I am looking at a Discord discussion about a Megagame set early 18th century, just after the war of the Spanish succession. The designer wants to include a large element of colonies. From the work we have done, it seems important to me to identify key elements of a model that such a Megagame could be based on. Are you in a position to identify them and give a brief useful to this designer?

Yes. I think this is an opportunity to give the designer something more valuable than a list of colonial activities or a collection of colonial rules: a conceptual model of the colonial system which can then be translated into a Megagame.

I would approach it in much the same way as we have approached the modelling problems in our other games. Start by identifying the real-world system, its principal actors, the flows of resources and influence, and the feedback mechanisms. Then decide which parts of that system need to be represented explicitly in the game.

There is one particularly important distinction: the colonies should not simply be treated as territories which generate income for their European owners. They were part of a complex, interconnected system involving commerce, finance, naval power, political authority, local populations, indigenous states and international competition.

For a game set around 1713–1720, this is especially important. The Treaty of Utrecht did not produce a settled colonial order. It redistributed important commercial privileges and territories, while leaving considerable scope for competition and conflict.

1. The fundamental model

I would divide the system into six interacting components:

1. European metropolitan states and their governments.
2. Colonial possessions and their administrations.
3. International trade and commercial networks.
4. Maritime power and military protection.
5. Colonial populations and indigenous political entities.
6. Finance, investment and the commercial institutions that connected everything together.

The important thing is that these are not six independent game systems. They are interdependent parts of one system.

For example:

- A government grants a trading monopoly.
- A company invests in ships, infrastructure and trading stations.
- Trade generates revenue and employment.
- Revenue provides taxation and customs income.
- Naval protection makes trade more secure.
- Military expenditure places pressure on government finances.
- Competition from another power creates diplomatic and military tensions.
- Colonial resistance or indigenous opposition can disrupt the entire process.

That is the sort of causal structure which should underpin the game.

2. The six components in more detail

A. Metropolitan politics and imperial strategy

The European powers are not unitary actors. The monarch, ministers, parliament, merchants, financiers and military establishments have different interests.

Relevant variables include:

- Government revenue and borrowing capacity.
- Political stability and ministerial influence.
- Strategic priorities in Europe versus overseas.
- Public and commercial pressure for expansion.
- Competing demands on military and naval resources.
- The relationship between the Crown and chartered companies.

An important design principle is to distinguish the continuing institutions of the state from the government currently controlling them. A change of government should change priorities and policies, not magically replace the entire state.

B. Colonial possessions and administration

Colonies differ substantially in their economic and political characteristics.

I would identify several broad types:

Type	Principal characteristics
Plantation colonies	Sugar, tobacco, labour, land and shipping
Settler colonies	Population, agriculture, land expansion
Trading stations	Trade routes, ports, warehouses and diplomacy
Resource colonies	Furs, timber, minerals and fisheries
Strategic possessions	Naval bases, fortifications and control of routes
Chartered territories	Company administration and commercial monopolies

Each possession should have a small number of characteristics:

- Population and labour availability.
- Economic production.
- Infrastructure and development.
- Political stability.
- Military security.
- Relationship with the metropolitan power.

It is important that ownership and effective control are not necessarily the same thing. A European treaty might transfer sovereignty without giving the new owner effective control of the territory.

The situation in Acadia following Utrecht is a particularly good example. Britain acquired the territory, but the boundaries remained disputed, the French population remained, and indigenous political interests could not simply be disregarded.

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C. International trade and commercial networks

This is probably the economic heart of the colonial model.

I would represent trade as a network of routes connecting production areas, trading stations, ports and metropolitan markets.

The important factors are:

- What is produced.
- Where it is produced.
- Who controls the production.
- Who controls transport.
- Where goods are sold.
- What taxes, duties and profits are collected.
- Whether trade is legal, monopolised or illicit.

Trade should generate different benefits for different participants. The Crown may collect customs revenue, merchants make profits, companies earn dividends, and colonial communities acquire goods and employment.

There should also be competition between legitimate and illicit trade. Colonial trade rarely followed the neat boundaries drawn by European governments.

The British acquisition of the asiento in 1713 is a particularly useful example: it was not simply a territorial gain, but a commercial privilege with considerable political and financial implications.

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D. Maritime power and military protection

This is not just another military subsystem. It is the connective tissue of the entire imperial system.

Naval power affects:

- The security of trade routes.
- The movement of troops and supplies.
- The defence of ports and colonies.
- The ability to blockade an enemy.
- The ability to project power into distant regions.
- The protection of merchant shipping.

There is a direct relationship between naval expenditure and commercial prosperity, but it is not automatic. A navy costs money, and concentrating forces in one theatre creates vulnerabilities elsewhere.

