Tabletop SPIRIT

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UKGE 2025
from a very different perspective?

Rift Domination
An interview with Stefan Ströbinger

So You Wanna...
Run Your Own Board Games Convention?

PLUS...
The Cult of the Old, Cons, Snapshots, Puzzles, and Much More!

50 Years of Chaos(ium)...
An interview with two of the team behind one of the most enduring RPG companies still going today!

50 1975 - 2025® CHAOSIUM INC.

#28
AUTUMN 2025

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#28 Tabletop SPIRIT

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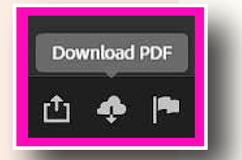
Another issue, so soon?

Hey there, what's this? Another issue of Tabletop SPIRIT Magazine so soon after the last one? Well it sure does feel like that at this end - between work, holidays, boardgame conventions and all manner of other things, this issue came up and bit me on the nose to be honest with you. Still, we're here, we've put together another cracking issue for you (and it's another 50+ pages, too: even bigger than last time - why do I put myself through this?!), and as always, we've got plenty to scream and shout about...

Alongside our fantastic celebratory interview with a couple of the bigwigs behind Chaosium —celebrating 50 years of Chaos dontcha know?— we've also got an interview with Stefan Ströbinger about his forthcoming RIFT DOMINATION boardgame (which looks pretty gobsmackin'), as well as a fair bit of Convention coverage. We have Tim Clare providing a very different perspective on this year's UKGE event, me and my good friend Paul spent a hot, steamy weekend in Warwickshire for MidSummerCon 2025, and we also asked Ryan Willis what the heck he was thinking when he started his own York Board Games Convention last year?

Alas, you'll find no letters or RPG column this time, or Indietalk — deadlines were a bit tight all-round and if I'm being frank, our readers (yup, that includes you!) have been a bit lackadaisical in reaching out and offering any form of comment on all the hard graft we put into the magazine every time. Yeh, that is somewhat deflating for me as the Editor, but fingers crossed these will be back for next issue.



One thing we always encourage is having readers contribute their own reviews, features and opinions for publication in the magazine, and I'm particularly pleased to welcome both Ben Bateson and Max Standring to our pages this issue. Ben Bateson has been an active contributor to the magazine for the last five years as Smallboat, our resident cruciverbalist, but he tried his hand at a couple of reviews for this issue and frankly they both make terrific reading — you can check out what he thought of PATH OF CIVILIZATION and PRIME MINISTER on pages 39 and 42, respectively. Max Standring had a bit of a rough time with DOCTOR WHO: NEMESIS, but we nonetheless remain grateful he shared his opinions with us. You can read all about that from page 31.

Besides our always excellent Smallboat Crossword in Still Board? (pg 27), we have a real doozy of a logic puzzle from Jamie Hargreaves for you to get stuck into this time as well! I'm not going to pretend it was easy to put the additional interactive hints together for it, but I still remain justifiably proud and pleased with the finished page!

And finally, I promise to talk a bit more about this next time, but I've always put a huge amount of personal energy, sweat, tears, finances and sheer hard work into making SPIRIT as accessible and welcoming as possible over the last 7 years or so, but guess what? I've now decided to give myself even more work to do by going through the archives and old issues of the magazine and 'remastering' them! Yeh, I know, it's a bloody crazy, stupid, bonkers idea, but I'm not exactly known for my common sense or sanity...!

— Alex Bardy, Editor

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Celebrating 50 Years of Chaos(ium)...

An Interview with Neil Robinson (CEO), and Michael O'Brien (Vice President), part of the awesome team behind the RPG company, Chaosium Inc.

by Alex Bardy

***Chaosium* has been a staple of the RPG industry for 50 years now, primarily through its *RuneQuest* and *Call of Cthulhu* RPGs – this in itself is an incredible achievement, but it certainly hasn't been an easy ride. For the benefit of our readers (who are primarily boardgame fans I suspect), can you tell us who *Chaosium* are and what they do?**

[Neil] *Chaosium* was founded by Greg Stafford 50 years ago in California to create board games and later roleplaying games as well. The best-known board games we developed are ***White Bear & Red Moon***, and ***Arkham Horror*** – yes, the one sold by *Asmodee* now.

Our roleplaying games are our core business, led by three classics: ***Call of Cthulhu***, ***RuneQuest***, and ***Pendragon***. We have recently made board games a priority, launching the ***Horror on the Orient Express*** Kickstarter which we are busy getting produced, and showcasing ***Miskatonic Tales: Journey to Innsmouth***, our second offering with the board game relaunch.

Like any business our age, we have had ups and down, but I am confident about the future thanks to our great developers and loyal fans. We are a distributed team and really only meet at conventions and summits. The sun never sets (or rises) on *Chaosium* with our global team, so I guess you can say that at least some of us are always in the dark!

[MOB] Over forty years ago Greg Stafford was quoted as saying *Chaosium* had quickly become renowned for its originality and creativity, not content to imitate and instead publishing games that are original in style of play, content and design. In our company's 50th year, I like to think the same applies today.

The history of *Chaosium* is somewhat chaotic but before we get into that please can you introduce yourselves and let our readers know who you are and what your role is within the company?

[Neil] I'm Neil Robinson, the newly minted CEO of *Chaosium*, but I've been part of the *Chaosium* leadership team for 10 years now. As my background is in developing financial software, I spend a lot of time on the financial and operational side of the business.

On the creative side, I act as the producer for the ***Basic Roleplaying*** line, including the newly released ***Age of Vikings RPG***.

[MOB] I'm Michael O'Brien, also known as MOB. My official title is vice president, but I wear various hats across the areas of creative and business development, and community engagement. I am producer for the ***Call of Cthulhu RPG*** line, and also producer / co-producer of our actual play and live shows including *Bookshops of Arkham*, *Graveyards of Arkham* and *Call of Cthulhu Live*, which recently toured the UK.

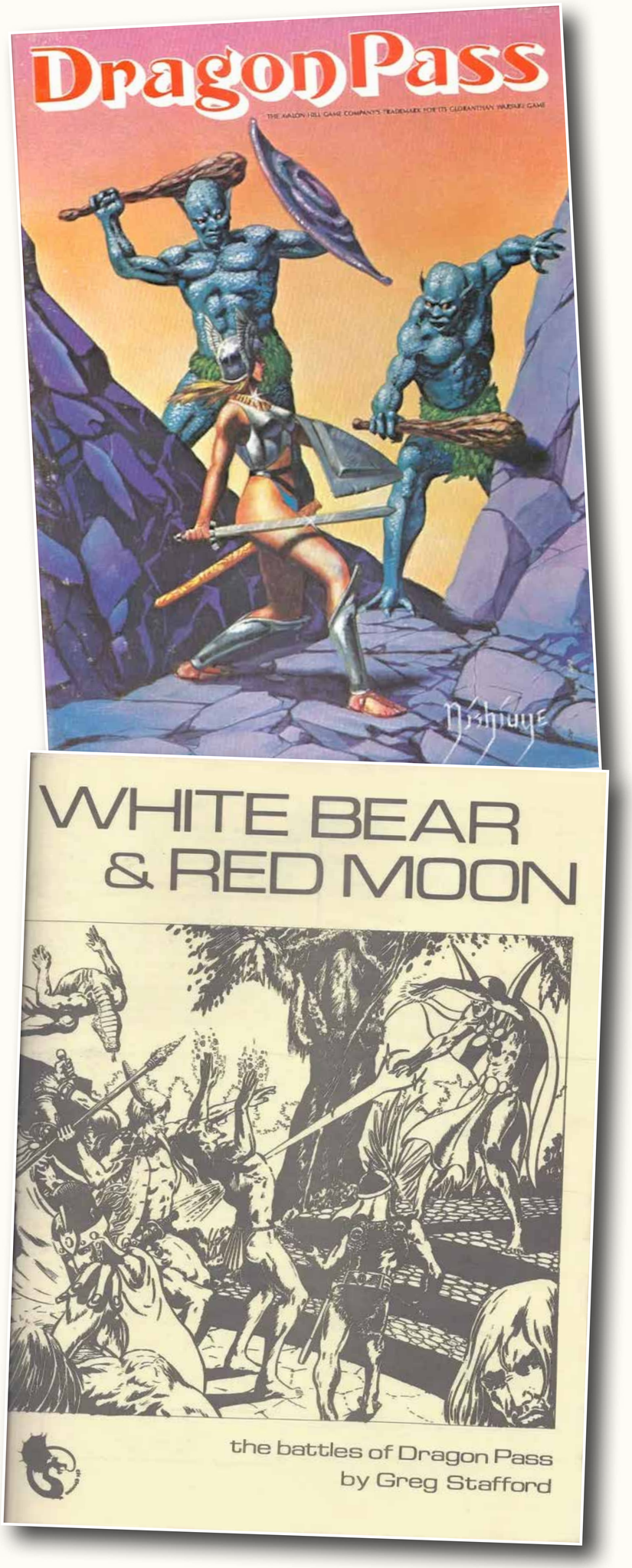
Greg Stafford founded the company in 1975 ironically to publish his *White Bear & Red Moon* boardgame (aka *Dragon Pass* in later years) – be honest, are any of you old enough to remember that in its original form, or even to have played it? I personally had a copy of *Dragon Pass* from *Avalon Hill* for all of about 3 months before giving up on getting it to the table – I would've been in my late teens at the time!

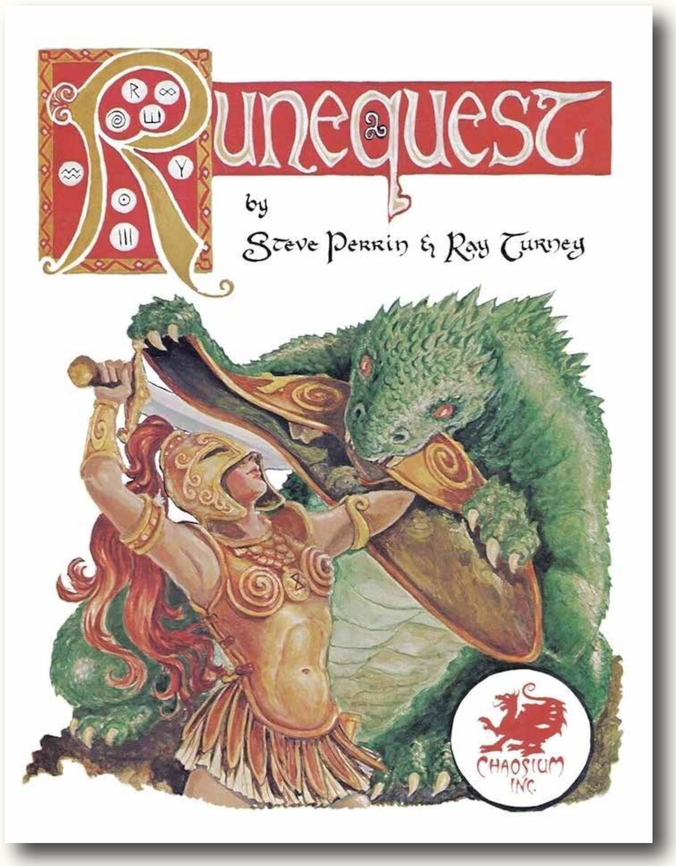
[Neil] Heh, the leadership team have been *Chaosium* fans long before we became involved with running the business. I've played [***DRAGONPASS***] many times, and even have the lovely French versions from *Oriflamme*, but I was a bit too young to play when it first came out.

[MOB] Well I go back as far as the *Avalon Hill* ***DRAGON PASS***; a school friend owned it, and we played it along with ***RUNEQUEST 2ND EDITION*** in the early 1980s. I recently bought a mint, unpunched copy of it for my wife (*Chaosium* fiction editor Susan O'Brien). She's working on a 50th Anniversary edition of Greg's ***WHITE BEAR & RED MOON*** / ***DRAGON PASS*** which we'll be releasing later this year. It's going to be very true to the original, with some updating of the rules. As part of the development process Susan used that mint copy I bought to re-play through all of the ***DRAGON PASS*** scenarios. She believes games are meant to be played, but the sight of her unpunching this pristine copy made some game collectors I know wince.

Do any of you have any stories to share about the late Greg Stafford and his passion for all things gaming and Gloranthan?

[Neil] Greg was a wargamer, a role player, a writer, the founder of *Chaosium*, and a legendary game designer. Those are often the only lenses we look at him through. But he was also a husband, a father, and a practising shaman, touching far more people than just through gaming. I was lucky enough to spend time on my journey from fanboy to running an RPG company with Greg, including an adventure out to Uluru in Australia.





[MOB] Under Greg's leadership, *Chaosium* introduced many things to the hobby that are standard today. When Greg sadly passed away in 2018, Tabletop RPG (TTRPG) designer John Wick wrote a tribute to Greg in which he reminded everyone of the 'Stafford Rule': John wrote, "The older I get, the more I hear young RPG designers say, 'Never been done before!' And then I just point to stuff Greg Stafford wrote about a few decades ago... Greg was brilliant. He was ahead of his time. You know the Stafford Rule? Every game designer knows the Stafford Rule: 'If you believe you've come up with a clever mechanic, Greg Stafford already did it.'"

There used to be a lot of *RUNEQUEST* vs *D&D* discussions back in the 80s – I always considered myself firmly in the *RQ* camp, mainly because I tended to like going against the grain and loved the 'shared universe' concept (as previously utilised by *TRAVELLER* and other RPGs), which camp did you fall in and why?

[Neil] I think there is a place for both styles of game. I love the depth of Glorantha and have had many great ***RUNEQUEST*** campaigns, but I also like the dungeon-crawling aspects of ***D&D*** and have great memories of my games at university.

[MOB] I started with the Blue Box ***D&D*** like many roleplayers of my generation. But it all changed for me when one of my friends —the same friend who later owned ***DRAGON PASS***, as it happens— got hold of a copy of ***APPLE LANE***, one of the earliest scenarios for ***RUNEQUEST***. This was in 1980. We didn't own the ***RUNEQUEST*** rules, so we had to work out ***RUNEQUEST*** by looking at the stat blocks and applying what we knew of ***D&D***. But there were no levels, no alignments, no armour classes. But there were hit locations – you could cut someone's leg off! Or get your own leg cut off, as we soon discovered. We were also entranced and intrigued by ***RUNEQUEST***'s setting, the world of Glorantha. We didn't really look back from there.

The *BASIC ROLEPLAYING* system (*BRP*) first made an appearance in 1980 and was arguably the precursor of many RPG systems to follow – I always preferred the use of percentile dice (D100) as opposed to any other system myself, and we played a lot of *Hero's CHAMPIONS RPG* back in the day. Nowadays I just like to keep things simple, sticking with D6s where possible, but do you each have any preferred resolution system(s)?

[Neil] The D100 is certainly one of my favourites. One strength of the ***BRP*** system is its flexibility and ability to adapt to the genre you want to run a game in. Adding traits and passions to get ***Pendragon***, or sanity to get ***Call of Cthulhu*** is the special sauce that makes the RPGs work, and ***BRP*** enables that.

[MOB] D100 for me. I love the way such a simple resolution system doesn't get in the way of the story, the roleplaying, or the mood. There are some RPG systems where the narrative tends to grind to a halt when you need to use the rules to determine something. Not so with a simple D100 roll: you just get your result and move on.

Although *RuneQuest* and Glorantha helped the foundation of *Chaosium*, I think *Call of Cthulhu (CoC)* was probably the license that built the company as it stands today – it was a revolution at the time with the emphasis firmly on roleplaying and horror rather than bashing monsters and collecting treasure. The world of roleplaying is all the better for it and has moved on a lot since then, but could any of you have foreseen what it has become today with the explosion of interest in *D&D* and other RPGs in general these last few years?

