts of the

institution's horrors in narratives that became Atlantic best-sellers. Perhaps the greatest of these was Frederick Douglass, who corrected the erroneous belief that slaves sang out of contentment; in contrast, he wrote, their "every tone was a testimony against slavery."
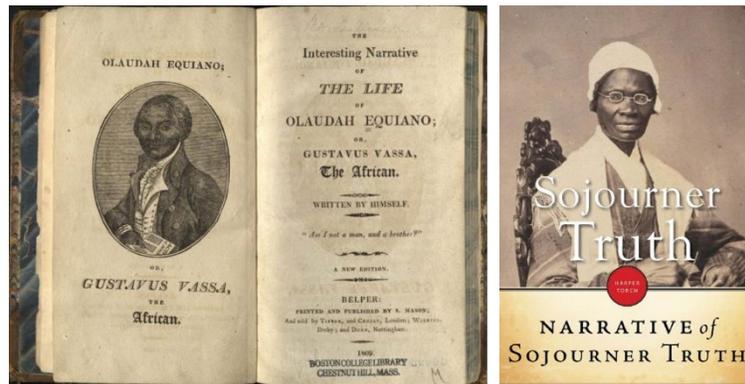

Figure 16: Abolitionists' best evidence against slavery came from the slaves themselves.

Words were powerful, but actions spoke louder. Slave resistance, collective and violent, belied the paternalistic defense of slavery, offering abolitionists rhetorical ammunition and credibility. Studies of slave rebellion in the Caribbean demonstrate the centrality to abolition of the feedback loop that developed between the slave periphery and the colonial metropole. Slave uprisings gave abolitionists evidence to argue for amelioration of oppressive conditions on the plantation. When slaveholders resisted these measures, slaves revolted, thus inspiring more repression. And that gave abolitionists more evidence to present to public and Parliament. Eventually, the cycle coincided with reform impulses in England to inspire the British abolition of slavery in 1834.[22] Other European empires followed.

The process took longer and was more complex in the United States, but a growing number of historians have posed the American Civil War as a massive instance of collective slave resistance. Back in 1935 W.E.B. DuBois pioneered the interpretation that slaves engaged in a 'general strike' during the American Civil War. More recently, James Oakes has argued that Union emancipation policy depended on slaves who would

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[22] Michael Craton, *Testing the Chains: Resistance to Slavery in the British West Indies* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982); Gelien Matthews, *Caribbean Slave Revolts and the British Antislavery Movement* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2006). This is an argument I apply to the United States in *Eighty-Eight Years: The Long Death of Slavery in the United States, 1777-1865* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2015).

free themselves, while historian Steven Hahn has termed the American Civil War "the greatest slave rebellion in Modern History."

It may therefore make some sense that *Pax Emancipation*'s revolution card for North America is labeled 'slave revolt'. But this may be too generous. There is no evidence that Eklund sees himself in conversation with these scholars or these sources. Instead, the game is characterized by a paucity of clear mechanics representing the agency of the enslaved themselves, and this neglects a major concern of the historiography and minimizes the slaves' role in their own emancipation. In history, enslaved African Americans protested their status through the limited means available to them.[23] These were the people who propelled into action the white abolitionists who dominate Eklund's story.

Significance

Pax Emancipation is in many ways a remarkable imaginative exercise in designing a ludic argument about something important in history. But it is not a historical argument. It does not reflect historical methodology, does not clearly explain change over time, and does not engage most of the relevant scholarship on its topic. But of course historians aren't the only ones who produce history; popular culture is rife with representations of this game's past. So where does the game fit amidst broader conversations about the past it represents? What is its place in our broader cultural moment? And can it help with our goal of teaching history with games?

The cultural politics of slavery and colonialism

The word 'slavery' conjures in American minds images from *Roots*, or *Amistad*, or *Glory* – of human property laboring in the plantation South, people defined as racially inferior being born into generation after generation of captivity. Cotton, scarred backs, fugitives. The Civil War. Of course the plantation slavery of the antebellum American South was just one manifestation of a practice that is as old as human civilization. From the dawn of history humans have practiced forms of compulsion we moderns have called 'slavery'. 'Slaves' have included not just forced laborers, but also debt peons, captives, domestic servants, harem slaves, military slaves, galley slaves, court eunuchs, and various others completely submitted (at least theoretically) to the wills of others. A very loose definition might even add serfs bound to the land, or even indentured (contracted) servants.

