

A Gest of Robin Hood



Playbook

By Fred Serval



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1.0 Introduction

This Playbook’s objective is to provide a glimpse into the multi-faceted character of Robin Hood, whose legacy of resistance and justice has maintained its popularity across centuries. Robin’s character has evolved, but his interactions with violence, religion, and revolution all retain some of the spirit of his medieval origin. We have also taken the opportunity to share some insights into related historical aspects that influenced the design, such as the tale of the slave Bartholomew, the mystical practice of tarot divination, and the depictions of weird little monsters in medieval manuscript margins. Furthermore, a political science perspective is provided by Stephen Rangazas, offering a fresh look on the dichotomy between roving and stationary bandits to enrich the narrative and mechanics of your adventures in Nottingham. Through these historical notes, we hope you’ll embrace a deeper understanding of the cultural and political context that shaped *A Gest of Robin Hood*.

2.0 Background Articles

The articles in this section explore the world of Robin Hood through the lenses of history, culture, art, religion, and political science, providing some background for the ideas that led to the creation of the game. Section 2.3, on “Reading the Ballad”, also offers a new way to engage with the game as an interpretive act inspired by traditional cartomancy.

2.1 The Many Face of Robin Hood

by Fred Servat

The thematic core of this game revolves around the folk figure of Robin Hood, here depicted as a symbol of resistance against oppressive feudal lords in medieval England. Scholars agree that each adaptation of Robin Hood’s tale can be seen as a barometer of its era’s sociopolitical climate, mirroring prevailing attitudes towards authority, religion, justice, and social hierarchies. From a rough outlaw to a noble vigilante, Robin Hood’s journey through time reveals as much about the society recounting his tales as it does about the character, if not more.

While modern narratives often paint Robin ‘of Loxley’ as a dispossessed nobleman, it is important to remember that this is not the original form of the hero. This game delves into a more radical interpretation, exploring Robin’s role as the more revolutionary figure that he originally was. This doesn’t mean that the depiction of Robin Hood here is more authentic, in a lot of ways it is also modern. More than going back to a ‘true’ form of the character, if such a thing exists, the aim is to revisit its origins through a modern lens. The following historical notes serve as a background to better understand the different faces of Robin Hood, and their historical relationship with culture, violence, God, and revolution.

I am not a historian, and some of the claims that I will make here are speculative – I will try to indicate as clearly as possible when this is the case. To go further and know more about the history behind Robin Hood, I highly recommend reading some of the academic material mentioned later in the bibliography.

The Birth of Robin Hood

Trying to figure out if there was a ‘real’ Robin Hood, where he was from, and what parts of the tales might be ‘true’ seems to me like an effort that misses the point of the ongoing popularity of the character. That being said, the most compelling research on this topic is probably by David Crook, who makes the argument that the probable inspiration for the character was an outlaw called Robert of Wetherby. This highway robber, active in Yorkshire during the early 13th century, was hunted down and captured in the local forest where he was hiding, and then executed under the orders of an official who had previously served as be the Sheriff of Nottingham.

What is truly fascinating about Robin Hood, beyond his potential historical origin, is what he says about the people telling his stories. Even in the earliest version of the tales, as analysed by Lesley Coote, we can see different aspects of the hero, sometimes in conflict with each other. The first written accounts of Robin stories that we have date from the 1460s, and putting into perspective the two earliest already shows a revealing contrast. On the one hand we have *Robin Hood and the Monk*, which depicts our hero as petty and acting as a bully towards Little John. He is also very brutal. The monk that recognised and denounced him ends up being abducted and decapitated. Probably not exactly the image of Robin Hood that we would expect today!



The second earliest tale is closer to what we would recognise today. In *Robin Hood and the Potter*, Robin is a trickster, a bandit with a heart that tries to avoid unnecessary violence. Both Robin and Little John now have proper manners, if you omit the fact that they are bandits. The outlaw here makes fun of taxation as he suggests that his victim should pay for *pavage*, an unpopular tax on travellers to maintain roads and bridges. The character of the Sheriff also makes an appearance as the main antagonist of our tale, who will often end up humiliated by Robin Hood. What is interesting in these stories is that the people owning the manuscripts were from very different socio-economic backgrounds. The first belonged to a country priest called Pilkington, from a known family in Yorkshire, and it is possible that he compiled the manuscript himself. It also contained different religious elements, satirical stories about contemporary events, as well as small humoristic tales with some sexual innuendo. The second manuscript belonged to a rich merchant family from London, the Calles. It seems that they probably preferred a more polished version of the folk hero, less morally ambiguous, and as critical of taxation as we might expect a merchant to be.

It is important to note that both stories are written versions of oral tales and short plays that would probably have existed in popular culture for at least a century before these versions were written down, as evidenced by the mention of Robin Hood in William Langland's fourteenth-century poem, *Piers Plowman*, indicating the character's established presence in popular culture. In a way, we could view Robin Hood as a sort of stock character that served as a canvas for a wide range of different stories. These stories all portrayed the bandit in different ways that would resonate with their specific audiences, depending on their own concerns and perspectives. The mythos of Robin Hood eventually became more consistent with the appearance of the printed word, which allowed the character to permeate into all layers of society. Even Henry VIII was an admirer of the bandit, throwing Robin Hood themed events on multiple occasions. His peak of popularity in Britain was probably reached during the Tudor era, but the character has remained present in popular culture right up until the modern day, experiencing ongoing changes that reflect the different eras.

Gentrification

With the printing of *A Lytell Geste of Robyn Hode* in the sixteenth century, stories of Robin Hood were grouped for the first time into a single work portraying a consistent character. This version was an outlaw, followed by Merry Men who were all skilled archers, poached royal deers, lived as marginals in the woods to conceal themselves, dressed in green garments, and worshiped the Virgin Mary, with the Sheriff of Nottingham as their archenemy. Some specific Merry Men are identified, and we still know them to this day: Little John, Allan-a-Dale, Much the Miller's Son, and so on. This original template served as a framework for multiple evolutions over time, from the bandit challenging social norms, to the social bandit, up to the noble vigilante. The evolution of Robin Hood's image is emblematic of an ongoing interaction between popular cultural narratives and society's superstructures, with each era moulding the folk hero to the exigencies and aspirations of the time in which it was created. One of these most significant evolutions has been described by scholars like Stephen Knight as a slow process of gentrification of the character.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries saw the legend of Robin Hood further romanticised and detached from its original bandit roots. As literary trends evolved, the portrayal of Robin Hood went through a major change. One of the key literary influences during this period was Sir Thomas Malory, whose works contributed to a romanticising trend in medieval literature (Malory is most famous as the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*). This trend contributed to the broader process of gentrification, in which Robin Hood's character drifted away from his roots as a commoner rebelling against social injustices. Through this lens, Robin's actions were less about challenging the ruling hierarchies and more about restoring his own 'rightful' noble status.

The evolution unfolded in phases: first a subtle elevation of Robin Hood's social standing as a yeoman, then a depiction of him as a wronged nobleman, later culminating in a portrayal aligning him with aristocratic norms and values. In the original ballads, non-commoners are predominantly villains—Guy of Gisborne, Robert of Doncaster, the Sheriff, and (later) Prince John, among others. However, as the tales evolved, the narrative saw a rise in righteous nobles, particularly in *Robin Hood and the Prince of Aragon*. This transition peaked in late sixteenth-century plays and with Martin Parker's 1632 *A True Tale of Robin Hood*, where Robin Hood is revealed as the Earl of Huntingdon.

Even the term 'yeoman' and its application in Robin Hood tales also reflects a complex social context, portraying Robin Hood as a hero for a new and large social group, the yeomanry of England. This yeomanry transcended the simple peasant economy, embodying the aspirations of the emergent rural elite and the downwardly mobile younger sons of the gentry. Robin Hood's status as a yeoman of the forest, admired by both gentle and common audiences, mirrored a fluid social landscape. There is also an element of historical romanticism with Robin Hood's depiction as a skilled archer. The retirement of the longbow in the 1590s spurred an intense nostalgia for archery. This nostalgia was also fueled by the boom in history plays during the same period, all of which contributed to the foundation of the mythic archer yeoman in the English national consciousness. This portrayal of Robin Hood, with his skillful archery and hunting prowess, resonated across societal strata, making him a relatable hero for all. His prowess with the bow, much like a super-power, bridged social divides and enhanced his appeal as a symbol of skilled, honorable common folk. This intermediary status allowed Robin Hood to transcend social categories, becoming a reflection of the diverse audiences' aspirations in the early Stuart period.

Through this lens, Robin Hood's gentrification underscores a unique interplay between literary evolution and changing societal attitudes. However, this also marked a decline in the hero's popularity, slowly becoming just a motif of medieval folk culture. This loss of relevance raises the question: doesn't a hero for all risk becoming a hero for no one at all?

Robin Hood and Religion

He has pulled down princes from their thrones and raised high the lowly.

He has filled the starving with good things, sent the rich away empty.

– Luke 1:52-53, excerpt from Mary's Magnificat

Religion has been a central theme from the earliest Robin Hood tales, and the outlaw's veneration of the Virgin Mary is one of his key features. The first ballads, like *Robin Hood and the Monk*, depict Robin as a perfect exemplar of this 'radical pastoral world'. During the Middle Ages, Mary was seen as a beacon of hope for the oppressed and the destitute. In the Gospel of Luke, the Magnificat (Mary's famous exhortation praising God that would later become an important part of the Church liturgy) emphasises God's favour towards the humble and uplifting of the downtrodden, presenting Mary as a champion for the op-

pressed. Mary herself comes from a humble social background, very much like Robin Hood, making her a relatable figure for the marginalised. Additionally, her portrayal as the *Mater Dolorosa* during the medieval period emphasised her compassion and shared suffering with Christ, reinforcing her connection to those facing adversity. As pointed out by Lesley Coote, this is well exemplified in French pastourelles such as *Avocacie de Nostre Dame* and *Miracle de la femme du Roy de Portugal*, where Mary often intervenes to uphold justice in favour of victimised women and poor peasants. Furthermore, religious orders like the Servite were established, reflecting and embodying the symbolic role of Mary as a compassionate intercessor for the marginalised and oppressed in medieval culture. This posture aligns seamlessly with Robin's position against an oppressive feudal nobility. But, if these tales underscore Robin's veneration for the Virgin Mary, they also show an older form of Christianity that is often overlooked.

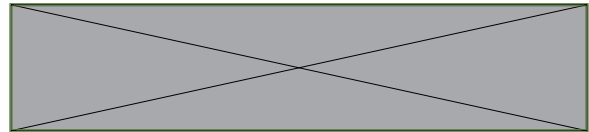
Following Friedrich Engels' *On the History of Early Christianity*, we can draw a parallel between Robin Hood's style of Christian devotion and the initial radicalism of Christianity. Engels argues that early Christianity emerged as a liberation movement among oppressed demographics, including slaves and those subjugated by Rome's empire. This original form of Christianity preached emancipation from oppression and suffering, even if this salvation was to be expected in the postmortem realm. Similarly, Robin Hood's allegiance to a more primitive, egalitarian Christian ethos, as characterised in the early ballads, reflects a deviation from the ecclesiastical hierarchy and a return to a more compassionate and communal Christian practice. The main difference is that this justice can happen in the world of the living, brought down by the weaponised arm of Mary on earth, Robin Hood himself.

“Christianity was originally a movement of oppressed people: it first appeared as the religion of slaves and emancipated slaves, of poor people deprived of all rights, of peoples subjugated or dispersed by Rome. Both Christianity and the workers’ socialism preach forthcoming salvation from bondage and misery; Christianity places this salvation in a life beyond, after death, in heaven; socialism places it in this world, in a transformation of society.”