[Neil] Yes, ***Call of Cthulhu*** is our most successful brand, and has grown along with the RPG business in general. Recently, there has been more of an interest in games other than ***D&D*** than any time in the last 20 years.

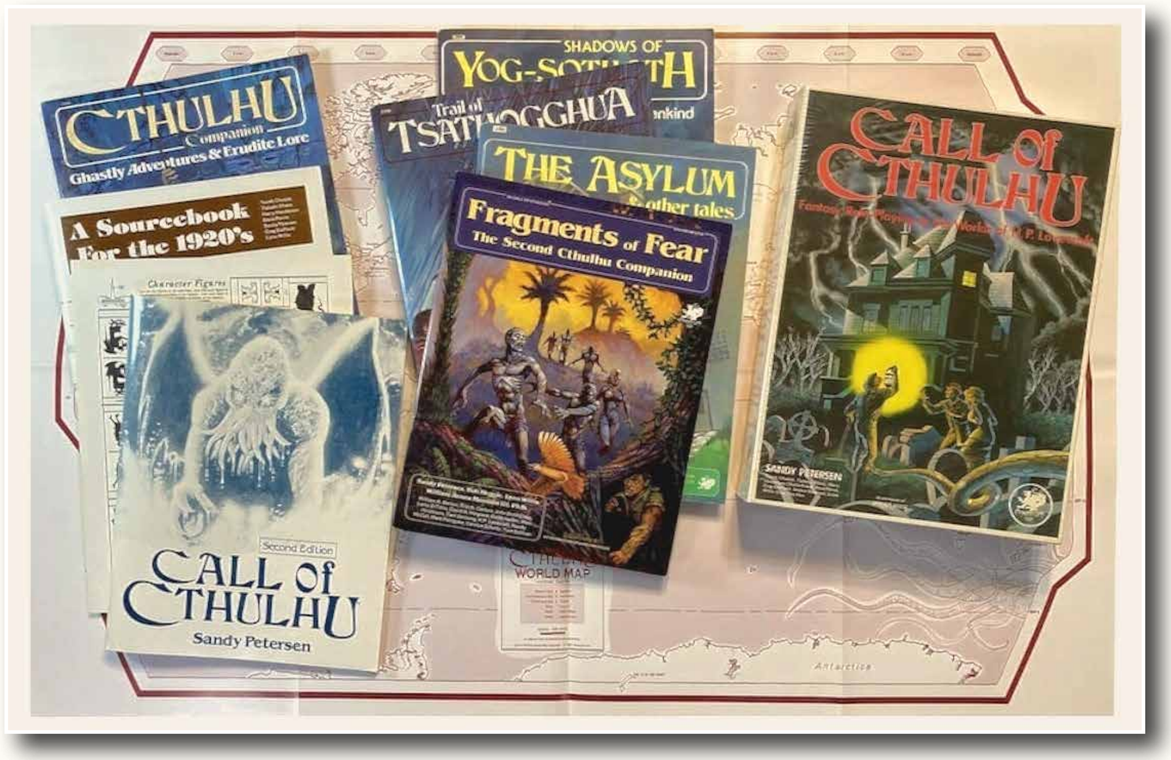
[MOB] There definitely has been an explosion of interest in recent years. All over the world the pandemic led to people discovering you can enjoyably play tabletop roleplaying games with your friends online and it is not necessary to have everyone physically around the same table, anymore. That coincided with the rise of the popularity of actual play shows like *Critical Role*.

Prior to the release of *Call of Cthulhu*, I'd hazard a guess that H.P. Lovecraft was largely unknown and of somewhat niche interest to all but the most avid horror readers – Cthulhu is pretty much a household name nowadays, and Cthulhu merchandise can be found nigh-on everywhere you look. I'm pretty sure the *CoC RPG* is primarily responsible for this, would you agree? And do you feel any guilt at all when you see yet another Cthulhu tee-shirt or plushie on sale…?

[Neil] I would agree that much of Cthulhu's popularity is because of ***Call of Cthulhu***. I don't have any guilt, but see it as opportunity for more people to be aware of our great game!

[MOB] No guilt from me either. Many people discovered H.P. Lovecraft and the Mythos through ***Call of Cthulhu*** (me included).

Another IP that has done really well for *Chaosium* is the *Pendragon RPG* – is there enough interest for this, or is it one of those lines that needs to grow and germinate more slowly, waiting for the inevitable revival of King Arthur in the public eye? Is there any interest in starting a movie franchise for *Pendragon* or any other *Chaosium* IP?



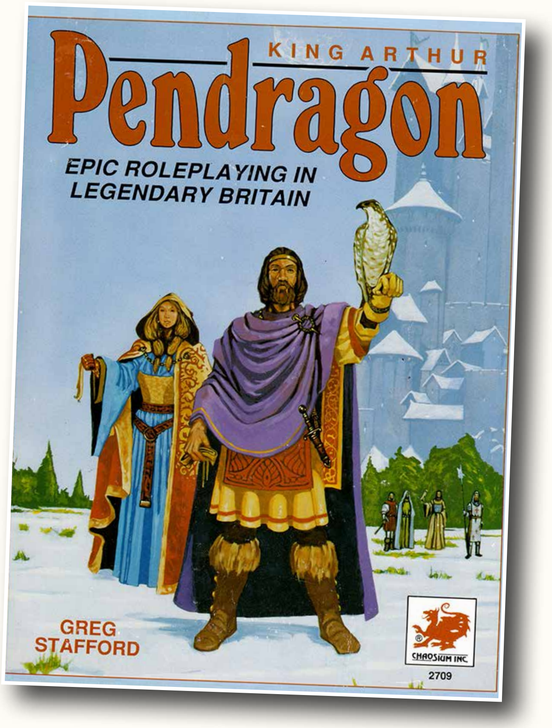
[Neil] *Chaosium* is an IP company as much as a roleplaying or board game company. We've seen fiction and computer games for ***Call of Cthulhu***, and one is coming out for ***RuneQuest*** soon. It would be great to see a film version of our adaptation of King Arthur in ***Pendragon***. And the 6th edition version of ***Pendragon*** is having great success for us.

[MOB] There's been some high-level interest from Hollywood in various *Chaosium* IPs but that's not something we can talk much about until (if / when?) the time is right.

I believe circa. 1985 proved the first crisis for *Chaosium* – having laid off staff and licensed *RuneQuest* to *Avalon Hill* a few years earlier, the subsequent pay off wasn't really enough to keep things ticking over, especially as the whole RPG hobby experienced a downturn over the next few years. Were any of you around (with the company) back then, and do you remember what you were doing or may have been working on at the time?

[Neil] No, none of us were with the company then. The longest-serving member, Dustin, started back in 1996, though, which is a very long tenure for any company these days!

[MOB] I wasn't with the company way back then, but did actually have my first manuscript rejected by *Chaosium* about that time – a submission for ***RuneQuest***. I think it was 1987, on a trip to the US from Australia I actually visited the *Chaosium* offices in Berkely and met the key people including Greg Stafford, Lynn Willis, and Sandy Petersen. They were very kind in turning down my work, and I guess I mustn't have been too dissuaded, given where I am today.



The 90s proved challenging for *Chaosium*: the Collectible / Trading Card Game (CCG / TCG) craze blew up (and then down again), and having released the *Mythos CCG* to positive acclaim, the company dropped the ball with the non-collectible *Mythos Starter Set* and subsequently was seemingly running on empty. Assuming you were working with the company back then, are there any horror stories from that time you're willing to share? Or more importantly, positive ones?

[Neil] I wasn't with the company then, but I fondly remember driving down to Seattle from Canada to meet up with friends from the ***RuneQuest*** community and playing ***Mythos*** when we weren't roleplaying.

[MOB] I wasn't part of the company back in the 1990s, either, and any of my interactions with *Chaosium* at

the time were on the ***RuneQuest*** side of things, so I don't have anything to add about the rise and fall of ***Mythos***.

Starting in 1992 there was a sequence of ***RuneQuest***–Gloranthan conventions run by fans in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. Greg, Sandy and other *Chaosium* figures came to many of these events, and it was great to be able to interact with them and learn secrets of Glorantha from the source. I attended many of these too, and helped organise the Australian conventions (in 1996 and 1998).

I did notice *Chaosium Con* came to the UK as well this year - is this a more recent development, and a sign of positive things to come as more of these events take place across the world? I'm guessing it's a great opportunity to meet and play games with your huge fanbase?

[Neil] We launched *Chaosium Con UK* in 2025 after the successful *Chaosium Cons* in the USA and Australia. We are also going to have a *Chaosium Con EU* this winter in Gdansk, Poland! That's a short flight for those that missed the inaugural UK event...

We have had a *Chaosium* presence at Conventions in the UK since at least the 90s (I think 1996 was the first one I went to), and *Chaosium Con UK* was a great success with larger-than-projected attendance. We have signed up to run it again in 2026 and plan to run them all annually.

Team photo, Chaosium Con 2024

[MOB] Having *Chaosium Cons* all over the world is great fun. Although our first *Chaosium Con* was in Ann Arbor, Michigan in 2022, the inaugural *Chaosium Con* was supposed to be in Sydney, Australia in April 2020. But we all know what happened then... Fortunately, we did return with an Australian *Chaosium Con* a few years later, in my hometown of Melbourne. Last month we held the second *Chaosium Con Australia* in the same location, with a growing number of attendees, and the month before that, *Chaosium Con UK*. I didn't make it to the one in the US this year, but am looking forward to *Chaosium Con EU* in Poland at the end of October! Who knows where we might be expanding our reach to next (actually, I do, but that announcement will come in due course).

Hmmm... GorpCon - True or False?

***Chaosium* split apart in the late 90s and even Greg Stafford left in 1998, but the company muddled its way through the next decade or so with a mountain of debt and a renewed emphasis on reprinting *RuneQuest* material and licensing *Call of Cthulhu* to other publishers (most notably *Wizards of the Coast*), as well as publishing the work of fans and staff. This was a lean time for everyone, I believe, what was that like?**

[Neil] I came to *Chaosium* later, but I was active with the Gloranthan community and met up with Greg at roleplaying conventions across the US, Europe, and even down in Australia. Greg founded *Issaries* in that time and published ***Hero Wars*** and ***HeroQuest***, which led to the ***HeroQuest Glorantha*** publication we did at *Moon Design*.

[MOB] This too was before my time. As well as the ***D20 Call of Cthulhu*** version produced under license by *Wizards of the Coast*, around then *Chaosium* set up what was called the *Miskatonic University Library Association (MULA) Monographs*. Independent creators could release titles under this *MULA* label and —as with current community content programs— retain ownership of their original creations while still using *Chaosium's* rule systems and IP. *Monograph* creators also performed most of the editorial and layout functions, with *Chaosium* printing and distributing what was submitted. I guess this saved *Chaosium* money, but in this way the *Monograph* products were an important precursor to the online ***community content programs*** that are now a familiar part of the TTRPG market, including the ***DM's Guild***, ***Storyteller's Vault***, ***Pathfinder Unlimited***, and *Chaosium's* own ***Miskatonic Repository***, ***Jonstown Compendium***, and ***Companions of Arthur*** community programs, for ***Call of Cthulhu***, ***RuneQuest***, and

Pendragon respectively. As with our community content programs today, many well-known ***Call of Cthulhu*** authors also got their start writing monographs for the *MULA*.

***Chaosium* turned to Kickstarter in 2012, and ran a series of 'successful' campaigns, but alas these caused even more financial issues for the company. With the tragic passing of Lynn Willis in 2013, I think this was the catalyst that brought Sandy Petersen and Greg Stafford back to *Chaosium*. Did this feel like the start of a revival, or did that only come later when they brought on board the *Moon Design Publications* team in 2015?**

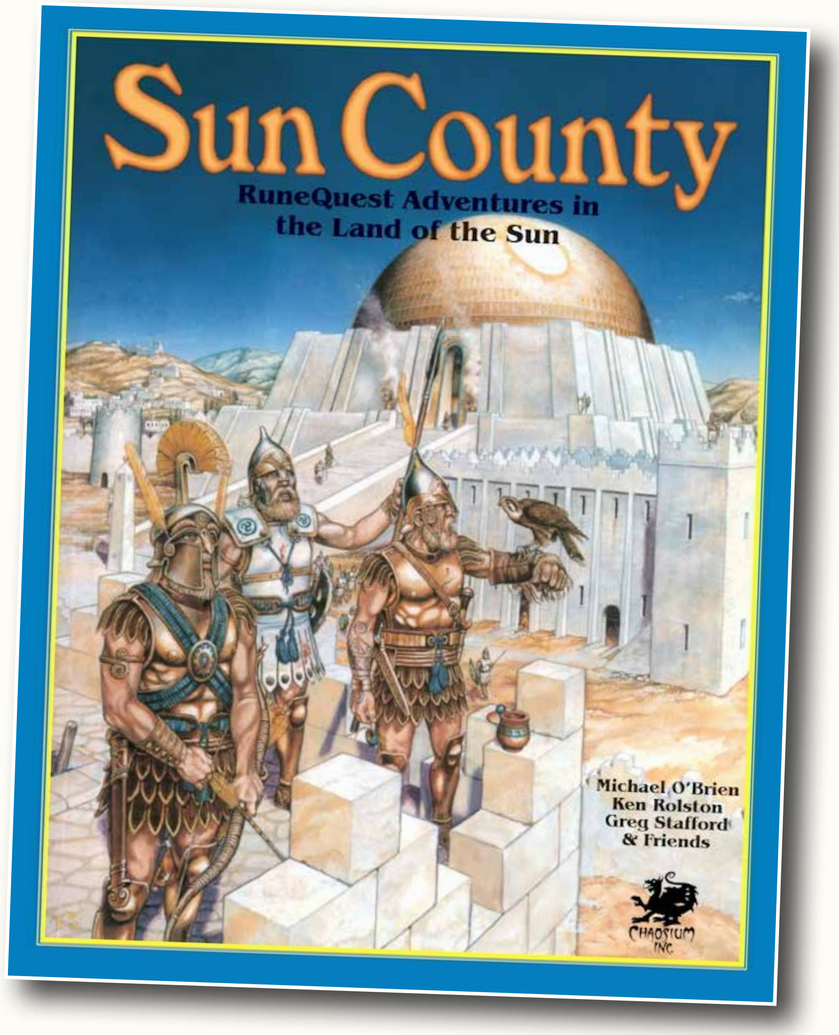
[Neil] Well, as a member of *Moon Design Publications*, I'll say that the revival came when Greg and Sandy brought us on board and together we helped restore *Chaosium* to its former glory. But that was only possible because of the hard work by others that kept *Chaosium* going in tougher times.

[MOB] That was the start of the revival. Greg's last public engagement was the 2018 ENnies Awards ceremony at *GenCon #51*. He said he was immensely proud of the work *Chaosium* had done in recent years, particularly since 2015 when he returned as chair of the board and brought the *Moon Design Publications* team into the company.

With the band back together (so to speak) and a new management team at the helm, *Chaosium* suddenly had *RuneQuest* and *Call of Cthulhu* safely back under its wing, with *Pendragon* following a short while later. They also picked up the *7th Sea* product line and the *Rivers of London* license in 2019 – the company seems to have gone from strength to strength ever since with newer releases for all these lines. It's been a truly chaotic ride, but do you have any personal highlights from the previous few decades? And what might you be looking forward to down the road, so to speak?

[Neil] I'm lucky enough to work with many great friends that I met through ***RuneQuest*** and Glorantha, and I look forward to doing it for many more years. Watching *Chaosium* grow and flourish as I see a new generation of gamers playing our games keeps me getting up each day.