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[23] I myself have explored the tradition of protest that the nominally 'free' African Americans of the North forged.
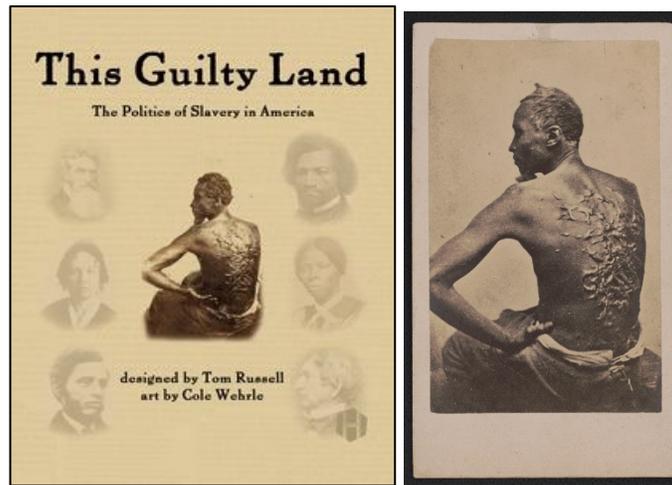
Figure 17: The cover of Hallandspiel's This Guilty Land *features a notorious image of the fugitive slave Gordon, who was photographed by Union forces during the Civil War*

Slavery has also long been used as a negative reference point. America's own Founding Fathers used the metaphor liberally, to describe their political subjugation to Great Britain. George Washington warned his fellow patriots, "we must assert our Rights, or Submit to every Imposition that can be heap'd upon us; till custom and use, will make us as tame, & abject Slaves, as the Blacks we Rule over with such arbitrary Sway." Such analogies appear throughout our history. Industrial labor has been called "wage slavery," and women's historical subordination to men has been posed as a kind of enslavement.

In today's public discussions slavery is used as a metaphor with increasing frequency. For some time now, activists and scholars have been asserting the similarities between slavery and the oppressive carceral systems of the Jim Crow South. More recently, this argument has been taken to the ahistorical extreme of asserting that the Thirteenth Amendment's framers built its 'exception clause' as a loophole designed precisely to permit the continuation of slavery. Indeed, the Thirteenth is making a comeback these days. We saw this during the U.S. government shutdown of 2018-19, when federal employees sued, arguing that to work without pay violates the Thirteenth Amendment prohibiting slavery. Questions about slavery's definitional boundaries are very much alive in our public culture.[24]

Pax Emancipation seems unaware of the discussions happening in the fields it explores, but its expansive definition of slavery is congenial to some of the positions taken in them. Indeed, the game may have emerged from the same zeitgeist that has fostered the idea that wage slavery, serfdom, mass incarceration, and other oppressive systems

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[24] The game does note that "THE 13th AMENDMENT of 1865 abolished slavery and involuntary servitude in the antebellum USA, except as punishment for a crime" (n. 94).

are all forms of 'slavery' which must attacked and abolished – just as thoroughly as was chattel slavery, one supposes.

A game where virtually everything that is not the Western liberal rights tradition constitutes 'slavery' in some degree could very easily be used to support any view of slavery as a limitation of freedom, some of them pernicious. If everything is slavery, then perhaps those white servants on the Mayflower should be thought of as 'slaves'. If everything is slavery, then maybe white supremacists are right to claim that Irish convicts and servants sent to the West Indies really were slaves, despite all historians' arguments to the contrary. Libertarians might find themselves appalled at the uses to which *Pax Emancipation*'s arguments could be put -- from justifying state reparations for slavery (since it's been ongoing since 1865), to excusing the atrocities of colonialism (since anything coming after 'slavery' must have been great). This conflation of 'slavery' and all other forms of unfreedom partakes of currents in popular thinking about the past, but it does much more to obfuscate than it does to clarify.

Pax Emancipation dovetails with a range of these current debates. For example, in arguments that echo Eklund's Enlightenment triumphalism, Fox News commentators such as Tucker Carlson and Katie Pavlich have erroneously claimed that the United States was precocious in ending slavery early, when actually it was late. Or consider the instance of political scientist Bruce Gilley, who like Eklund published an essay defending colonialism, only to be met with a firestorm of controversy that led the author to withdraw it amidst charges of academic malfeasance.

Eklund's conflation of socialism with Nazism reflects a particularly unfortunate instance of willfully promoting historical misinformation that seeps into public discourse. Consider Alabama Congressman Mo brooks, who recently quoted *Mein Kampf* in a nonsensical effort to accuse liberals of spreading Nazi-style propaganda. Or take the Texas Republican Party official who recently used Holocaust Remembrance Day to announce that "leftism kills." Or the Brazilian president who labeled Nazi's leftists despite having just visited a Holocaust museum in Jerusalem. This willful ignorance has become a trend, reinforced by the questionable claims of libertarian writers ideologically inhibited from distinguishing between left-swing socialism and right-wing authoritarianism.

