

18XX Forever: Railway Time and Fossil Play on the Tabletop

Steven Gotzler

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Every week, thousands of players worldwide spend entire Saturdays laying track across hexagonal maps, calculating profit margins, and manipulating stock prices in elaborate board game simulations of 19th-century railroad development. These games require no computers, yet their players voluntarily perform the complex mathematical labor of capitalist accumulation for hours on end—sometimes four, six, or eight hours in a single session. This extended abstract proposes to examine the 18XX series of board games as cultural artifacts that mediate contemporary relationships to time, capital, and ecological crisis, bringing together game studies, material culture studies, and the energy humanities to analyze how these games reproduce the temporal logics of what Andreas Malm terms "fossil capital" while offering players a form of nostalgic refuge through the displacement of play.

The 18XX system refers to an interconnected family of board games originating with Francis Tresham's *1829* (1974), each title named for a year marking railway development's beginning in a particular region. Unlike typical "eurogames" that abstract economic relations into streamlined mechanics, 18XX titles meticulously model the operations of 19th-century finance capital: stock manipulation, corporate mergers, dividend payments, and the transformation of landscapes into profit-generating transportation networks. Players assume the role of investor-capitalists, managing multiple railroad corporations while balancing personal wealth accumulation against corporate solvency. The games are almost entirely deterministic—chance plays virtually no role beyond initial seating order—positioning players as rational optimizers whose success depends entirely on calculation.

Drawing on Malm's *Fossil Capital* (2016), this project proposes the concept of fossil play to describe recreational activities that both depend upon and reproduce the temporal and spatial logics that underwrote the transition to fossil-fueled industrial capitalism. Malm argues that the shift from water to steam power in early 19th-century Britain was driven not by thermodynamic efficiency but by the need for temporal control: "capitalist property relations of early nineteenth-century Britain had produced *their own form of temporality*, which, after entering a moment of acute contradiction, had to reorder nature" (Malm, 193). Unlike the flow of water, which followed "its own clock—not that of the factory" (Malm, 192), steam could be

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activated at will, enabling manufacturers to impose factory time on production. The 18XX system encodes precisely this temporal logic: players operate railroad corporations whose value depends on the relentless optimization of routes, the efficient deployment of trains, and the calculated obsolescence of older technologies—all measured against the abstract time of operating rounds and the inexorable depletion of the game's bank.

This project analyzes 18XX games through two overlapping armatures of futurity: railway time and futures markets. Wolfgang Schivelbusch's *The Railway Journey* (1977) traces how railways effected what contemporaries called the "annihilation of space and time" a transformation through which "nineteenth-century people encountered the new conditions of their lives; they encountered themselves as moderns, as dwellers within new structures of regulation and need" (Schivelbusch, Foreword). Railway development was inextricable from a parallel revolution in financial temporality: new mechanisms for stock speculation in futures markets that treated anticipated profit as present value. The 18XX system models both armatures. Players experience railway time through the relentless uniformity of operating rounds and the transformation of abstracted landscape into routes and networks for profit generation. Simultaneously, players engage in futures speculation: buying shares at low prices, timing dividend payments to inflate stock value, and "dumping" companies on opponents before inevitable decline. The games literalize the temporal abstraction whereby "time is money" became encoded in market mechanisms. Share prices rise and fall based on calculated expectations of future revenue, and victory depends not on building the most efficient railroad but on correctly timing purchases and sales to maximize personal wealth.

Building on game studies scholarship, this analysis situates 18XX games within theorizations of play time and game time. Jesper Juul's influential model delineates game temporality around a "basic duality of play time... and event time" (Juul 2004), producing what he terms a persistent "now." In 18XX games, this persistent now takes on particular historical weight: players are locked perpetually in the temporal frames of 19th-century railroad capitalism, inhabiting the year 18XX forever. Christopher Hanson's *Game Time* (2018) argues that games' temporal "malleability, navigability, and possibility" (Hanson, 2) is often structured by repetition and recursion. In 18XX games the recursive structure of stock rounds and operating rounds creates temporal manipulation built into the game's fundamental architecture: players must constantly calculate future states, anticipating how present actions will compound across subsequent rounds, internalizing the speculative temporality of financial markets as a mode of strategic thinking. The question is not whether other games encode fossil-capitalist temporalities — many do, in attenuated or aestheticized form — but how 18XX games stage these temporal logics with unusual transparency, in the historical idiom from which they originally emerged, rather than abstracting them behind the streamlined mechanics of contemporary euro-design.

The material components of 18XX games—hexagonal track tiles, paper money, cardboard stock certificates, and wooden or plastic train tokens—also participate in the tactile reproduction of fossil capital's logic. When players place tiles to transform blank hexes into profitable routes and trace routes from city to city, they perform in miniature the landscape transformation Malm identifies as central to the fossil economy, enacting Schivelbusch's "annihilation of space by time." When they manipulate stock prices through carefully timed purchases and sales, they rehearse

the speculative operations of 19th-century finance capital. Yet the ludic frame of play distances these operations from their material consequences: the "slow violence" of extraction and emission that accompanied historical railroad development registers only as increased revenue potential on the game's profit tracks. The games thus offer a form of temporal refuge within a perpetual age of steam—an opportunity to experience mastery over complex economic systems while remaining insulated from the patterns of ecological degradation they encode.

This analysis raises questions about the pleasures of fossil play. What satisfactions do players derive from the marathon duration of 18XX sessions, the obsessive calculation of optimal routes and stock transactions, the experience of mastering complex interlocking systems? Future research will pursue these questions through digital ethnography of online player communities, including the 18xx.games platform, Discord servers, and BoardGameGeek forums, as well as interviews with players. Such ethnographic analysis may reveal how the pleasures of fossil play relate to the temporal rhythms of capitalist accumulation that the games reproduce—and whether interrogating these pleasures might expose the contingency of fossil capital's logic, making visible operations that typically remain obscured.

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