– Friedrich Engels, *On the History of Early Christianity*

The shift of England's elites towards a church independent of the Catholic Pope in Rome around the mid-sixteenth century, mainly to enable Henry VIII's busy 'romantic' life, saw Robin Hood's legend transformed to fit the reigning power's narrative. As Pollard explains in *Imagining Robin Hood*, the May Games' suppression led to Robin Hood stories resurfacing as anti-Catholic ballads, depicting Robin Hood as a rebellious voice against the establishment, which was identified with Rome. The Reformation replaced the Virgin Mary in Robin's heart with Maid Marian, and Anthony Munday's plays elevated Robin to nobility, aligning him against the Catholic-centric reign of Prince John. The figure of the Prioress of Kirklees remained, which can be interpreted as an antithesis of Mary.

In the 1560's comedic play *Robin Hood and the Friar*, Friar Tuck's initial portrayal is that of a jovial and courageous cleric, embodying a sense of righteousness and camaraderie that aligns well with Robin Hood's spirit. Their encounter, initially adversarial, evolves into a profound respect and friendship, showing the common ground of their politics. This early depiction of Friar Tuck not only introduces a religious figure who also challenges the establishment, but also foreshadows a deeper theological engagement within the Robin Hood tales.



Friar Tuck doesn't like debate bros

With the emergence of Friar Tuck, the theological depth of the tales expanded further. Tuck's early portrayal echoes what would centuries later be identified as the foundations of Liberation Theology. Like Gustavo Gutiérrez, Tuck embodies a theology rooted in aiding the poor, challenging ecclesiastical opulence, and advocating for a more egalitarian spiritual community. I believe that these resemblances aren't just coincidences and that, in a way, they resonate particularly well with Rodney Hilton's article comparing Robin and his Merry men to Cuban Barbudos. If Robin Hood is a historical ancestor of Che Guevara, then drawing a parallel between Friar Tuck and Liberation Theology doesn't seem like too much of a stretch.

Liberation Theology also emphasises a preferential option for the poor, mirroring Friar Tuck and Robin's early religious ethos against feudal oppression. The Magnificat, often referenced in Liberation Theology, resonates with the early Marian devotion depicted in Robin Hood's ballads, further blurring the lines between the folk tales and the theological precepts of Liberation Theology. The evolution of religious elements within the tales not only reflects the broader socio-political shifts of the era but also paints the picture of a radical, egalitarian hero that continues to resonate across centuries. As we see, the seeds of social justice and theological radicalism are the roots of Robin Hood's early depictions. Therefore, the next and final part of these historical notes will examine the relationship between the folk hero and revolution.

Robin Hood and Revolution

Robin Hood's radical form of Christianity didn't exist in a vacuum, and there were various Christian movements in medieval England that challenged established hierarchies. For example, the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, led by figures like Wat Tyler, Jack Straw, and the preacher John Ball, championed the cause of commonality and equality against the serfdom imposed by the nobility. John Ball's sermons, as retold by the chronicler Jean Froissart, called for social egalitarianism, a theme that can also be found in the medieval Lollard movement, and later resonated with the Levellers of the seventeenth century. In their manifesto, *The Agreement of the People*, the Levellers showed a similar theological trend, stating, "The earth was made by Almighty God to be a Common Treasury of livelihood to the whole of mankind, without respect of persons" (and other contemporary religious

movements, like the Diggers and the Ranters, took this radicalism even further). Robin Hood, as a character, can therefore be seen as part of a broader political and theological tradition that had existed in Britain for centuries (other notable medieval British rebellions include Jack Cade's Rebellion of 1450 and Owain Glyndwr's Welsh revolt between 1400 and 1415).

As early as the sixteenth century, Robin Hood emerged as a political symbol, especially in Lowland Scotland. According to author A. J. Pollard, Robin Hood became a theme in civic parades, celebrating him and his men in a comical yet rebellious manner. These parades were public processions organized by town or city communities, often to mark significant religious or civic events. Recognizing the subversive potential of the thematic use of the outlaw, the Scottish parliament decreed a ban on Robin Hood in 1555. Despite the ban, the enduring rebellious spirit associated with Robin Hood manifested in events like the 1561 Edinburgh riot. Here, a mob elected a tailor as Robin Hood, dubbed him 'Lord of Inobedience', and carried out acts of defiance against authority.

The gentrification of Robin Hood, transitioning from a yeoman to a dispossessed nobleman, diluted the revolutionary content of the early tales. This narrative shift from social justice to personal vendetta or restoration of lost nobility softened Robin Hood's radical edge, aligning him more with the status quo. In the early nineteenth century, the 'Norman Yoke' narrative also became more pronounced in Robin Hood's character, especially through Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820):

*Norman saw on English oak,
On English neck a Norman yoke;
Norman spoon to English dish,
And England ruled as Normans wish;
Blithe world in England never will be more,
Till England's rid of all the four.*

– Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*

This narrative resonated with post-Reformation portrayals of Robin as a 'Saxon' noble, romanticising resistance against Norman oppressors and aligning with a bourgeois socio-political narrative of the era, more conservative, and with nationalist undertones (never mind the fact that 'Robin' derives from 'Robert', a decidedly Norman name). Francis Child's 1888 edition of the *Gest* then further solidified the modern narrative of Robin Hood as an Anglo-Saxon freedom fighter resisting Norman occupation.

The 'Norman yoke' dimension was also included in early Hollywood portrayals, notably in Errol Flynn's 1938 film *The Adventures of Robin Hood*. Amid the rise of fascist regimes in Europe, this adaptation depicted Robin Hood as an individualistic hero resisting menacing Normans, serving as a metaphor for contemporary resistance against totalitarian forces. This Hollywood rendition can also be seen as a subtle endorsement of Roosevelt's New Deal, reflecting the broader socio-economic discourse in the U.S. during that era. This takes us to a nuanced facet of the Robin Hood mythos: wealth redistribution. While early ballads showcased Robin Hood challenging societal hierarchies, and stealing from the rich, the emphasis on redistributing wealth was initially less pronounced. So when did this motif appear?

By the late eighteenth century, some of Robin Hood's narrative had morphed, aligning with the revolutionary spirit sweeping through Europe. Joseph Ritson's 1795 anthology solidified Robin Hood's redistributive ethos: "From wealthy abbots' chests, and churls' abundant store, What oftentimes he took, he shar'd amongst the poor." This shift in narrative reflects the revolutionary ideals of the time. The French had just a few years before beheaded their King, after toppling the old regime to ensure that all strata of society would pay their fair share in taxes for the common good.

In 1958, the Marxist medieval historian Rodney Hilton explored Robin Hood's origins, drawing parallels between the outlaw and socialist guerillas of his time, notably in Cuba. Hilton's analysis contributed to the re-emergence of Robin Hood as a socialist figure, viewed through the lens of class struggle and resistance against oppressive feudal lords.

"I shall suggest that what matters is that one of England's most popular literary heroes is a man whose most endearing activities to his public were the robbery and killing of landowners [...] and the maintenance of guerilla warfare against established authority."

– Rodney Hilton, *The Origins of Robin Hood*

However, the emergence of this interpretation was perceived as a threat by anti-communists during the Cold War era. In 1953, an Indiana State textbook commissioner called for the banning of all references to Robin Hood in school books, criticising the narrative of robbing the rich to give to the poor as promoting 'communist' ideology. In response, a group of five Indiana University students initiated the 'Green Feather Movement' in early March 1954, adopting Robin Hood's legendary feather-capped green hats as a symbol of protest against McCarthyism's siege on freedom of speech.

Conclusion

Robin Hood's legacy as a symbol for social struggle still exists to this day. The 'Robin Hood Tax' campaign in the early 21st century sought to levy a small tax on financial transactions to tackle poverty and climate change, using the image of Robin Hood to advocate for wealth redistribution to address common needs. These modern appropriations of Robin Hood's imagery echo the historical episodes of the sixteenth century, showcasing the continuing appeal of Robin Hood as a symbol for social justice and resistance against oppressive structures.



A Robin Hood Tax was among the demands of Occupy protests in 2011 (image credit: Matt Brown, CC BY 2.0)

The variety of representations of Robin Hood, from a radical egalitarian to a noble who softly challenges authority, demonstrates the legend's plasticity across eras, each incarnation mirroring the spirit of its time and of its authors. These diverse narratives prompt a reflective exploration into our own alignment within the legend's thematic dichotomy. Are we drawn to the radical defiance against oppressive structures, or do we lean towards a milder assertion of justice that operates within current existing norms?



2.2 Social Bandits and Stationary Bandits

By Stephen Rangazas

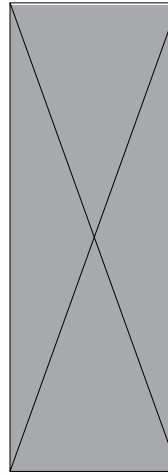
You fellows have to make revolution because you are dirt poor. I too am poor, and this is why I became a bandit. You want to overthrow the rich. I too plunder the houses of the rich. So, what's the difference?

– Bandit chief of Ban Trang to early Viet Minh members

Given the similarities between *A Gest of Robin Hood* and the games in GMT's COIN series that focus on historical and contemporary episodes of insurgency, one might be confused, like the bandit quoted above, by what the difference is between them. One answer might be that *A Gest of Robin Hood* is purely for

the fun enjoyment of robbing fictional monks on the side of the road, while the COIN series volumes are serious models of real conflicts. However, as a political scientist, I was struck by how *A Gest of Robin Hood* has a lot of politics behind its mechanics, with interesting ties to social science theories of state formation and banditry. Fred has kindly allowed me to elaborate on how political science theory can help explain the politics behind your exciting adventures in Nottingham.

The Sheriff of Nottingham as a Stationary Bandit



The economist Mancur Olson, famous for his theory of the collective action problem, proposes that one way to conceive of early state formation is the difference between a roving and a stationary bandit. A roving bandit rolls through an area pillaging extensively, but then soon departs for the next area of activity. A stationary bandit sets themselves up in an area and then regularly extracts tribute from the populace of that area. The puzzling result of Olson's argument is that both the populace and the bandit are better off with a stationary bandit that *regularly* robs the local people. Why would the people prefer a continual bandit presence over the roving bandit? In short, a roving bandit has

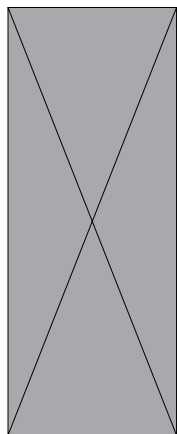
little reason to rob responsibly. By robbing and

leaving, they are incentivized to take as much as possible and thereby discourage economic investment and activity. In contrast, the stationary bandit needs to worry about robbing from the next harvest too. Therefore, stationary bandits will rob less and with greater regularity (not too dissimilar to taxation if you think about it), incentivizing the local populace to economically invest and grow. That economic growth in turn increases the revenue of the stationary bandit in the long run. In exchange for the revenue, the stationary bandit will also generally offer public goods, such as protection from those frustrating roving bandits. Now, how does this all relate to *A Gest of Robin Hood*?

The Sheriff of Nottingham faction might prefer to present themselves as 'protectors of the realm', but they perfectly encapsulate Olson's stationary bandit of early state formation. One of the main duties of the Sheriff is to ensure the flow of tax revenue from the parishes around Nottingham, while also deploying patrols to protect the citizens of Nottingham from the roving bandit of the area, Robin Hood. At times, the Sheriff may even use some of the tax revenue to distribute other forms of public goods, shifting parishes recently frustrated over taxation back to Submissive status. This is particularly true during the first Ballad of the game, when the Sheriff player must worry about ensuring taxation in the following two Ballads. However, why doesn't the Sheriff (and Prince John) confiscate as much taxes as they can every Ballad? Olson would remind our greedy folk villains that attempting to rob everything would ultimately not maximize revenue, given that this behavior generates the same responses from the population as when they face a roving bandit: no incentive to economically invest and often resistance to collection. I recommend curious players to try Confiscating in every parish during the first Ballad and see how the rest of their game goes.

