

History of the game: Great Fire: London 1666

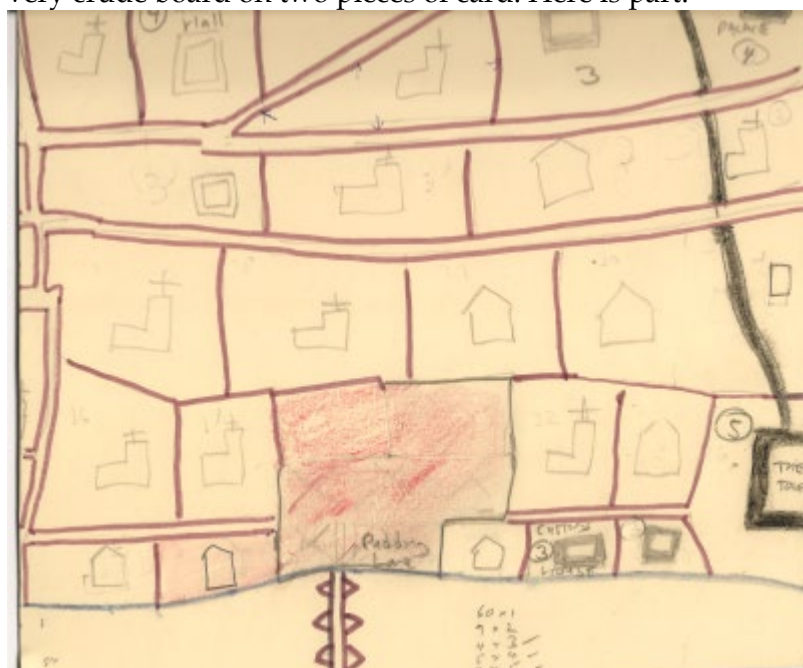
Late at night in a bar at Essen in 2007 several of the UKGE organisers fell into a discussion common no doubt to the many gamers who attend - ideas for board games. Most of the ideas lead nowhere, but I had a beginning of a concept for a game involving some disaster and trying to survive it. The initial idea was far from a game about the Great Fire of London - it was actually about British soldiers trying to escape the collapse of the army at Isandlwana on the eve of the battle of Rorke's Drift in 1879. That game never seemed to work but did include some movement cards intended to move the fleeing soldiers north, east, south or west. The mechanic clearly could work as a way of showing how the wind was blowing and so whilst I was working on it the Great Fire of London popped into my mind.

Ferry Spiel

I had been doing some reading about the Great Fire as part of research into a historical novel (that eventually became my Historical Fantasy Novel, [The Last Seal](#)) and it occurred to me that there could be a game in it. So in October 2008 I ordered this map from Amazon ('Hollar's 'Exact' Surveigh' of the City of London, 1667', in *Leake's Survey of the City After the Great Fire of 1666 Engraved By W. Hollar, 1667*):



It was actually drawn in 1667 (the year after the fire) and showed the extent of the damage as there was a significant number of disputes about what streets and properties had burnt down. Using this I sketched a very crude board on two pieces of card. Here is part:



