

BONUS - Tea Time - Ceylon

SUZANNE ZINSLI: You're listening to Immersed. I'm Suzanne Zinsli.

CHRIS ZINSLI: And I'm Chris Zinsli. This time we're going to learn about the origins of some of the best tea in the world, in... Ceylon. The game Ceylon is designed by, hang on... Suzanne and Chris Zinsli.

SUZANNE: Huh. Weird.

CHRIS: Huh. How about that.

SUZANNE: How about that.

CHRIS: That's crazy.

SUZANNE: Right, so Ceylon is a game designed by... us. So this is going to be a bonus episode of Immersed.

CHRIS: We're releasing this brief special episode outside of our normal schedule, because our game Ceylon is going to be shown in North America for the first time, at the Gen Con 2019 convention, this coming week.

SUZANNE: The game was originally published by Ludonova and released last year at the Spiel convention in Essen, Germany. Now it's getting a North American release from Asmodee.

CHRIS: The path that the game took has some unexpected parallels with the history of its setting. That was a surprise even to us.

SUZANNE: Our guide to the history of Ceylon will be Jayne Broomhead. She works with Ludonova, and she oversees international translations and communications for the publisher. She also helps with playtesting and does various other jobs for the company.

JAYNE BROOMHEAD: And in the case of Ceylon, I was kind of involved right from, right from the beginning, really. Right from the word go when the game first came into their hands.

SUZANNE: In a lot of ways, Jayne took the lead in transforming the game that we signed with Ludonova. Her experiences and her research deeply informed the game and its design.

CHRIS: Working with the team at Ludonova was a two-year process of development, and it took us in directions that we didn't anticipate.

SUZANNE: When we first signed the game with Ludonova in 2016, Ceylon wasn't Ceylon. It was originally set during the Ottoman Empire. The team at Ludonova wanted to find a new theme that was a bit more unique. Something appealing and accessible to a wide range of players. As it turned out, Jayne was the perfect person for the job.

JAYNE: So we're having this conversation and the idea of, perhaps this game could possibly work with the idea of tea, naturally, perhaps came to me, being an English lady. But I actually had the wonderful experience about 17 years ago, I'm a teacher, and so I was teaching in a tea garden near Darjeeling right at the very top of a tea garden. I lived in West Bengal just after university, just before starting a teaching career, I went and moved to India for six months. Just over six months. It was fantastic. And naturally the game seemed to, I felt that the mechanics of the game could possibly fit with this idea.

SUZANNE: Working on the game that would become Ceylon gave Jayne a chance to once again immerse herself in the world of tea.

JAYNE: I became, like, a little bit of a geek and started to do quite a lot of research for the game with the idea of fitting this with the game that we were looking at at the time. And the more I looked into it, the more interested I got.

CHRIS: She wanted to learn as much as possible about the tea industry in Ceylon, which is what the island of Sri Lanka was called when it was a British colony in the 1800s.

SUZANNE: She dug deep into the historical records.

JAYNE: I was able to get hold of a lot of books online that were historical records of the time many of them that were had obviously been written on a typewriter, which was fascinating. And I think the other element that is particularly interesting was that there were a lot of actual tea manufacturers that are still going today were developed at the time. One of its most famous brands is Lipton, and that was, it was started there. It started when Thomas Lipton, the founder of Lipton Tea had visited the island right at the start of the tea industry there.

SUZANNE: Jayne even reached out to some of those tea companies directly, to get even more background information. Even we didn't know the full extent of her research, until we talked with her for this episode.

CHRIS: So, let's go back to the beginning. Oddly enough, the story of Ceylon tea begins... with coffee.

JAYNE: Sri Lanka at the time was exporting coffee all over the world. It was a British colony at the time in the 1800s. Unfortunately they had the misfortune of being devastated by a fungal disease called coffee rust or coffee blight, a disease that very quickly took hold and killed all of the coffee plantations over the island. And it was a pioneer man called James Taylor, not the folk

singer, obviously, a different James Taylor, a Scot that had happened to have a certain amount of experience in the tea industry in India. However, he had lived in Ceylon in his youth. And so he took full advantage of Ceylon's misfortune and decided that it probably had the perfect climate, the perfect rainfall, the perfect altitudes to grow tea. And really he also knew that obviously these people who had these plantations were in dire straits. They had the infrastructure to transport coffee around the island and also off the island. They had distribution already fairly set up all over the world, really, to Europe and to America. And they knew that possibly that this could work. And so he built the first tea plantation and from there, many other pioneers that he brought over.

CHRIS: Players of the game Ceylon take on the roles of some of those pioneers. You build plantations, harvest the tea, and ship it off to customers.

SUZANNE: That's a far cry from the game's old setting, in the Ottoman Empire. In that original design, players would vie for influence across the empire and inside the imperial court. When you made a move, you would almost always be helping out the other players. You just wanted to make sure you weren't helping them too much.

CHRIS: In the final game, any time you take an action, you give the other players the opportunity to take an action. That means you play the game even on other players' turns.

SUZANNE: Despite the shift to Ceylon, a lot of the game's design, and especially what it feels like to play it, remained the same.

