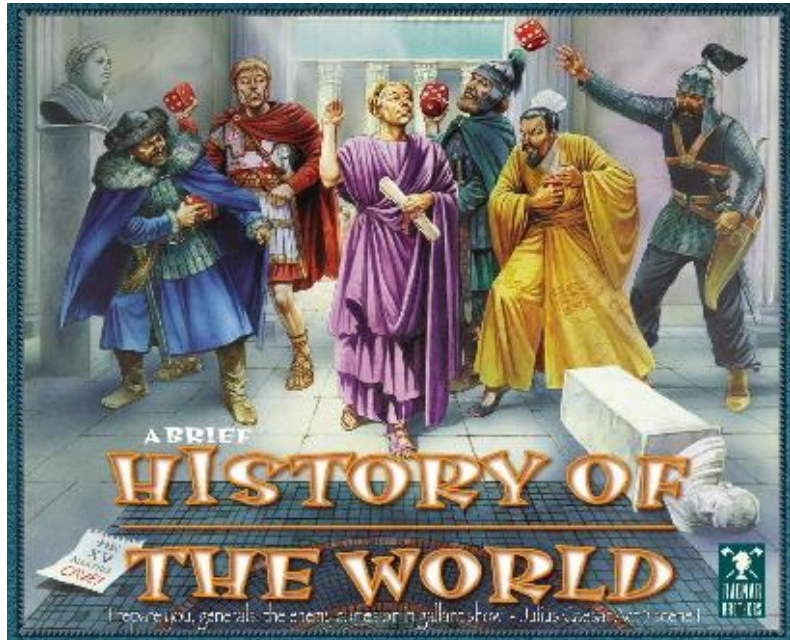


Look out, Caesar!

A Brief History of the World reviewed by Pevans

Calling this latest version of the Ragnar Brothers' terrific game "A Brief History" is both a neat piece of marketing and quite appropriate. The Ragnars' explicit aim in developing this edition was to produce a game that plays more quickly and smoothly than the earlier versions. It is very much a development of the original, so if you know *History of the World*, you will know the basics of this game. I'll approach this as



a new game, but I'll add a bit at the end comparing it to the previous versions. Old hands may want to skip to that.

If you haven't come across *History of the World*, it was designed and published by the Ragnar Brothers some 20 years ago (Boardgamegeek has the publication year as 1991 and I'm not going to argue). This first version had the Ragnars famous printed "tea towel" as the 'board' and cardboard pieces. It was a big hit with gamers and was taken on by Gibson's Games, who produced the first commercial version—with a few tweaks. Avalon Hill then produced their own edition, also with a few changes. A big box version with lots of plastic figures was published by Hasbro (under the Avalon Hill brand) in 2001. (This is the one version I've never played.) And now we have a completely new edition.

As with the Ragnars' other recent games, production is highly professional. *A Brief History of the World* comes in a sturdy box, illustrated with a picture of Julius Caesar about to be assassinated by other historical figures, all wielding red dice! Inside are a solid board, plastic pieces, cardboard counters, two decks of cards, half a dozen dice and a couple of other boards. The map shows the world from the north, slightly distorting things so that the areas where players will play most are larger. The continents are divided into differently coloured areas (such as Northern Europe, China and India), each made up of a number of 'lands'. The lands are named and some are illustrated with forests or mountains—these are harder to conquer—or have a 'resource' symbol. There are also barren lands, where nobody lives, and seas and oceans.

A small board is used to lay out the 'Event' and 'Empire' cards for the six epochs the game is divided into (from 2500 BC to AD 1942). Another small board helps the current player to organise what they're doing in their turn. Each player has a set of playing pieces in their colour—miniature busts of Caesar. As well as these, there are generic cardboard pieces for everyone to use: cities/capitals, fleets, forts and monuments. There are also player aids that show which empires appear in what order in each epoch, their strength and where they start on the map.

