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GAME REVIEW: THE SHORES OF TRIPOLI

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🕒 March 18, 2021 📁 Book Reviews, Thursday Tidings

Reviewed by Tyler Robinson

“In the whole range of human activities, war most closely resembles a game of cards.”

-Carl Von Clausewitz, *On War*

The Shores of Tripoli was named one of the best two-player games of 2020 by *New York* magazine, and it has recently been favorably reviewed on the website of the Center for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC). The fact that this game is of interest to academics and enthusiasts alike is a testament to how well Kevin Bertram, founder of Fort Circle Games and a longtime NHF member, has balanced real world strategic dilemmas against the requisite simplicity of broadly accessible gameplay. Small wonder that *The Shores of Tripoli* has found its way into the classrooms of the US Naval Academy.

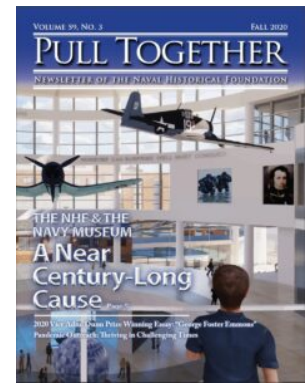
Though historians may appreciate an accompanying booklet which

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provides historical context, they should not expect the game itself to replicate specific events from the Barbary Wars. Rather, students of history will primarily benefit from immersing themselves in strategic decision-making without the advantage of hindsight to highlight the “right” decision in any given scenario.

Rest assured that this is a tabletop game where you get your money’s worth, both in terms of the carefully crafted gameplay and the physicality of its execution. With game pieces and tokens made of wood as well as cards illustrated with period paintings and textured to match, the physical product is every bit up to the ideas behind them.



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Trying out the game as a single player exercise can be an excellent way to get a handle on the nuances of the game. This setup requires the Tripoli side to follow a set of decision rules in order to determine when it plays which cards, and so lends unique insights into how the game is intended to function. I was initially concerned that this single player system would be comparable to attempting to play chess against oneself, but the system seems to make a decisive victory more likely, if only at the cost of the dynamic qualities which make two-player gameplay so engaging. This single player feature also seems particularly appealing as the ongoing pandemic creates challenges for in person play.

The Shores of Tripoli is something of a sandbox game, enabling widely divergent playthroughs. As such, understanding what rules apply under what conditions can be daunting when first getting started. Perhaps the best primer on how to play the game can be found in this video commissioned by Fort Circle Games:

How to Play The Shores Of Tripoli in 11 Minutes



Irregular conflicts are notoriously difficult to simulate, but the shores of Tripoli deftly replicates the unique challenges they pose, particularly the role of Fabian strategies and Pyrrhic victories in enabling an outgunned force to outlast its adversary.

The Tripolitan player primarily aims to evade rather than fight the American ships, preferring the soft targets of merchant ships. Each pirate ship has a 1 in 3 chance of successfully raiding a merchant ship and gaining a token in any excursion, as opposed to an American frigate, which they have a 1 in 6 chance of hitting when forced to wage a pitched battle, and must strike twice to sink. The game provides strategically significant distinctions between ships which have given up the fight, those that have withdrawn temporarily for repairs, and those which have been sunk.

It is tempting for the American player to spread his forces thin and reserve his strength, as with the right cards the Tripolitan player can bring in allied forces from the Barbary states of Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, who will raid with impunity if there is no American presence in their territorial waters.

Moreover, the American player can lose the game outright in a single pitched battle due to an unfortunate roll of the dice, as the Barbary states only need to sink four ships to win. Though the American side is always on the offensive in naval combat, and therefore announces its moves and throws its dice first, combat proceeds as a simultaneous game. Hits are only allocated by the recipients after both have had a chance to roll, and thus no inappropriate first mover advantage is present.

As in real life, numerical advantage does not guarantee victory even in isolated skirmishes. Some variant of the 3:1 guideline for military force concentration seems applicable to in-game determinations of when it is worth risking a decisive offensive. But even then, the old adage “nothing risked, nothing gained” applies to almost every aspect of gameplay.

At least one card must be used or discarded in every turn, so no action can be taken without sacrificing alternatives. The players are able to combine cards to provoke and respond to their opponent’s actions in imaginative ways, which can lead to gridlock if neither side is willing to risk everything.

The safest course of action for the American player is naval bombardment of enemy ground forces, but this will only result in long term benefits if it is paired with mobilization of one’s own ground forces. This is a daunting commitment, as “Hamet’s army” of US marines and Arab infantry requires special cards to create, and then deploy from city to city. All the while, the Barbary states can exploit inactivity at sea to plunder the seas.

Possessing a strategic vision from the outset is critical to achieving victory, particularly for the American player. The ability to deploy ground forces seems trivial at first, but it is critical for capturing cities and meeting the conditions for ultimate victory. It may be more important to lay the groundwork for your endgame than to focus your attention on asserting an immediate advantage in firepower. This mechanic functions like the 8-ball in pool or the stalemate in chess—or better yet, kriegspiel—in that it prevents tactical victories from guaranteeing strategic benefit for an inexperienced player. The difficulties of leveraging tactical victories to gain strategic advantage will be all too familiar for anyone familiar with asymmetric warfare.

The double-edged sword of alliance politics is also present in *The Shores of Tripoli*. Swedish frigates can be a great help in patrolling Tripolitan waters, but they are also powerless against a late-game Tripolitan card which represents the effect of a weaker ally unable to continue the fight: Swedish forces withdraw, relinquishing American treasure into the hands of the pirates.

Like all wargames, *The Shores of Tripoli* remains an imperfect representation of the myriad dynamics at play in armed conflicts. For example, storms would ideally be incurred as a random draw rather than cards playable by the Tripolitanian player, and ideally the allocation of hits would also be randomized. But these drawbacks seem inevitable, given the need to ensure the sides are well balanced and the game remains accessible and enjoyable for its players, and the game ultimately succeeds at replicating the conditions of uncertainty that pervade actual warfare.

Tyler Robinson graduated with an MLitt in International Security Studies from the University of St Andrews in 2018. He has also contributed reports on emerging technologies and geopolitical threats for OODA LLC.

The Shores of Tripoli (Kevin Bertram, Fort Circle Games, Washington, DC, 2020)

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