I would also include privateers, piracy and local naval forces, although their importance will vary by region.

The Royal Navy's position following the War of the Spanish Succession provides a particularly important starting asymmetry for the game.

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E. Colonial populations and indigenous political entities

This is an area where a simplistic model could easily become historically misleading.

The European powers did not operate in an empty world. They interacted with:

- Indigenous states and confederations.
- Established trading networks.
- Local rulers and political elites.
- Settler communities.
- Enslaved populations.
- Free and mixed communities.
- Local militias and colonial assemblies.

These groups have interests and agency of their own.

For example, an indigenous polity might negotiate with two European powers, trade with both, support one against the other, or resist both.

Similarly, a colonial assembly might oppose taxation, resist administrative interference or demand military protection.

Enslaved people should not simply appear as a production statistic. The system depended on coerced labour, and resistance, flight, revolt and the actions of enslaved communities could have substantial consequences.

F. Finance, investment and commercial institutions

The financial system links all the other components.

The game should distinguish between:

- Government taxation.
- Government borrowing.
- Private merchant capital.
- Company investment.
- Colonial revenue.
- Commercial credit.
- Military expenditure.

The East India Company and other chartered companies are especially interesting because they were neither ordinary businesses nor simply government departments. They could possess substantial political, military and administrative powers.

This creates a potentially valuable player relationship: the government needs the companies' commercial capabilities and finance, while the companies need political protection and privileges.

The model should allow investment to have delayed returns. Building a port or developing a plantation should not produce immediate wealth.

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3. The interactions are more important than the individual components

I would encourage the designer to think in terms of causal loops rather than six separate sets of rules.

Here are five particularly useful ones.

Loop 1: Commercial expansion

Investment in colonial development

Greater production and trade

Higher profits and tax revenues

More capital available for investment

Reinforcing feedback

Loop 2: Imperial overstretch

Colonial expansion

Increased defence and administration costs

Higher borrowing and taxation

Political and financial pressure

Constraining feedback

Loop 3: Naval-commercial interaction

Naval protection → safer trade → greater commercial revenue → increased capacity to finance naval power.

But the same navy must protect multiple theatres, and its costs compete with other government priorities.

Loop 4: Colonial resistance

Greater metropolitan control → local opposition → disruption and instability → increased military expenditure → further resentment.

Loop 5: International competition

One power's commercial or territorial expansion → perceived threat to another → diplomatic pressure and military preparations → possible conflict → redistribution of territory and trade privileges.

These loops are useful because they create interesting decisions without requiring the designer to script particular historical events.

They also produce unintended consequences, which are often the source of the most interesting Megagame developments.

4. The actual game model

I would resist the temptation to create a separate board game for every colonial possession.

Instead, I would suggest three levels of representation.

Level 1: The metropolitan powers

Each major power has:

- Treasury and borrowing capacity.
- Naval and military resources.
- Political stability.
- Commercial strength.
- Diplomatic relationships.
- Imperial commitments.

Level 2: Colonial regions

Each region has:

- Economic characteristics.
- Population and labour.
- Political relationships.
- Infrastructure.
- Military presence.
- Trade connections.

A region might be represented by a card or a small area on a map, with its characteristics recorded on a common system.

Level 3: Commercial and political interactions

Players can:

- Establish or expand commercial operations.
- Invest in infrastructure.
- Negotiate trading privileges.
- Impose or challenge monopolies.
- Develop settlements.
- Negotiate with indigenous powers.
- Raise local forces.
- Protect or attack trade.
- Seek changes to colonial ownership.
- Challenge metropolitan control.

The critical design feature is that these actions have consequences in other parts of the system.

For example, a company might finance a colonial expedition, but that expedition might create a diplomatic crisis, require naval protection and provoke opposition from a local power.

This is where the Megagame becomes a simulation of an imperial system rather than a sequence of colonial activities.

5. What should the players actually be doing?

This is where I think the designer needs to be particularly careful.

There are several different categories of player, and they should not all be doing the same thing.

Player group	Principal decisions
National governments	Strategy, finance, diplomacy, war
Colonial governors	Administration, taxation, security, development
Trading companies	Investment, trade, monopolies, negotiation
Merchants	Commercial opportunities, credit, smuggling
Naval commanders	Deployment, protection, raiding, blockades
Indigenous powers	Diplomacy, trade, alliances, territorial interests
Colonial political groups	Representation, taxation, autonomy, resistance

Not all of these necessarily need separate teams. Some could be represented through negotiations, Control interactions or special roles within larger teams.