If the people of Nottingham are frustrated with the Sheriff of Nottingham's confiscations, why don't their widespread grievances translate into armed revolts? Lessons from political science on state formation, and particularly on the strength of states (often referred to as state capacity), can also help us here. The puzzle is that grievances over issues such as repression, poverty, or political exclusion are unfortunately quite common, even in the present day, but armed rebellion is relatively rare. James Fearon and David Laitin argue that the *opportunity* for rebellion matters more than the presence of relatively common grievances. They find that there is a strong association between low state capacity and the start of civil war. Low monitoring capacity in the periphery of weak states allows armed groups to safely form with a reduced risk of early detection. According to Fearon and Laitin, it is the ability of small groups of violent entrepreneurs (often less than fifty initial members), who can later tap into local grievances, that explains the origins of rebellion. One can quickly see the problems of weak state monitoring even in the relatively small shire of Nottingham. The parishes of Mansfield and Tuxford will commonly be garrisoned by Henchmen but, outside the use of a Ride Deed, responding to a rebel camp in Retford will often pose a challenge. Even harder for the Sheriff, the area best suited for armed group formation, with low population density and difficult terrain, is located right outside Nottingham Castle. Henchmen must repeatedly patrol Sherwood Forest in large costly groups, compared to what is needed in the parishes, to deny any aspiring rebels or bandits the sanctuary of the forest.

Robin Hood as a Social Bandit



As mentioned above, low monitoring capacity, particularly in difficult terrain, often enables armed group formation. However, it is worth noting that the opportunity arguments presented above explain the formation of *any* type of armed group in weak state peripheries. There is no guarantee that the armed groups who form will be politically motivated rebels rather than economically motivated bandits. The distinction becomes murkier when one considers the historian Eric Hobsbawm's claim of 'social bandits'. Based on folklore tales and songs, such as Robin Hood and other more historical cases, Hobsbawm argues that some bandits serve as a 'primitive' form of rebellion that

protects the local population from the resource extraction of elites (the stationary bandits discussed above) and challenges the existing political order. In some cases, according to Hobsbawm, bandits live up to the Robin Hood ideal of stealing predominately from the rich and distributing wealth to the poor. The game mechanics tie directly into Robin Hood's dual role in *A Gest of Robin Hood*, as both adventurous bandit and instigator of revolt. The local population accepts the robbery of the elites who populate the deck of Travellers or of the Sheriff's Carriages loaded with tax money. Robin's Donate Deed then allows him to use his gains to encourage the population to join him in revolting against the order imposed by the Sheriff.

Hobsbawm's book generated an entire field of history, known as 'bandit studies', that went around the world in search of real bandits to prove or disprove the concept of social bandits. Perhaps not surprisingly, real bandits do not live up to the positive ideals of bandits in the songs and stories used by Hobsbawm. However, evidence from the field of bandit studies also demonstrates that one should not completely reject Hobsbawm's depiction. Even if most bandits are not Robin Hood, they are also not the simplistic 'evil' thugs devoid of political aspirations and context as commonly seen in fantasy or medieval popular culture depictions across board games, role-playing games, videogames, or films. Funny enough, real life bandits are not simply suicidal 'low-level' enemies who harass powerful adventurers on the road.

First, while bandits do commonly prey on lower classes and not just the wealthy, they also generally do not target their home community. Bandit groups require and often possess civilian support, just like fledgling rebel groups. Supporting communities provide bandits with a refuge from state pursuit, a place to purchase food and supplies, and a useful source of information. Although some support is given due to coercion, evidence suggests that communities also have incentives to support bandit groups. Bandits can bring business with their spoils, often offer some protection against rival armed groups when state protection is lacking, and their actions against abusive local elites can be inspiring to frustrated populations. These factors explain why the popular myths around bandits used by Hobsbawm to generate his theory of social bandits exist at all. The dual responses of communities are summarized well by anthropologist Scott MacEachern from his study on banditry in the contemporary Lake Chad Basin:

"On the one hand, their [bandits] activities are often recognized as licit even if non-legal – banditry is seen as a legitimate form of economic extraction from states and elites that have no concern for common people. On the other hand, bandits are widely recognized as being violent and pitiless: people have been not just kidnapped but also raped and killed in the course of holdups along the roads." (MacEachern 2018: 103)

Even if the Robin Hood myth presented in *A Gest of Robin Hood* neglects the more brutal side of banditry, the support of the populace of Revolting Parishes, represented by lowering the effectiveness of the Sheriff's Capture Plot, accurately captures an important part of how bandits often operate among, not outside of, local communities.

Second, in contrast to Hobsbawm's social bandits, only some bandits challenge the existing political order, and often only by joining or assisting fledgling rebel groups. Local bandits, as skilled violent entrepreneurs on the weak state periphery, can offer crucial aid to early rebel groups. Many of the most famous political insurgencies of the twentieth century (such as Mao's CCP in China, Ho Chi Minh's Viet Minh in Indochina, or Castro's M26 in Cuba) relied on bandit support early in the insurgency. Some of this support is due to a genuine sympathy with the cause of the revolutionaries, while at other times the support is more opportunistic. Some even provided material support in the hope of gaining future political favor. As Chu Văn Tấn of the Viet Minh recounts, one leader of a better equipped bandit gang 'donated' weapons to the rebels "because if the Vietnamese revolution succeeds you won't forget me, will you?" (1974: 146).

However, bandits are not always on the side of rebellion. As the historian of Chinese banditry Phil Billingsley notes, "bandits operated outside the *law*, but not in conscious opposition to the system" (1981: 239). Many bandits see revolutionaries as rival groups or use the name of revolution to cloak their predation of local communities. It is common that once rebel groups begin to govern territory, including all three historical groups mentioned above, they either incorporate or eliminate bandits in their base areas to establish order. Even worse for revolutionaries, many bandits take the opportunity of political chaos to join the existing order as militia for the state or private elites. The two most likely fates for many real-life bandits are either death or incorporation into the states' security forces. One can easily interpret the victory conditions of *A Gest of Robin Hood* in this manner. Either Robin Hood is isolated and experiences the short brutal life of many bandits, or he manages to cause enough trouble to join the existing order during a Royal Inspection, perhaps even being appointed as the new Sheriff upon King Richard's return!

Although, as Hobsbawm notes, rural crime such as banditry has continued to decline with the expansion of state capacity over the last two centuries in many regions of the world, banditry still exists as a major problem in weak states around the world. Spreading banditry and communal violence in northwest Nigeria has been described as a major security issue by International Crisis Group (2020), of possibly greater severity than the lingering violence of the Boko Haram insurgency. Groups such as Boko Haram also exploit the ambiguity of insecure regions, with many small armed groups able to take refuge when weakened until they can rebuild sufficient strength to once again disprove declarations of their defeat. Although the immediate solution may seem to be an expansion of state capacity to eliminate the possibility of armed group formation, this expansion also increases the repression and resource extraction capabilities of the stationary bandits known as states. If state capacity is not accompanied by governance and political inclusion, communities on the periphery might prefer the imperfect order provided by the bandits. Therefore, the struggle between stationary and (sometimes) social bandits continues.

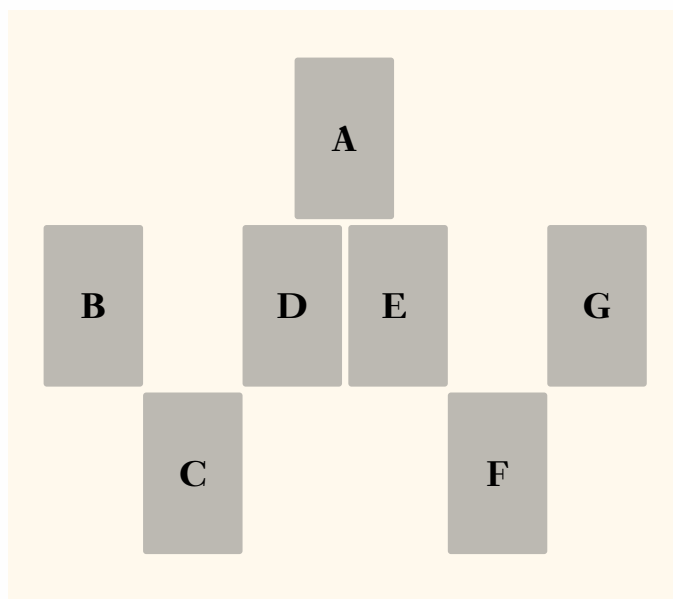
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2.3 Reading the Ballad

By Fred Serval and Joe Dewhurst

A card spread is an arrangement of cards drawn from a deck (usually tarot) for a cartomancy reading. For players interested in a more narrative approach to the game, I have created the 'Ballad Spread', inspired by Jodorowsky's and Costa's 'Heroic Spread', which I think is a great template for this kind of playful reading. Each position in the spread has a specific significance, providing context to the card in that spot. The relationship between the card's meaning and its position within the spread helps to construct a narrative. There are many tarot spreads, from one-card pulls to more convoluted layouts, each created to answer different kinds of questions. This one loosely follows a Campbell-like structure of the 'hero's journey', and you can arrange it after completing each Ballad, using the six Events and one Fortune Event that were just played. Try to intuitively get to the meaning of each event by interpreting their effect narratively and using the illustration as cues to tell your story. As with all tarot readings, the most literal interpretation of a card's title and illustration might not always be the most revealing, so do not be afraid to be creative and dig beneath the surface.



The Ballad Spread

Place the Ballad's Fortune Event in position A. This will serve as the theme for the hero's journey. It indicates the major event happening in the hero's universe while they are on their journey.

Shuffle the other Event cards from the Ballad and randomly place them face-up in the other six positions in the spread.

B: The original situation our hero is in.

C: Their call to adventure, the event that will bring the hero out of their daily life.

D & E: The obstacles that the hero must overcome to accomplish their goal.

F: The key, an ally or an event that helps the hero in resolving the challenges that they face.

G: Their goal, the objective of our hero, whether it was conscious or not.

Then reflect on Robin Hood's (or perhaps another hero's!) journey through the Ballad by looking at the current board situation and the cards in the spread.



The Learn to Play Ballad

The example spread above was composed using the Event cards from the Learn to Play Ballad. To read this Ballad spread we begin with the Fortune Event, **QUEEN ELEANOR**, which tells us perhaps that the theme of the Ballad is the struggle with oneself to use power for noble purposes. For the original situation of our hero we have **SOCIAL BANDIT** – at the start of our tale Robin Hood is a common highway robber, but he has aspirations for better things. For his call to adventure, **FAST CARRIAGES**, we could follow the surface-level reading (that the carriages make a tempting target), or perhaps we could look deeper and say that Robin is growing tired of the frantic pace of bandit life. To answer this question we might want to look ahead at his goal, **AMBUSH**. This points us back towards the obvious reading, that Robin has spotted some vulnerable carriages and decided to rob them, but let's combine our two ideas and say that Robin has set his sights on one last big robbery that will allow him to settle down and live a peaceful life. Along the way he faces two challenges: he must first achieve a **GREAT ESCAPE** from the inevitable cycle of violence that his bandit lifestyle has committed him to, and then he must also do penance for all the pain that he has caused to innocent people (symbolized by **FRIAR TUCK**). For the final card, **LITTLE JOHN**, we can return to the easy reading! Robin's loyal friend and companion helps him atone for his sins and make peace with those that he has hurt, before joining him for one last heist that allows them both to retire happily. Who says that crime doesn't pay?