[MOB] It's been a great experience working with my friends who, like me, have been long-time *Chaosium* devotees, seeing the company prosper and reach out to new fans all over the world. It's small in the scheme of things, but a personal highlight for me has been bringing my ***RuneQuest 3rd Edition*** book ***Sun County*** back into print. You see, I did that book back in 1992 as a work-for-hire (WFH). I got paid, I gave up the rights as part of the deal (no complaints, I signed with my eyes open, that's what WFH is). That book was well-regarded at the time, spurring a brief flourishing of the ***RQ*** line known as the 'RuneQuest Renaissance'. But ***Sun County*** was long out of print and had never been available in digital format as it predated PDFs. However, it dawned on me several years ago that now I am a co-owner of *Chaosium* I also have the rights to my own book back again! So, last year, I cheerfully arranged to have ***Sun County*** brought back as part of our ***RuneQuest Classic*** line! You can even get it in PDF, something that wasn't possible for the original (as PDFs weren't a thing). It's gone on to reach a new generation of ***RuneQuest*** fans, and spurred a flourishing of fan-created ***Sun County*** content in the *Jonstown Compendium*.



Among many other great *Chaosium* releases in the early 80s, the original *Thieves' World* campaign appeared in 1981, the Melnibonean and *Stormbringer* RPGs a few years later (and the *Superworld* and *Ringworld* RPGs), and the *Elfquest* RPG as well – a republished version of the latter did very well on Kickstarter recently, so are there any plans to return and / or support any of these original, older IPs in the near future? That'd certainly be exciting…

[Neil] I'd love to see those back in print (I have copies upstairs), but they are all licensed IPs so it is up to the IP holder. Still, never say never!

[MOB] We do have another 'Classic' Kickstarter in the works which we'll be announcing later this year. Our past Classic Kickstarters have been very popular, so if and when we have other licenses in place we'd certainly love to do more!

***Chaosium* had a chequered history of magazine publication, with *Different Worlds* and *Wyrm's Footnotes* among others — I personally found *Different Worlds* one of the very best 'hobby' magazines, is there any lingering or latent interest in developing an in-house magazine, or has all that long been superseded by the internet?**

[Neil] Many magazines have been superseded by digital publications, and even some online ones are struggling with AI-based reporting. I think it is better for *Chaosium* to focus on our core competencies: RPG and board games.

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image c/o Etsy.com

[MOB] I loved *Different Worlds* back in the day, and was part of the editorial team that produced a well-regarded fanzine in the 1990s and early 2000s that is acknowledged as playing a very influential role in keeping Gloranthan fandom alive. Through that zine (*Tales of the Reaching Moon*) I made gamer and Glorantha friends and creative partners all over the world – including my colleagues who I now own *Chaosium* with. While we have no plans to revive an in-house magazine, the thriving creator communities that have developed around our community content programs at ***DriveThruRPG*** are a brilliant new way for gamers to collaborate with each other on creative projects that can be shared across the community.

And finally, *Chaosium* is a publisher previously synonymous with chaotic production schedules and erratic financial book-keeping – with a lot of this hopefully in the past, can you share any plans for the next few years?

[Neil] Well you can't say *Chaosium* without starting with chaos, so I would be lying if you shouldn't expect some level of disorder. Saying that, we are putting a lot of investment into improving systems, and recently added a production manager to go along with the producer model we are rolling out.

[MOB] I've just got back from the UK where, working in partnership with *AEG Presents*, we put on a five-city *Call of Cthulhu Live* tour which was a great success. Actual play —watching people play a roleplaying game, whether on line or live on a stage— has exploded in recent years, and ***Call of Cthulhu*** is hopefully going to be a growing part of that. *AEG Presents* is one of the world's biggest and leading companies in live entertainment. They do acts like Taylor Swift, Beyoncé, The Rolling Stones, and the actual play area *Critical Role*... and now *Call of Cthulhu Live*. We have some exciting plans to take these live shows to other parts of the world.

Thank you both for the time you've given us today, huge congratulations on reaching your 50th Annversary, and fingers crossed things continue to go well for all of you and *Chaosium* in the near future...

[Neil] Thank you.

[MOB] Thanks.

Berlin: The Wicked City launch...

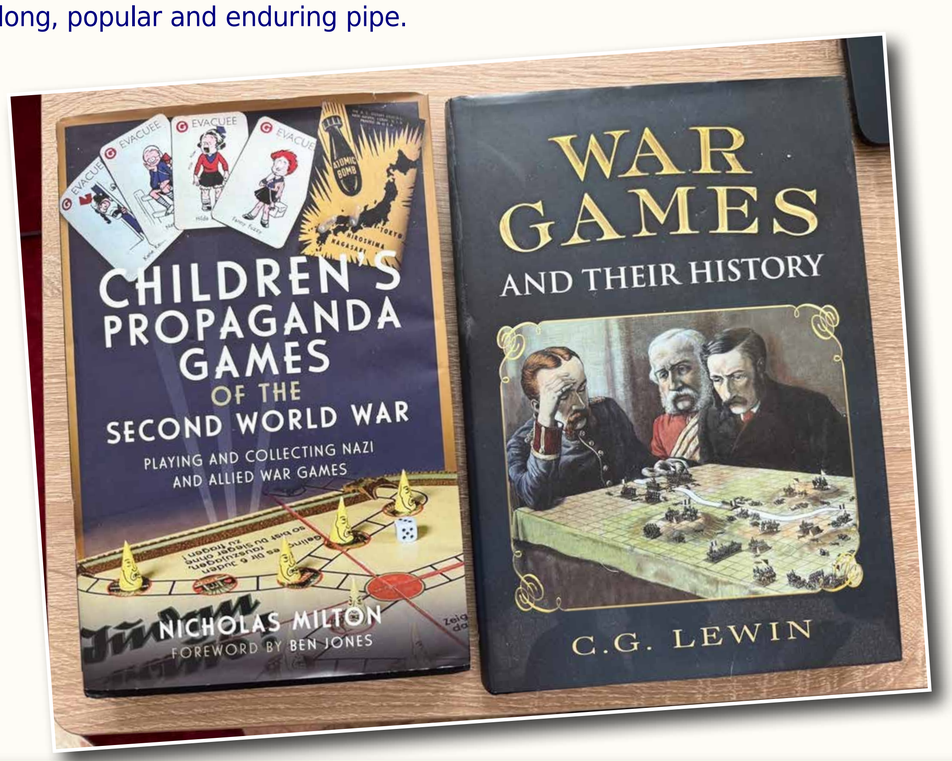
THE CULT OF THE OLD 11

BY TONY BOYDELL

Tony Boydell regularly offers readers a glimpse at just some of the fantastic treasures from his* Museum of Boardgames*. In this issue, Tony takes a look at some of the classic wargames you'll uncover at the Museum, and reminds us that...

"The only winning move is not to play."

If you mention 'War Games' to a modern gamer their eyes will likely glaze over at the thought of thousands of square, numbered chits and a be-hexed map with the most mundane illustrations; mention them to a member of the general public and you'll instil visions of ***Battleships***, ***Escape from Colditz*** and ***Risk***: not so much two sides of the same coin as two ends of a long, popular and enduring pipe.



Since the mid-19th century, the Prussian army-pioneered ***Kriegspiel*** (and the miniatures systems beloved of *Lord Scrumptious*, *Winston Churchill* and *H.G. Wells*), modern games of conflict and war have been a popular genre; most are simple, accessible and make light of the underlying theme to appeal in the family market. The Museum has managed to acquire a fabulous 'representative sample' – described hereafter – but I *still* kick myself for bottling out of a 2013 eBay auction for *Allan B. Calhamer*'s early ***Diplomacy*** prototypes; they sold for $1500 in the end – not a large amount, really, for such an important part of gaming history - if only I'd been convinced I was going to open a Museum back then I'd have gone the extra $500, to be sure!

While general examples —the usual suspects— can be quickly collected, a deeper exploration of the genre requires the assistance of more learned folks: recent publications by Nicholas Milton (2024) and C.G. Lewin, (2012) are a remarkable resource of background information, gameplay descriptions and —most importantly— pictures; an impossible to complete 'wishlist', they're a fantastic guide to what we have already, and for what we might seek out in the future.

In the Summer of 2024, author Nick Milton stopped by the Museum to compare my collection with his; pleasingly, I had a number of key items that he was missing #smug. Particular highlights in the Museum's collection are the following:

- A 1st edition ***L'Attaque*** (1919, BGG 9246) – designed by *Mme Hermance Edan* and the forerunner of HP Gibsons' '*War Without Tears*' series that extended the original mechanisms to ***Dover Patrol***, ***Aviation*** (aka ***Battle of Britain***), ***Tri-Tactics*** and even the Fantasy-themed ***Swords & Wizardry*** (1980s). ***L'Attaque*** has, of course, inspired a variety of other spin-offs including ***Stratego*** and ***Flint's Fist*** (with its *Treasure Island* theme).

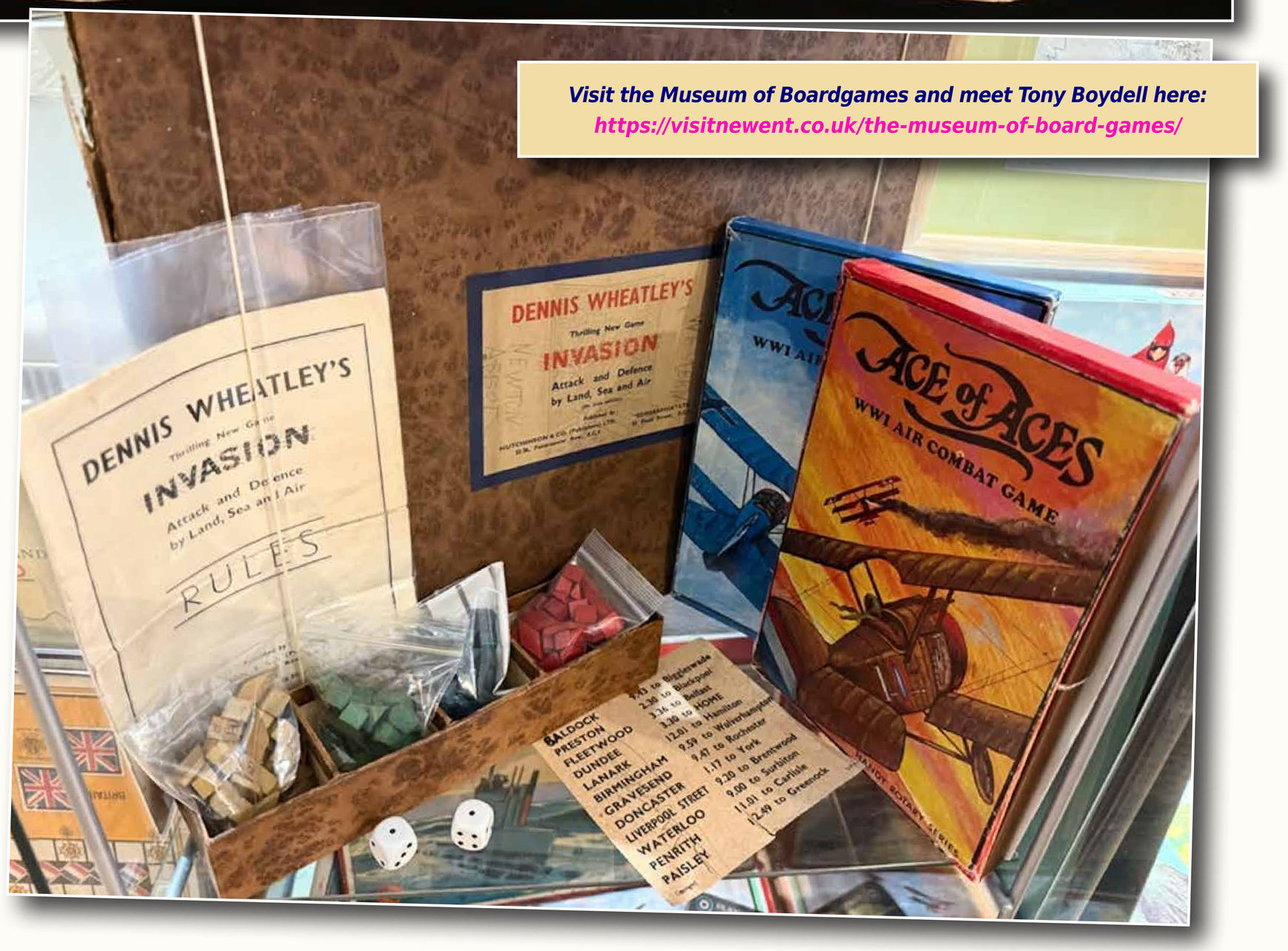
• ***The New Game of Jutland*** (1925, BGG 68862) – perhaps the earliest example of ***Battleships***: players follow a more sophisticated ruleset to fire off 'salvos' (depending on the size/ nature of the ship) and apply a bit more deductive reasoning to the results; hit and miss responses are singular and applied to the whole salvo, while damaged ships have their salvos reduced too. In the Museum's Library, one book of 'common game rules explained' devotes *nine* whole (small print) pages to the rules of ***Battleships*** – all-in-all, a bit more of a game than the one-shot, back-and-forth blandness of modern implementations.

• ***GHQ*** (*Waddingtons*, BGG 32696) – only produced between 1940 and 1944, ***GHQ*** is *very* hard to find 'complete' and necessitated purchasing two separate Lots, 15 months apart, to be combined into 'one good one'. Utilizing a D3 (a D6 numbered 1-3 twice), players manouvre their units across the European board to 'take' one of the opponent's capitals. In a mid-70s edition of the excellent *Games & Puzzles* magazine, the then-Chairman of *Waddingtons* appears in the Letters page begging readers to locate a copy for the company to examine as, apparently, no copies remained in their official archive!

• ***Campaign*** (*Wills & Hepworth*, BGG 58542) – also a product of WW2, *W&H* went on to specialise in another of their outputs —children's illustrated books— and would eventually change their name to *Ladybird Books* (!). The board depicts an abstract battlefield with obstacles, and the goal is to get a number of your own forces into the opposing bunker. Typically, there are variations between printings and we have both the blue and red box versions; excitingly, the blue box came with a selection of home-made, paper medals —one dated 1947— which I like to imagine were awarded at the end of each game: brothers, perhaps, keeping track of their rivalry, maybe?

PINPOINT THE BOMBER
by Francis Chichester

Visit the Museum of Boardgames and meet Tony Boydell here:
https://visitnewent.co.uk/the-museum-of-board-games/



• ***SEA-WINKS*** (*H.P Gibsons*, 1930s) – ***TIDDLEY-WINKS*** meets ***BATTLESHIPS*** in this dextrous diversion; it featured as my 'virtual donation' to BBC 6 Music's own Museum in my interview with Lauren Laverne in 2022 (***https://boardgamegeek.com/blog/344/blogpost/132812/on-my-radio***).

• ***PINPOINT THE BOMBER*** (1942, BGG 96795) is a book with three 'levels' of gameplay: from simple narrative to proper puzzle-solving through observation and calculation. The author was Francis Chichester – pioneering aviator and round-the-world sailor (he also crops up in another genre of Museum exhibits dealing with Travel and Racing). A series of exercises will, if successful, carry you across the map to Coblenz: your bomber's target.

• The author Dennis Wheatley —more famous for his novels, particularly the 'Devil' ones— was a big gamer, and turned his talents to a number of conflict board games (***INVASION*** and ***STRATEGY***) as well as a series of pseudo Escape Room-esque detective puzzle books.