Of course Nazis and Communists were enemies rather than allies. They occupied the extreme opposite ends of the political spectrum. They fought against each other tooth-and-nail, not just at the voting booth, but in the streets of Berlin. As authoritarians, Nazis were statists, but of course not all statists are leftists. Whereas socialism ultimately seeks to empower all, the Nazis sought to create an exclusive, authoritarian, militarized, racial state. Hitler's ideal order was characterized by "unconditional authority downwards and responsibility upwards."

Eklund's ideas seem culled from the pseudo-academy that has emerged with the fast rise of social media, the slow decline of the university, and the overt politicization of academic knowledge. It ranges from 'think tanks' bought and paid for by corporate sponsors, to popularizers widely debunked by the experts (think Pinker and Jordan Peterson), to fringe academics largely speaking to a cabal of dedicated adherents. Bari Weiss half-jokingly calls this the 'Intellectual Dark Web', a loose association of self-styled intellectual heretics who pose anti-PC provocation as academic (think *Quillette*).

Who knows; given the downsizing of higher education this may become mainstream. But it will never be right. Contention is good, but academic disciplines exist to develop methodologies designed to keep the debates constructive. Arguing over settled matters, as do deniers of climate change and the Holocaust, keeps us from arguing about useful things, like how to keep the environment healthy, and intolerance at bay. This is not simply a matter of representing the past *accurately*; it is more importantly about how we approach the past *responsibly*. The standards of academic work exist not to legitimate conclusions we've already reached, or hammer opponents into rhetorical oblivion. They exist because they offer the best principles for arriving at sound conclusions and arguing on fair and equal terms of debate.

Sound methods serve us all. We don't start with the conclusions we want to reach and reverse engineer explanations. We don't cherry pick evidence, fight against straw men, get personal, manipulate numbers, uncritically accept sources on their own terms, or do any of the other things people do when they want to lend bogus academic credibility to their arguments. In practice we often fall short of these disciplinary standards. But our effort to honor them reinforces a positive tendency to fair play. That benefits everyone by offering interpretations and conclusions that are more rather than less likely to go awry. There is no perfection, but we can increase the odds of producing useful results that we, and the public, can trust.

This matters, because history is a potent weapon in the propaganda campaigns of the culture wars. Questions surrounding race and slavery have been flashpoints in many academic fields. Contention currently rages among medieval historians over white supremacists' affinity for medieval studies, with museums working hard to de-center their Eurocentric medieval narratives to emphasize Africa. Meanwhile, Classicists are beset with their own disputes over matters such as the place of race in the ancient world, and discrimination and under-representation in the discipline. Many have expressed concern over white nationalists' perversion of ancient history for their own purposes. The babel that reigns over issues of race and slavery demands that those representing them undertake their enterprise with a sense of responsibility befitting the subject.

A recent incident illustrates the stakes for board games. Eurogames' depictions of colonization and imperialism have become matters of academic analysis in the last decade, but the conflict simulations (i.e., wargames) corner of the hobby has enjoyed relative safety from the culture wars. The front seems to be moving, though. Just recently GMT canceled a potential title, based on early concerns that its mechanics and theme were "out of step" with the market. Apparently players took on roles as nineteenth-century European powers seeking to carve up the content, with no apparent effort to address the people who lived on the continent. A heated debate followed, which made it onto major internet fora such as Daily Kos. Needless to say, this is not the kind of publicity GMT was hoping for. As for *Pax Emancipation*, whatever hybrid genre it inhabits is surely closer to the ideological battlelines than *Scramble for Africa*.

Teaching history with games

This evaluation of *Pax Emancipation* suggests that the art and science of making serious historical arguments about non-military subjects with games is advancing, if haltingly. As board games gain popularity, they will continue to address novel historical topics in novel ways.

They are already a long way from their origins. Modern simulation games were born in the effort to represent history, but with a traditional focus on military conflict. They tend to differ from their 'Eurogame' counterparts in creating the mechanical complexity required to simulate exceptional circumstances. *Why does that special hex confer a huge advantage to the defense? Because it represents La Haye Sainte, the stone farmhouse that gave Napoleon fits at Waterloo.* While Eurogame designers tend to start with clever mechanics they then explain with plausible historical themes, wargame designers tend to start with a historical reality they seek to illustrate with clever mechanics. Because they work so hard to simulate a complex reality, wargames work more didactically then Euros. They simply do more to explain how their mechanics represent the past.