The game is all about the rise and fall of empires, from the earliest civilizations to the British Empire. In each epoch empires appear around the world and then decline, though remnants can sometimes hang on into much later epochs. Players get a new empire in every epoch and try to maximise the points they score from this by building it up. However, they score points from all their pieces on the board, whether they arrived in the current epoch or are leftovers from earlier times. Hence, players do better by having empires in different areas from epoch to epoch, as they are then not competing with themselves. Even better is being last in one epoch and first in the next so that no-one has attacked your older empire before it scores again.

As the scoring system is crucial to the game, let me start there. Each area on the board is worth a number of points. Players get the points simply by occupying at least one land in the area. They get double points for having at least two lands and more than anyone else in the area. And triple points if they are the only player in the area and occupy at least three lands. This last can be done relatively easily in the first epoch, when the board is empty, but is much harder to do as the board fills up. Much of the tactics in the game is how best to expand your empire to gain points. Hence, empires are encouraged to expand areas.

The values of the areas change during the game. Initially, the most valuable area is the Middle East and it stays that way almost to the end. India and China are important and become more so in the middle epochs, along with Europe. Other areas, such as the Americas, come into play in later epochs—with North America ending up as the most valuable area, along with northern Europe, at the end. This, of course, reflects the historical rise of European powers and their exploration of the New World. However, the game does not ignore the eastern world—India and China remain important right the way through.

Hence what I wrote earlier. If you have an empire in China in one epoch, having the next one in India or Europe means you should score something for both. However, this is not the only way to score points. Most empires start with a capital, which is worth points. So are cities and monuments. An empire can build a monument for every two resource areas under its control. An empire that doesn't start with a capital is considered barbarian and scores points for capturing (and trashing!) other empires' cities and capitals.

So that's the way you score points, what I haven't talked through are the mechanics of the epochs—and how you get to score these points. There are seven empire cards for each epoch, but not all of them are available. At the start of the game, each

epoch's cards are shuffled and one for each player dealt out. To begin the epoch, the player in last place takes the cards and chooses one. They pass the other cards to the next to last player, who chooses one and passes the rest on. And so it goes. It's very useful to be in last place and know precisely which empires will appear when.

Conversely, the player in first place will have no choice about which empire they get. And the other players generally make sure it is disadvantageous for them. In this way the game has a built-in balancing mechanism: take the lead and you're handicapped. The best place to be in this game is a close second (or even third) through the mid-game and hope to leapfrog to a win in the last couple of epochs. Of course this can go horrible wrong. In particular, you can't guarantee what is good or bad for a player—it depends on their position on the board. And which empires are available for the epoch.

As well as empire cards, each player chooses an event card, starting with the first player. Most of these can be used in that epoch or retained for a later one. They generally cost victory points to use and give the player's empire an advantage of some sort—taking a land without a fight or having an extra fleet, for example. There are also some 'minor empires'. These are just like the main empire cards, but much less powerful, and must be played before the player's main empire. They allow the player to get an extra piece or two on the board.



The order of play for the empires is set, so it's then a question of who has the first empire in the list. The card shows how many pieces they get for this empire, where it starts and whether it has a capital, fleets and any special ability. You start by placing the first piece in the starting land, along with a capital if there is one. Any pieces already in the land are removed, so it's worth checking where empires may start in the next epoch and not leaving anything too valuable there. You expand the empire by placing another piece adjacent to one already on the board. Easy when the land is empty, but an occupied land must be conquered.

The invading player rolls two dice and takes the higher number, the defending player just rolls one. If the invader's score is higher than the defender's, they gain 'invasion points' equal to the difference in those scores. One point is needed to successfully invade a normal land, two points if it's wooded or mountainous. The defender's piece is removed and the invader is now in control. What's more, any invasion points left over can be used to 'overrun' more lands of the same empire. Hence rolling a 6 as an invader against the defender's 1 could let you take five lands in one attack!

Conversely, if the invasion is unsuccessful, the invading piece is removed. However, the invader gets a +1 bonus on their die roll if they immediately try to invade the same land again (using another piece, of course). Successive failures increase this bonus and it's tracked using a pointer on the current player board. This is a simple combat system, but I do find it a bit fiddly. In particular, players who are new to the game have to understand the difference between the die roll modifier for repeating an unsuccessful invasion and the invasion bonus after a successful one.