Also dotted around the place are *pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey* and *tiddly-winks* variants themed to The Siegfried Line (the German defensive line built during the late 1930s); ***Snakes and Ladders*** gets various military spin-offs and the good old 'roll-and-move' mechanic hides behind ***Bomber Command*** (1940, BGG 209965), multiple ***Race to Berlin*** games (1915 and 1940) and ***Benedicto*** (aka ***Beat the Blitz***, BGG 33132 – where workers need to get home from their job at Benedict Peas factory while avoiding jams, bombs and other hazards).

There are comedic (morale-building) evacuation games, set-collecting of military ranks, feeding your troops on the frontline with ***Die Gulaschkanone*** (1937, BGG 169310) and shipping-themed ***Snap***; even post-War 'reconstruction' is covered by *Pepy's* ***Housing Drive*** (BGG 36636, 1948), which was reputedly part-funded by the Government to promote and normalize the rebuilding of huge housing estates in the post-War rationed years.

As it turns out, war is *everywhere* in the Museum —in some shape or form— and as popular and accepted a subject today as it has been for the last 350 years…

CLICK THIS BOX if you'd like to visit Tony's Patreon and support The Museum of Board Games and all of Tony's very hard work, thereby helping to keep it going for generations to come:

The Museum of Board Games Patreon

The UK Games Expo 2025 from a very different perspective?

by Tim Clare

This feature originally appeared on the Tim Clare blog, 2nd June 2025. It has been re-edited and updated for this magazine. More of his writing can be found here: www.timclarepoet.co.uk

When I first went to UK Games Expo, back in 2021, I didn't know anyone. It was my first convention, and I spent a lot of time sat at tables alone, shuffling cards.

This year, from the second I arrived I kept running into friendly faces. People messaged me and asked if I wanted to meet for a game. The whole three-and-a-half days were a bricolage of faces old and new, being generous and welcoming, sitting with me round the table to play and chat, and to share our mutual enthusiasm for this incredible storied human artform. From fellow writers and tabletop media people whose amazing work guides and inspires me, to dear friends I only ever see at boardgame conventions, and game designers, artists and random strangers who I had the good fortune to find myself seated with during a demo: every interaction was charged with joy and kindness, and humanity. I felt accepted. I felt understood.

In the years since I first started wearing the sunflower lanyard, increasing numbers of people seem aware that it signifies an invisible disability. At one demo table, a man in a football shirt paused before we started and asked if my disability meant there was anything extra I'd need to be comfortable. An interpreter took a moment before we started an interview to ask what my flavour of neurospicy was, and to check if I had any extra accessibility needs. A fellow lanyard wearer understood I was autistic within about sixty seconds of meeting, and told me it was okay to drop the mask while the neurotypicals weren't listening.

Sometimes I meet autistic people and it's like being part of a secret society. We're not all one big village but occasionally, after a flash of mutual recognition, there's a rapid and easy bidirectional flow of information. Damian Milton proposed something called the 'Double Empathy Problem', which posits that it's not so much that autistic people are intrinsically impaired at socialising, we just start in a different place to neurotypical people, with different habitual thinking styles and different experiences as a result. Neurotypical people are actually just as bad at reading our emotions, making accurate inferences based on what we say, and maintaining conversation with us as we supposedly are with them it's just that

CAT, PLANT, MONSTER (Tim Clare)

In ***Out of Sorts***, you and your friends have been abducted by an alien. They want help organising their library, and it's down to you, the abductees, to come up with a filing system. Naturally, there are some cultural and linguistic barriers to surmount. For a start, none of the alien's books has a conventional title. Remember when Prince changed his name to a symbol that was sort of a combination of the male and female symbols mixed with the ***Thurn and Taxis*** horn? That's the kind of thing each book is called. And my convoluted attempt to transmute it into something vaguely recognisable is the kind of thing players will find themselves shouting all game.

image c/o Connor Wake

It's a cooperative challenge where players race against the clock to find specific symbols amongst a thick deck of cards, match them to the corresponding index card, then hand them to the archivist, who has to arrange them in their hand according to a bizarre filing system you all have to spontaneously invent.

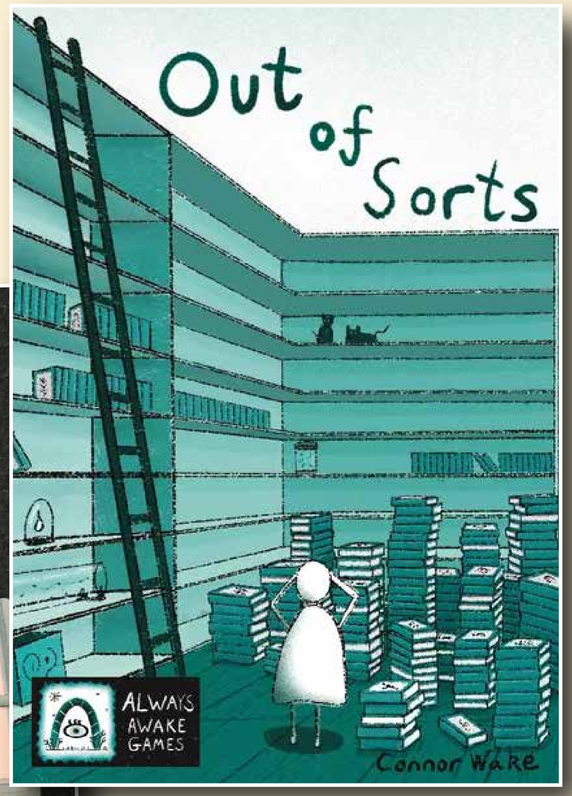
image c/o Daniel Thurot

You'll have three words like 'Cats', 'Plants' and 'Monsters' as your Dewey Decimal System criteria, and somehow you find yourselves arguing about whether a squiggle with two dots dangling off it is more cat-like than a sort of squashed olive or more plant-like, or maybe really it's a Monster – but more or less a Monster than the hairy sword?

If you're struggling to picture how this game plays, believe me when I tell you how quickly it all becomes frighteningly natural, as the group coheres around a shared, ad-hoc paratextual logic. ***Out of Sorts*** rewards memory, creativity and solid teamwork, but these skills need not be distributed evenly amongst your group. Different players' strengths have space to come to the fore, and it's hard to feel too crushed by failure because it's all so silly, the bibliomaniacal xenomorph's disapproving eyes slowly rising from behind a card with each check of your filing system that you fail.

Language works by consensus, appealing to mutual experience to convey meaning. If you are marginalised in any way, if your experience of the world is different to most people's, either because of how you're perceived or because of how you think and feel, our everyday language no longer serves you. A core part of you is cut adrift, and —because you don't have the words to articulate it— you might not even fully realise what it is that's missing. Even if you could find the words, would other people understand them? Or would it be like showing the letters D O G to someone who had never seen a dog? The words and their meanings were made by the majority, and the majority aren't like you.

Out of Sorts is a game about building a community where you're understood.



they, being the majority, get to say that their way is right and ours is wrong.

Several studies, as well as lived experiences as reported by autistic people, suggest we're often really good at connecting with, understanding, and socialising with other autistic people. It's just that neurotypical people are the dominant culture, they set the norms —without realising— and it bleeds into everything: stories, music, language, such that we perpetually feel like lost tourists, frantically trying to guess what the local house rules for poker are.

One function of special interests then —or 'restricted interests', as the ICD [International Classification of Diseases] and DSM [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders] choose to pathologise them— is to cobble together a home culture, a floating country of reclaimed land built from fandom or history or nature or science, where we do know the norms, where our preference for deep engagement isn't scorned as weird, and where the formerly uncertain and baffling world feels briefly knowable. Loving boardgames and wanting to play them all the time marks me out as odd, immature, dorky and boring in the big wide world. At

a boardgame convention, it is utterly unremarkable. Socially, at *UKGE*, it is a boon. The average neurotypical person without my interest in boardgames would feel bewildered and lost. I glide through it like a gorgeous debutante at their coming-out ball. I thrive.

People were gracious and thoughtful, and each of those moments where someone saw me, checked in, and let me know people with minds like mine were welcome too, meant the absolute world. Everyone who made the time for a game with me —even if only a five-minute one before the halls opened for the day— made my weekend.

Please understand, I would have struggled to just meet them in a café for a chat. It's not that I don't like people —I do— it's just that everyday interactions feel like trying to walk barefoot across a pitch-black room strewn with Lego. The real me is just bursting to geek out about stuff, and to sit and listen while other people geek out about the stuff that makes their heads fizz. In the normal world I'm starved of that. At the gaming table, I can *feast*.

Games have been bringing us together for millennia – before every major global religion, before we had a written alphabet. They are an elemental technology of connection, of communicating something that the fickle and transitory language of words struggles to capture.

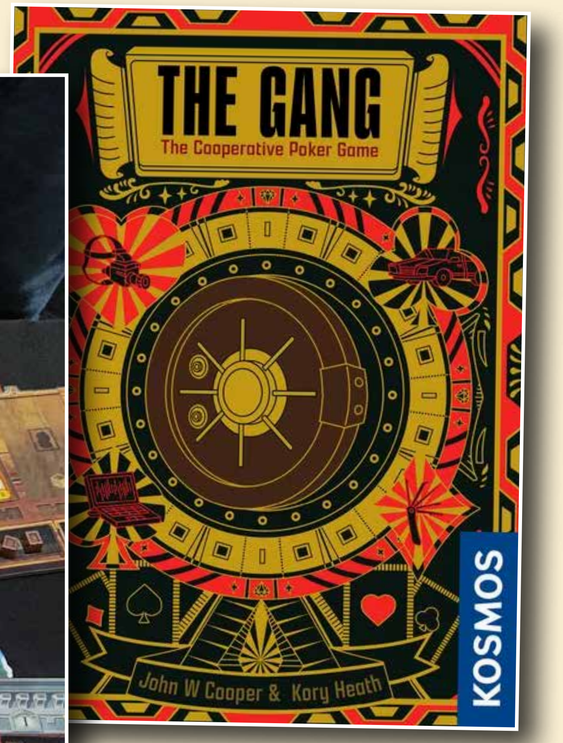
I love games, and I love people. The *UKGE* weekend just gone felt deeply affirming, and I'm going to try to carry some of its lessons forward, in the hope of extending that love, someday, to myself.

If you liked this piece, you might like to check out Tim's book about the history and culture of tabletop games,* The Game Changers. *Click here to pick up a copy.

If you're in the US, it's called* Across The Board, *and you can order a copy here.

TEXAS THREE-STAR GANG (Tim Clare)

The Gang was everywhere at *UK Games Expo*, and with good reason. It takes the emergent feel of *Spiel des Jahres*-winning card game ***The Mind*** —that weird hivemind flow state where you're communicating via wordless intuition— and gives it more of an arc, a build up, and a grand reveal.



But it relies on everyone round the table having a fairly intuitive understanding of poker hands and their relative rarity. We played with an old friend of mine who, at the start of the game, admitted he didn't know poker very well. The various hands possible and their rank order is laid out on a handy player aid, but as we soon discovered, actually the game asks for far more than that. How much better than 3-of-a-kind is a Flush? According to the chart, a Flush is bang in the middle of the rankings. But if you've played ***Texas Hold Em*** for any time at all, you'll know it's often a winning hand. A Royal Flush, Straight Flush and 4-of-a-kind are rare enough that you'll often not see one all evening.

When I sat down to play ***The Gang***, I brought this whole ambient knowledge of poker hands and relative probabilities to the table I've spent decades absorbing, from poker dice back when I was 11 to ***Texas Hold Em*** at university, to watching tournaments online that bring up instant percentages and graphics displaying the spread of possible winning hands. To me, the cognitive labour ***The Gang*** asks for was simple, intuitive and obvious – so obvious, I forgot it was there.

image c/o Jeremy F (Instagram: @itsallfunandboardgames)

To my friend, it was much, much harder, to the extent that the smooth, spooky interchange of information I'd experienced in other games just wasn't possible. He didn't know what a three-star chip was telling him. He couldn't read the air.

An Interview with Stefan Ströbinger, the designer of Rift Domination...

by Simon Neale

Simon caught up with Stefan Ströbinger who is in the final stages of launching his first game, RIFT DOMINATION, on Kickstarter. He tells us about his work in creating the game and general involvement in the boardgaming hobby.

Hi Stefan, thanks for taking part in this interview, Please can you give our readers a bit of background as to how you got into the boardgames hobby?

I always used to play a lot of video games, for example all games of the *Total War* series, *Civilization*, *Stronghold*, *Battle for Middle Earth* – to name but a few. My first tabletop experience was with ***D&D*** but when I moved to a nearby big city (Vienna) the opportunity to participate with my ***D&D*** group was lost.

At 21, my cousin invited me to a board game night during the holidays. It was my first real experience with more complex titles —we played ***MUNCHKIN*** and ***TWILIGHT IMPERIUM***— and I immediately fell in love with the hobby. Later I learned about the ***COSMIC ENCOUNTER*** series and went on to collect them myself. That was the beginning of my boardgame career. I gotta say I've also always been a big *Star Wars* fan and sci-fi generally attracts me. Besides ***COSMIC ENCOUNTER*** and ***TWILIGHT IMPERIUM*** I also fell in love with ***STAR WARS REBELLION*** and even started to paint my first miniatures. I don't have the biggest board game collection, around 20 games, but amongst my favourites are: ***BLOODRAGE***, ***7 WONDERS***, ***LORD OF THE RINGS: DUEL FOR MIDDLE-EARTH***, ***ONITAMA*** and ***RES ARCANA***.

What also inspired me for the battle system in ***RIFT DOMINATION*** was the game ***STAR WARS: ARMADA***.

I can see that you enjoy space-themed battle games. Do you play a lot of boardgames?

I have over 15,000 hours of video game experience and even played *Apex Legends* in the local Esports tournament. For my tabletop experience I would say I am not a hardcore gamer, but someone who plays regularly on a monthly basis. My gaming group actually plays ***RIFT DOMINATION*** most of the time! It is crazy how often we already played it and yet every session feels different and refreshing. We already established strategies in our group, and I love to break out of it to try something new and still feel like I am able to win the game.

I have been to the *Spiel Essen* convention in Germany which I believe is the biggest convention in Europe, if not in the world. It was a stunning experience and seeing so many people sharing the same interest as me was such a cool time.

I'll agree with you about *Spiel Essen*, it is an awesome experience. So what made you want to design your own boardgame?

I love specific mechanics from various games, but often felt frustrated when my favourites didn't hit the table. So I thought – why not take the elements that I love most and blend them into one experience? So I decided to take the best out of the games I love and create a game around them that combines everything. Now that you know my background it is no surprise that my game would take place in the sci-fi genre. That's how ***RIFT DOMINATION*** was created.

How did you learn what you needed in order to design a boardgame?

When I was 17 and still in school, our teacher gave us the task to design a poster for our prom night. I had already tried some things in Photoshop and I used it to produce a poster. Mine was chosen to be placed in the villages around my hometown and my

teacher told me that I had a talent for design and that I should look more into it. So as a hobby I started to design. First, only digital mash ups, then textures for 3D models / displays for video games, flyers for music events, birthday cards, websites, and I even started a webshop business for bracelets. Later on I went to a media design college to study 'Information, Media & Communication' and finished it with my Bachelor of Arts in Social Sciences. In my studies I also had lessons about film producing and image editing, where I helped my teachers with the teaching because I already had experience with [Adobe] Photoshop and Premiere.

So I had the business background from my webshop business and the design background from my hobbies. The only thing I really lacked in the creation of ***Rift Domination*** was patience with my drawing skills. Yeah, I absolutely sucked at drawing the content for my game, but fortunately I had friends and family that actually had amazing drawing skills and were willing help me out.

