



EMPIRE BUILDER



A Robber Baron's Game of Transcontinental Railroading

By David Landes, Edited by Coleman Charlton

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In Empire Builder®, you face the challenges of building and operating a rail empire that spans North America from coast to coast and from Canada to Mexico. Your trains will need to transport goods from suppliers to consumers while dealing with strikes, floods, tornadoes, blizzards, derailments, and anything else man and nature throws at you. In the end, you will only win if you can capture the entrepreneurial spirit of America and build the most effective railroad empire!

Summary

Empire Builder is the first in a series of similar games, which also includes Eurorails, Australian Rails®, Russian Rails®, India Rails®, British Rails®, Nippon Rails®, etc. Each of these games uses a laminated map-board that is marked with a hexagonal grid of mileposts. Erasable crayons are used to draw train track connecting adjacent mileposts. Players then use the tracks to transport commodities from “supplier” cities to appropriate “demand” cities, receiving millions of dollars in return.

You start with 60 million in cash, a freight train, and you always have three demand cards (also called “contract cards”). Each shows 3 different “demands.” A demand consists of: a commodity type, a payment amount, and the location at which the commodity is to be delivered.

Mixed in with the demand cards are event cards. When you draw such a card, the event is immediately resolved. Events include: natural disasters, commodity shortages, labor strikes, and accidents.

Your standard turn consists of two phases:

➤ Your operation phase:

- You can move your train from milepost to milepost along existing track. The distance you can move is determined by the type of train you have. When you move on an opponent's track, you must pay him \$4 million.
- At any “supply” city, you can pick up a load of the commodity type produced by that city. Usually you pick up loads that are on one of your demand cards.
- At any city for which you have a demand card and the corresponding load, you can deliver that commodity and collect the appropriate payment—\$4 to 50 million depending upon the price shown on the card.

➤ Your building phase:

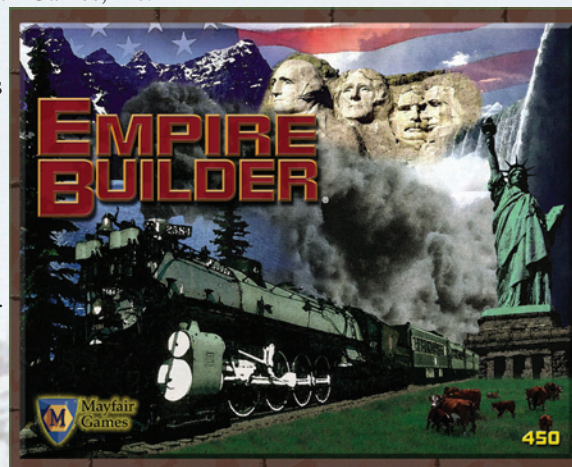
- You can pay (1 to 5 million per milepost) to build track connected to your existing track or start a new track from a major city. Building track through difficult terrain (e.g., mountains, rivers, cities, etc.) is more expensive than building through normal terrain.
- You can pay (10 to 20 million) to upgrade your train, so that you can carry more loads and move further each turn.

If you are efficient enough at constructing track and fulfilling contracts, you will win by being the first to accumulate 250 million in cash—while connecting all but one of the major cities.

Some Basic Strategies

There are a few basic strategies that apply to most Empire Builder games:

- Initial Track Building — At the beginning of the game, you get two turns of track building before anyone gets to operate their trains. This track should be built with three goals in mind:
 - Plan an initial route that will allow you to deliver at least one or two of the loads on your starting three demand cards (you can only deliver one demand per card)—you need to get those initial payments quickly.
 - Try for as long a length of track as possible. This track will provide your basis for future track building and thus your potential for load deliveries.
 - Build straight track when possible. You do not save anything by bypassing only one mountain, but the longer route will always end up costing you more in the end.
- Loads — Carry as many loads as possible. Some events will destroy a load, and you can always dump a load if you need to pick up something specific. In addition, there are only 3 or 4 of each type of commodity, and if you are carrying one there is one less for the other players. Speculation can also prove profitable—if you are at the only location for a type of commodity, pick one up since such commodities often have large payment amounts.
- Train Upgrades — The upgrades are worth it. Buy them as soon as possible. A Fast Freight lets you get there quicker, while a Super Freight allows you to get there quicker with more loads.
- Using Other Players' Tracks — Early in the game using other players' tracks is seldom worthwhile; you should usually expand your own





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network of tracks instead. Later in the game you should consider using other players' tracks if it will save you significant time and/or money.

