

CATTLE TRACK TO KANSAS CITY

GREAT WESTERN TRAIL

THE LIFE OF COWBOYS WAS REALLY A VERY HARD ONE!

Alexander Pfister is actually a very well know game designer, after the success of some of his previous games (Broom Service, Händler der Karibik/Port Royal, Isle of Skye, Mombasa, etc.). And Great Western Trail is another hit, in my opinion, as it combines a very interesting theme (the Far West) with well tested mechanics.



The components are sturdy and the graphics very nice: a square board depicts part of the Far West with several paths (trails) that cross the countryside before arriving to the town of Kansas City. Each trail has a certain number of "square cases" that the players will later try to fill with buildings. Six of those cases are an "obligatory passage" for each herd and are filled with "common buildings" at the set-up. In the top part of the board we also see a railway connected to Kansas City: it will be used to ship the herds to some greater cities. The box also contains 4 player boards, 150 tiles of different dimensions (and use), 92 cards "Cattle", 28 cards "objective", and a ... fistful of dollars (do you remember Clint Eastwood and the "spaghetti" western of the same name from Sergio Leone? I could not resist this!). Please note that in the first edition a tile for the "red" player was wrong (same printing on both sides) but the producer sent a replacement one to everybody who asked for it.

The set-up of Great Western Trail takes some time as there are many tiles to place on the boards: Five "Station Masters" near the railway; seven "Common Buildings" on some "gray" cases of different trails; 7 "Workers" in Kansas City; seven hazard tiles or Indian camps; etc. This number "7" of course will remind "white hair" readers like me of another classic with Yul Brynner (The Magnificent Seven), but this is probably a coincidence. Finally, 13 "cattle" cards will be placed on the bottom side of the board and the gaming

table will look like the one of picture 2.



Each player will take a Cowboy, a series of colored "building" tiles, his deck of "cattle" cards (same number and type for everybody) and the personal board on which he will provisionally cover all bonuses with wooden discs of his color; a wooden cube is inserted on the special track on the right of the personal board. Four player locomotives are placed in Kansas City station. Finally, each player receives an "Objective" card, while four more are discovered on the table as a reserve and with the remaining deck (covered) aside.

Pietro Cremona

A good mix of known mechanics to reveal a very nice game

The goal of the game is gain the most Victory Points (VP), by selling the herds in Kansas City, reaching the best cities and/or stations with the locomotive and building the most valuable buildings. The movement capabilities of each Cowboy and the number of cards that the players may take in hand may change during the game, as we will see.

So ... how we play Great Western Trail?

- 1 - Each player, in turn, moves his Cow Boy passing from one building (or hazard/camp tile) to another, along one or more paths, within the limit of his actual movement capacity (which is done in number of cases) and following the arrows printed on the board.
- 2 - Then the actions of the final destination building tile are resolved
- 3 - And if a player spends "herd" cards during his turn he refill his hand up to the maximum allowed

On game turn #1 (and only this time) each player may select the initial building for his

cow boy (one of the "common" buildings of the set-up) and immediately gets the associated bonus.



In Picture 3 you see the complete range of Blue Tiles and a couple of "neutral" ones (brown): the first of the latter (on the left) gives you two coins for discarding a white cattle card and allows you to hire a new Worker tile, too. The second brown tile gives you two coins by discarding a green card and to build one of your buildings. The number on the top left of each tile shows the number of "craftsmen" needed to build it. The number on the top right states the VP you will gain at the end of the game if you built that tile.

Each player has an initial deck of 14 "cow" cards as his original herd: Five Jersey (grey "1"), three Dutch Belt (green "2"), three Guernsey (white "2") and three Black Angus (black "2"). None of them grants VPs but if you look at Picture 4 you will see that to get points you have to purchase other "cow" cards during your trip to Kansas City: and they will grant three to seven VP. Players shuffle their decks and pick in hand the first 4 cards.



Before starting your long trip, it is important to examine your initial "objective" card to decide which strategy to follow at the beginning of the game: in effect, each objective

card offers a certain number of VP if you get something (an Indian camp and a station, three herd cards, etc.).

Picture 5 also shows the personal board that each player received during the set-up. In the center, we notice an area with cases used to host the new personality tiles that will be hired during the game:

- Cow boys (used to reduce the cost of the herd cards)
- Workers (used to build the most valuable colored "building" tiles)
- Engineers (used to speed up the locomotive on the railway)



Around this middle area there are 14 square cases covered by a wooden disc (again look at picture 5). Every time that a city is joined by the railway (or if a station is built) one disc is removed from the personal board and placed on the city, therefore it frees one extra bonus that the players may use later to get extra money, permanently discard the worst cards, change cards, move the locomotive, speed up the cow by or enlarge to 5 or 6 cards your hand. Your priorities often depend on the "objective" cards received at the beginning or collected during the game.