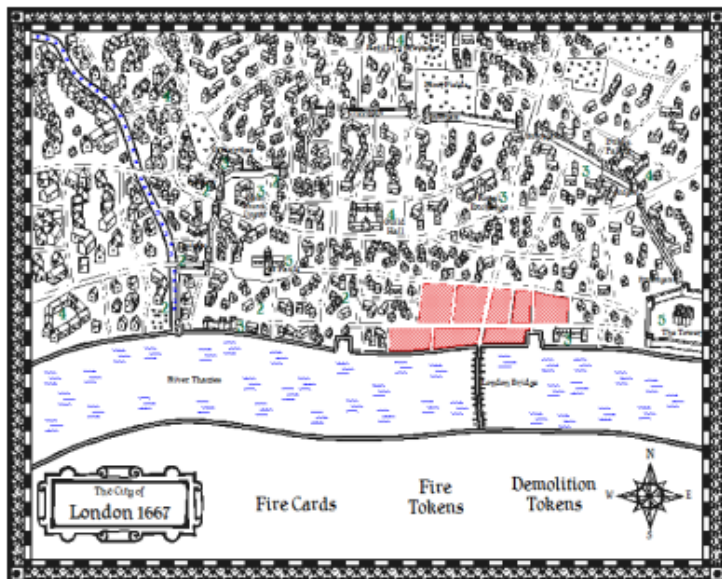
I also produced hand drawn fire move cards (those N, E, S and W cards from the abandoned Zulu war game). Using wooden counters picked up at the previous Essen, the first Great Fire Game was created in time for **Ferrycon 2008**. This term was coined by a pal, Pete Heatherington after we both agreed to take early prototypes of our games on the cross-channel ferry. As we sat down to play through the 90-minute crossing a Welsh Male choir on board (and mostly at or near the bar) started to sing '*Men of Harlech*'. My father, who is Welsh, abandoned the game claiming patriotic duty and went and joined them. Thus, the first play test of Great Fire took place against this backdrop. (Incidentally Ferrycon still takes place each October Apart from 2020 of course when there was no real-world Essen. So, if you see a group of folk huddled round cardboard boards and wooden pieces come and ask to play.)

In the very first game players were trying to run away from the fire (you can still see the influence of the Isandlwana game there) as opposed to mainly being concerned about their houses. Later research revealed that the death toll was very low and that a focus over physical property damage was more appropriate.

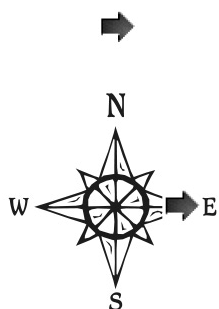
The play test was naturally bumpy (especially due to the ferry) but showed potential and so on the drive through Belgium, Holland and Germany we continued the discussion and analysed the combinations of numbers of houses, districts and players that might work, eventually falling on the old Babylonian magic numbers 60 and 120 etc which allowed numbers divisible by 2,3,4,5 and 6. More purchases of bits took place that Essen, including wooden houses and on my return I was ready to make a proper prototype.

Early Prototype

Below: The First attempt at the game board using Campaign Cartographer. Note that I made an error and the date of the original map I copied (1667) was brought across!



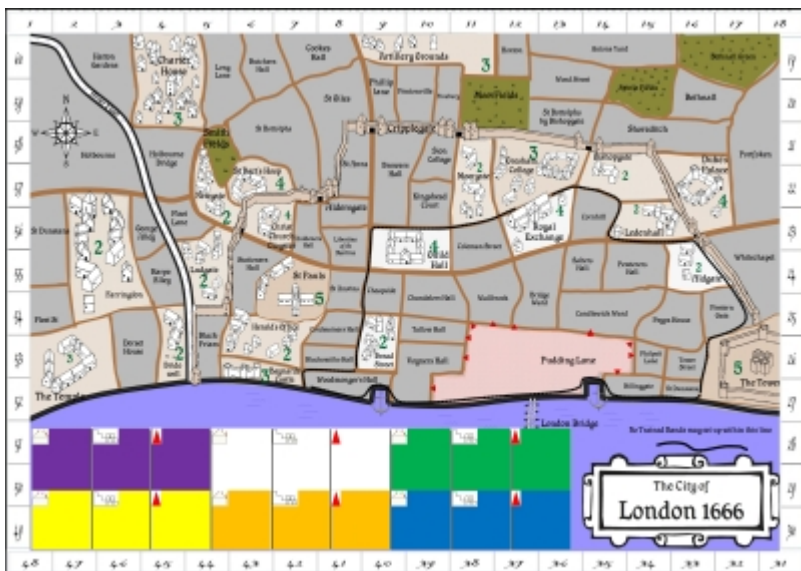
I also produced some Fire movement cards - crude versions which looked like this:



At this stage players got 2 pts for each house that survived and that was about it. It was still fun, but it was obvious that we needed something to strive for in the game beyond just burning other player's houses. Suddenly inspiration hit me in the middle of an after game debrief - we needed objective cards.

