

Athens

The Birth of Politics

Design Notes

If you are coming to this game from *Founding Fathers*, you may already realize that the ideas and practices that led to the American republic owe a debt to ancient Athens. All of America's founders studied Greek philosophy, drawing inspiration from its morals, ethics and the sense of independence, all fundamental principles of any democratic society. Plato's writings on mixed government, an idea fundamental to separation of powers, were not only important, but directly flowed from the experience of government in the period of the game. Aristotle wrote on this topic as well. Thomas Jefferson, who read and spoke the language, admired many aspects of the ancient Greeks. He agreed with many of their precepts, such as the idea that man is measure of all things. This was the groundwork for his belief in humanism, which recognized no barriers to the use of the mind, and which sought to make all knowledge useful to man. Jefferson particularly admired the Greek conception of man's relationship to himself.

Creating a game in which the government type changes, forcing players to cope, has been my desire ever since reading the ancient historian Polybius, who discussed in a rather scientific way the how government forms evolved regularly in the ancient world. When the form of government changes, those on the top and bottom tend to change places. Can you see such an event coming? How do you prepare for it? Or will you be the one actually triggering it? Once the change happens, how do you cope? All should make for interesting challenges.

The best structure for such a game was a major puzzle, however. It was only by creating *Found-*

ding Fathers that it became clear that a character-based system would probably work well. It was also originally to be set in Syracuse, but study of Athens revealed a richer and more resonant setting. Moreover, learning about the reforms of Cleisthenes that put everyone into one of 30 tribes, dramatically realigning all the votes, made me wanted to see how that would work out.

Originally play was to start with the reforms of Solon the Lawgiver and continue all the way to the conquest by Alexander the Great, but it grew too large. Consequently, I lopped off the first (Oligarchy and Tyranny) and the last (the coming of Alexander the Great) eras.

It seemed interesting to force each player to be a particular **class**. Aristocrats lived in the city, but had extensive wealth, land holdings and followers. Merchants/Artisans tended to live on the coast either as traders or craftsmen. Farmers lived in the interior, growing wheat, figs, olives and sheep. The challenge was to make each class distinct, but maintain balance as well as competition within classes. Otherwise, for example, it would only be possible to play in a six-player configuration.

The practice of **Ostracism** inspired the implementation of **Popularity**; it was the Athenian way to handle the situation of strongly disagreeing leaders. The one most thought correct would stay and lead; the other would shuffle off into temporary exile and divisiveness would end, at least for a moment. That it can be a mystery who will win the game is just a happy by-product.

The voting of the **Thetes** in favor of war reflect the fact that most wars required fleets. Athens paid good money for rowers, representing a good source of employment for the Thetes, but also reflecting the dangers inherent in direct democracy.

That passing a **Law** does not require a vote reflects the ability of sophists or demagogues to ram popular legislation through the Assembly.

For a while now I've thought that **persuasion** as practiced in *The Republic of Rome* is both too easy and not realistic. In the game you can decide you want to ask someone to join your faction and like as not, a persuasion party starts up. In real life wouldn't it be a more gradual process? You would express your interest. They would think about it. You would think more about it. And then you would see. When you want to persuade someone, you start the process one turn in advance. This affords the target faction some form of early response, including making the target the Faction Leader. At which point you may switch targets. But the target faction may regret changing their faction leader. And in any case, if players feel the need to pick on a leading player, they can only protect one character in this way.

Assassination in ancient Athens didn't occur at legislative meetings, but privately, so in this game it occurs during player turns. This turns out to solve two problems: multiple players wanting to do it at the same time and handling proposals when one of its principals has died.

We don't have birth years for most of the characters in the game, thus the **relative ages**. The queue is a loop so you never need to slide chits around. We don't have any statues or paintings for most of them either.

Unlike *Founding Fathers*, it is possible that the **leader** does not change all that often. Leading Statesman could hold power for many years. For example, Pericles held sway from 461 to 429. (See the end of the [Historical Timeline](#) for others' time spans.) But this is a fragile post as the Leader cannot go to war as often as the best generals and thus becomes vulnerable to Ostracism. If Ostracism is not in effect, you can find it in the discards or steal it via Intrigue.

Although it requires more cards, it seemed fun to avoid family cards and only use **actual characters**, many of whom have interesting personal stories to include. Actually many of them deserve longer backgrounds, but a card holds only so

much.

Something else that bothers about *The Republic of Rome* is that players make tactical decisions during what is ostensibly a perfunctory phase. So **redistributing funds** is something you now do during your turn, and you have to decide whether it's important enough to do versus other activities you might pursue. In real life it would probably have been a non-trivial and time-consuming task to get faction members to make contributions.

Public Reaction and Trials were a big part of Athenian life and have their role here.

The **Ten Tribes** voting system has proven unpopular with some play testers, though with practice you can make it work efficiently. Fortunately there are two easy remedies: as well – either go to the Council of 500 system or never instantiate it. I preferred to keep it in the rules so that players could see how uncertain were the first steps toward representative Democracy. The Ancient Athenians tried things that didn't always work out perfectly, but labored patiently until they could evolve a better system. It's kind of fun to speculate that what irritates modern players of this game also irritated the Athenians in real life!

Changing the government type occurs in case of serious defeat in the case of Democracy, as actually occurred in Athens for a while. Becoming a Tyrant requires a Coup. If the Tyranny expansion ever appears, there will be two methods of transcending it: assassination or conspiracy.

There's no support for **three players** because there is too much tendency toward an unbalanced two-on-one situation. Later there may be rules for a virtual player to permit this configuration if it's of interest.

Finally, for the expression "**Act of Zeus**" see Sophocles' play *Women of Trachis* where after many tragic events the final passage relates "There is nothing here which is not Zeus".

– Rick Heli, November 9,, 2018