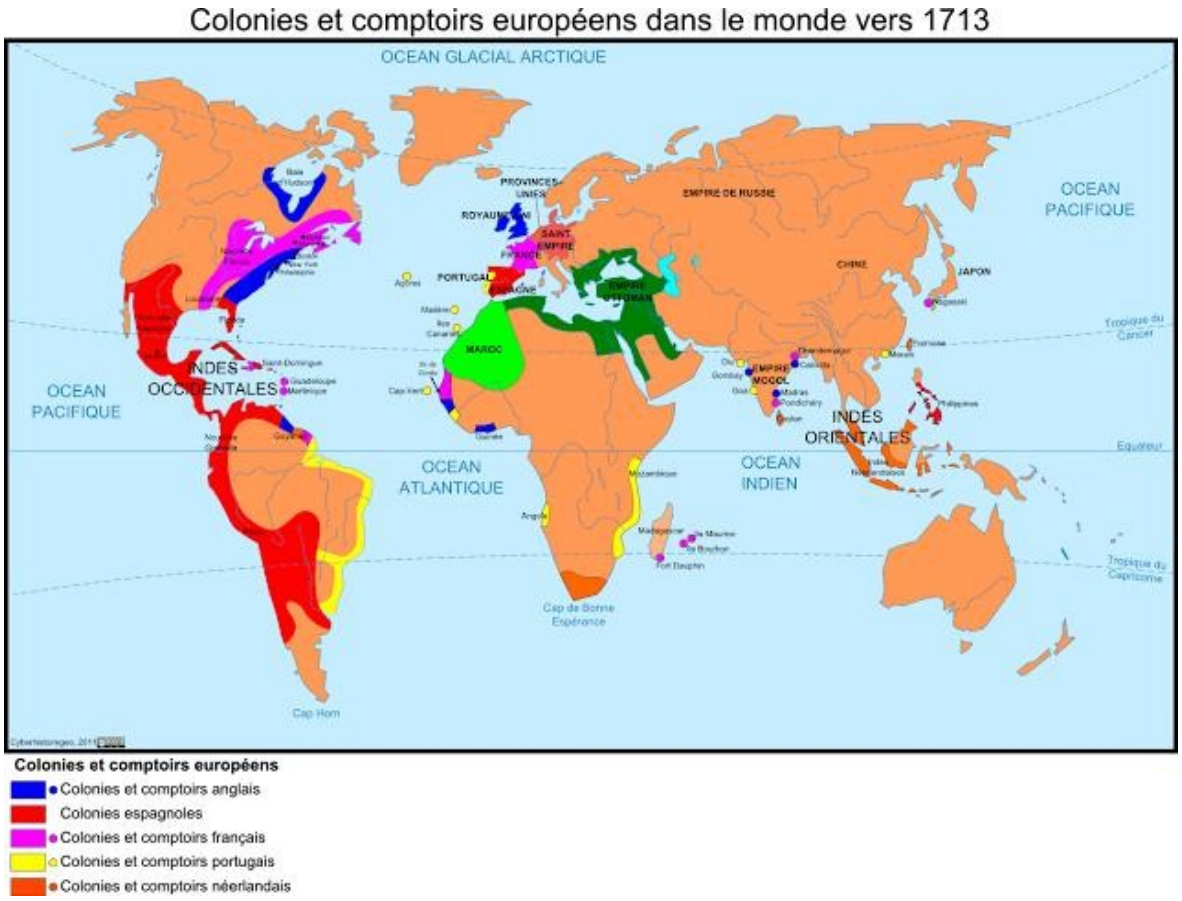
But the distinction matters because it creates competing objectives.

For instance, a merchant may want to trade with a foreign colony even though their government is preparing for war with that country. A colonial governor may want to expand military expenditure when the metropolitan government is trying to reduce costs. A trading company may want political privileges which the government is reluctant to grant.

These are excellent sources of Megagame interaction.

6. Historical calibration: the world of 1713

I would suggest that the designer starts with the actual situation immediately after Utrecht, rather than attempting to construct a generic eighteenth-century colonial world.




