

## Blog 2: The Gallic Wars Megagame

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It's still early days in our project (April 2024), and we have many unanswered questions that we can't find in the literature: What does a player experience in a megagame? How does interaction between players unfold? And very practically, how do you organize it? We also want to gain our own experience with megagames. We couldn't find any educational megagames, but we did find something similar in the Netherlands: [De Bello Gallico](#). A history-based megagame played on June 15, 2024, in Veldhoven, at the board game association [Roll the Dice](#). A part of the project team (Kristin, Daan, Karel, and Sonia) naturally had to go!

### De Bello Gallico: The Story

In the spring of 58 BC, a Roman proconsul intervened in the migration of the Helvetii, a Gallic tribe, towards territories of tribes allied with the Roman Republic. With great loss of life, the survivors were driven back into the Alps. Although his arrival was ostensibly intended to bolster the morale of Rome's allies, it also set the stage for the proconsul's military ambitions, who planned to assert his influence throughout Gaul.

This game deals with the struggle between the Gallic nobles as they try to take advantage of the developments set in motion by Caesar's arrival. Should they cooperate with the Romans, try to establish themselves as the most prominent tribe of an independent Gaul, or should they focus on strengthening their position within their own tribe? You can read more about the game and its story on the website of the [Dutch Megagame Makers Foundation](#).

### The Megagame Gameplay

The megagame incorporates elements of board games, role-playing games, and wargames (Figure 1). Players are divided into teams (Gaul, Roman, Bard, Trader, Game Master) and try to achieve both their personal goals and the goals of their team. Players are encouraged to set their own goals and come up with creative solutions that thematically fit within the time period. The game starts in 57 BC and runs for seven rounds, with each round lasting 1 hour and representing 1 year in the game. In each round, you consult with other players to make agreements and take actions. There is a joint debriefing both at the beginning and at the end. The game is supervised by multiple referees who ensure that all actions conceived by the players can be carried out. People can dress up as their character or use an object or piece of clothing related to it (Figure 2). In De Bello Gallico, there was a team from Belgium that had dressed up completely, which immediately created a playful atmosphere!



Figure 1



Figure 2

[Image 1: A diagram illustrating the various elements of a megagame.]

[Image 2: Players dressed in costumes related to their characters.]

On June 15th, there were about 40 participants (32 men and 8 women) of various ages (between 18 and 75, we estimate). About half of the participants were members of the board game association; the rest consisted of family, friends, and people who were attracted by the type of game, a megagame, like us, a team from Belgium, and people from the megagame foundation.

We divided ourselves among the different roles: Kristin was a Gaul, Daan a bard, and Karel a referee. Sonia stayed outside the game to interview the players and organizers. The game started at 10:00 AM and continued without breaks until around 4:00 PM (see Figures 3 and 4). There were bowls of chips and sweets on all tables, and the players had brought their own food and drinks. It was also possible to order delicious toasties and buy snacks on the spot. In short, a super-cozy atmosphere to study the progress of the game.



Figure 3



Figure 4

[Image 3: Players engaged in the game, sitting at tables.]

[Image 4: A close-up of players interacting.]

The players are sitting at tables with their own teams. It's a bit chaotic; there's no strict structure. You can listen to [Dave Datema's podcast on Spotify](#) where he followed the game live and interviewed players during the game for a vivid description of the event.

## Player Experiences

How do players experience the megagame? "It's more of an experience than a game," says one of the players. "There are no clear rules and you don't know what the rules are." Another player describes it as "intense and chaotic," but also fun "because as a player you can contribute something and be creative." The game lasted for many hours non-stop and the players remained engaged and enthusiastic until the end (Figure 4). Only one participant dropped out, at the end of the morning. He explains that roleplay is not his thing and that he found the megagame too unclear and too improvised. He prefers board games with clear rules and structure, but he found it fun to try this out and saw that others were enjoying it.

Reflecting on the experiences of the participants we spoke with and interviewed, it seems that the interaction between the players is the main ingredient. The interaction makes the game; the rules were unclear and the people we spoke to had hardly prepared themselves. They didn't always know what to do, but they didn't mind and tried to get into their roles. While for some players the uncertainty and room for improvisation were motivating aspects, other players indicated that they needed clearer instructions and rules.

## Have the Players Learned Anything?

What have the players learned? Kristin has learned more about the time of the Romans, about their customs and history. Furthermore, as a player, you practice all sorts of creative and social skills. For example, Daan (as a Bard) had to cast his messages in verse, which requires a lot of creativity and language skills. Karel had to use his communication and leadership skills in his role as referee.

## Designing a Megagame

A lot of thought and preparation goes into the design and execution of such a megagame. The interaction is also well thought out. One of the designers of De Bello Gallico explained: 'A megagame is a complex interaction between players; players want to solve a problem. It's about creating a problem for the players that they want to solve. You have supporters and opponents, but it's more than that. There are also different interests.' For example, in De Bello Gallico, the players received a personal letter that is revealed at a certain point. This is determined by the game master (or referee), who in this case was Marc Seutter. He determines the general course of the game and announces the completion of each round and the end of the game. Marc decided to end the game earlier, as it was already clear that the Romans had been defeated it made little sense to play the seventh round.

## Conclusion

Megagames prove to be a good method to bring people together and learn through social interaction. However, it remains a fascinating and elusive phenomenon. The experience with the De Bello Gallico megagame has given us a lot of insight into the experience, organization, and design of megagames. Yet, De Bello Gallico was not an educational megagame. Because it was organized by a board game association, it was primarily a social and informal event: groups of friends and family came, and everyone talked to each other. Importantly, people were there on their day off (it was Saturday). They ate and drank together, and many people stayed behind to talk to each other afterwards. In a more formal educational context, a megagame will bring about different experiences and types of learning and so it will have a different character. We were surprised that we and the other players were continuously engaged with the game throughout the day; we were especially surprised at how well people could play together without strict rules. How can we take this enthusiasm and energy to a more formal context, such as education?