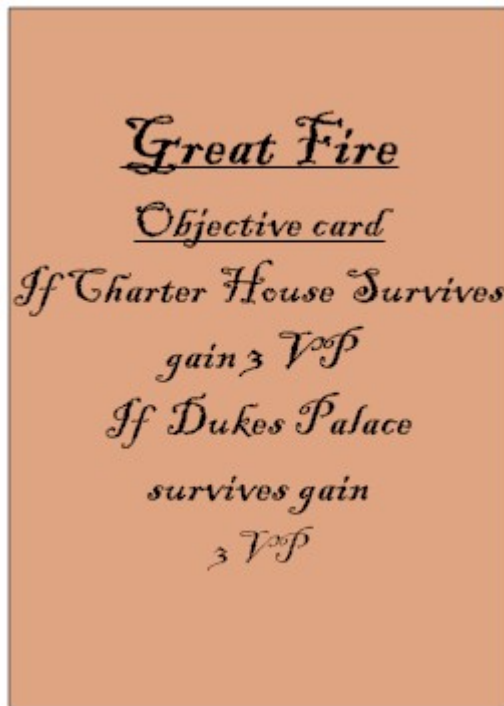
Midcon 2008

Midcon was a 200 person or so attendance board game convention that occurs in November in Birmingham (I believe it moved to Derby later). Although lacking in much trade element, its size makes for a nice friendly weekend. In 2008 It was a chance to twist a couple of arms and get an opinion on the game from the gamer. I actually ran 3 play test sessions that weekend. We used these two maps:

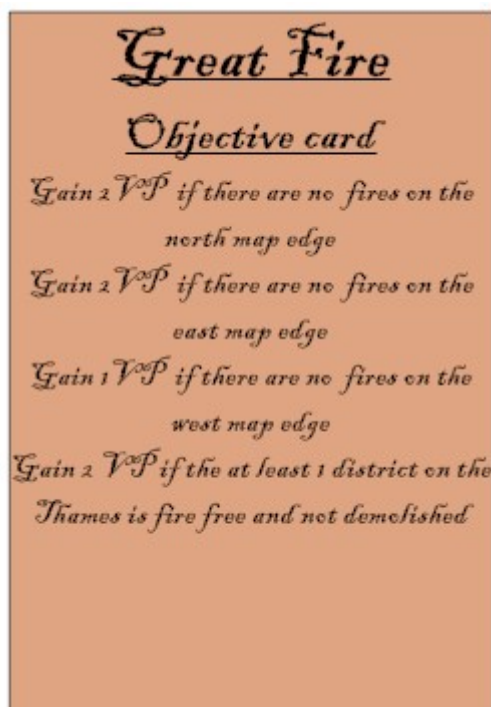


You can see that the date is still wrong on the former but that we are starting to get nearer the appearance of the final version. The district around pudding lane is now delineated. I am playing about with having houses in all districts or just some. I also now have objectives - the lighter shaded areas. However, at this stage we have more than the 12 we ended up with.

Here are some early objective cards:



At this stage I also had a number of other objectives:



We played around with many such ideas but found there was a high element of luck in what cards you got. In the end settled on the 12 objectives in the final version of the game. A lot of stats were then drawn from playtest to show which properties tended to survive and which more often burnt and that was what led to the allocation of victory points.

At this stage the game setup was still very random and massive element of luck could apply to where your houses ended up. It was clear that a LOT of work needed doing to knock this game into shape.

Early 2009 Version

By now the eventual publisher (in this first version I was only the designer not the publisher) was heavily involved having played the game at Midcon. Over the winter of 2008 to 2009 various ideas and concepts

were tried. It was quite a fun period several groups were playing it a lot and ideas were flying all over the place. Some many dozens of emails later and the game started to tighten up.



Now we have a score track appearing, we have a map grid, we have 4 zones to the board to make for more even spread of houses and the 12 objectives had been mostly settled upon. We also developed 3 sets of objective cards to ensure everyone got one near to the fire, 1 middling and one further out.