➤ **Discarding Demand Cards** — You can forgo your entire turn, discard all of your demand cards, and draw three new ones. This is a complicated decision, and only experience will guide you. However, as a rule of thumb, discard if two of your demand cards are inefficient due to your track network, your current train location, and/or the routes required to pick up and deliver the loads on the demand cards.

In addition, near the end of the game, if discarding is the only potential route to victory, by all means give it a shot.

Revenue Versus Cost

There are two sides to achieving the \$250 million needed to win; the revenue side and the cost side. Most new players focus on delivering and accumulating as much revenue as possible. During the early game, their primary initial concern on the cost side is to make sure there is sufficient money to continue expansion and make that next delivery possible. But in the final analysis, the player with the best chance of winning must address two strategic criteria.

First, the final rail network has a total cost which includes train upgrades and money given to opponents for track use. This total cost is subtracted from total revenue including money received from opponents using your track. Looked at this way, overspending to build a magnificent network drives up total revenue needed.

The second strategic criterion is efficient movement of a player's train. Building a cheap network is fine. However, if it causes many additional turns of movement, the player still falls behind—less money is spent but less revenue is generated. The winner will usually be the player who concentrates on building the cheapest network that still allows for good revenue generation.

Overall Strategy

There are distinct strategies and tactics in Empire Builder which will vary widely based on the level of experience of the player. Strategies will guide overall expansion on the board while tactics involve track building, train movement, and the use of demand cards. The key point to remember is that winning Empire Builder is NOT about having the largest rail system, the most cities connected, or even the greatest dollars in goods delivered. It is about connecting the required major cities and achieving \$250 million in the fewest turns possible. Efficiency in track building and delivery is paramount!

A new player who makes tactical decisions based on current cards may have a small chance to win if the right cards come up in the right order. However, there are a number of key factors that every player should address in order to have a decent chance of victory. Making tactical decisions that take these factors into account is key. Here are some of these important 'stations' on the Empire Builder track to victory:

- Everyone needs six of the seven major cities to win. The way the board is structured, the city left out (though having all seven may be fine) is most likely to be a west coast city, Mexico City, or New York. Kansas City and Chicago will almost always be part of the mix. Atlanta will typically be one of the six. For Seattle, Los Angeles, New York, or Mexico City the first player (or two) to connect to one of them has a decidedly cheaper and more direct path.
- Understand where types of goods come from and where they are in demand. A major example is east-coast-only goods versus west-coast-only goods—e.g., tobacco from the east, and sugar from the west. Coast to coast deliveries pay off big, especially when you can combine two or more deliveries at once.
- Know which cards don't fit the rail system you have constructed. Just because a card has attractive deliveries on it, does not make it useful to you. Stretching your rail system to incorporate a single delivery is typically not profitable. There will always be give and take, but generally use deliveries that generate the most dollars within the constraints of your current, or very near term track configuration. "Sitting" on a delivery card reduces the potential valuable loads you may find by one third. If you have two useless cards and a third that is trivial or lengthy to pickup and deliver, draw a new hand on your next turn. Don't be afraid to draw a new hand twice in a row if necessary. Even three to four new hand turns in a game will still leave a great chance for victory.
- Get there first in track building. Don't get closed out of a key small or medium city. Don't take the expensive route through mountains and rivers if it can be avoided. The main player interaction in Empire Builder comes through laying track in best locations and forcing your opponents to take more costly, less efficient routes. But this should be balanced against your current needs to generate money to finance growth for your next deliveries.
- **Efficient Movement** — Make sure you are not traveling a long distance just to pick up a good that you will then travel a long distance to drop off. This may give you a big payoff, but if you divide the revenue generated by the number of turns of travel required, it can actually be inefficient. Upgrade train speed as early as it is feasible without making track building impossible. If you get a faster train three turns earlier than an opponent, you effectively gain a "free" turn relative to that opponent.
- Plan your trips around more than one card at a time, preferably carrying multiple deliverable goods along the same stretch of track. There are numerous "mid-board" goods such as corn, swine, wheat, oats, etc that can work well in combination with longer haul goods.





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➤ **Efficient Track Building** — Think of the continent as a network that you will have to completely span. The most effective way to do this involves only one long route completely across the country with spokes off it to areas of the board and/or specific cities. This primary route should not divert back and forth through every city along the way or cross-country movement will become tortuously long. A 'Y' configuration with Kansas City as the hub and one route west and two eastward to Atlanta and New York is often strong.