The players may decide to have a faster or slower travel to Kansas City: this depends simply on the number of intermediate stops that the Cow Boy will do along the path. Where to stop is decided by the player considering the number and type of actions that he wish to implement: hire new workers, purchase or sell herd cards, build new tiles, move the locomotive, take a new objective card, etc. Please note that you may always stop on the common tiles, as well on your own ones, and still perform the depicted actions, but if you stop your Cow Boy on tiles of another player you may only do a very limited number of actions (the ones listed on the left side of your personal board)

Whatever will be the path or the length of your trip, soon or later you will arrive at Kansas City to sell your herd, and here you must perform the following sequence:

- Take one tile from position 1 (disasters or Indian camps) and place it on the board
- Take one tile from position 2 (personalities) and place it on the "job market"

- Take one tile from position 3 (personalities or Indian camps) and place it on the "hire grill" (or on the board)

- Sell your herd (sub-action 4)

- Reach a station with your locomotive (sub-action 5) and place a disc on it

Then the players fill their hands with new herd cards taken from their deck, while their Cow Boys are transferred on the opposite corner of the board, at the beginning of the trail, and the travel will start again on the following turn.

The "hire grill" is a sort of waiting list for the different personalities to be hired by the players: each row of the grill has a different cost (from a minimum of 5 coins to a maximum of 10). The players may "purchase" those tiles during their turn if and when their Cowboy stops on the appropriate buildings (common or colored). Note that when the final row of the grill is completely filled the game ends.

To sell your herd in Kansas City (sub-action 4) you have to "discard" cards of different colors (initially you will have a hand of 4 cards, but they will become 5 or 6 along the game if you free the bonus case, as we already discussed). The sum of the value of the different cows is the total amount of money that you get: typically, on the first arrival you will get 7 coins because you only have three different "value 2" cows (white, black and green) and one "value 1" cow (white), but later you may acquire value "3", "4" and "5" herd cards and your income will increase. You may add to this total the value reached by the "cube" on your personal board.

The mechanics of the railways (sub-action 5) are reminiscent of the game MOMBASA: there is a line 40 cases long, but only the locomotives may reach its end. On the left side of the railway you have ten cities (from Kansas City on case "0" to San Francisco on case "18") and these are the places where you will sell your herds. On the right side of the railway you find ten stations and each of them offers an increasing number of VP (from "1 VP" of case 4 to "9 VP" of case 40): the first 5 stations also offer a "Station Master" tile that gives a special bonus to the player that purchases it.

To better clarify this point let me repeat the mechanics: when you sell your herd in Kansas City the amount of money that you get also tells you how far you may ship your "beef steaks": with 7 coins, for example, you may place a disc on Kansas City (case "0"), Topeka (case "1"), Wichita (case "4") and Colorado Springs (case "6"). With 18-19-20 coins (this is the max income that you may have if you sell the best cards) you may



My lines for WIN

Dagmar de Cassan, Editor-in-Chief

This time this article is not available for editorial reasons

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English Edition Version 1.0

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reach San Francisco (case 18). All those cities are on the left side of the railway. If your locomotive already passed those cities, you may place one of your discs free of charge on the selected city; if not, you have to pay an amount of coins that depends on the distance between locomotive and city.

When you move your locomotive, you may eventually decide to enter a "station" (right side of the railway), pay the printed amount of money and place one of your discs on that case: at the end of the game you will get some VP (from 1 to 9) for each station with your discs. As you certainly remember each disc placed on a city or station also frees one case on your personal board, so you are entitled to some extra bonus from that turn on. Please also note that part of the cities and stations are printed in black and these are the only ones where you may place your discs to free the black cases (the most valuable) of your personal board.

When the "hire grill" is completely filled the game ends and the players add the VP that they acquired with objectives, stations, herd cards, money, special tiles, buildings, etc. The winner is the one with the higher total.

I liked this game very much and, in my opinion, it is an improvement compared to Mombasa. After more than a dozen games we still did not find a "winning" strategy and this is for me a compliment to Alexander Pfister.

But, of course, we recognized three different ways to play Great Western Trail: please find some personal suggestions in the following lines, but never forget to always look at your opponents to try to react to their tactics.