2.4 Apocrypha and Marginalia

By Fred Servat

The character of Bartholomew

Bartholomew was a black slave brought to England by a knight, Roger de Lyntin, who seemed closely affiliated with the English royal court. His life took a dramatic turn in 1259 when he seized an opportunity to escape, possibly during a visit to London. This escape could be envisioned as a desperate act for freedom, while Robin Hood also symbolizes a quest for justice and equity, challenging the oppressive social order prevalent in medieval England. His band of Merry Men, often depicted as misfits and social outcasts, came together under a common cause of resisting tyranny. This band, composed of diverse individuals from varying socio-economic backgrounds, showcases an early form of social egalitarianism.

Therefore, the addition of Bartholomew into Robin Hood's storyworld made sense to me. With his unique background and personal quest for freedom, Bartholomew's story would find resonance with Robin Hood's ethos. The camaraderie and shared experiences of defiance amongst Bartholomew and the Merry Men was an opportunity to highlight the timeless struggle for justice and equality. Unfortunately, there are no records of what happened to the historical Bartholomew, but perhaps he ended up in Sherwood Forest.

This is obviously not a new idea. Previous adaptations of the Robin Hood have also featured racialized characters finding acceptance among the Merry Men. A couple of obvious examples are characters like the 'Saracen' warrior Nasir in the 1980s British TV series *Robin of Sherwood*, or the Moorish character Azeem in the 1991 film *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*. Both are great examples of the sense of camaraderie transcending racial and cultural boundaries within Robin's group of outlaws. This tradition underscores the Merry Men's broader struggle against a stratified and oppressive social order, emphasizing the importance of the notions of social justice and equality found in the original material.

Weird Medieval Guys

A couple of years ago, I was introduced to the odd world of illustrations in medieval manuscript margins through the magnificent Twitter and Substack account "Weird Medieval Guys", created by Olivia Swarthout. A great example of this can be found in the *Rutland Psalter*, a 13th-century English prayer book, where the margins are full of random and whimsical drawings. These illustrations are not just decorations, but engage in a witty dialogue with the adjacent text. Scholars have studied this playful interaction, revealing how the marginal art is often used as a visual commentary, making the text more engaging and memorable.



Those uncanny illustrations appeared in many different contexts, carrying different meanings. In thirteenth-century French manuscripts, the peculiar marginal motif of knights fighting snails can be seen as a form of satirical commentary, possibly mocking the Lombard invaders or, more generally, an oppressive aristocracy. Like the *Rutland Psalter's* illustrations, these snail-knight drawings reflect the medieval artists' penchant for including social commentary within what appears at first glance like fantastical imagery, enriching the manuscripts by offering a glimpse into the medieval socio-cultural context.



This subversive aspect of medieval marginalia resonates well with the early Robin Hood ballads that were promoting rebellion and social justice. Both are, at the same time, playful yet subversive. Their popular accessibility was a way to bring nuance and criticism to a broad audience and provide a unique point of view on the social dynamics of the time. For this reason, we wanted to sprinkle *A Gest of Robin Hood's* art with tributes to those illustrations. Have fun finding them.

3.0 Card Tips and Background

Each Event card depicts an important occurrence or person related to the dynamics being modeled in this game, sometimes drawn from the various historical tales of Robin Hood, with shaded and unshaded options that may be carried out by either player. Fortune Events have only one option that is always carried out when the card is drawn, and Traveller cards typically have two options that the Robin Hood player must choose from before rolling for their Rob attempt. A number at the top left of each card (displayed here in brackets after each card title) indicates the number of Carriage moves when the card is revealed (Events) or the Defense value against Rob (Travellers). The italicized flavor

text describing each option plays no role in gameplay.

As you play through the three Ballads of a game of *Gest*, the cards serve not just as game mechanics but also as pathways into the tapestry of twelfth-century England. Equally as interesting are the facets of the Robin Hood narrative that these cards explore. From the disputed origins of this enigmatic figure to the various interpretations of his deeds across time and space, these cards prompt us to engage with the lore in ways that extend beyond its current popular depiction.

3.1 Event Cards

1. Day of Market (2)

FORTUNE EVENT

Time to make a profit: The Sheriff may return any number of Henchmen to Available to gain one Shilling per Henchman returned, up to the number of Submissive Parishes. Then, Robin Hood may return one Merry Man to Available to gain half that number of Shillings (rounded down).

Tips: The Sheriff must first choose how many Henchmen to return to Available, before Robin Hood chooses whether to return one Merry Man.

Background: The existence of local markets in England can be traced back to at least the Anglo-Saxon period, but there was a significant growth in the number and size of markets during the twelfth century. This was partially due to population growth and increased agricultural productivity, as well as improved technology and techniques. Markets became important meeting places for local producers and consumers, facilitating the exchange of goods beyond the immediate community. These markets can be seen as the beginnings of a commodity-based economy. As they grew, so did the specialization and division of labor, elements key to the development of a capitalist mode of production. While these were important developments, it would be a stretch to say that they marked the emergence of capitalism as we understand it today. Feudal structures and relations of production remained dominant, with markets operating within, and under the constraints of, this system. The feudal system, with its obligation of serfs to work the lord's land, persisted. Therefore, it made sense to create a Fortune Event that would require the Sheriff to get rid of some Henchmen to generate income, illustrating that this economic system was still based on mutual obligations.

2. Bishop of Hereford (2)

Easy mark: Place the Bishop in the Travellers Deck and remove a Knight from the Travellers Deck or discard pile from the game (if possible), then shuffle the Travellers Deck.

Seeks sanctuary with the Sheriff: Gain 2 Shillings and remove a Monk from the Travellers Deck or discard pile to the Victims Pile.

Tips: The 'Bishop' is the BISHOP OF HEREFORD Traveller card (T11), which should have been set aside at the start of the game. A 'Knight' means a NOBLE KNIGHT Traveller card (T3 or T4), which should be removed from either the Traveller deck or discard pile (unless all Knights are already in the Victims Pile). A 'Monk' means a MONKS Traveller card (T6, T7, or T8), which should

be removed from either the Traveller deck or discard pile to the Victims Pile. The Traveller deck should be shuffled if it needs to be searched through to find a card.

Background: The rich and greedy Bishop of Hereford (or a similar figure) appears in several of the classic Robin Hood ballads, where he is captured by the Merry Men and forced to celebrate mass, before providing a feast for the Merry Men at his own expense. There are several historical Bishops of Hereford that might have provided inspiration for the character, although he could also stand in more generally for the corrupt and unpopular upper ranks of the medieval church.

3. Queen Eleanor (0)

FORTUNE EVENT

Morality questioned: The Sheriff may remove a Noble Knight from the Traveller deck to the Victims Pile. Shift one step towards Order if there are now four or more cards in the Victims Pile, otherwise shift one step towards Justice.

Tips: The Sheriff may check the number of cards currently in the Victims Pile before choosing whether to add a Noble Knight to it. The Traveller deck should be shuffled if it needs to be searched through to find a Noble Knight card.

Background: Eleanor of Aquitaine was one of the most powerful and influential women of the Middle Ages, not only a queen consort of both France and England, but also a significant figure in the governance of her sons, particularly Richard the Lionheart. Eleanor's political acumen and personal influence were apparent in the upbringing and reign of Richard. From an early age, Richard was involved in the governance of Aquitaine, his mother's lands, which likely shaped his understanding of political leadership. Eleanor was known to have fostered a sense of cultural sophistication in her court, instilling a deep appreciation for arts, literature, and chivalry in Richard. This is evident in his own patronage of the arts and the chivalric ideals he upheld. During the tumultuous years of King Henry II's reign, Eleanor supported her sons, including Richard, in their rebellions against their father. Richard's ascension to the throne in 1189 was significantly aided by Eleanor, who acted as a regent during his frequent absences, including during his participation in the Third Crusade (she even secured his release from captivity while returning from the crusade). Thus, Queen Eleanor's influence on Richard the Lionheart was profound. Her influence extended not just to his personal life, but also to his reign, thereby significantly shaping the course of English history. Her influence over her son is depicted through this Fortune Event, as she judges the actions of Robin Hood before Richard's return.

4. Guy of Gisborne (1)

Fooled by decoy: You may swap Robin Hood, even if he is in Prison or in Available, with any other Merry Man on the board. Hide Robin Hood and Reveal the Merry Man.

Ruthless second-in-command: Place Guy in the Travellers Deck and remove a Monk from the Travellers Deck or discard pile from the game (if possible), then shuffle the Travellers Deck.

Tips: If the unshaded effect is selected then the Sheriff player should look away while Robin Hood is moved and hidden. ‘Guy’ is the GUY OF GISBORNE Traveller card (T12), which should have been set aside at the start of the game. A ‘Monk’ means a MONKS Traveller card (T6, T7, or T8), which should be removed from either the Traveller deck or discard pile (unless all Monks are already in the Victims Pile).

Background: Guy of Gisborne is the classic villainous foil to the heroic Robin Hood, originally appearing as a hired killer and then later developing into a romantic rival for Maid Marian’s affections. His first appearance, in the fifteenth-century ballad *Robin Hood and Guy of Gisborne*, is reproduced at the end of the Learn to Play guide.

5. Little John (1)

Loyal companion: Reveal Robin Hood to place a Hidden Merry Man in his space and gain 2 Shillings.

Foolish bumbler: Set a Revolting Parish with a Revealed Merry Man to Submissive.

Tips: The unshaded effect may only be selected if Robin Hood is currently Hidden.

Background: Little John is Robin Hood’s most loyal companion, an ironically large man who makes a consistent appearance in many Robin Hood tales. The well-known tale of his first meeting with Robin Hood, where they fight with staves across a tree bridge, is a later addition that does not appear in the earliest ballads.

6. Prioress of Kirklees (1)

Robin’s cousin provides shelter: Flip all Merry Men in one Parish to Hidden and shift one step towards Justice.

Weakens Robin with poison: Remove Robin Hood and any one Merry Man in the same space to Available.

Tips: The shaded effect could remove Robin and one Merry Man from any space, even Prison. Robin Hood will be returned from Available to the map during the next Royal Inspection Round Reset phase.

Background: In the traditional ballad *Robin Hood’s Death*, Robin Hood is betrayed and killed by his cousin, the Prioress of Kirklees. In one version of this tale she intentionally takes too much blood while bleeding him (a traditional medicinal remedy), while in another he is killed by a nemesis called Red Roger. Either way, his betrayal by the Prioress continues a common theme in the ballads of criticizing the established church hierarchy.

7. Yeoman Revolt (2)

Revolt encouraged: Set a Parish without Henchmen to Revolting and shift one step towards Justice.

Revolt suppressed: If there are more Submissive Parishes than Revolting Parishes, shift one step towards Order.

Tips: The unshaded effect could be selected even if there are no eligible Parishes, just to shift one step towards Justice.

Background: As early as *Robin Hood and the Potter*, Robin is depicted as a yeoman, a term evolving over time from signifying a ‘rank of service’ to referring to freeborn, free tenure peasants by the later Middle Ages. This shift reflects a growing self-consciousness among prosperous farmers, marking a transition toward proto-capitalism. Yet, the definition of ‘yeoman’ remains debated among scholars. Some argue, as in Almond’s analysis, that Robin Hood symbolizes an emerging rural elite, bridging the social divide between lower-ranked nobles and peasants. The larger socio-political backdrop of medieval England was marked by uprisings, such as the Peasants’ Revolt in 1381 or Kett’s Rebellion in 1549, reflecting the struggle against oppressive feudal lords and a demand for economic and social rights. This event plays on these potential sympathies and the historical role of yeomen in leading medieval uprisings.

8. Warden of the Forest (0)

FORTUNE EVENT

Surprise inspection: The Sheriff may Hire in up to two Revolting Parishes, then Robin Hood may Donate once. Shift one step towards Order if there are now five or more Submissive Parishes, otherwise shift one step towards Justice.