It is clear to me why you chose the theme and mechanics for *Rift Domination*. However, why did you choose a large, complex game as your first design and not start with a simple card game?

My goal was never to design something small or commercially simple – I just started combining all the ideas and systems I loved. I didn't realise at first how ambitious the scope would become. Four years later, I ended up with a massive 4X experience that truly reflects my passion. Of course it took me a while (4 years) from the first idea to the final version of the game but I never wanted my game to be just a commercial product. Instead, I put all my heart and passion into creating the perfect 4X experience for myself.

Please give us an overview of your game, then…

Rift Domination is a fast-paced 4X (eXplore, eXpand, eXploit, and eXterminate) strategy board game set in an unknown galaxy where powerful factions battle for control of ancient star systems, rare resources, and mysterious rift anomalies. Combining deep strategy with modular fleet-building and tactical combat, ***Rift Domination*** offers limitless possibilities and high replayability for competitive and strategic players alike.

In ***Rift Domination***, 2–6 players take command of one of 30 asymmetric factions – each with its own strengths, unique abilities, and strategic approach to galactic conquest. Whether you lead a swarm of sentient machines, a stealthy alien syndicate, or a brutal war cult, your path to victory is yours to forge.

The game blends traditional 4X mechanics with a modular combat system unlike any other. Battles are resolved on a specific board (conflict zone / space and ground map) where fast-paced, customisable engagements take place. 16 different unit types, action cards (OCC-Cards) and real-time tactics allow for creative strategy and diverse play styles, meaning that no two battles feel the same.

Players will explore new planets, upgrade them with buildings, and exploit the planet conditions for game-changing advantages. As the galaxy evolves, players must adapt their strategy, form (and break) alliances, and decide when to strike or retreat. With dozens of possible setup combinations, every session offers a fresh experience.

That sounds intriguing. So walk me through the steps of your design process?

I started with a lot of Excel sheets, on which I first recorded the 30 factions, then the unit types, OCC-cards, planet conditions, and planet upgrades. I always tried to balance everything the best I could with numbers, and I gotta say not much really changed during the playtesting / balancing phase later on.

After I had everything settled in my Excel sheets I started to create the gameboard in Photoshop and designed the first layout for the cards and tiles. Then I

tried to draw my ideas to the already existing factions and this is where my friends helped me because as I said earlier I just suck at drawing with a pencil. Next I photographed everything because I didn't even have a printer with scan function, and loaded the pictures into Photoshop to colour them and give them every needed asset.

After everything was ready for a prototype I went to a local print store and for 70 Euros had a lot of thick pages in my hand ready to be cut out, put together and play for the first time. It was a horror for setting up the game because even though I used the thickest paper the print shop offered, the thin units were hard to pick up and during a game you have to use a lot of them. But I saw that the mechanics worked and just needed refining.

Over the next year I redesigned most of the game assets and even updated the gameboard, wrote the rulebook, and used my drawn images as a basis for generating more appropriate pictures. Next my search for a real manufacturer began – first in Europe because I am a fan of local support, but then I found *Magicraft* in China. The reason being that most of the manufacturers in Europe either had no option to only print one version (minimum quantity 500 units) or the price of the prototype print was just too high. *Magicraft* had a very nice price offer and a lot of cool games like ***Mage Knight*** that had cooperated with them. So I decided to create my first high quality prototype with them and it was a good decision. The team at *Magicraft* guided me through the manufacturing process and told me exactly what they needed from me, and even pointed out some minor errors in the game design.

The initial manufactured prototype was created and my game group played it, some of them trying ***Rift Domination*** for the first time. Everyone enjoyed the game and asked me to create a specific game group purely for ***Rift Domination*** and added their friends into this group. With all those people I used a whole year to playtest again and optimize wherever the game felt a little unbalanced. Then I reworked everything that needed to be changed and created the final version of my game.

I had the chance to speed pitch my game to publishers at *Spiel Essen*, and the team at *Magicraft* kindly brought the final version prototype with them. I almost cried seeing the final version of my game because everything looked so clean and professional, and was even better than I hoped for.

The latest step was to create the website: ***www.riftdomination.com*** and I paid a freelancer to create a TTS (Tabletop Simulator) mod so that the game could be played online.

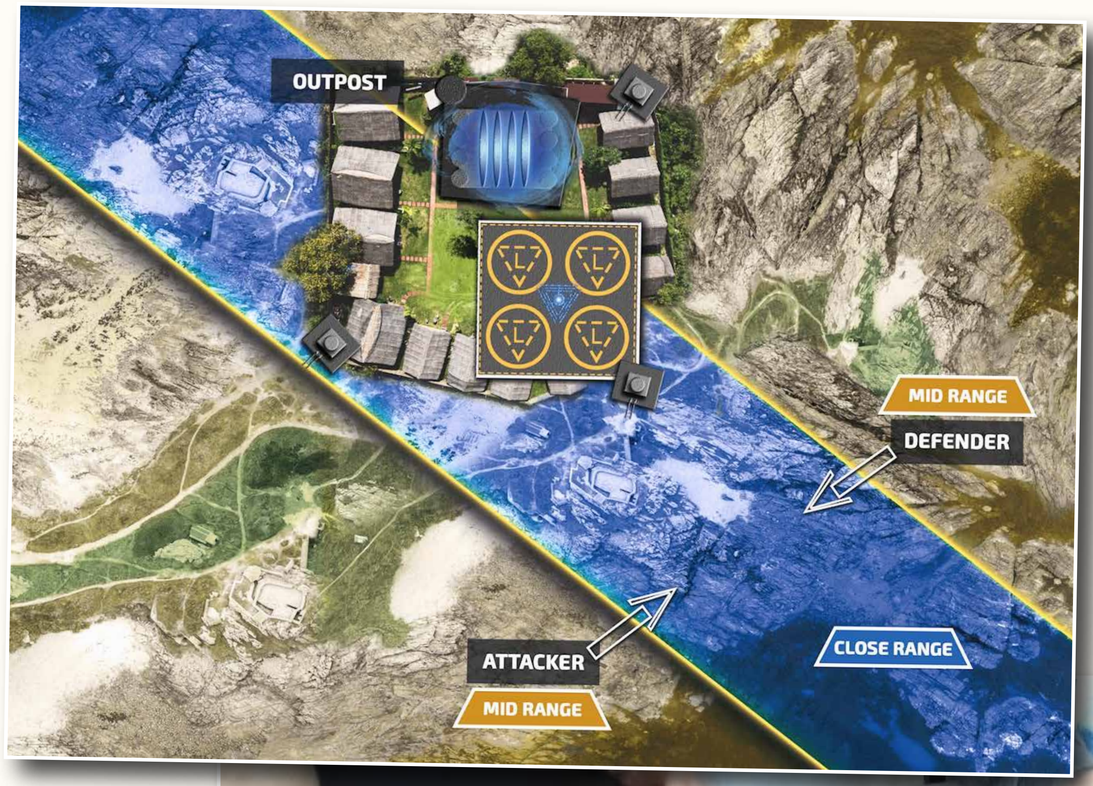
With all that effort, did you ever feel like you had taken on too much?

To be honest, I didn't feel the development process to be too challenging at any point. I love being creative and I always found a solution when something wouldn't work the way I thought it would. The real challenge was finding a 3D prototype print organisation and dealing with the backlash once they told me they couldn't do it. That was the only challenge I didn't overcome, and so I just decided to not go for miniatures at all. In our modern times you can always just look things up if you have no clue what to do, and that's how I gathered knowledge about everything I needed, including how to design a game box.

The biggest challenge for me was creating the TTS mod. I had no problem to get every asset into the application but coding something was pure horror. I struggled to code the first step of the game (Draw 2 factions, redraw 1 if wanted, and select a faction) for over a month and had to be honest to myself: I cannot write code and don't have the time to learn a coding language. So I hired a freelancer to write the code for my game. I gave him clear instructions over some Microsoft Word pages for what I needed and he just delivered. After a few revisions the mod was perfect and I was happy.

What made you decide to self-publish and not find a publisher for *Rift Domination*?

As I mentioned earlier, I had the time to speed pitch my game to publishers at *Spiel Essen*. It was just like speed dating where I had only 8 minutes to present my game. One of my closest friends who loves to talk came with me, and together we pitched the game. Most of the publishers told me that my game looks great and they would love to play it but it just won't fit into their repertoire of games because of the setting, genre or complexity. Other publishers told me that they want to publish it but the queue of games to release is full until 2029 or offered me money for the license. So the experience was a setback but I knew I wanted to publish ***Rift Domination*** before 2029, and to me the game is far more valuable than the licence money offered.



Whilst I was at *Spiel Essen*, I also talked with other board game developers, crowdfunding platforms, etc. and got a good impression of how to proceed to self-publish the game.

Now the game is ready to go, what are your next steps?

Right now I am advertising ***Rift Domination*** on social media and collecting as many email addresses as I can before I launch the game on Kickstarter. The ***pre-launch page*** for ***Rift Domination*** is already up and future backers can follow. I want to use every opportunity to create more resonance for my game and I plan to participate in future events, use a developer diary, fill the socials with more content, or simply host a TTS session, film it and upload it to YouTube.

If I find enough backers on Kickstarter I will stay with *Magicraft* to manufacture my game as I already have the minimum quantity and prices settled.

For the delivery I will cooperate with *Quivo*, an Austrian logistics company, who will get all the copies of my game, store them, and send them to the backers.

Looking back on what you have achieved so far, what have you learned?

Believe in yourself and your vision. If you're passionate about something, don't wait – build it, test it, refine it. You'll be amazed how far that commitment can take you.

That sounds like very sound advice. Looking to the future, have you any plans?

I already have plans for an expansion for ***Rift Domination***, which I think will be one of the achievable stretch goals in the Kickstarter campaign. Besides that, yeah... I already have plans for another game, but it will be a card game and not as complex as ***Rift Domination***! But who knows? Maybe my next game will be even bigger, haha.

Thank you so much Stefan, for giving us an insight into your work in designing and developing *Rift Domination*. Your passion for the game comes through clearly and I wish you all the best for the future. If readers are interested in finding out more about the game, both the webpage and Kickstarter pre-launch pages are linked in the above article, but they're also here:

Website: *www.riftdomination.com*

***Rift Domination* Kickstarter pre-launch page**

Let's Talk About... A Hot Weekend in Warwickshire!

by Alex Bardy

During a scorching weekend in late June, I was very fortunate to get the opportunity to join 100 or so others at* MidSummerCon 2025*, a 'trial event' organised by the team behind* MidCon*, a games convention that happens every year circa early November... As far as I know they've been doing* MidCon *for 45+ years which makes it one of the most consistent and longest established conventions in the UK, so they know their stuff.

I already know the team are excellent from previous visits to *MidCon* and such-like (even if it's not quite the very same team who started the whole thing back in the 70s!), but this 'experiment' in Warwickshire also seems to have gone very well.

You can find out more about *Midcon* here:
www.midcon.org.uk

At the very least, I and my long-time friend and travelling companion for the weekend (Paul Willcox of *Eurydice Games*) had a fantastic time, and both agreed that it was a very worthwhile and packed weekend of gaming that we both really enjoyed.

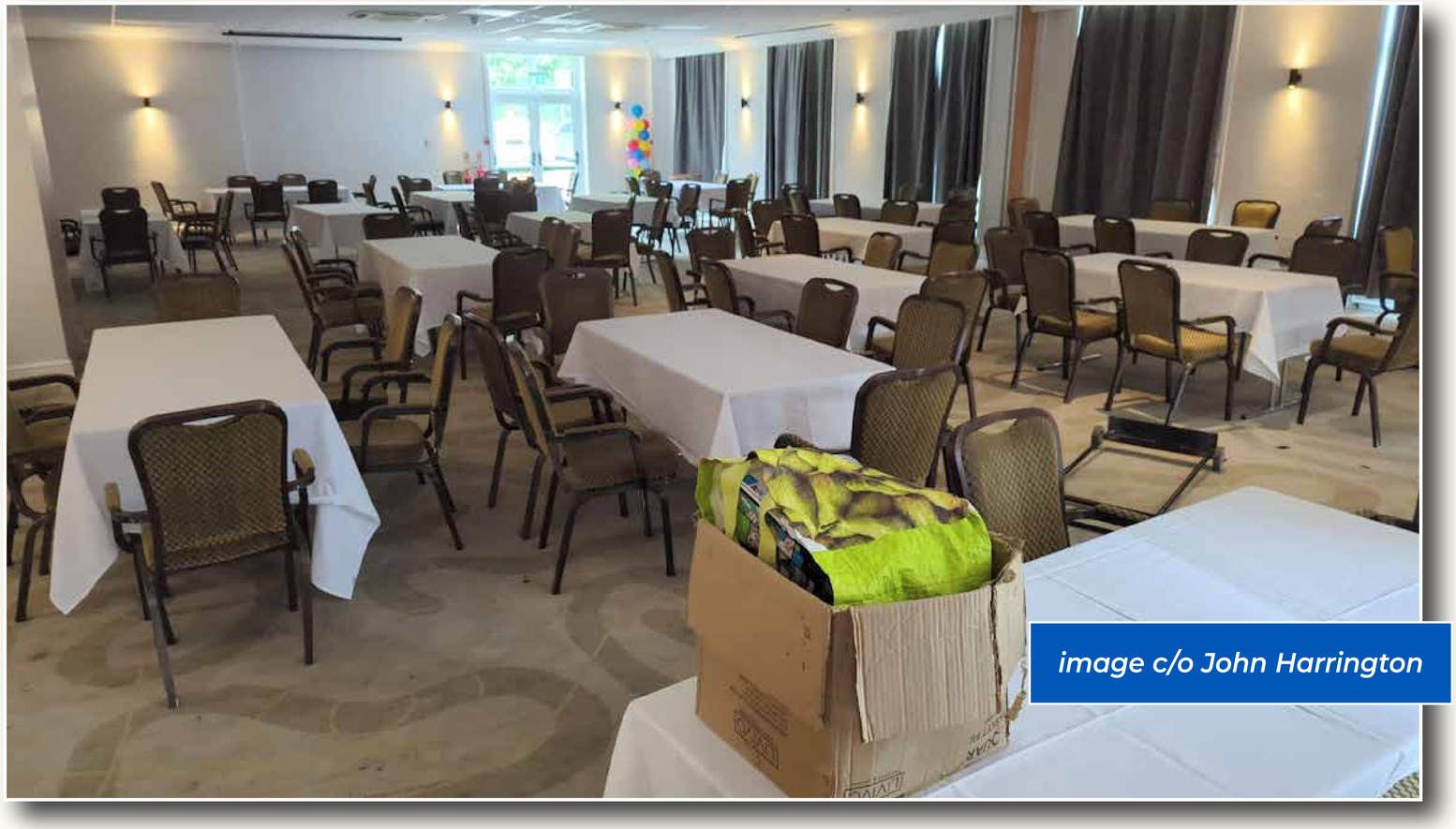
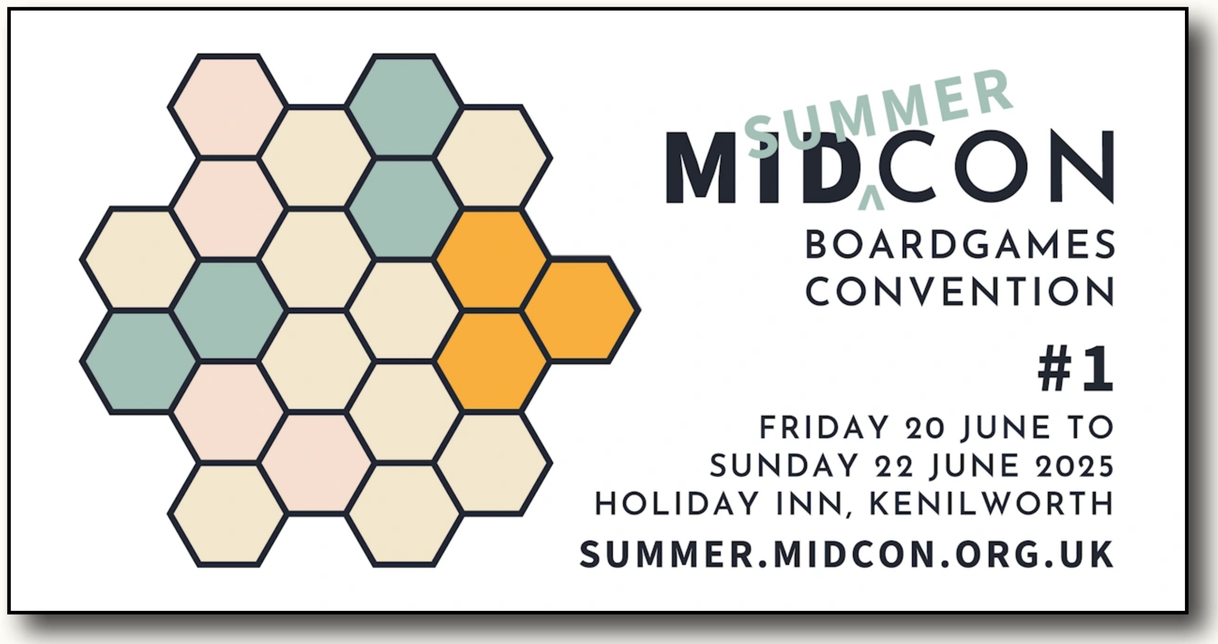


image c/o John Harrington

What's more, I'd like to tell you a little bit about what we got up to... and those at the back can put your filthy minds away, now!