All this didacticism may be of great use when teaching military history, but of course most history instructors are responsible for covering topics other than warfare. For better or worse, even military history as a field now situates its concerns amidst broader contexts of society and culture.[25] But wargame designers and publishers are steadily expanding into new realms. Games like Here I Stand (about national and religious

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[25] See, for example, Patrick Porter, "Good Anthropology, Bad History: The Cultural Turn in Studying War," *Parameters* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2007): 45-58. The seminal work bridging military and cultural history is John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo, and the Somme* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976). To see where the "cultural turn" has taken military history, compare Victor Davis Hanson, *Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) with John A. Lynn, *Battle: A History of Combat and* Culture (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2003).

rivalries in the age of the Reformation) seek to capture far more than military conflict, and systems like COIN seek to model the social contexts in which warfare takes place. Sierra Madre's "Pax" games, among which *Pax Emancipation* numbers, explicitly respond to this call for thoughtful historically-themed games that avoid depictions of traditional military conflict.

At the same time that heavy gamers are moving ever closer to thoughtful representations of history, the historical profession is beginning to understand the potential of games in representing the past. As I've written elsewhere, it's unlikely that board games will ever prove viable substitutes for the scholarly monograph. But of course monographs are not the only way we learn about our past. We might think of historically-themed boardgames as a kind of public or consumer history, capable – like good museums (think the Smithsonian museums in Washington, DC) or thoughtful films (e.g., *The Return of Margin Guerre*) – of evoking aspects of our past in engaging ways while also effectively modeling something about the way the discipline of history operates.

Games may become a potent ally in the historical profession's ongoing effort to define and communicate the methods and skills that define it as a discipline. Scholars such as Sam Wineberg are conducting primary research on the particular 'habits of mind' required of historical study, while the American Historical Association's Tuning Project is helping college history programs "articulate the disciplinary core of historical study and to define what a student should understand and be able to do at the completion of a history degree program." Games are emerging as a potent means of conveying a range of historical knowledge to students. The Reacting to the Past historical role-playing system, in which students take on the personalities and interests of those involved in critical moments in history, is exploding across campuses. Historians such as Adam Chapman, Jeremiah McCall, and Jeremey Antley are sharing their experiences with 'gamifying' their classes, are beginning to define best practices when teaching with games, and are pioneering new forms of criticism that meld the discourse of academic history with the methods of new media studies.

Figure 18: The Reacting to the Past role-playing system is transforming college-level history education.

In short, historians are learning to appreciate the value of games, just as game designers are working harder than ever to use their games to make historical arguments. It is imperative that academic concerns be brought to bear on new game designs. Scholars, too, must come to appreciate the unique features of games as a medium for making arguments. Since ultimately we are concerned with teaching not just the past but how to study it, it will not do to dismiss these new games as quixotic attempts at the hopeless, incapable of sustaining cultural critique. After all, the same thing was once said of historical feature films, yet for at least a generation the profession has recognized the need to take the medium seriously.[26]

Assessments

Pax Emancipation is a powerful example of the principle that 'the mechanic is the message', for it represents an extraordinary melding of ludic and discursive rhetorics. The game is not only procedurally dense, it is discursively dense. Simply learning to play it requires internalizing the meaning of the game's interconnected systems. In so explicitly melding ludic and discursive rhetorics to teach a lesson, the game is a notable example of the didactic game tradition, demonstrating how modern board game technology can meld with academic history to make powerful claims about the past.

It has emerged at an important time. Only now are we beginning to appreciate the enormous potential of games to shape and transmit our collective stories. Much of that power owes to our understanding of games as trivial pursuits, engaged in simply for the

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[26] Robert Brent Toplin, "Introduction," *Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (December 1989): 1003-5; Mark C. Carnes, ed. *Past Imperfect: History According to the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt, 1995); Robert Brent Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996); Natalie Zemon Davis, *Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000); Gary W. Gallagher, *Causes Won, Lost, and Forgotten: How Hollywood and Popular Art Shape What We Know About the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008).

pleasure we take in the experience they give us. Didactic games have always sought to harness our engagement with games for the promise of delivering painless (or, at least, less painful) education. As the art and science of modern board game design continues to flower, it seems likely that games will become an ever more important medium for education as well as entertainment. The didactic tradition may return, carrying with it everything we've learned about game design since the Eurogame revolution of the 1990s.