Tips: The Sheriff may still only Hire in Revolting Parishes with more Henchmen than Merry Men, and a single Donate Deed may target up to two Parishes with at least as many Merry Men as Henchmen.

Background: The role of the forest warden, or a ‘forest keeper’ as they were often called, in twelfth-century England was significant within the context of the royal forest system. The position emerged during the reign of William the Conqueror, who declared vast tracts of land as royal forests, governed by forest law. These ‘forests’ were not just woodland areas, but also included fields, moors, and villages. The forest law was designed to preserve game animals, primarily for the king’s hunting, but it also covered aspects like protecting the vegetation crucial for the survival of these animals. The laws were often harsh, and punishments for offenses were severe, reflecting the socio-political hierarchy and the power of the monarchy. As representatives of the king in remote areas, forest wardens were seen as figures of authority, and their role often put them in conflict with local communities, who relied on the forest for subsistence. For that reason this Fortune Event triggers an early check on the unrest level in Nottinghamshire, as usually happens during the Royal Inspection. This incentivizes the Sheriff to keep the Parishes under control even before the end of the Ballad.

9. Social Bandit (2)

People’s hero: Reveal Robin Hood in a Parish to place a Camp there, shift one step towards Justice, and gain 2 Shillings.

Out-of-touch outlaw: Reveal Robin Hood and set the space he is in to Submissive (if possible).

Tips: The unshaded effect may only be selected if Robin Hood is currently Hidden, and only shifts towards Justice if a Camp is placed. The shaded effect may set a Parish to Submissive even if Robin Hood is already Revealed there. If Robin Hood is in

a Forest or Submissive space the shaded effect would have no further effect beyond Revealing him.

Background: Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'social banditry' refers to a form of primitive rebellion conducted by peasants in pre-industrial societies. Social bandits are individuals, usually from peasant backgrounds, who rebel against oppressive socio-economic systems and become outlaws. They are seen as heroes, champions of justice, and defenders of the common people against oppressive authorities. Hobsbawm's social bandits are often deemed criminals by the ruling elite, but are revered as righteous rebels by the peasantry. They operate outside the law, yet adhere to a peasant code of justice, thus representing a form of social resistance. Through this lens, bandits like Robin Hood emerge as symbolic figures embodying peasant resistance against feudal injustices. As described by Stephen Rangazas in his article earlier in this booklet, there is a complex relationship between historical bandits and rebels or revolutionaries, both of whom live outside the law on the fringes of society. This event explores the ambiguous status of Robin Hood: is he a folk hero or a common thug?

10. Tax Collectors (1)

Incompetent administrators: Move up to 4 Merry Men from adjacent spaces into Nottingham, flip them Hidden, then may attempt a Rob there.

Brutal enforcement: Confiscate in up to two Parishes, even if not Submissive.

Tips: The unshaded effect will Hide the moved Merry Men even if they would normally be revealed Sneaking into Nottingham. The shaded effect would still require Henchmen in the selected Parishes as normal, but may select Revolting (or Passive) Parishes.

Background: Robin Hood's nemesis, the Sheriff of Nottingham, is generally depicted as an unjust ruler who subjects the common folk of Nottinghamshire to crippling and arbitrary taxation. There were many different kinds of taxes in medieval England, ranging from land taxes, taxes on goods and services, and customs duties on imports and exports. These taxes were often imposed for specific purposes, such as to fund overseas military expeditions (perhaps to go crusading), and were frequently a source of discontent among those forced to pay them.

11. Great Escape (1)

Daring rescue: Place Robin Hood and all Merry Men from Prison adjacent to Nottingham, Revealed.

A traitor in the ranks: Reveal all Merry Men in one space, then Capture there.

Tips: The unshaded effect may place Robin Hood from anywhere, even Available or Prison, or move him from another map space. The shaded effect may be used just to reveal Merry Men even in a space where there are no Henchmen to Capture them.

Background: The great escape or prison break is often the centerpiece of modern Robin Hood dramas, providing a dramatic

opportunity for acrobatics and swashbuckling. Betrayal by one of the Merry Men is also a common theme, either for money or to satisfy a personal vendetta.

12. Boats & Bridges (1)

Crafting boats: Move any number of Merry Men from one space adjacent to a River to one other space adjacent to a River, then Hide all moved Merry Men.

Building bridges: Place the Bridge across any River border, which is now treated as a regular border. Shift one step towards Order.

Tips: The unshaded effect may be used to move Merry Men into a space where they would usually become revealed if Sneaking in. Use the provided Bridge counter to mark the effect of the shaded text.

Background: Swarkestone Bridge, in modern Derbyshire but not far from Nottingham, is a fine example of medieval construction, originally built in the thirteenth century, around the time that the Robin Hood tales supposedly take place.

13. Ambush (1)

Perfect hiding places: Move any number of Merry Men to a space with a Carriage, flip them Hidden, and attempt a Rob there now.

Easy to detect: Reveal all Merry Men in a Forest and shift one step towards Order.

Tips: The unshaded effect may be used to move Merry Men into a space where they would usually become revealed if Sneaking in, but at least one must then be used to Rob there (targeting either the Carriage or a Traveller, as desired). The shaded effect may be selected just to shift towards Order, even if there are no Hidden Merry Men in either Forest.

Background: Rebel fighters (or bandits) like Robin Hood frequently make use of guerrilla tactics, such as ambushes, against their more numerous and better equipped opponents. By striking at weak links like supply routes, they are able to wear down enemy forces, capture equipment, and eventually win a battle of attrition, although such tactics can backfire if their plans are discovered and they stumble into a trap.

14. Temporary Truce (0)

FORTUNE EVENT

Opportunity to escape: The Sheriff may move all Henchmen to Submissive spaces to shift one step towards Order, then Robin Hood may move all Merry Men to Camps or Forests (and Hide them) to shift one step towards Justice.

Tips: Neither player is forced to move any pieces, but they must move all their pieces as indicated in order to shift Royal Favour. If Robin Hood chooses to move any Merry Man then they will all become Hidden, even those already at a Camp or Forest. If all Henchmen are already in Submissive spaces or all Merry Men already at Camps or Forests, then that player may choose to shift Royal Favour even though no pieces will be forced to move.

Background: Temporary truces or ceasefires between enemy forces are common in many historical and modern conflicts, although there must be some perceived benefit for both sides in order to maintain the truce. Truces may allow time for negotiations, for both sides to recover their wounded, or perhaps just for political agitation and preparation for renewed hostilities.

15. Will Scarlet (2)

Talented woodsman: Place a Camp in one Forest (and shift one step towards Justice), even if there is already a Camp there.

Robin's resentful kinsman: Reveal Robin Hood and perform a free Single Patrol.

Tips: The unshaded effect only shifts towards Justice if a Camp is placed, but may place an additional Camp in a Forest space where there already is one.

Background: Will Scarlet is present in many of the earliest Robin Hood tales, and he is often depicted as a younger relative of Robin Hood (originally a nephew, but sometimes a cousin or half-brother). He is typically younger and more flamboyant than the other Merry Men (aside from Allan-a-Dale), and in some modern depictions he is jealous of Robin Hood and considers betraying him.

16. Heavy Rain (0)

FORTUNE EVENT

Storms slow action: Both players, in eligibility order, may either perform a Single Plot or gain 2 Shillings.

Tips: The player who is currently 1st Eligible performs their Single Plot (or gains 2 Shillings) first, then the 2nd Eligible player does so, without adjusting Eligibility order.

Background: Medieval England is in many ways a foreign country even to modern residents of the UK, but the unpredictable weather is one thing that hasn't changed.

17. The Red Cap (1)

Robin wins archery contest: Reveal Robin Hood to set one adjacent Parish to Revolting, then shift one step towards Justice.

Chief archer leads henchmen: Reveal Robin Hood and move up to two Henchmen to his space from any other space.

Tips: The unshaded effect may only be selected if Robin Hood is Hidden, but the shaded effect may be used to move Merry Men even if he is already Revealed.

Background: In Howard Pyle's romantic nineteenth-century depiction, *The Merry Tales of Robin Hood*, Gilbert o' the Red Cap is the Sheriff of Nottingham's chief archer, against whom Robin Hood competes in an archery contest. A 'redcap' is also a kind of malevolent goblin or sprite from English and Scottish folklore – perhaps the Sheriff has recruited supernatural assistance to defeat his nemesis? (Note: the figure in an orange hood is actually Robin Hood wearing a cunning disguise, the Red Cap is the man standing behind him, wearing a red cap.)

18. Allan-a-Dale (2)

Flamboyant troubadour: Reveal any number of Merry Men in one space, gaining one Shilling for each Revealed in this way. Shift one step towards Justice.

Noisy troublemaker: Perform a free Single Patrol, automatically Revealing all Merry Men in the destination space if at least one Henchman is there.

Tips: None.

Background: Allan-a-Dale is a relatively late addition to the Merry Men, first appearing in a seventeenth-century ballad as a wandering minstrel who joins the band. In his first appearance Robin Hood rescues Allan's romantic interest from unwanted marriage (see Event #29), while in a later nineteenth-century tale, written by Peirce Egan the Younger, he is the brother of Maid Marian.

19. Royal Pardon (2)

Empty promise: Place half Merry Men from Prison (rounded down) in a space adjacent to Nottingham, Revealed.

A chance for peace: Release any number of Merry Men from Prison to Available, then shift one step towards Order for every 2 released in this way.

Tips: Both effects of this Event might be of interest to either player, depending on the circumstances.

Background: Much like modern presidential pardons, a royal pardon could just be a cynical opportunity to reward allies or gain a political advantage, or it could be a genuine attempt at reconciliation, as with the recent amnesty of thousands of minor FARC fighters and government soldiers in Colombia.

20. Major Oak (2)

Sanctuary: Place a Camp on Ollerton Hill (shift one step towards Justice). For Robin Hood, all spaces adjacent to Ollerton Hill are now adjacent to each other (keep this card as a reminder).

Camp destroyed: Remove a Camp from a Forest space (shift one step towards Order).

Tips: If the unshaded effect is selected then the Camp placed on Ollerton Hill cannot be removed (as Ollerton Hill is not a map space that can be selected for Plots or Deeds), but serves as a reminder that the Robin Hood player now treats all four spaces surrounding it as adjacent to each other. Place the Camp in Ollerton Hill with its symbol side up, to indicate that it will earn one Shilling during the Royal Inspection.

Background: The Major Oak is a huge and ancient oak tree in Sherwood Forest, estimated to be almost 1000 years old. According to legend it served as a refuge for Robin Hood and the Merry Men, providing shelter and a resting place among its boughs. Oak trees have long played a prominent role in British folklore, dating right back to the harvesting of parasitic mistletoe from their branches by druids. This Event is also an opportunity to make a subtle reference to the figure of the Green Man in British folklore, often associated with natural and ancient forest

spirits, representing the spirit of nature and the wild. Over time, this figure became intertwined with other characters and seasonal celebrations. In some interpretations, the Green Man has also been linked to Robin Hood, embodying the freedom and untamed spirit of the forest.

21. Robin's Horn (2)

An epic robbery: Reveal Robin Hood to move up to 3 Merry Men from adjacent spaces into his space, Hidden. Then, may attempt a Rob there.

A common thief: Place Henchmen up to half the number of cards in the Victims Pile (rounded up) in any Parishes, then may Capture in one Parish where a Henchman was placed.

Tips: The unshaded effect may be used to move Merry Men into a space where they would usually become revealed if Sneaking in.

Background: In one of the oldest surviving ballads, *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, Robin blows a horn to summon over a hundred men to ambush a traveling monk.

22. Fast Carriages (1)

Vulnerable to attack: Perform a free Single Sneak, then Rob in up to three spaces, adding 1 to the result of each Rob roll.