There are a few wrinkles to expanding an empire. It can take over a land already occupied by one of your pieces (from an earlier epoch) without a fight. If the empire has a fleet in a sea or ocean, they can cross that sea or ocean. However, invading across the sea means the invader only rolls one die. Players can also choose to forego placing a piece and place a fort instead. The defender rolls two dice when a land with a fort is invaded and an invader can't overrun a fort.

When the player has used all the pieces for their empire, they place a monument for each two resource lands the empire controls. Then the player score their points for their pieces on the board (whether they're part of the current empire or not) and capitals, cities and monuments in their lands. This is important: effectively each empire gets points when it's at the height of its power. By the time you get another turn, there may be nothing left of your last empire! Finally, the player lays down the pieces from their current empire: only the current empire's pieces are standing up, which makes it easy to distinguish them.

The epoch ends when all the empires have been played. There is one last thing to do. Three bonus chips are available each epoch. These are worth 1-3 points and are distributed at random at the beginning of the game. The player in the lead takes all three, chooses one and passes the others to the player in second place. This provides a bit of a bonus for the players in the lead to counter-balance the penalty of being

the last to choose their next empire. The bonus points are revealed at the end of the last epoch and the player with the most points wins.

A Brief History of the World is a terrific game that I find completely involving from start to finish. Playing each empire is very tactical as you try to get the best out of your current position on the board. The strategic element is in getting the best out of your selection of empires across all the epochs. The ideal is preserving some pieces from epoch to epoch so that you can benefit from them several times over. The remote areas of the board (Japan, southern Africa and, to some extent, the Americas) may not have many points available, but pieces established there can remain in place for the rest of the game. However, the main action of the game is the Middle East, which can change hands several times in a single epoch, along with India, China and, a bit later, Europe.

My one issue is that I find the combat system a bit fiddly and I'm not keen on the overrun rule. One lucky die roll can give a player several lands in one swoop. Not a major issue, though. I also have to say that I don't find the game particularly brief. The rules suggest the game takes 30 minutes per player, but I'm finding it's closer to an hour apiece. Mind you, most of my games have involved a high proportion of beginners and that does slow things down. I recommend keeping beginners' games down to four players for this reason.

For those who know the game of old, the main differences are fairly obvious. To start with, the number of epochs has been reduced from 7 to 6. Apart from shortening the game, this concentrates the action. As the Ragnars' design notes put it: "*A Brief History of the World* sees a powerful rise of civilisations in Epochs 1, 2 & 3, followed by the dissolution of the Dark Ages during Epoch 4, the introduction of the New World in Epoch 5 and ending with the colonial era of Epoch 6." (You'll find the full design notes at http://www.ragnarbrothers.co.uk/html/design_notes_for_brief_history.html)

The board has changed, too, with fewer lands in each area. The number of pieces in the empires has reduced accordingly. This makes things move a bit more quickly, but still allows the empires to achieve what they did historically. Yes, those Romans can get everywhere from Britain to Egypt. The details of the combat system have also changed, the aim being to remove the (almost) endless die-rolling that can happen in earlier versions of *History of the World*. In particular, this game introduces the idea of overruns. Beating the defender's die roll by lots gives the attacker the chance to take over several lands in a single attack. Again, this will speed things up a bit. The overrun attack makes forts more useful.

Other changes are to the way the empires are distributed at the start of the epochs, empires without capitals gaining points for attacking cities and the addition of the bonus chips for the leading players each epoch. This last was introduced in the Hasbro version and the Ragnars have retained it. It re-balances the handicap of choosing your empire last and provides a hidden element to the final points score. The last change is adding a cost for playing (most) event cards. This means that

drawing a useless event card is less of a handicap as you keep points by not playing the card.

All in all, this is a terrific version of an excellent game. I have enjoyed all the versions and *A Brief History of the World* is no exception. It gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

A Brief History of the World was designed and published by the Ragnar Brothers. It is a strategy board game for 3-6 players, aged 14+, and takes 30 minutes per player.

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