



TEACHING IDEAS FOR BUSINESS, ECONOMICS, OR INVESTMENT CLASSES

Although **Sodbusters** has a farming theme, at its heart the game is really all about risk and reward. The various farming options offer differing levels of required investment, returns, and degrees of risk. Successful players will maximize their wealth by employing classic investing strategies such as diversification, using leverage, and managing risk. The game is a simplified simulation of real life and is best played over the course of several class sessions. We suggest that the game be used after the class has been introduced to basic investment concepts as a means of illustration and an opportunity to put the concepts into practice.

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 (such as the impact of doubling or halving land prices).

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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GAME OVERVIEW

All players start with a homestead, a bank loan, and one section of land. Each turn represents one season; the game consists of twenty turns or five four-turn “years”.

During the first eight turns (the Pioneer Era), expansion is limited by technology as well as available cash. Players whose farms fail completely during this time may “go prospecting out West”, a mechanism which keeps everyone in the game.

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.

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.

WHAT THE GAME TEACHES

***Spoiler Alert!** The following section reveals knowledge of the game which can otherwise only be acquired either through repeated play or analysis of the cards to calculate probabilities.*

Scarcity: At first, the supply of available land appears abundant. However, the amount of land that’s ideal for each farming option (dairy farming, planting corn, etc.) is limited, and it’s not uncommon for most of the board to be bought up by the end of the game.

☛ *To better demonstrate the way markets react to scarcity, you may wish to alter the land purchase rules and use a true auction format with a minimum bid of half the price listed on the gameboard. You also may wish to “seed” the Event deck to bring up the cards which raise and lower the listed land prices at key points during the game.*

Knowledge: Although everyone starts with the same knowledge of the game, **Sodbusters** is designed to reward learning and expertise. Specifically:

- corn, soybeans, and dairy farming do best in the Lake District and Paradise Prairie;
- a wheat/sorghum rotation is the best crop strategy for Clay River Flats;
- the Buzzard Hills offer cheap grazing land for sheep and beef cattle ranchers.



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Some players will catch on to this quicker than others, demonstrating how “perfect knowledge” in a marketplace is only theoretical, and seldom if ever actually exists.

Return on Investment: Some farming options require much less investment than others. Typically, the lower-cost options offer higher ROI than the more expensive ones, at least when matched with “ideal” land. (A herd of sheep placed in the Buzzard Hills early in the game offers perhaps the highest available average ROI). So why plant soybeans or raise hogs? Because of ...

Scale: Even at a lower ROI, the total dollar yield of the more costly options is higher than the cheap ones. A herd of beef grazing in the Buzzard Hills will earn more dollars at an ROI of 2 than a herd of sheep with an ROI of 3, and it’s total dollars that wins in the end. This at least partially explains why people invest in low-margin industries. So, then, is the winning strategy to go whole hog and invest in the most expensive option - hogs? Not necessarily – because of...

Risk: Hogs have the highest potential payout of any option and can be raised almost anywhere, but there’s a catch: they’re also the most risky option. Payouts for hogs range widely, and in a game with only five production cycles, there’s no guarantee you’ll earn the average payout in a particular game. Players who stick with hogs throughout the game seldom win. However, an early gamble could help you build a big lead, while you may as well “bet the farm” if you’re losing late in the game.

Risk also enters the game through the Event and Chance cards. Lovers of pure strategy games such as chess hate cards like these, but uncontrollable events are part of life. The world’s most successful strategists know that and allow for it. Thus the most successful **Sodbusters** players will be those that practice...

Diversification: Players may diversify their holdings by buying land in different regions or using different farming options in the same region. Planting corn in Paradise Prairie, for example, is very attractive from both a risk and reward perspective, but you’ll rarely win by doing this and nothing else. First, all it takes is one bad year to knock you off the pace relative to other players. Second, it’s rare for one player to acquire enough Paradise Prairie cropland to win without expanding elsewhere, because of...

Competition: **Sodbusters** is similar to any emerging industry in that there’s plenty of room in the market for multiple players and the aim is not to destroy or swallow your competitors, just outperform them. In fact, players may benefit by cooperating. For example, a player with only a few crop sections may be better off renting a tractor and combine from another player rather than buying the equipment themselves. Still, the competition can be intense, and the one place in the game where players go head-to-head is for available land, which takes us back to where we started: scarcity. But what investment simulation game would be complete without...



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Leverage: All players start with a loan, which they are free to pay off according to a set schedule any time during the game. The repayment schedule assumes a certain rate of expansion through the game – a rate which is achievable but certainly not easy or guaranteed. Players who never find themselves in a position to repay the loan will feel frustrated (and, in an educational setting, should perhaps be coached), but others will be faced with an interesting choice – whether or not to repay the loan at the first possible opportunity. Knowledgeable, experienced players who get off to a good start will probably do better to use the leverage and reinvest in expansion... provided they don't get wiped out by a tornado!

LESSONS AND DISCUSSION TIPS

☛ *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. Were they able to stick to the strategy, or did events force them to change course? If they changed voluntarily, why? If they did stay the course, should they have?*

☛ *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 impacted their early plans. Remind them that the game is a simplification of the pioneer era in North America. Discuss how risk is mitigated in the real world today (hedging, insurance, etc.).*

☛ *At the end, ask players 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? Compare this to today's corporate farming industry, and to other industries such as the media. Could something similar happen one day to the Internet? Discuss the impact of barriers to entry and economies of scale on industries.*

☛ *Have players write a report or paper explaining how each of the various elements of investing – scarcity, knowledge, ROI, risk, etc. – was illustrated in the game.*