The first is "the herd way": to follow this strategy you have to hire as soon as possible 2-4 Cow Boys tiles in order to purchase at a reasonable price as many high value herd cards as possible (at least a couple of "4" and "5" and some "value 3" cards). Now you have more possibilities to arrive in Kansas City with a very good hand and therefore to get a higher amount of money and this will allow you to send your herd to the most valuable cities (possibly San Francisco, that offers nine VP for each disc placed on that case). Of course, you also have to quickly free the cases of your personal board that let you keep 5-6 cards in hand so you will be able to get more money and to sell your herd to the most valuable cities.

The second strategy may be the "Railway rush": you try to push your locomotive as far as possible in order to occupy as many "stations" as you can. If you succeed you may

arrive to 44 VP with the stations only. To do this you need to get "2-3 Engineers" tiles and then advance your locomotive 3-4 cases each time that you use the related buildings. You need also to free as soon as possible the bonus on your personal board that pushes the locomotive one case extra and those that allows your Cow Boy to move quicker (5-6 cases per turn).

The third way is the "building strategy" where you have to hire 3-4 "Workers" tiles in order to place as many buildings as you can. This means that you will add a lot of your buildings on the trails, thus slowing down the movement to all the cow boys and possibly receiving some fees from the opponents that transit on your tiles. Of course, you will also benefit from the many extra actions that you may do stopping on your tiles. We found that this is the riskier strategy, but sometimes works well, especially when the opponents discover too late that they cannot use any extra buildings because most of the cases are already filled. Also note that if you place all the buildings on the board you may arrive to a max of 49 VP: not bad at all.

Of course, if you select one of those strategies you still have to keep your eyes well open to profit of any possible opportunity: sometimes getting an Indian Camp is interesting to get extra money (very valuable on the first half of the game) that you may then invest in some herd cards; or you may place one extra disc on a station to free a new bonus; etc. Everything is OK if it gives you some extra VP, but your main task will be staying as much as possible on your "strategy path" to avoid a dispersion of actions.

With each strategy, it is clear which are the first and the best cases to free on your personal board (remember: you take out discs from your board when you place them on cities and/or stations near the railway). Each player has his favorite cases and, in our tests, everybody vigorously supported his choices, so I cannot give you a general "guideline", but only my personal preferences.

My very first disc is normally the one that gives extra moves to the locomotive (paying 1 coin per case): this is also a stronger action if you already hired an Engineer. The second is probably the option to "permanently" discard one herd card from your hand: in this way, you may lighten your deck (discarding value "1" cards) to increase the possibility of good sales in Kansas City (as expert players usually do in any deck building game to try to create a dynamic hand). Depending on the selected strategy as soon as I am able to reach "black" cities and/or stations I also try to get the bonus that increases the move-

ment of the Cowboy and/or the ones that adds 1-2 cards to my hand.

Finally, a short consideration on the "hazard" tiles: flood, drought and rock fall. Their main task is to slow down the cow boys on the "dangerous" trails as you must spend a movement point for each of them. Players must also pay 1-2 coins to pass through or to stop on those tiles, a very heavy penalty at the beginning of the game. But they also offer 2-4 VP if acquired during the game. So, if you see that a path is becoming extra long or dangerous (because your opponents filled it with their buildings) you may free a secondary trail by acquiring hazard tiles. And do not forget that some of those tiles are also requested by a few objective cards.

This is a game that gives you a lot of flexibility and it is not so "demanding" in learning time: all the players of our clubs that tested it then wished to play Great Western Trail again in the following sessions, so I passed one month in explaining it to more than 25 different friends and many of them of course purchased a copy of it. This, in my opinion, is one of the best compliments that a game may receive. ☑

Pietro Cremona

INFORMATION

Designer: Alexander Pfister

Artist: Andreas Resch

Price: ca. 40 Euros

Publisher: eggertspiele / Pegasus 2016

www.pegasus.de

PLAYERS:
2-4

AGE:
12+

TIME:
150+

BEWERTUNG

Development
Users: For experts
Version: multi
Rules: de en others
In-game text: no

Comments:

High quality components * Acceptable learning curve * Well interlocking, standard mechanisms * Another great game by Alex Pfister

Compares to:

Mombasa and other development games

Other editions:

999 Games (nl), Conclave (pt), Delta Vision (hu), Gigamic (fr), Lacerta (pl), Ludicus (ro), MasQueOca (es), Stronghold (en), uplayit (it)