A MAP of the
WEST-INDIES
or the Islands of AMERICA
in the NORTH SEA
GULF OF MEXICO
ATLANTIC
GREATER ANTILLES ISL
NORTH SEA
GREAT SOUTH SEA
NEW GRANADA
TERRA FIRM
LOUISIANA
French
English
Variable winds
LUCAYOS or BAHAMA ISLANDS
The ANTILLES Islands
CUBA
The Bay of Campechy
WIL. PATERSON


PACIFIC OCEAN
UNEXPLORED
HUDSON BAY
HUDSON'S BAY COMPANY
NEW FRANCE
NEW-FOUND-LAND
NOVA SCOTIA
NEW ENGLAND
LOUISIANA
Mississippi R.
ENGLISH COLONIES
VIRGINIA
CAROLINAS
ATLANTIC OCEAN
FLORIDA
GULF OF MEXICO
NEW SPAIN
CUBA
HISPANIOLA
CARIBBEAN SEA
NEW GRANADA
NORTH AMERICA, 1713
France
England
Spain
0 1000 Miles
0 1000 Kilometers

The principal powers might include:

- Britain: Increasing commercial and naval strength, important new territorial and commercial gains.
- France: Still a major colonial power, but with considerable financial and military pressures.
- Spain: An extensive American empire, with important questions about commercial control and the relationship between the Crown and colonial authorities.
- The Netherlands: An established commercial and financial power, although increasingly challenged by Britain.
- Portugal: Important Atlantic and Brazilian interests, with its own relationship with Britain.
- Other European powers: Particularly those with interests in the Indian Ocean and Asian trade.

There are also important regional differences. The Caribbean plantation economy is very different from the North American fur trade, which in turn differs from the trading networks of India.

The Treaty of Utrecht provides an excellent starting set of disputes and opportunities. The asiento, Gibraltar, Minorca, Acadia, Newfoundland and Hudson Bay all provide different examples of the relationship between territorial, strategic and commercial gains.

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7. My suggested design principles

If I were advising the designer, I would make the following recommendations.

1. Model relationships, not just possessions. Ownership of a colony is only one element of effective imperial power.

2. Make trade the economic engine. Trade should generate wealth, but its benefits should be distributed among governments, companies, merchants and local interests.

3. Make naval power consequential. It should influence the security and profitability of the whole imperial system.

4. Give local actors agency. Colonial governors, merchants, indigenous powers and colonial populations should be able to influence events.

5. Allow competing objectives. Government, companies and local authorities should not always want the same things.

6. Include delays. Investment, communication, transportation and political decisions all take time. Distance is a fundamental characteristic of this system.

7. Avoid excessive geographical detail. The model should represent economically and politically significant regions, not every settlement.

8. Allow history to emerge. Provide the initial conditions and external pressures, but don't predetermine the outcome.

That last point is particularly important. We want players to create history, not reenact it.

8. A suggested starting specification for the designer

I would actually give the designer the following as the initial brief for developing the game.

An Imperial and Colonial Systems Model

PROPOSED DESIGN BRIEF · c.1713 ONWARDS

Purpose

To model the interaction between European metropolitan powers, their overseas possessions, international commerce and the political and economic interests of colonial and indigenous populations.

Central question

How do European powers acquire, exploit, defend and maintain overseas empires, and how do the economic, political and military consequences of imperial competition affect the balance of power?

Principal model variables

- State finances and borrowing capacity.
- Commercial capital and investment.
- Colonial production and population.
- Trade volume and profitability.
- Naval strength and maritime security.
- Political stability and local autonomy.
- Diplomatic relationships and international competition.

Principal processes

- Trade and commercial development.
- Investment and infrastructure development.
- Taxation and revenue collection.
- Colonial administration.
- Naval deployment and military operations.
- Diplomacy, treaties and commercial privileges.
- Local resistance and political negotiation.

Desired outcome

A dynamic system in which economic success creates opportunities and new commitments, imperial expansion creates both wealth and vulnerability, and political and military decisions continually reshape the international order.

9. One further observation

There is a potentially important distinction between this game and something like Two Brush Strokes.

In Two Brush Strokes, the central problem is the interaction of political authority, economic resources, military power and internal stability within a relatively defined geographical area.

In this proposed game, the system is much more geographically dispersed. It is a network of relationships between metropolitan centres and distant possessions, with different actors exercising different degrees of authority.

I would therefore pay particular attention to information, communication and delegation.

A governor may act before receiving instructions from home. A naval commander may pursue commercial interests of his own. A company may make commitments which its government subsequently has to honour. Local merchants may circumvent metropolitan restrictions.

These are not merely historical curiosities. They are consequences of the system's structure. A recent scholarly study of British naval activity in the Caribbean after Utrecht illustrates precisely how distance, institutional ambiguity and weak oversight could produce independent behaviour by naval officers.

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I would make that an explicit feature of the model rather than trying to control every action centrally.

My overall recommendation: give the designer the six-component model, the five causal loops and the proposed design brief. Encourage them to develop the game around those relationships before deciding on counters, cards, maps or detailed rules.

That is the approach we have been developing in our own Megagame design work: establish what the system is doing, identify the decisions and feedback mechanisms, and only then decide how to represent them in the game.

I think this would give the designer a sound foundation without attempting to design their game for them.

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