Paul and I left a very hot and sunny York on the Friday afternoon circa. 2pm, and although the trip was supposed to take approx. 2-3 hrs, we didn't actually arrive until gone 6pm due to assorted traffic issues and more roadworks than I care to remember – no, of course they didn't have anyone working on them, that'd just be silly right? It was an extremely hot day as well, with both of us noting that it reached 30°C around 4pm while we were stuck in traffic (and in the car!) on a largely static motorway (the M1, to nobody's surprise, I suspect).



Anyway, having finally arrived at the hotel, we were extremely grateful to discover that our room (and the hotel in general) did have decent air-conditioning: a massive bonus given the stifling heat of the day and the longer than expected road trip we'd just endured. After a quick shower and refresh, we were both famished and agreed to go down and register our attendance before grabbing something to eat – an absolute necessity before we even tried to do much else on the boardgaming front.

Fully refreshed, fed and watered, we made our way to the main (large) room in which the convention was taking place. If I'm being honest, we weren't really expecting that many people to be there on the Friday evening and were very surprised that at least half the room was already filled by lots of gamers with their heads down, all deeply engaged and focused on the various games in front of them.

Worth adding is that both Paul and I were largely expecting the place to be populated by your stereotypical 'middle-aged white male' (something we both identify as by the way), and thus were genuinely pleased to see it was nothing like that at all. To be brutally honest, not only was there a good cross-section of gamers from all walks of life and across most age groups, but we were pleasantly surprised to see so many female gamers in attendance as well – we felt this made for a much more relaxed and welcoming environment, and a positive sign that the convention organisers had successfully managed to appeal to a wider audience.

Unlike so many conventions, *MidSummerCon* was designed purely as a boardgaming event – there were

no stalls selling things, no games library per se, nobody demo-ing anything (as far as I'm aware, at least), and nobody trying to stuff games and toys into our hands for "a heavily discounted price". Indeed, other than a makeshift DIY bring'n'buy table, the convention consisted primarily of a very large, carpeted hall, full to bursting with tables upon which anyone in attendance could break out a game and invite other people to join them. Doing precisely that proved pretty much par for the course across the entire weekend for Paul and I, punctuated only by a few essential breaks for food and drink, and alas, the annoying need for sleep.

We both already had a small list of games we were keen to get to the table over the weekend, and while some of them were new titles we hadn't played before, there were several we just wanted to get back to the table again, having perhaps not played them in a while or so...

First up on the Friday was Paul's copy of ***Wandering Towers*** – we played a learning game, but the visual appeal is also very good, so it didn't take long for us to get chatting to a few people as they and others expressed an interest. It made for an easy start to the evening and a pleasant introductory game, before Paul then completely kicked my ass in a 2-player game of ***Nova Luna***, thus setting the tone for the results for the rest of the weekend, I think... A 6-player game of ***Flip 7*** followed, and this extremely quick and fast push-your-luck game has rapidly become one of our go-to 'party perennials' – as expected, it pretty much endeared itself to all the players, even poor old Dan who is the only person I have ever played with that scored absolutely nothing the entire game, bless his cottons!

We finished the evening / morning (it was gone midnight at this point!) with a 6-player game of ***Ethnos*** – an old classic that I really do enjoy bringing to the table whenever I can. Reasonably fast and quick, it went down very well with the group, even though most weren't familiar with the game at all. We gave them as much warning as we could about the revised edition, and the terrible re-worked version (***Archeos Society***), so we did our bit for the good of boardgaming-hood, so to speak.

The Saturday proved particularly busy, and once we'd both got ourselves sorted after breakfast, etc. we made our way down to the main hall, only to find that every table was already full and being used! The staff were kind enough to set up a few more tables when we asked, and before long we were busy playing the rather excellent ***The Fellowship of the Ring: Trick-Taking Game*** (***Fellowship*** hereafter). A couple of games of ***Rebirth*** followed, as well as another crack at ***Fellowship*** (with 4 players this time). ***Fellowship*** is an evolving and progressive co-operative campaign and what we've seen of it so far is quite impressive.

Saturday was to prove very much non-stop for both of us (in between the odd beverage or two, of course), and among other things we also played ***Scout***, ***Can't Stop***, ***Castle Combo***, ***Foundations of Rome***, and ***Harmonies*** during the day and into the early evening.

We closed out the late evening and early Sunday morning (3am this time!) with 6 of us again, playing ***Flip 7***, ***Art Robbery***, and ***Mada*** (the latter are both pocket games from *HeidelBAR* and a lovely young couple were happy to play together as a team for both games).

Sunday was check-out day, but as soon as we'd sorted that, we were both back in the hall late morning for more games, and this time managed to complete a lengthy game of ***Dune: Imperium – Uprising*** (which took longer than originally expected mainly because I hadn't fully refreshed myself on the rules!). The hall wasn't as busy but we still managed to get a full complement of players for both ***Wandering Towers*** and ***Castle Combo*** before deciding to head back home. We left about 5pm-ish by which time the main hall had emptied significantly, but agreed that it'd been a very productive and relaxing event, all-told.

In case you hadn't guessed, we really enjoyed the entire weekend, and of course, we did manage to stay up playing games with random strangers until the early hours of the morning on both the Friday and Saturday night. To be fair they didn't remain strangers as we invariably bumped into most of them the following day, and they seemed happy to join us for even more games a second time, so I guess we didn't frighten them away completely, which is always nice to know!

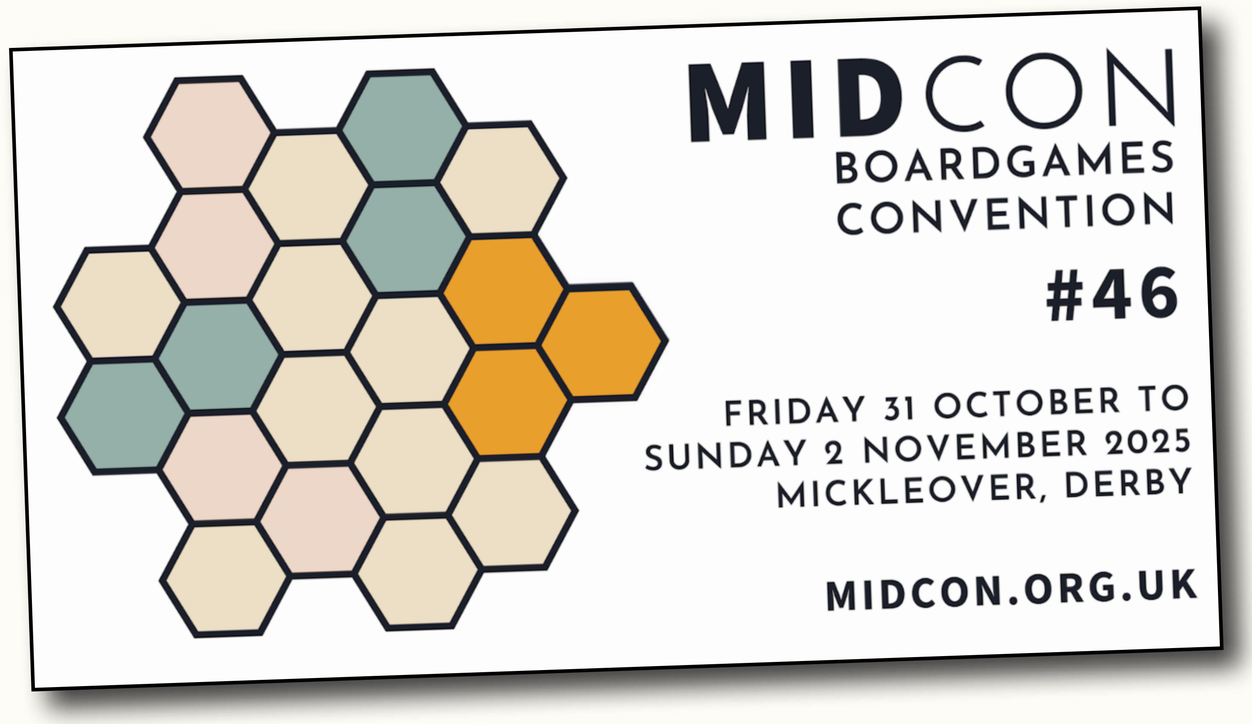
Mind you, although there were undoubtedly quite a few attendees that were just as tired and knackered as we were, the vast majority looked 100% more healthy and refreshed than Paul and I, given we are both inveterate early risers and thus neither of us can lay claim to having more than 6 or 7 hours sleep across the entire weekend!

The first ever *MidSummerCon* took place at the Holiday Inn in Kenilworth, Warwickshire, and while it's very important to say the hotel staff were absolutely brilliant throughout, the hotel building itself could do with a bit of a refresh as it looked rather dated in places, and could probably also lay claim to having the tiniest lifts and the slowest lift doors I have ever come across!

Quibbles aside, breakfast on both the Saturday and Sunday morning was excellent, and although the staff were clearly unprepared for the Saturday morning rush, they were all extremely helpful and accommodating on both mornings. The bar staff were also great, and did their level best to look after everyone who visited the bar for top-ups and such-like.

I believe the team behind *MidSummerCon* are not planning to make it an annual event (as yet), but I for one would be extremely happy to attend again (*MidCon* in late October / early November is largely a no-go for me, unfortunately), and I think the reduced capacity (100-ish as opposed to 400-ish for *MidCon*) helped considerably to make it feel like a nice, smooth, well-run gaming and community event.

image c/o John Harrington



So You Wanna... Run Your Own Board Games Convention?

An interview with Ryan Willis

by Alex Bardy

Hi Ryan, thank you for agreeing to talk to us today. Please could you introduce yourself, tell us a little bit about the team behind you and YBGC (York Board Games Convention), and what the devil made you decide to go ahead and organise a local boardgames convention?

Hi Alex! I'm Ryan Willis and I run a couple of businesses in York focused on games. Every time I've attended a board game convention I've found myself thinking "York really should have a convention", and one year at *Airecon* I was chatting about the notion and landed on "Someone should make that happen... Hey, I'm someone." So I then set about the challenge. I had some excellent advice along the way, got extremely lucky in many ways, and met some wonderful people who've since joined the team!

Can you tell us about the practicalities of getting something like this off the ground, because presumably it isn't just about finding a venue, getting some tables together, and selling tickets to the public?

There's a lot involved, certainly. The venue is the first thing to get sorted because until you've got a venue you can't tell people when or where your event is happening, and nor do you know how many tickets you can sell, etc. So that's definitely the first concern. After that there are about a hundred things to do, from finding a ticket vendor and selling tickets to organising a team of volunteers, finding or building a board games library, and sorting out software to manage all the above! I received some excellent advice from Mark Cooke who runs *Airecon* regarding getting set up (mostly start small and build from there) and lots of wisdom from Adam Best who runs *Here For Games* about how to make the event as accessible as possible. Both were extremely generous with their time and thoughts. I was also very lucky to meet Matt Coward-Gibbs and Jamie Maloney who both came onboard at an early stage and are both utterly wonderful – they help run both my convention events in dozens of ways great and small. *Demons Wake* is the other one.

I suspect taking on such a project as YBGC probably seemed like a great idea at the time, but I believe it wasn't all plain-sailing... How easy or otherwise did you find working with the local community, and especially navigating the stringent health and safety implications?

No, it wasn't all plain sailing, but the local community was amazing – everyone was incredibly supportive right from the start. A local board gaming club initially offered use of their board games library, which was a very exciting development. We ended up not following through on that (for mostly logistical reasons). I also made a daft mistake because for some reason I was terrified no-one would want to volunteer, so every time someone said they'd do it I'd just about bite their hand off. In the end we had slightly more volunteers than we needed, and it was

good to have more people around to help, but I felt like a bit of a wally. Surprisingly, health and safety implications didn't present a big challenge at all.

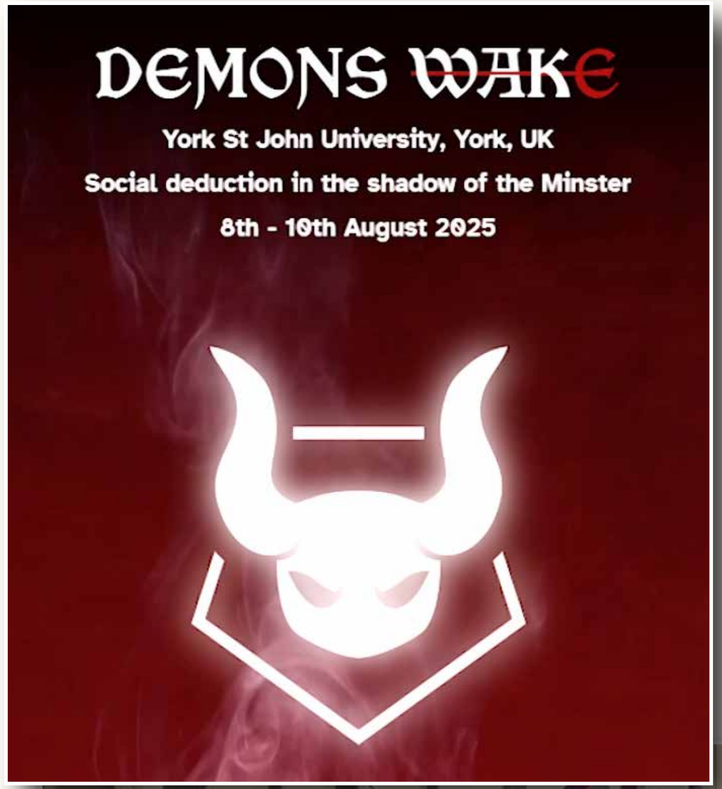
You mentioned *Demons Wake*, can you expand on just what *Demons Wake* is?