Build straight track early, even if it costs more—particularly if it is part of one of your key east/west or north/south lines that you will be traversing frequently during the game. Never build your track out and back to avoid one mountain, it costs exactly the same and always takes longer to move across.

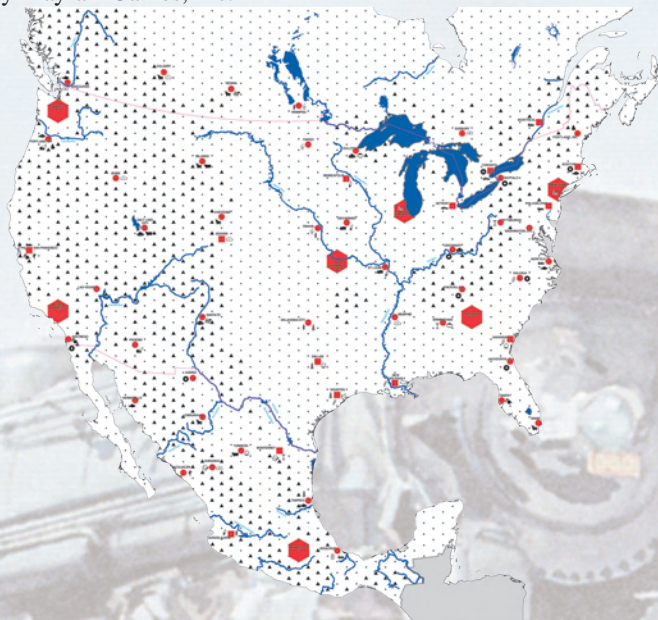
Never build into a major city if it is avoidable, always build out—this saves big bucks. Remember, your track can always start from any major city, unconnected to the rest of your rail system, so it never pays to build into a major city. For similar reasons, also avoid building into the same minor city or mountain multiple times.

Don't build across rivers early if avoidable—river crossings can be destroyed by flood events. A major city (e.g., Kansas City) can be used to cross a river rather than building track across it. Along a similar vein, if you will not be crossing a given river for a while, delay building, save the money, and build track across it the turn before you need it.

Know which rivers have flooded already. Except in the rare game (usually more than four players), the delivery card deck will not cycle twice and most rivers will only flood once per game. Once a river system has flooded, it is safe to build track across it without fear of a flood washing out your bridge.

If you have a few extra dollars early in the game, spend a little to lock in the particularly efficient routes, even if it does not support current delivery needs. This can be tricky as you do not want to run out of money you need to build the track required for your next deliveries. Nonetheless, there are a few routes that can be crucial. Some of the most important routes to compete for:

- coming out of NY through Buffalo
- being among the first to connect Kansas City to Atlanta,
- connecting straight from the east side of Kansas City to Chicago
- being first on the south, north, or middle routes from the west coast eastward



Additional Tactics

When you deliver a load at a city, you must immediately turn in the card and pick up a new one. Such a card may have a negative event that can cause you to lose a load (e.g., derailment). To minimize this potential loss if you are delivering two goods to the same city (or to very close cities), deliver the much larger revenue commodity first.

Be careful of where your train ends its movement—particularly on a turn before you draw a new hand. Stopping in a city enables you to go either direction at the beginning of your next movement. It also gives instant access to the goods in that city if you are lucky enough to draw a card that matches.

Stay below \$50 early in the game, or you may run afoul of the tax event. You will have plenty to spend your money on, since you should be expanding toward your rail network goals and upgrading your trains.

Try and keep a loose sense (without getting into memorization) of which big ticket deliveries for which commodities have been discarded. For example, if the tobacco delivery to Los Angeles demand card has been discarded, it reduces the potential value of tobacco as one of the big ticket deliveries.

The more players in the game, the more important it is to take into account the strategies/tactics involving access to major cities and major supply regions.

Know the types of event cards that may occur—this may allow you to prepare for potential bad effects.

Conclusion

Will you create an empire that covers America from sea to shining sea? Will you be ready when a flood sweeps away all of your bridges on the mighty Mississippi? Will your trains and tracks bring you fortune and success, or will your competitors beat you to the bank? The challenges of Empire Builder await anyone who loves good games, railroads, and cold, hard cash.