Rapid transportation: Immediately move one Carriage up to 2 spaces.

Tips: A Carriage moved with the shaded effect must still follow the paths marked on the map as normal.

Background: More haste, less speed.

23. Friar Tuck (1)

Popular preacher: Donate in up to three Parishes where a Merry Man is present, even if there are more Henchmen, paying only 1 Shilling per Parish.

Issues with alcohol: Reveal all Merry Men in one space where a Henchman is present.

Tips: None.

Background: After Little John, Friar Tuck is probably the most well-known of Robin Hood's companions, a jovial and irreverent preacher who ministers to the Merry Men. There is a long tradition of hermits taking to the wilderness in British Christianity, and figures such as Eustace the Monk (a thirteenth-century pirate and outlaw) might provide some historical basis for Friar Tuck's role. His life of poverty and opposition to the established church is also reminiscent of the 'heretical' Lollard sect (some of whom participated in the fourteenth century Peasants Revolt), or even contemporary Catholic Liberation theology.

24. Maid Marian (1)

Distributed leadership: Perform a free Single Plot and then Swashbuckle or Inspire with any Merry Man.

Sheriff persuaded to show mercy: Remove a Carriage from the map to the Used Carriages box to set any one Parish to Submissive. Move all Merry Men in that Parish to an adjacent space.

Tips: The unshaded effect allows any Merry Man to be used as though it were Robin Hood for Swashbuckle or Inspire.

Background: Maid Marian may originally have been inspired by a folkloric character associated with the celebration of May Day, but in the later tales she is typically a young noblewoman who falls in love with Robin Hood, or in more modern versions rebels against a patriarchal society and escapes to join the Merry Men.

25. Weapons of the Weak (1)

Passive resistance: Remove one Submissive marker from the game. That Parish is now neither Submissive nor Revolting, but still counts as Submissive for Rob and Capture Plots.

Peasants resigned to oppression: Set one Revolting Parish to Submissive.

Tips: A Parish without a Revolting/Submissive counter is marked 'Passive'. It is treated as Submissive for Rob and Capture only, not for any other game effects.

Background: In *Weapons of the Weak*, anthropologist James C. Scott describes how peasant communities use various forms of passive resistance, such as slow-downs, absenteeism, and feigned ignorance, against both centralized governments and private landlords. His case study focuses on a specific twentieth-century Malaysian village, but similar strategies could easily have been adopted by medieval peasants.

26. Corruption (2)

Sheriff's authority crumbles: Pay 1 Shilling to replace 1 Henchman with a Merry Man.

Hungry Merry Men defect: Pay 2 Shillings to replace up to 2 Merry Men in one space with 1 Henchman each.

Tips: The shaded effect costs 2 Shillings even if only one Merry Man is replaced.

Background: The line between bandits and those who hunt them can be thin at times, especially when they become hungry and desperate. Historically some of the best bandit hunters or anti-guerrilla fighters have been former comrades of those they hunt, and defection is also a frequent problem faced by counterinsurgent forces.

27. Will Stutely (1)

A cunning ruse: Move a Hidden Merry Man to a Parish from an adjacent space, then move all Henchmen there to Nottingham.

To the gallows! Place any two Revealed Merry Men in Prison (not Robin Hood).

Tips: The shaded effect must use a Hidden Merry Man, but will not Reveal it even if Sneaking into the Parish normally would.

Background: Will Stutely is often one of the first Merry Men to join Robin's band, sometimes even an older companion or steward from before his time as an outlaw. In one ballad he is caught spying on the Sheriff and must be rescued before he is hanged.

28. Nottingham Fair

Little John befriends the Sheriff's cook: Replace up to 2 Henchmen in Nottingham with Merry Men.

Too much stout ale: Remove up to 2 Merry Men from spaces adjacent to Nottingham to Available.

Tips: None.

Background: Medieval fairs were opportunities for merriment and social mixing, and also good cover for petty crime and thievery.

29. A Tale of Two Lovers

Allan-a-Dale marries Ellen: Pay 1 Shilling and, in a single space, remove one Merry Man and up to 2 Henchmen from the game to shift one step towards Justice.

Edward of Deirwold supports the Sheriff: Gain 2 Shillings and place up to 2 Henchmen in any one Parish.

Tips: The pieces removed by the unshaded effect should be placed to one side (or back in the box) and may not be used again during this game.

Background: In several early tales the Merry Men rescue an unwilling bride from a forced marriage, and in later versions she is eventually married to Allan-a-Dale by Friar Tuck, the only minister willing to conduct the ceremony without the blessing of the established church. In Howard Pyle's book she is named Ellen and given a father, Edward of Deirwold, who is a supporter of the Sheriff.

30, 31. Royal Inspection (1)

Immediately conduct a Royal Inspection Round, then continue play.

Tips: One Carriage should be moved (if possible) before conducting the Royal Inspection Round.

Background: King John expanded the role of itinerant justices who traveled around England to oversee local administration. They checked on the behavior of local lords, ensured the king's rights were upheld, and collected tax revenue. Their role helped improve administration, one of the few areas in which the king left a positive mark, and of course increased royal income. They were a crucial part of John's efforts to exert control over the kingdom and expand royal authority in an early centralization effort.

32. King Richard's Return (1)

Immediately conduct the Unrest Phase of a Royal Inspection Round, then determine victory.

Tips: One Carriage should be moved (if possible) before conducting the Unrest Phase. After executing any shift to Royal Favour from the Unrest Phase victory will be determined immediately, based on the new position of the Royal Favour track.

Background: In the later Robin Hood tales, King Richard's return symbolizes the restoration of rightful authority and justice. Often depicted as fair and noble, his comeback contrasts with the corrupt reign of his brother, Prince John. Richard's return

to the throne is a turning point, signifying a return to order and justice, and aligning with folkloric themes of social and moral righteousness.

3.2 Traveller Cards**T1, T2. Rich Merchant (1)**

"Invitation" to dinner: If successful, gain 2 Shillings and put the card in the discard pile. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

Fleece him! If successful, gain 4 Shillings and put the card in the Victims Pile. If failed, Sheriff gains 2 Shillings and put the card in the discard pile.

Tips: Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob. If the shaded option is failed the Sheriff gains two Shillings from the pool.

Background: Merchants were vital for medieval economies, traveling between towns and trading goods. They faced various risks on their travels, including banditry. In the Robin Hood tales, merchants are often stopped by Robin and his men, and 'invited' to dine in the forest. While depicted as a form of extortion, it's also a playful means to redistribute wealth, often testing the merchant's character, with the honorable ones treated well.

T3, T4. Noble Knight (2)

Pas d'armes: If successful, gain 3 Shillings and put the card in the discard pile. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

Mug him! If successful, gain 5 Shillings and put the card in the Victims Pile. If failed, Capture the Robbing Merry Men and put the card in the discard pile.

Tips: Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob. "Capture" means send all Robbing Merry Men to Prison and, if Robin Hood is among them, shift one step towards Order.

Background: In the early ballads, Robin Hood's encounters with knights are often a challenge to their social status, sometimes playful, sometimes not. This mirrors the medieval tradition of the *pas d'armes*, where knights would prove their worth in ritual staged combat. The myth of chivalry, often romanticized, is also somewhat criticized in these tales. Robin's interactions play with this tension, sometimes honoring the noble knight's code, especially if they are poor, or at other times subverting it to expose the nature of true nobility, bringing a playful and critical perspective to the chivalric ideals of the later Middle Ages.

T5. Richard at the Lea (1)

Extortion: If successful, gain 2 Shillings and put the card in the discard pile. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

Lend money: Spend 3 Shillings without rolling to set Retford to Revolting and place a Camp there (shift one step towards Justice), then remove the card from the game.

Tips: Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob (only make a Rob roll if the unshaded effect is selected).

Background: Richard at the Lea is a significant character in the Robin Hood ballads. His first appearance can be traced back to one of the earliest medieval ballads, *Robin Hood and the Monk*, dating to the fifteenth century. The character and his portrayal have evolved over time, but in his initial representation Richard is a destitute knight whom Robin Hood assists by lending a significant sum of money. In return, Richard pledges his loyalty to Robin, eventually aiding him in his exploits. Richard's predicaments show the harsh economic realities of the Middle Ages and the perceived greediness of the Church. It also serves to highlight the fluidity of feudal society, where even members of the lower nobility could face financial distress due to factors such as failed crusades, ransoms, and excessive taxation. Over time, Richard's character evolved, often becoming more complex and ambiguous. In some later adaptations, he is portrayed as Richard the Lionheart in disguise, further connecting Robin Hood's legend to the political narratives of the time. This has often been interpreted as a commentary on the good king who understands his people's suffering, which again reflects contemporary ideals of just rulership. In the game this Traveller can become one of Robin Hood's greatest allies, opening up the northern Parishes to the player.

T6, T7, T8. Monks (0)

Forced charity: If successful, gain 1 Shilling and put the card in the discard pile. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

Brutal punishment! If successful, gain 3 Shillings and put the card in the Victims Pile. If failed, set the space to Submissive (if possible) and put the card in the discard pile.

Tips: Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob. If the shaded option is failed in a Revolting Parish, set it to Submissive, otherwise there is no further effect.

Background: The motif of Robin Hood robbing (or killing) a traveling monk dates back to one of the oldest ballads, *Robin Hood and the Monk*, which is also generally considered to be one of the best.

T9. The Potter (1)

Road toll: If successful, gain 3 Shillings and put the card in the discard pile. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

A clever trick: If successful, place Robin Hood Revealed adjacent to Nottingham, gain 2 Shillings from the Sheriff and shift one step towards Justice, then put the card in the Victims Pile. If failed, Capture Robin Hood and put the card in the discard pile.

Tips: Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob. "Capture Robin Hood" means send Robin Hood to Prison and shift one step towards Order.

Background: In the ballad *Robin Hood and the Potter*, Robin Hood disguises himself as a potter to infiltrate Nottingham, where he is invited to dinner by the Sheriff's wife and eventually manages to capture and ransom the Sheriff.

T10. The Miller's Son (0)

Quick shilling: If successful, gain 2 Shillings and put the card in the discard pile. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

A new recruit: If successful, gain 1 Shilling, place a Hidden Merry Man in the Rob space or an adjacent space, and put the card in the Victims Pile. If failed, put a Henchman in the Rob space, then put the card in the discard pile.

Tips: Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob.

Background: Much the Miller's Son first appears in the ballad *A Gest of Robyn Hode*, one of the earliest surviving Robin Hood tales. He is portrayed as young and naive, but also a very loyal member of Robin Hood's band. His background as a miller's son places him among the peasant class, distinguishing him from characters like Robin Hood and Will Scarlet, who were often depicted in later tales as dispossessed nobles. His presence as a commoner among the outlaws is significant as it reflects the economic realities of the time. Millers, due to their essential role in food production, held an indispensable position in medieval society. They often faced accusations of deceit and were generally distrusted, a sentiment reflected in the depiction of Much in some stories. The regular inclusion of this character in Robin Hood tales over time is representative of the populist appeal of the legendary bandit. The band of Merry Men is often portrayed as a microcosm of society, with members from all social classes, united by the common cause of opposing the tyrannical ruling class.

T11. Bishop of Hereford (1)

Forced donation: If successful, gain 3 Shillings and discard the card. If failed, put the card in the discard pile.

Repent! If successful, gain 6 Shillings and put the card in the Victims Pile. If failed, the Sheriff gains 3 Shillings and sets the space to Submissive (if possible), then put the card in the discard pile.

Tips: This Traveller card begins out of play and is only added to the deck if the unshaded effect of Event #2 (BISHOP OF HEREFORD). Robin Hood must choose either the unshaded or shaded option before rolling to Rob. If the shaded option is failed the Sheriff gains 3 Shillings from the pool and, if the Rob attempt was in a Revolting Parish, sets it to Submissive.