Demons Wake is Europe's biggest social deduction gaming convention, and it (newly) happens in York every August. Where *YBGC* focuses on board games, *Demons Wake* is all about social deduction – also known as hidden role games. Often people think of games like ***Werewolf***, ***Avalon***, ***Secret Hitler***, or even *The Traitors* on TV, but in principle things like ***Among Us*** could be included in there as well. Easily the biggest and most popular social deduction game currently is ***Blood on the Clocktower***, which is produced by *The Pandemonium Institute*.

This year the event is running 8th August to 10th August, and it completely sold out a good while before the event. Next year we'll probably go bigger still and might even end up being the biggest in the world!

I'm guessing your experience as a Web Designer may have come in handy for PR and website purposes, or not so much?

Yeah, being a software developer has helped in various ways. Being able to spin up a website very easily has been a big help, although you don't need to be a webdev to be able to do that. But having a website from the start meant there was always a place for people to find information, etc. and to let people sign up for early access tickets. Seeing that mailing list grow was also very reassuring at the start when I'd spent a lot on a venue and was only hoping we could break even.



I gather the second YBGC is going to be much larger than the first, with considerable emphasis on RPGs as well, so congratulations on that, but where does it go beyond 2025? I'm guessing 'keeping it local' will be a struggle as larger and bigger venues become more difficult to find?

Oh yes, it's going to be much bigger this year than it was in 2024, and we're leaning quite hard into RPGs with ***The Forge***, which is our dedicated RPG zone. And you're quite right, York can be a tricky place to find large spaces to gather. At our current size, our venue for this year (St Peters' School on Bootham) will be perfect, and I expect they will have plenty of space for us next year as well. If we want to continue growing beyond that though, it gets challenging. Many places you can gather a few thousand people in York are either concert-style spaces or they're outdoors, neither of which would work for us. We've been in talks with one of the biggest venues in York for over a year, but it seems they're currently not able to accommodate us due to staffing issues at their end.

What's your idea of a good games evening, and do you have a preferred game (or type of game) as your go-to whenever you get the chance to play?

For me a good games evening is so much about the people, and the vibes! I *love* the games and am not super competitive, which is fortunate because I lose a lot. I do have some favourite games, however: ***Space Base*** and ***Daybreak*** are my current go-to games. I'm fortunate to know the designer of ***Daybreak*** and he'll probably be at *YBGC* this year, too! I also love ***Wormholes*** and ***Hanabi***.

Where can readers find out more about YBGC 2025 if they want to get involved and / or attend?

The best place is on our main website and our socials, *Facebook*, *Instagram*, and *TikTok*:

The YBGC main website is here: www.ybgc.co.uk

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/yorkboardgamesconvention

Instagram: https://www.instagram.com/yorkboardgamesconvention

TikTok: https://www.tiktok.com com/@yorkboardgamesconvention

Thanks again for your time today, and fingers crossed there'll be many more great cons to come!

the Word of GOG! on the YouTube...

We've received more ramblings from GOG (Grumpy Old Git). Again, we don't necessarily agree with him but would like to know if others might. Is it just us or he is he sounding a little more lucid? Just a little. Not much though. A shortage of paint thinners perhaps? Let us know if you agree or disagree either way!

I've lately been exploring the interwebs and that there *YouTube*. Great fun. Unless you're one of these new-fangled 'content creators' (I refuse to acknowledge the term 'influencer'). They're in deep doo-doo. Many of them appear to have forgotten the golden rule: don't monetise your hobbies. This is a sane warning even coming from me. They work so hard to chase a relatively small amount of revenue and *YouTube* periodically change stuff making it even harder to secure revenue… it must feel like a Sisyphean task for those engaged in it.*

But, upon further reflection (whilst using a Costa urinal), I realised my sympathy for this load of twonks is extremely limited. Essentially, they are like parasites. They are constantly creating new content. The vast majority of this content focusses on new games. Obviously, the gaming public can't be arsed to remember anything more than a year old, unless it's a delayed Kickstarter.

I think that by focussing on new games they appear relevant, hip, cool and capturing the current zeitgeist (now there's a word for the total spanners!). Their goal is to accrue likes, watchers, and followers. I suspect they don't really need to care about the games themselves that much. And it's a never-ending cycle. Publishers probably want to engage these content creators as they are a cheap, easy way of marketing to an audience. (I'm sure when pitching on why they should receive a free copy of your game 'follower count' or 'hits' probably features quite extensively).

But it's all bollocks. Some of the channels' viewership varies hugely game by game, leading me to conclude that some games just seem more appealing to the social media crowd than others. The problem is that with print media being a tough industry (*Senet* and *Tabletop Gaming* keep flying the flag in the UK though!) and *Boardgamegeek* being a fickle advertising beast, there's not really a lot of alternatives. Yes, I know there are *Facebook* ads, but they are rather expensive from what I understand.

YawnTube?

Now I know some content creators are far from free of charge. There are some channels where publishers pay for content. I won't go into my feelings about this (you know, to maintain some decency). The channels that have been the most successful can now be more picky about which games they review or feature. No surprise that this favours games from established designers, larger publishers and, arguably, skews things towards the more over-produced end of the board game market.

Take ***Hansa Teutonica*** for example, an awesome game that looks like someone spat cardboard into a box – that wouldn't get a look in. It's still an awesome game, though, and does not need any deluxification – the current trend… and no amount of 3D figurines will make ***Agricola*** or ***Puerto Rico*** better than they already are, so there!

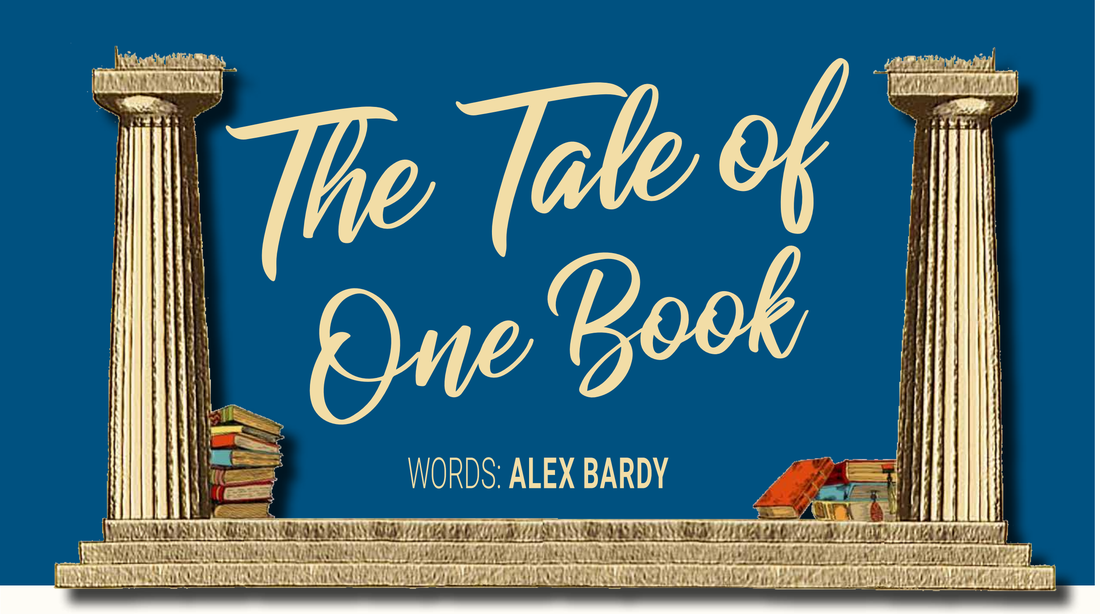
So, the game-buying public is seeing an edited crop of new games, and the smaller creators often seem overly positive about any naff game they've been graced with; a case of not wanting to bite the hand that feeds perhaps?

The ones I hate, that boil my ju-ju, seem to be most common on *TikTok* (visual diarrhoea for the barely educated) that have bold titles like 'The 10 best 2-player games of all time' or '5 games you must play'. My issue with this is that it often belies a trend I've spotted whereby the creators have a limited depth of experience and knowledge about their hobby. That's fine, I guess – I don't want to be a gatekeeper (never had a gate, and never liked 'em anyway), but when the 10 best 2-player games of all time feature no games older than 5 years, something starts to feel off. Similarly, if the 5 games you must try are all huge boxes full of minis from the last few years, then something doesn't sit right with me. I would even argue that ***Carcassonne***, ***Puerto Rico*** and ***Hansa Teutonica*** should be compulsory on such lists and all for good reasons; ***Carcassonne*** is a quintessential tile-placement game that pretty much revolutionised that element of design and gave us the meeple, any one of which could beat 100 plastic minis in a fight; ***Puerto Rico*** is pure class, the ultimate role selection game with multiple routes to very tight victory; and ***Hansa Teutonica*** is a near-perfect sandbox game that starts bewilderingly but settles into a pleasing rhythm.

My many hours on 'the tube' have shown that I most enjoy the channels where a group of friends play games, banter, take the piss, and shoot the breeze. From this I get a sense for the feel of the games they're playing; of the emotions it can evoke. It's still marketing, but less gauche (another word for the spanners).

But this style of fun content aside, what really gets my goat (well it would if I had one, but I don't have a gate, right?) is that it is all about simply celebrating the new. I worry there is little depth to it all. A slick marketing campaign and getting product in front of the right content creators is now more important than designing an awesome game in the first place, and that's just capitalist crapola.

For the uneducated – Sysyphus was that bloke doomed to keep rolling a boulder uphill, forever.



Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons

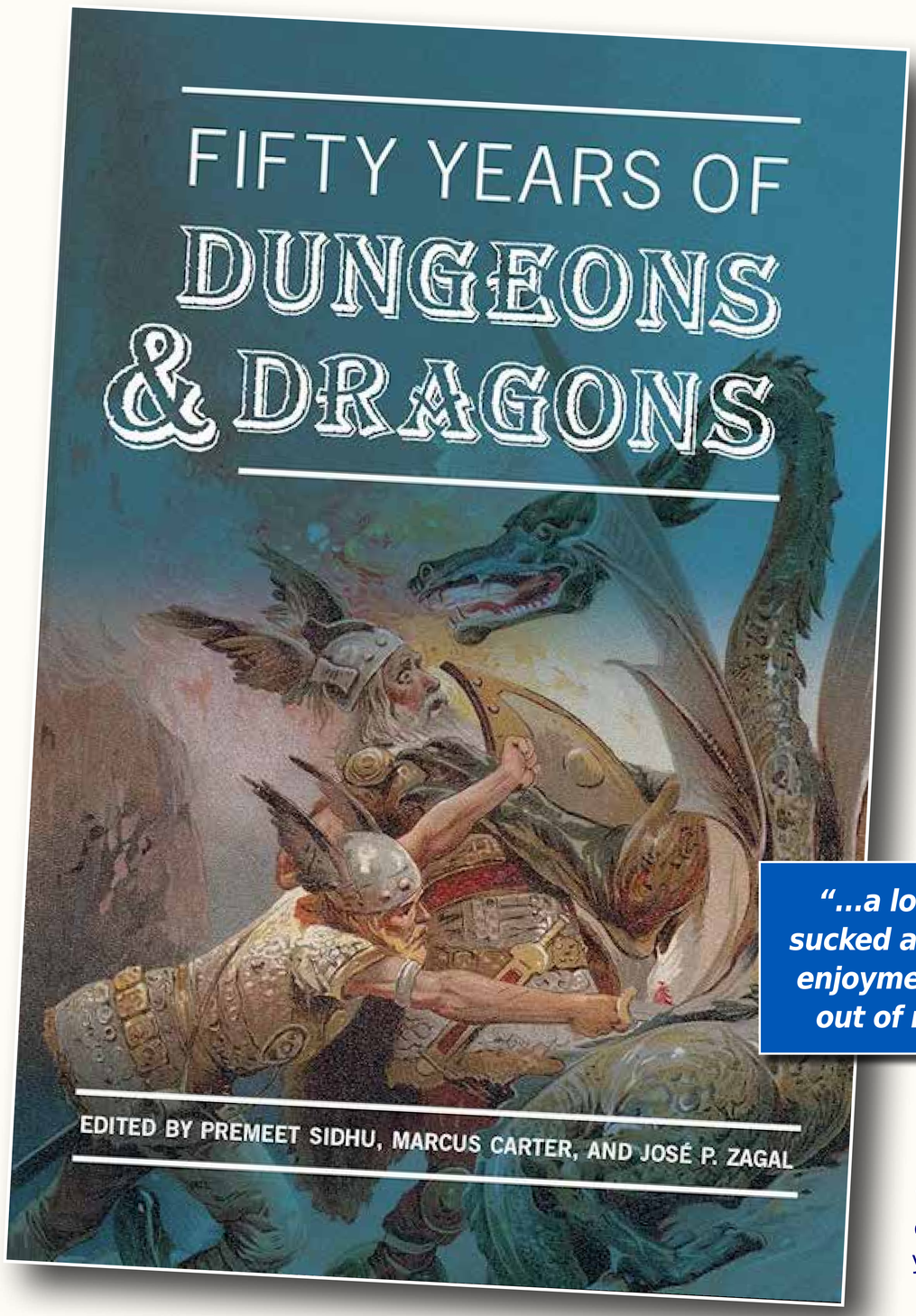
Edited by Premeet Sidhu, Marcus Carter, and Jose P. Zagal
Published by MIT Press, 2024

For those of a certain vintage, ***Dungeons & Dragons*** was a revelation for not only breaking the mould of what a game actually was —more specifically, of what a *wargame* was— but also of what it could now be, and it arguably changed the very nature of what constitutes a game. It introduced the concept of roleplaying to an entire generation, helped make cosplay and live action roleplaying (LARP) become a lifestyle choice for some, and laid the very foundations for many of the things we see today and take for granted in computer games. Whenever your game or character 'levels up', whenever you earn some form of reward or experience bonus in a game, or indeed whenever your options are improved in some way or you're rewarded with better bonuses and equipment that lets you do things more efficiently – all of these have their history deep in the bowels of the basic concepts originally introduced by ***Dungeons & Dragons*** (***D&D*** hereafter).

Last year, ***D&D*** celebrated its 50th Anniversary, not just with the more common fanfare of special editions, badges, and assorted paraphernalia, but also with a couple of books that looked a little deeper at this whole phenomenon. Given that you can now live and breathe ***D&D*** 24/7 if you so wish (don all the gear, decorate your house in ***D&D***-related furniture and cushions, lampshades, etc. and of course, drink ***D&D*** tea or coffee in your favourite ***D&D*** mug), it's probably no surprise there are a great many writers wanting to somehow study, analyse and reflect on how and why this has happened...

Fifty Years of Dungeons & Dragons tries to do this, while also pausing to offer some critical acclaim and credence to the game. What follows are lengthy discussions of ***D&D***'s foundational influence on roleplaying games and game systems across the board (as alluded to in my introduction), including essays on the exploration and experience mechanics, the design of the combat system, and the Open Game License (OGL). Alongside these are some more personal recollections of ***D&D*** on topics as diverse as its educational and social benefits, what is meant by so-called 'performative play' as typified by Matt Mercer (the leading GM from the popular *Critical Role* series on YouTube), how it helped reconnect people during the COVID-19 pandemic, the open LGBT community it welcomes and even revels in, etc.

The more critical 'serious essays' following these cover things like how religion is represented in the game, how the 'races' and racial abilities / ethnic references have developed and changed over successive iterations, the influence of ***D&D*** on literature, performance and art; in addition to extensive commentary on how the pre-conceived indigenous / settler colonialism traits so evident in the earlier editions has evolved (and how the language employed has similarly shifted and modernised over time), etc.