The cards had a map reference to help find them (as shown on the Anton’s Yard card that became Shoreditch in the end.). Eventually a mini map on each card with a red dot assisted location whilst also removing all language apart from proper names.



UK Games Expo 2009/Essen 2009

The game was now ready for exposure to the public again after 6 months development from Midcon. The result was pretty good support and enthusiasm.



Above: a playtest at UK Games Expo June 2009

Below: A playtest at Essen Spiel, October 2009



The play tests at Expo and Essen threw up a couple of minor issues and niggles. These were about the balance of objective cards which were tweaked further. There was also a look at the use of gunpowder or the tendency not to bother to use them to create fire breaks as intended as you needed to go and get them from the Tower which people did not feel was worthwhile, apart from my father who spent an entire game once collecting gunpowder and taking it to every objective and blowing them up! From that experience came the rule that

objectives could not be blown up. In addition, tokens showing gunpowder were dispersed around the board, making for easier collection. These tokens might also have other symbols. One example was the double fire move tokens that allowed fire to jump forward occasionally, perhaps if it appeared to be stalling. That same issue (the fire's progression stalling) led to introduction of Fire Priority rules – so that if it could burn a house it would and the bringing in of Fire Intensify cards in the deck.

Midcon 2009/Dragonmeet 2009

Initially these Fire Intensity Cards (which meant additional fire cones were added to the board) were random. More play testing ensued and it was clear that some mechanism to evenly spread these amongst the players was needed and a suggestion by Andy Hopwood (Hopwood Games) after a playtest at Midcon 2009 led to the birth of the Fire Stack cards which not only controlled the game length but gave each player 1 or 2 of these opportunities. It required mock games when I used my daughter's cuddly toys as varied numbers of pretend players to get the fire stack cards right. More games at Dragonmeet in 2009 showed these worked well.

Push to production.

At this stage the game mechanics were now solid and the publisher approached the artist Andreas Resch and now the work began on making the game look great. There was a lot of discussion about components and at one time the fire fighters were little wooden pumps and the fire was a flame shape – as shown in this image from UK GamesExpo in 2010 (but abandoned later as not functional):



Making the Game

Finally, the game design was settled on and all that remained was to get the game printed and ready for Essen in 2010. There was a last-minute hitch when the first bag of components arrived and disappointingly

the fire cones had been replaced with bullet shaped cones which did draw some criticism. Also, two of the house colours were wrong (in particular the orange houses had become red which did cause some confusion with the fire colour).



From this I learnt a lesson which was useful when I started publishing games myself – pay close attention to components.

Essen 2010: the release of the game

Despite that last-minute issue, we headed to Essen with excitement and I must say seeing the games for the first time on the shelves is a moment to remember.



We now waited to see how well the game went down. The publisher had allocated 2 demo tables to the game but it soon became apparent that as many as 6 were needed at the peak. At one point the game appeared in the top 15 games on the BGG Essen 'hotness' live charts which was exciting.



Post Release

The reception for the game was gratifying. It was great to see it being played at events around the UK and the world, as far away as Brazil. We sent 300 copies to the USA but demand there led to Pandasaurus Games obtaining the rights and running a successful kickstarter with a print run of 3000. That version corrected some of the problems with the original version – so the correct shaped fire cones were returned in this version.

We found that sales of Great Fire were (and are) steady and so when the rights to the game reverted to me from Pandasaurus a few years ago Medusa Games made a new 3rd edition which finally sorted out the house colour and meeple colour problems. That is the current version of the game.

2 Player Version

In 2010 there was no demand for 2 player games. Over the last few years demand for 2 player games has increased and so in 2020, to mark the 10th anniversary of the original game release we brought out a small pack of cards that allows play by 2 players.



The future

The Great Fire concept is applicable to other great fires in history and we are exploring those. News on this will follow in coming years.

I hope you enjoyed this trip down memory lane. Tips from me on game development is 1)playtest a lot 2)get the game in front of the public as that is the best way to truly testing it 3)play attention to art – it is important 4)keep a close eye on components so you don't get surprised.

Richard Denning -Medusa Games – November 2020.