Background: See Event #2.

T12. Guy of Gisborne (3)

Fight! If successful, remove the card from the game. If failed, Capture the Robbing Merry Men and discard the card.

Tips: This Traveller card begins out of play and is only added to the deck if the shaded effect of Event #4 (GUY OF GISBORNE). There is no choice of Rob option on this card. "Capture" means send all Robbing Merry Men to Prison and, if Robin Hood is among them, shift one step towards Order.

Background: See Event #4.

4.0 Opinionated Bibliography

Diving into the world of Robin Hood and the medieval period while designing this game was a bit like being thrown into a whirlpool of tales, facts, and wild historical interpretations. This curated list of books and articles here is my attempt to help you navigate through that whirlpool. Each one was a stepping stone, some leading to eye-opening insights, others to very speculative interpretations. While I'm no historian, these texts were my companions in crafting a narrative that I hope will resonate with players. They are a mix of heavy reads and lighter takes on the unique figure of Robin Hood and his era. Take a peek if you wish to delve deeper into what shaped *A Gest of Robin Hood*.

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Broader historical context:

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Designer Notes

There is no standard set of metrics, benchmarks, or operational techniques that apply to all insurgencies or remain valid for any single insurgency throughout its life cycle. And there are no fixed “laws” of counter insurgency.

– David Kilcullen, *The Accidental Guerilla*, 2009

How it all started

While I was writing this playbook, I had the chance to meet with Cole Wehrle as he was on his way back from the UK Games Expo, and we rambled over how what’s going on in our lives can sneak into our designs. This got me thinking, why not kick off these notes with a snapshot of what was happening when I started designing *A Gest of Robin Hood*?

It was April 2020, when the COVID pandemic was just taking off. A couple of months before, I’d just joined the COIN Players Discord server to playtest a prototype game, *The Pure Land*. Suddenly, I was playing a lot of COIN games online with smart and fun new people and, for the first time, really getting my head around Volko’s unique system. It felt like a lightbulb moment, and as often happens to players that get into this system, I started seeing potential COIN designs everywhere. Still, with my first design *Red Flag Over Paris* on my plate, I knew I had to be careful not to get carried away and start any new design without a clear goal.

Replying to @joe_dewhurst
Your friends, through tears: please... Joe... you can't just make everything a COIN
You, pointing at historical conflict: COIN

My developer Joe Dewhurst was less careful

After a while, I decided that if I were to create a COIN or COIN-adjacent game, my main aim would be to make it as approachable as I could. This got me contemplating the hurdles that might put off people new to the series, and I pinpointed three main roadblocks:

1. The perceived mechanical complexity of COIN games, which, to be honest, I reckon is no more complex than something like *Root*, but still stands as a stumbling block for a lot of players.
2. The fact that the topics tackled by the series can often feel a bit niche or grim, and sometimes both, which can be a turn-off for the general public.
3. The footprint of COIN games at the time – most of the entries were known for being big and, more importantly, long games.

With these thoughts in mind, I wanted my design to be a sort of gateway, a way for players to delve into an awesome part of our hobby while also sparking an interesting conversation about the nature of insurgencies. Even though I had clear game design objectives, I was missing a topic that really excited me. Then, on April 2nd, 2020, I read an article that lit the fuse: “The Origins of Robin Hood” by Rodney Hilton (1958). I talk about this article in more detail in my historical notes, but let’s just say that it became the bedrock of my design. I quickly knocked together a basic prototype using pen, paper, and bits & bobs from *Andean Abyss*, while also diving into Eric Hobsbawm’s book *Bandits* (1969/1981) for more inspiration.

Now feeling pretty good about the project’s potential, I thought I’d send an email to Gene Billingsley and Jason Carr to see if there might be any interest at GMT Games for such a project. Both of them were keen, and Jason even sent me one of his classic lengthy emails, which I’ll share here just as he wrote it:

- I love the idea, go for it.

- No longer than 45 minutes, no more complex than Cuba Libre.

- Can you make it so that you don’t have to have a counter moving up and down a track, keeping score?

Jason’s email was exactly what I wanted to hear. It lined up perfectly with what I had set out to do. I couldn’t wait to get started.

[Developer’s note: two out of three isn’t bad, sorry Jason!]

Hiding COIN in plain sight

As I said earlier, my primary objective in designing *A Gest of Robin Hood* was to capture the essence of the COIN system, while minimising its footprint. The COIN series is an amazing framework to represent complex political and military conflicts in a nuanced manner on a strategic level. However, this complexity can sometimes act as a barrier for newcomers or casual gamers. The footprint reduction was achieved by streamlining certain mechanics and using a familiar and family friendly setting, which lowers the barrier to entry and invites a wider audience to engage with these kinds of games, while also re-evaluating the current popular perception of Robin Hood. In short, my plan was to hide the COIN system in plain sight (just like Robin Hood at the archery contest).



Carriages are mobile ECs: A unique adaptation in *A Gest of Robin Hood* is the introduction of Carriages as mobile Economic Centers (ECs), a concept familiar to classic COIN players but with a fresh medieval twist. When the Sheriff executes the Confiscate Deed (or ‘Special Activity’, for COIN nerds), Carriages are placed on the board, embarking on a journey back to Nottingham. These mobile ECs act as a conduit of wealth extraction from the peasantry, reflecting the economic oppression of the era. As they traverse the board, they become potential targets for Robin Hood’s band, adding a layer of strategic interaction. I wanted this mechanism to tie socio-economic exploitation to the game’s strategic decision space, drawing a parallel to COIN’s portrayal of resource control, yet with a thematic medieval twist. Also, as those ‘mobile ECs’ are central to the Sheriff’s victory condition, it was a way for me to bring the attention of the Insurgent player to their strategic relevance, an aspect often misunderstood by less experienced COIN players.

Capabilities, without capabilities: Traditional COIN games feature Capabilities, special powers granted through certain events that tweak a faction’s actions. While a clever mechanic and a great asset to convey major turns in conflicts, it often requires players to remember these alterations, potentially muddying the gameplay and expanding the cognitive load. I wanted to retain the spirit of this mechanic but also integrate it directly into the gameplay without making the game more complex. Through events that alter the game state, players gain ongoing powers without the need for additional reminders. For instance, the Travellers deck, a game element both players can influence, becomes a dynamic landscape for exerting subtle advantages, echoing the evolving strategies common in COIN titles, yet without the fiddly overhead.

No extra tracks: The decision to omit additional tracks serves a dual purpose. First, it removes an external political track, bringing the political struggle directly onto the main board, encapsulated by a single Royal Favour track that reflects the absent King Richard’s attitude and determines victory at the end of the game. This design choice immerses players in a direct political tug-of-war, embodying the essence of this power struggle between Robin Hood and the Sheriff of Nottingham. Second, by replacing resources with tangible coins, the game alleviates the cumbersome bookkeeping typical in COIN titles while making the whole experience more thematic. My hope was that this approach would enhance the flow of the gameplay, subtly embedding COIN’s strategic resource management within a more intuitive and tactile framework.

Why no solo?

Ah, the solo conundrum! It seems in every game’s journey from concept to tabletop, at some point arises the inevitable question on BoardGameGeek’s forums, “But can it be played solo?” While the desire for solo bots is understandable in our often solitary wargamer lives, not every game is destined to echo in the halls of solitude. *A Gest of Robin Hood* is, at its core, a game of deception and strategy between two players, each vying for the King’s favour under the watchful eyes of history.

Now, let’s address the elephant in the room: the element of deception. Robin Hood isn’t one to reveal his position lightly, preferring to hide with his band of Merry Men until the opportune moment arises. This hidden movement mechanism, if not the core thrill of the game, is one of its key features, both mechanically and thematically. The Sheriff, on the other hand, has his own bag of tricks with concealed Carriages carrying unknown goods or potential traps. These elements of hidden information, much like the secret whispers in the courts of old, are vital to the game’s experience, creating a constant tension between the players. Attempting to replicate this with a solo bot would be like making a solitaire mode for an auction game. Sad.

Additionally, it’s important to keep in mind that I conceived *A Gest of Robin Hood* not just as a game but as a gateway, an invitation to the grand hall of COIN games. It is designed to encourage players to find someone to play with, either to discover the series together or to introduce them to it. Hopefully players will engage in a fun strategic duel where every decision is a brushstroke on the canvas of medieval England, making them both want to continue exploring what historical games have to offer. This experience isn’t conceived as a solitary stroll through Sherwood Forest.

Could one wander the paths of Nottinghamshire alone? Very probably. I encourage any solo players to come up with their own solitaire variants, and I will engage with them with excitement [developer’s note: he will not]. Yet, for me, the true essence of *A Gest of Robin Hood*, as I designed it, is to be enjoyed in good company.

Design influences

Childhood memories had a major impact on my design of the game, from the Disney movie I watched dozens of times as a kid to my youthful gaming experiences. Most notably, the experiences captured in the pages of Choose Your Own Adventure books were the seeds of narrative engagement elements I wanted to add into the game. Those books were the golden circles where my brother and I embarked on fantastic quests, full of hard choices leading to treasures, glory, or death. This love for narrative choice steered the design of the Traveller deck in *A Gest of Robin Hood*, a mechanism offering players options, each unfolding a different shade of the medieval tapestry, reminiscent of the adventure books of my youth.

Avalon Hill’s *The Legend of Robin Hood* from 1979 was the first strategic game I played about Robin Hood and the Merry Men. The random mechanism of traveller counters gave me the idea for a more fleshed-out Traveller system in my own design. This mechanism, initially a simple chit-pull used as a tribute, evolved into a core part of the game and the one that I am most fond of.

Colonial Twilight was my entry point in the COIN series and I owe this game a lot. It also showcased that the essence of COIN could be distilled into a two-player setup, even without the multi-factional chaos that makes the system so unique. The Algerian war backdrop and Brian Train’s design were not just a gameplay experience, but also a major inspiration. The way *Colonial Twilight* depicted a two-player type of insurgency and counterinsurgency showed a path for how *A Gest of Robin Hood*

could encapsulate the essence of COIN, albeit in a medieval setting. Beyond that, I feel like most young designers interested in exploring new topics from a different angle owe a lot to Brian for opening the way.

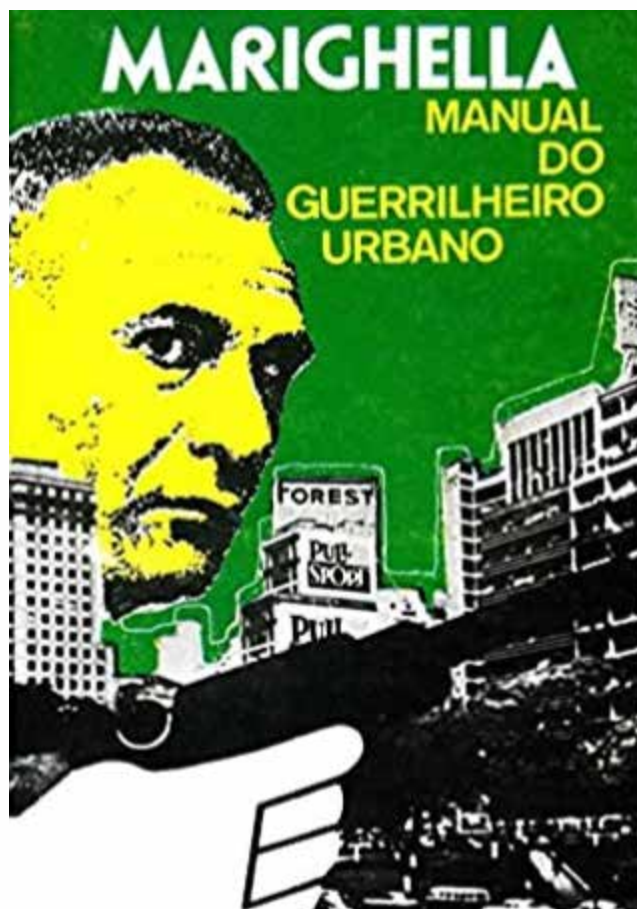


I often joke about the fact that my game is a ‘prequel’ to *The British Way*. *A Gest of Robin Hood* shares a parallel journey of design with this COIN multipack and it wouldn’t exist without it. The innovative sequence of play, the weightiness of events, and the narrative driven faction dynamics in *The British Way* were critical elements that I needed to make my game the way it is. Stephen Rangazas’ ability to make every event count, even in a tightly-wound action economy, set a benchmark for how events in *A Gest of Robin Hood* could drive the narrative while keeping the strategic core intact. I owe a massive debt to Stephen’s work, but, beyond that, without his support and encouragement I probably wouldn’t have finished this design.