CHRIS: Just like the switch that Sri Lanka made, from coffee to tea, we were able to use the game's underlying systems—to use its infrastructure, so to speak—as a basis for developing the new game.

JAYNE: The British had already set up all the railways and the trains. I mean, the island it was quite small. So I think it already had railways and ports, etc. Many of the coffee plantation roots had already been cleared by elephants on the island. And I think it was just a case of sort of redeveloping the roads, perhaps using the altitude a little bit more, building a little bit higher in certain regions. But yes, I think that most of the infrastructure was fairly set up at the time. It was just getting in the minds and knowledge of tea as opposed to coffee.

SUZANNE: It really only shows up in the artwork, but adding the trains made it so we could joke that Ceylon is a "train game." Another thing that factored into the game design was the geography of the island. If you've ever seen pictures of the tea fields in Sri Lanka, you'll know how beautiful its hills are. The tea grows on terraces along the rolling hillside.

CHRIS: Those terraces also appear in the game. The elevation of each plantation determines what kind of tea it produces. The higher levels aren't as common, but they're the only spots on the board that produce the higher-quality types of tea.

JAYNE: I had known from visiting tea plantations in India and visiting their factories that this sort of funny element of this was that, we actually lived really high up in the mountains, in a tea garden that sold very pure Darjeeling tea. And when we visited factories on lower levels where they didn't have the climate that they needed to grow under these perfect tea conditions, that when they rolled and dried the tea, they sold their tea, the lower-level kind of tea, was often sold and shipped to the U.K. to be sold in tea bags for the British. And I found this hilarious that the idea that we were kind of drinking the dregs of the factory, the tea factories, as they left the superior stuff to sell to themselves or to ship off in these fancy tea bags and tea chests that were for the pure Darjeeling tea.

SUZANNE: Another important element of the Sri Lankan tea industry was new technology. Some significant developments were made during the switch from coffee.

JAYNE: Part of the process was that the technology of tea was still very much developing. I mean, there were many industrial-level machines that hadn't been developed anywhere in the world. And many of these were developed in Sri Lanka. In fact, James Taylor himself prided himself on having developed this tea-rolling machine and being one of the first people to develop an industrial-scale tea-rolling machine that he developed on the island of Sri Lanka. And they developed tea dryers there and tea rollers that were then used all over, very much to the benefit of all of the tea producers and manufacturers on the island.

CHRIS: In the game, players can build up the island's technology, which benefits everyone. The technology action gets you a token that you can use like a "wild" action later on. You pay for it, and everyone else receives money.

SUZANNE: This action changed several times during the game's development. In the original design, it was called "charity." That made sense with the Ottoman Empire setting, but not so much with the industrial theme of Ceylon. In that early version, you would literally give away your money to the other players.

CHRIS: We tested out a few different ways of divvying up the money between players, before settling on the final process.

SUZANNE: A few other things changed while the game was developed.

CHRIS: Like movement. Just figuring out how players could move their pawns around the board was a lot more challenging than you'd think. In the early designs, players had two pawns for performing different actions. This got simplified to one pawn per player.

SUZANNE: Other aspects of the design remained largely the same throughout the process.

CHRIS: Take the councillors. These are influential people on the island. They can give you special powers to make things easier, but they can also get you a lot of bonus points at the end of the game if you've built plantations in their areas of the board.

SUZANNE: That aspect has been crucial to the design since the very beginning. Working with Ludonova was an extremely collaborative process. Ideas flew back and forth constantly. There were a lot of times when we had to figure out how to reconcile the designers' vision for the game, our vision, with the publisher's vision.

CHRIS: At the start, our visions weren't the same. Ceylon and the Ottoman Empire are a world apart, or at least half a world. But we all worked to make the best game possible. Over the course of development, elements were added and cut, over and over, getting closer and closer to the final design each time.

SUZANNE: The final published game has some absolutely gorgeous artwork from Laura Bevon and graphic design by David Prieto. It makes the box look like an old tea tin. It honestly blew us away.

JAYNE: It's beautiful, it's such a beautiful game. You know, few games come off so well, I think, especially the gold paint and the wear and tear on the box, it's just beautiful. It's just that, when we got it, I was just, I think outlived my expectations and my expectations, I think, were pretty high.

SUZANNE: Same.

CHRIS: Same.

SUZANNE: Immersed is produced by Cardboard Edison. Find out more about the show, our games, and everything else we do with board game design, at cardboardedison.com.

CHRIS: And check out Ceylon at Gen Con this August. Look for Asmodee.

SUZANNE: Very special thanks this episode go to our guest, Jayne Broomhead. Editing assistance by Eric Booth. Music credits are available in the show notes. Cardboard Edison is backed by our patrons on Patreon. Help us support the game design community by becoming one of our patrons. You can listen to episodes before they officially release, and you can hear an extended interview with our guest, Jayne Broomhead, only by supporting Cardboard Edison at patreon.com/cardboardedison. I'm Suzanne Zinsli.

CHRIS: And I'm Chris Zinsli.

SUZANNE: And join us next time as we become immersed in another game.