Pax Emancipation represents a powerful gesture in this direction, but it also shows how far we have to go. If games are going to realize their potential to make real historical arguments and teach real history, they need to reflect not just accurate renderings of the past, but also the responsible use of historical methodology. And it helps a lot if the custodians of good game design can speak with the custodians of good history. Game designers need to learn things from historians and history instructors, and history instructors need to learn things about games and how they work.

If games are not merely trivial pursuits, then we must also remain aware of the social consequences of our play. Designers who take on sensitive historical themes like slavery, race, and genocide should expect the scrutiny they receive. After all, as those fifth graders sought to remind me, uncovering slavery's past is serious business. Between the establishment of Jamestown in 1619 and the founding of the nation in 1787, more people came to American shores enslaved than free.[27] These, though, were just a small fraction of the 12.5 million Africans loaded onto ships destined for a hell awaiting them on the other side of an ocean. The Americas were made by slaves. Their descendants are us, and we are all haunted by the institution that chained them. Generations of scholars, the descendants of the enslaved among them, have dedicated their lives to the task of uncovering and understanding their stories. And they have illuminated the long shadow of slavery, which led to the horrors of Jim Crow, the denial of civil and political rights, and the persistence of structural inequality into our own day. For a lot of people, this is understandably no trivial matter. It should not be entered into lightly, or without considerable thought for the many people who maintain enormous stakes in how we represent this past.

For better or worse, *Pax Emancipation* speaks to the capacity of the ludic to shape the ways we give meaning to history. This power emerges from our willingness to enter the liminal space of play, temporarily suspend our disbelief, and assume roles we might never in real life. Modern games ask us to do some crazy things. In Antler Island players

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[27] *Historical Statistics of the United States, Earliest Times to the Present: Millennial Edition*, Susan B. Carter, Scott Sigmund Gartner, Michael R. Haines, Alan L. Olmstead, Richard Sutch, and Gavin Wright, eds. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Table Ad3-15 – Decennial net migration to English America, by region and race: 1630–1800.

become bucks seeking to rut with does. In Baby Boomer you must disarm the infant who found an assault rifle in your closet, and in Bistourisq you give each other plastic surgery makeovers. Check out Falling. As with no other medium, we give ourselves over to games. We're game to do almost anything they ask us to do. After all, it's only play, right?

Figure 19: We let games such as Falling (Cheapass, 1998) put us in very interesting circumstances.

But, as the cliché goes, with this power comes responsibility. *Pax Emancipation* does not, like other games, ask us to practice slavery. But its mechanics are still perilous, precisely because they work so well to make their argument. It is the argument itself here that is the problem. In the end, the game is a brilliant box of mechanics that effectively teaches highly suspect lessons about abolitionism, the Enlightenment, and the liberal tradition.

Conclusion

Pax Emancipation is a remarkable but exasperating game, which makes problematic historical arguments in fascinating ways. In offering a game heavy in terms of both mechanics and argument, it uniquely melds the ludic and the discursive into a modern game that exemplifies what is possible in didactic games. Ultimately, my exasperation with the game stems from my disappointment with its argument.

I've spent so many words on one game not simply because the game itself deserves attention. I have sought to use its elements, both positive and negative, to suggest some possibilities and challenges for making historically-themed games that can teach useful historical lessons that go beyond military history. That requires considering not just what makes a good game, but what makes for good history. And what makes for good history is more than simple 'accuracy'. Historical games must reflect the basic methodological commitments of the discipline—matters such as a full consideration of the relevant literature, fair use of evidence, and a willingness to modify old views in light of new information.

Despite my exasperation, I have made peace with *Pax Emancipation*, for it illustrates the enormous potential for board games to convey historical arguments. This may be easier to see in *Pax Emancipation* than in other games precisely because the argument calls attention to itself so loudly. Had its history been more normative, or more subtly offered, players might not even experience it as a human-constructed historical interpretation. Because it stands out so clearly, it reminds us that Eklund's is, like all historical interpretations, merely one possible assertion about 'what happened and why?' As professional or lay scholars, and as culturally savvy consumers, it is our job to practice the critical thinking that helps us evaluate which of those interpretations is more or less defensible, and why.

So don't take my word for it. This is just my perspective; the whole point is to develop our own analyses. Play the game. Enjoy immersing yourself in its world, and appreciate its designer's capacity to spin words and mechanics into something extraordinary. Then use your enthusiasm to do your own broad reading on the issues the game addresses.

Fin

Patrick Rael, Pax Exasperation

Version history

1.0 (May 12, 2019).