



TEACHING IDEAS FOR HISTORY AND SOCIAL SCIENCE

Sodbusters can be incorporated into any study of North American history and society to illustrate both the settlement of the prairies and the basic nature of farming. The game is a simplified simulation of real life and is best played over the course of several class sessions. We suggest that playing time be interspersed with object lessons.

CLASS GAME PLAY LOGISTICS

Sodbusters can be played by up to 6 people (or small teams). The game moves in set phases and turns during which all players make decisions and act simultaneously. This minimizes downtime and makes it easy to plan and control the pace of the game.

Although the Event Card deck is normally shuffled and played at random, for educational purposes you may wish to arrange it so that particular cards come up at opportune times. This gives you some influence over the flow of the game and allows you to plan object lessons around topics raised on the cards (such as railroad building or the impact on native tribes).

Before you begin play, send a copy of the rules and Prairie Almanac reference sheet home as a reading assignment. (We don't object to your making photocopies of these documents for use in your classroom!) In the next class session, review the rules and play Turns 1 and 2. Allow 10-20 minutes for the Turn 1 Purchase Phase, during which players choose an initial strategy. Allow 10-15 minutes to complete the rest of turns 1 and 2.

In an educational setting where socializing is minimized, we estimate that 2 hours should be adequate to complete the rest of the game starting with turn 3. If multiple games are being played in one classroom, let each game group manage its own phase timing but keep the class in lock-step on turns by not allowing a new turn to start until all are ready. To keep average turn time in line, we recommend that you enforce the following maximum time limits:

- 7 minutes for Purchase phases in turns 2-8; 10 minutes thereafter.
- 5 minutes for Event and Harvest phases in turns 2-8; 10 minutes thereafter.
- OR 12 minutes per overall turn in turns 2-8 and 17 minutes thereafter.
- If you are playing with teams, you may need to allow more time for them to discuss and reach decisions.



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OBJECT LESSONS AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

The basic structure of **Sodbusters** replicates the appeal of the prairies and the seemingly endless supply of land as well as the difficulties faced by pioneers who had to learn how to deal with the harsh climate and conditions. Note that the various crop and livestock options are tuned for different regions and land types, and offer different levels of risk and reward. Learning how to farm successfully and manage risk is the heart of the game.

☛ *On the second turn, after the players have settled on their crop or livestock strategy, ask them to explain their choice and what they hope to accomplish during the course of the game. Later, they will be able to reflect back on their expectations and compare them to how things actually turned out.*

☛ *Around the fifth or sixth turn – or as soon as a **Treaty Signing** or **Native Unrest** event card is played – ask the players to consider the place they have settled in. Why is it “empty”? Was it always this way? Why are there so few trees, and what used to happen to all that grass their cattle are now grazing on? Consider the people and animals that were displaced by the arrival of European settlers. Discuss what a “prairie” is, and where we might find one today.*

The fluctuating payouts on the *Harvest* cards replicates the influence of weather and markets on a farm’s earnings. Together with the random events on the *Chance* and *Event* cards, this shows how little control farmers had (and still, to some degree, have) over the outcome of their efforts.

☛ *Some time after the eighth turn, ask the players how they feel about the unpredictability of the *Chance*, *Event*, and *Harvest* cards, and discuss how luck has affected their early plans. Is luck fair, or entirely unforeseeable? Can one plan for all possible events? Consider the many unknowns the early pioneers faced in farming a land that had never been plowed before, and the relative absence of risk-reducing structures such as insurance companies, fire departments, pesticides, irrigation equipment, hospitals, etc., in their society. Consider all the products and government services we use today to minimize risk in our own lives.*

During the first eight turns (the Pioneer Era), players whose farms have completely failed may “go prospecting out West”, a mechanism which keeps everyone in the game. It also touches on the mining booms which, at least temporarily, drove wealth-seekers further west to Colorado, California, and the Klondike.

☛ *If any player goes *Prospecting*, use the opportunity to discuss the real-life phenomenon and its impact on society at the time. Who actually went prospecting, and why? What happened to them, and to the families they often left behind? Compare the*



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hardships and dangers of the goldfields and mining camps to those of farming. What would we find if we visited those early mining areas today?

The shift from the Pioneer to the Modern era moves the game into a higher gear. Modern technology makes larger, more widely-spread farms possible, but increases the amount of capital investment required. If players haven't already competed for land, they soon will. This shift demonstrates the ongoing impact of technology and the forces of market capitalism.

☛ *There are two railroad-related Events. Although railroads don't play a big role in this game, they did in the settlement of the prairies, and you may wish to discuss this when a railroad Event comes up. Why were the Union Pacific and Canadian Pacific so important to their respective countries? What roles did governments and speculators play in funding the railroads? Discuss the settler recruitment drives run by the railroads in eastern North America and Europe. Who physically built the railroads, and how did these workforces impact society? Study the connection between the formation and growth of prairie towns and their railroad links. Examine the impact of overbuilding in the railway industry, and compare it to the recent technology "bust" around the turn of the millenium.*

☛ *At any point, you may wish to reflect on the various types of produce depicted in the game. Where do these products come from today, and why? If you are in a farming region, what types of produce are raised locally, and why? Discuss the pros and cons of regional specialization and monoculture.*

☛ *As players enter the last "year" (around the 17th turn), ask them to describe how the Modern Era changed the course of the game and their own strategies. Would it be possible to win by staying small and old-fashioned? What would happen if the game went on for five more years and players were allowed to buy each other out? Discuss the large-scale, corporate nature of modern farming. What is the implication for other parts of the world where farming remains a labour-intensive lifestyle for millions of families?*

The winner is the player with the most cash for retirement, *after* paying off the mortgage on the farm, at the end of turn 20. Note that players are not allowed to sell their land, buildings, equipment, or other permanent holdings at the end of the game. This is because the farm was usually passed on to the next generation.

☛ *Discuss the nature of a society in which people became farmers because they were born on a farm, and assumed their children and grandchildren would be farmers just like them. Why was it like that, and why did it change? What happened to families who could never get ahead of their debts? Discuss the emergence of tenant farmers and, in some areas (particularly the US South), "sharecroppers".*