The reception

Gene initially objected to the politics of the game, but not for the reason you might think... I remember a fiery discussion where he told me, “This game reflects the outdated and frankly degenerate foco theory, you are either a revisionist or a fool”. When I asked what could be done to make the design fit GMT’s ideological orthodoxy, he let loose and shouted: “THIS DESIGN NEEDS MORE CITIES!” All the while, he was throwing multiple copies of Marighella’s *Minimanual* in my direction. Now, while this anecdote might make Gene sound like a tough leader, I have to admit that his lively way of thinking really pushed me to make the game the best it could be. For that, I am grateful for his wisdom.

[Developer’s note: as you can see, Fred has a lively imagination that is surely to his credit as a designer.]



Once the game was in good shape, Stephen Rangazas came up with the idea of running a tournament on the COIN Players Discord server as a kind of playtest, before listing the game on GMT’s P500. This was a cool way to give back to the community that had helped me shape and develop the game, and it also served as a great stress test for the game’s engine. The tournament went brilliantly, it confirmed our thoughts on the game’s balance and pointed out a couple of areas that needed a bit of tweaking. By the time it wrapped up, we had a solid game ready for pre-orders.

Once GMT announced the game, one thing that really made my day was seeing that people who aren’t usually into traditional wargames started showing interest. That was a solid hint that my approach might actually be working. Among these folks was Rodney Smith from *Watch It Played*, a guy I have a ton of respect for, and to whom I owe a lot of the game’s visibility, since he has mentioned it multiple times on his show.

Now, I’m just crossing my fingers and hoping that this game will find its crowd, get played a whole lot, and hopefully get new players excited about a series that I reckon is one of the most innovative ways to portray conflict in board games over the past decade.

How to play this game

L'autore offre insomma al fruitore un'opera da finire: non sa esattamente in qual modo l'opera potrà essere portata a termine, ma sa che l'opera portata a termine sarà pur sempre la sua opera, non un'altra, e che alla fine del dialogo interpretativo si sarà concretata una forma che è la sua forma, anche se organizzata da un altro in un modo che egli non poteva completamente prevedere: poiché egli in sostanza aveva proposto delle possibilità già razionalmente organizzate, orientate e dotate di esigenze organiche di sviluppo.

– Umberto Eco, *Opera Aperta*, 1962

[Developer's note: I asked Fred to include a translation of this quotation, but he insisted that we had to include a "sign" for the Italian audience.]

I want to conclude these notes by offering some hints to players, to incentivise them to make this play experience their own. I believe that once a design is made public, the creator starts losing some of their ownership, and it goes to the community. In that sense I had a few thoughts on how the game could expand from its original design.

The first idea I had was inspired by *Thousand Year Old Vampire*, a solo RPG that I started playing in the late development stage of this game. This game has a fascinating approach to prompt journaling, and I believe that it is possible to include some of this in *A Gest Of Robin Hood*. At the end of each Ballad, players could display the Event cards in a way akin to a Tarot reading (see section 2.3 of this Playbook).

I also wanted players to integrate some of their ideas into the game. The storyworld of Robin Hood is rich, and there is a lot of potential to include new Events and Travellers. For this reason I have asked GMT to provide blank card templates to be available to download for you to make your own cards. Have fun and share them around. I am looking forward to seeing the creativity of the community.

Finally, as I have said multiple times in those notes, I see this game as a gateway. In that sense you should feel free to slightly adjust the rules to help out younger or less experienced players. Give them more Royal Favour, or more pieces to start with, and guide them in their first moves beyond the openings suggested on the back of the player mats.

Make this game yours.

– Fred Serval, London, UK, October 2023

Developer Notes

Fred has already said a lot, so I will keep my own developer notes short and sweet. I got to know Fred a few years ago, around when I was first getting interested in wargaming, and he has ever since been a constant companion in my boardgaming life. One of my earliest jobs for GMT was working on the final stages of his first game, *Red Flag Over Paris*, so I am already well-acquainted with how much effort can be required to get Fred to finish a project. He is constantly approaching me with fascinating and unexpected new ideas for games, and has been known to come up with a whole draft of a new game while washing the dishes, but when it comes to pinning down the details he needs the help of a more grounded mind like my own. Perhaps we could say that I am the Little John to his Robin Hood, helping him complete his ill-planned schemes, ready to rescue him from prison if necessary, and always on hand to knock him into a river if he gets a bit too big for his boots.

Fred's concept for *A Gest of Robin Hood* made complete sense the moment I heard it – what better setting could there be to explore medieval counterinsurgency, the dynamics of peasant revolt, and the myth of foco leadership! Of course, the details still needed to be pinned down (perhaps with a precisely shot arrow), and many aspects of the game changed dramatically during development. Originally the Sheriff's Carriages were placed *in* Nottingham and had to reach the edge of the map (perhaps heading towards London, although the direction of exit didn't matter). With some help from our friend and early tester Shaun O'Keeffe we quickly realized that this didn't really make much sense, and that it would be better for the Carriages to be generated in the Parishes and then move *towards* Nottingham, which made the process of wealth extraction much clearer and also helped to give the game a more self-contained feel (one might even say claustrophobic). There were several other refinements of this kind along the way, and Fred also enjoyed surprising me with new ideas, ideally introduced in the middle of a public demonstration of the game. However, eventually I put my foot down and insisted that we had to draw the line somewhere, or else the game would never get finished. As Fred has described eloquently in his own notes, what you have before you is therefore just a single snapshot (although hopefully a well-composed one) of an ongoing process of iteration, and you should feel free to adapt or modify it as you see fit. Please share your experiences of the game with us, and who knows, perhaps some of your ideas might even make their way into an eventual expansion...

– Joe Dewhurst, Glasgow, Scotland, October 2023



Acknowledgements

I already acknowledged a lot of people and their work in my designer notes, people without whom this game wouldn't have come to be in this form. I would like to focus on one specific person in this section: the developer of this game, Joe Dewhurst.

I often call Joe my design husband, so in a way you could interpret the following paragraph as a designer's love letter. In my designer notes I already explained the context in which this game came to be. An important aspect was joining the COIN community on Discord, and more importantly meeting with Joe. It is intriguing how in this digital age someone can go rapidly from being an *étranger* to someone I talk to on a daily basis, exchange ideas with, play games and share hardships with. The years that passed while working on *A Gest Of Robin Hood* weren't the easiest ones on a personal level, as I had to go through issues that significantly affected my ability to design. Each step of the way Joe was by my side, pushing me forward and collecting the pieces to make the game the coherent design that it is today. Without his intelligence, creativity, and empathy this game wouldn't exist, but I would also most probably have stopped designing games after *Red Flag Over Paris*. In a way, I owe him this game and all of the ones to come, and for this I will forever be thankful.

On a lighter note here are some other people I would like to specifically thank:

- Stephen Rangazas and his partner Jordan Malone. Beyond Stephen's obvious source of inspiration for this game, these two's enthusiasm and support for this design really got me going in times of doubt.
- My partner, Julia Coulibaly, whose complete lack of interest in my game design work is a humbling reminder not to take any of this too seriously.
- Volko Ruhnke for coming up with such an elegant and versatile system, but also for being a gentleman and a scholar. His ongoing support in my gaming related endeavours are greatly appreciated and I treasure our discussions, especially when we disagree.
- Jason Carr for being annoying but always putting my ideas straight. I am looking forward to being inspired by his own designs.
- Tim Porter, a.k.a. the Boardgame Bloke, an example of how wholesome the community can be. Beyond making the Vassal module for playtest, Tim is one of those people that work on the ground to make the wargaming hobby as welcoming as it can be.

- Luke Evison and his room mate Vincent. The latter was the winner of the playtest tournament and helped to adjust balance. I fondly remember a whole evening spent with him discussing all different openings to the game to figure out a possibly unstoppable Robin Hood strategy. The former is a friend that I have the chance to play with regularly. His design skills helped me soften some sharp edges in the final stages of development. I hope I will have the chance to work with him on a design one day, definitely a designer and developer to keep an eye on.
- Chechu Nieto and Robert Altbauer, the two artists that gave this game its sumptuous graphical style. Working with Chechu was an honor and a great way to reinforce the lineage between this game and the COIN series. Robert's illustrations are to me the key element to bring the narrative into the game. I wish to have the luck to work with them again.
- The members of the COIN Discord community, a space that was critical in my designer journey. The possibility to exchange on design with brilliant people like Cory Graham, Joe Schmidt, Saverio Spagnolie, Shaun O'Keefe and many others is an amazing experience.
- And of course, all the people that took part in playtesting, and also the ones who just showed interest in the game. Your enthusiasm is the reason I make these games.

As I write these final words of the playbook, I feel a sense of achievement and gratefulness towards all the people that made this game possible. From the ones involved in the design process to all who will make the game a physical object, shipped across the world to find its players. The ethos of this game design is an echo to Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta*, an object that will be collectively completed, in the same way that the character of Robin Hood is itself what we collectively decide to make of it. I hope you will enjoy what I tried to do with this design.

Play well.

– Fred Serval, London, UK, October 2023

Credits

Game Design

Fred Serval

Game Development

Joe Dewhurst

Original COIN Series Design

Volko Ruhnke

ICS Series Development

Jason Carr

Art Director

Justin Martinez

Map Design, Card Layout, and Cover Art

Chechu Nieto

Card Illustrations

Robert Altbauer

Counter Design

Terry Leeds

Mats, Screens, and Package Design

Justin Martinez

Booklet Design

Caitlin Land, Justin Martinez

Production Coordinator

Kai Jensen

Lead Playtesters

Stephen Rangazas, Jordan Malone

Playtesters

Gianmaria Amato, Erich Chaves, Vincent Aranzana-Climent, Moritz Beneke, Deborah Brabyn, Brandon Datwyler, Aymeric Dubos, Maurice Engels, Luke Evison, Einar Faanes, Per Fischer, Lukas Gehring, Luccas Gissoni, Cory Graham, Martin Graßhoff, Sig de la Guyenne, Michael Harvath, Charles Hildebrandt, Konner Howell, Taylor Howell, Drew Lawson, Fabian Lüthe, Sean McKittrick, Tomáš Marek, Aman Matthews, Scott Moore, Harvey Morris, Shaun O’Keeffe, Joshua Clark Orkin, Claude Pallavidino, Ravel Riik, Jan Sander, Saverio Spagnolie, Alessandro Vitale e Samuele Sessi, Russ Wetli, Kale Widell, Ibai Zabaleta Ibero, Unai Zabaleta Rodriguez

Background Consultants

Eren Dewhurst, Stuart Ellis-Gorman

Proofreaders

Deborah Brabyn, Julia Coulibaly, Brendan Irvin, Fabio Spelta, Pierre Vagneur-Jones, MORE TBC

Executive Producers

Tony Curtis, Rodger McGowan, Andy Lewis, Gene Billingsley, and Mark Simonitch