To be fair —and this is only my personal opinion— I felt a lot of the latter essays sucked much of the enjoyment I was getting out of my reading of this. They of course have just as much 'validity' as the rest of the essays in here, but I came to this book expecting more of a celebration than a critique. Is that too much to ask?

Alas, the only bits I really enjoyed reading were those essays (of which there are many) where the authors were celebrating the development and influence of the game, what ***D&D*** meant to them personally on an emotional and physical level, as well as how they had 'grown up with D&D': how it had maybe directly affected them and had a major influence on their attitudes, outlook on life, modern character, etc.

"...a lot of the essays sucked away much of the enjoyment I was getting out of reading this..."

The more critical stuff I could have probably happily skipped to be fair, but as an overall read I did enjoy the bulk of it, so in that sense it's certainly worth a second look if you're on the fence about it.

Here's another pair of puzzles to help keep your thinking caps on...

You can click this box to reveal the complete solution for the Demo Drama puzzle, or just click on a single column for some extra help (online only)...

Hargreaves' DEMO DRAMA at GenEssCon...

	Publisher	Genre	Title
	Jazmodee Red Banana Susapeg Spiele Halfplay	Family Card Game Underwater Skirmish Abstract Dexterity Sci-Fi Bag Builder	Xon Craaaaash Town Bulk Order Stars & Cripes!
Time	09.30 am 11.00 am 12.15 pm 16.00 pm		
Title	Xon Craaaaash Town Bulk Order Stars & Cripes!		
Genre	Family Card Game Underwater Skirmish Abstract Dexterity Sci-Fi Bag Builder		

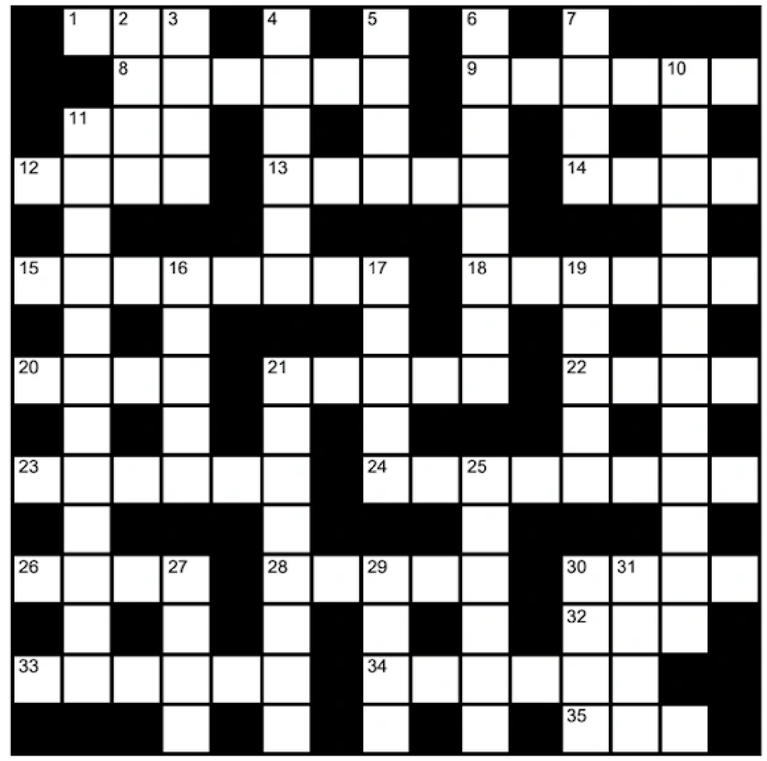
I've just come back from GenEssCon where I spent the day demo-ing 4 games, but my memory is awful and I can't remember all the details. I wrote down the schedule but the dog chewed it up, so now I just have scraps of paper. Based on the few things I can remember, can you match up all the details: the times, games, genres, and publishers?

- *I remember I played the Family Card game in the afternoon*
- *I know that Jazmodee and Halfplay never make abstract games*
- *'Stars and Cripes!' was the last game I played*
- *I played Jazmodee and Susapeg Spiele games in the morning*
- *The Sci-Fi game was not what I expected. It was called 'Bulk Order'*
- *'Craaaaash Town' was the game by Red Banana*
- *The Dexterity game was played at the start of the day*
- *The Family and Dexterity games were called 'Xon' and 'Stars and Cripes!' but I can't remember which was which*

You can rollover or click here to reveal the Crossword answers... (online only)

Smallboat's CRYPTIC CROSSWORD

*This crossword puzzle contains a number of words that all relate to a particular board game, these clues are all in **bold**.*



Across

1 Mushroom found in rice pudding (3)
8 Tarbuck occasionally rude and a cold-blooded individual (6)
9 Natives inserted in to Java, no looking back (6)
11 Silence Josh (3)
12 Camera equipment belonging to Mr Goodman (4)
13 Cheeky liebfraumilch bottles: a little Australian? (5)
14 The French sides of Mbappe are pathetic (4)
15 Curry following brave bender: exactly what I heard (8)
18 Count on gaining height from the effect of jet engines (6)
20 Riverside deposit (4)
21 I dig a chatty bird on the radio (5)
22 Father carved out wooden chess piece (4)
23 Among The Stars and Ra covered in last review (6)
24 A game perpetually on PC (8)
26 Slimy type seeing to marketing material (4)
28 Rip it up, like Joe Satriani (5)
30 Proclamation of a queen from 1432 (4)
32 Possess a topless dress (3)
33 Part of a conglomerate peel bananas shot by airgun (6)
34 Michelangelo, perhaps, enjoining the hearts of maturer gentlemen (6)
35 Some energy (3)

Down

2 Grace taking the part of freelancer (4)
3 Fills one's face with fuzz, informally (4)
4 Overheard task for teacher is one that's stalled? (6)
5 Accept wedding vows close to bridal beloved (4)
6 One who creates awkward environment in the absence of men (8)
7 Introduction to love eggs up the front, in Surrey home (4)
10 Designer had last of tea, jasmine, slow brewed (5,1,6)
11 Sergeant toyed with role in village shop (7,5)
16 Bad break in Hollywood, for instance? (5)
17 Problem with coat of lion hair, infested by gnats at first (5)
19 Flying with 50 Cent's passport? (5)
21 Sweet girl in Springfield bar (8)
25 Council cutting off car repairmen from the top... (6)
27 ...do expect bailiffs today for this... (4)
29 ...damn council tax has no exemptions, initially (4)
30 A constituent of Avogadro's lawn? (4)
31 Water carrier apparently more sheepish (4)

Age of Galaxy

DESIGNED BY

Jeffrey CCH

PUBLISHER

ICE Makes, 2022

REVIEWED BY

Alex Bardy

1-4 players
40-50 mins (approx)

It probably won't have escaped the eager-beaver eyes of many a boardgame fan that Portal Games are on the cusp of releasing a new version of AGE OF GALAXY (2ND EDITION). Indeed, Ignacy Trzewiczek (Head of Development at Portal) has been pushing it all over the place on various websites and social media, and just can't stop talking about it. So it's with a heavy heart that I say you can blame Ignacy for pushing me into seeking out a copy of the original game, but I'm so pleased he did — it's a good game, and from what I can gather the new Portal edition is even better, with much clearer rules, better graphics and components, as well as an improved solo experience...

We're not here to talk about that new-fangled all-singing, all-dancing edition of the game, however, so here goes with my assessment of the original...

Unboxing

AGE OF GALAXY comes in the tiniest box: it's barely the size of a deck of tarot cards, and yet inside you'll find a whole load of goodies. Alongside 40+ faction cards, there are 8 large galaxy cards, 4 player boards, 5 Trade cards, a small selection of other boards needed for play, and a solo play reference card. There's also plenty of tokens (lots and lots of them, for all manner of things), action cubes (16 per player), some tracking counters (2 per player), and even 36 small plastic ships (9 per player) – all in all, it's an absolutely packed box!

Setting Things Up

Once you've sorted all the components and punched everything out, setting things up can be fiddly. There are

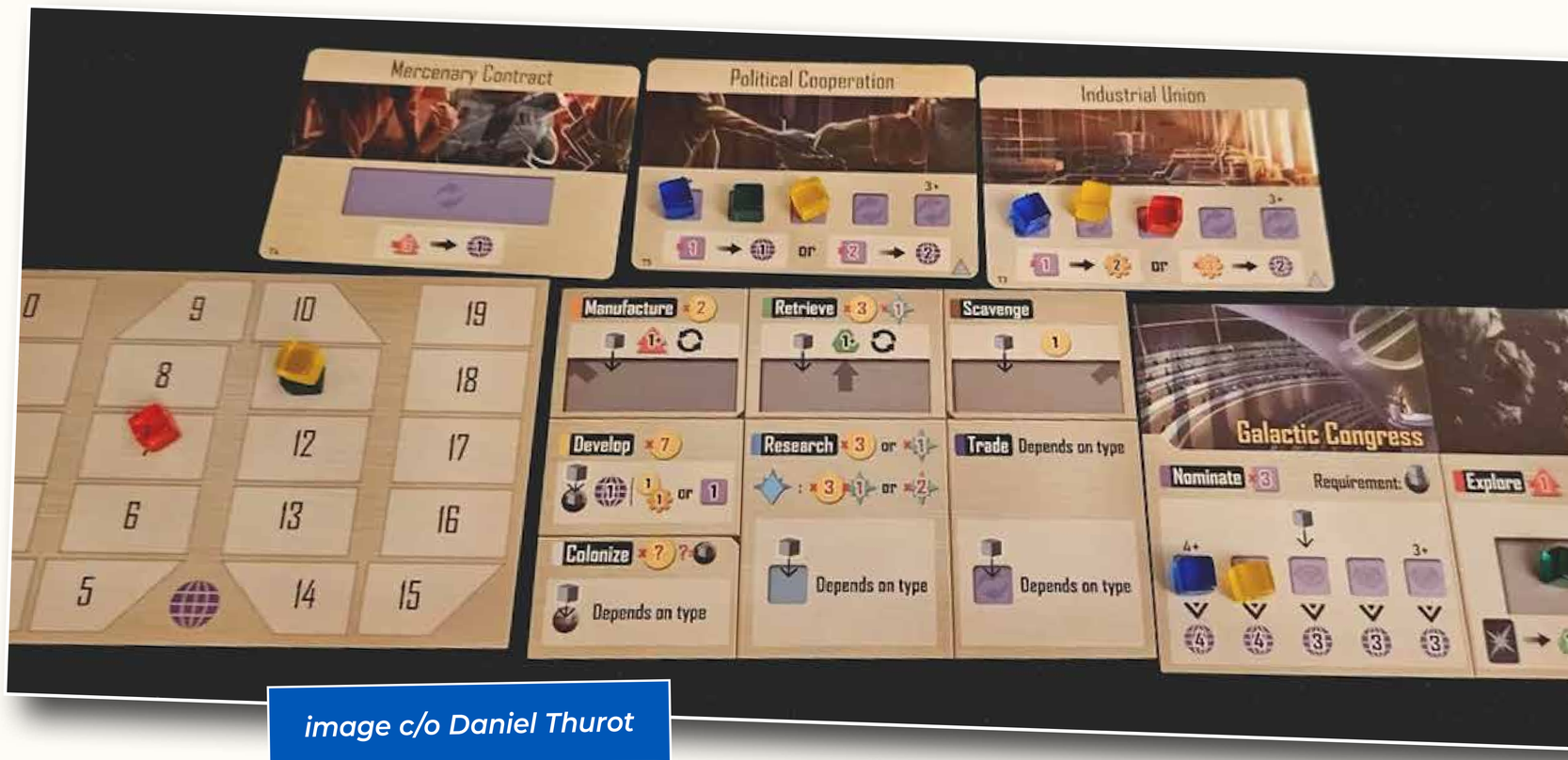


image c/o Daniel Thurot

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several boards to organise, starting with the prestige tracker (VPs), the core action board, and the G&A board (which tracks purchased spaces on the Galactic Congress and any explored Anomalies, respectively). There's also a Hints board to be placed somewhere readily accessible —you'll need this a lot when you first start playing— and 3 random Trade cards to be drawn for every game (from the 5 available – the other 2 won't feature).

image c/o Daniel Thurot

You'll also need to set up your own player board area, which involves gathering together your player board, taking a smaller 'tips card', your credits and productivity counters, and drawing 7 faction cards at random from the deck. From these 7 cards you'll choose an initial faction to start with and place it in front of you, this will affect some of your starting resources, what your end-game bonuses might be, and makes for an asymmetric start for each player (which is a good thing, in my opinion at least).

Once you've determined who starts the game, that player draws 5 galaxy cards and places them in a row (2 face up, the rest face down) – this is effectively also the game timer because the game is played over just 5 rounds, each made up of 4 phases: Production, Action, War (skipped for the first round), and the Galactic phase (which reveals the next face down galaxy card and progresses the game). Oh, and as you probably guessed, the player with the most prestige / VPs wins.

How does it play?

As mentioned, the game is played over just 5 rounds, but the kind of stuff that can happen in each of those rounds varies considerably. There are a LOT of choices here (most of which will cost resources), but it's a rather delicious decision mix that will both infuriate and leave you tingling with anxiety. Being able to generate more resources is an essential here, but it's not just a case of trying to put together an 'engine' because the game simply doesn't last long enough, so you'll be robbing Peter to pay Paul most of the time. In effect, it's generally a case of the more you're prepared to spend (generally), the more Prestige / VPs you can gain.

You'll start each round with just 3 action cubes (and this is what you'll have throughout most of the game unless other stuff happens), so in a nutshell: 3 actions per round (played in turn order, one action at a time), 4 phases in each, and 5 rounds in total – yup, that's a minimum of 15 actions per player in the entire game. Needless to say it plays quickly when everyone knows what they're doing and doesn't have to refer to the player aid(s) every time they wish to do stuff, but until then it's a pretty tough learning curve for everyone, not helped at all by a terrible rulebook, frankly...

My honest, practical suggestion? If you're not planning to buy it already, download the rulebook for the *Portal Games'* ***Age of Galaxy (2nd Edition)*** version instead – seriously, this will make it a lot easier to learn what does what and how things work. You can get it from the BGG page, or use this link:

Age of Galaxy (2nd Edition) Rulebook

But is it any Good?

Rulebook aside, I genuinely like this game; the decision-making, the options, the varying abilities of the factions (which are multi-use cards in themselves), the different ways of accomplishing things, and the sheer amount of differing approaches this game supports are all to its credit, and it means no two games will ever play out the same way. That said, there are certainly some faction combinations that work better than others, but I don't want to be getting ahead of myself here, or to blind you with too many details...

Faction combinations? Ahh, well, y'see, at any point during a round you can play an additional faction card from your starting hand (only once per round, mind), and this can be used either as a one-time reinforcement to give you some resource(s); as an adaptation that will allow you to colonise a particular planet type you might otherwise not be able to; as an additional faction added to your tableau (you can only have a maximum of three in play, and once added they can't be replaced or discarded); or you can play it as a major ideology card (this can be done only once per game).

Normally, the symbols on the top-left of your faction card(s) determine your faction ideology and any endgame bonuses you might get (if you achieve any, that is), but playing a faction as a major ideology will effectively override this, in turn changing what endgame bonuses you might be able to claim (again, if you achieve any).

A very nice touch is that adding some faction cards to your tableau will offer you additional research options (which are unique to you in the game), but faction cards in general will generally provide production bonuses, maybe some additional special abilities, usually some form of extra resources (only when they're initially played, though), and quite often just bonus resources for completing other actions. As I alluded to above, some factions will invariably work particularly well with others, but exploring these combos is very much an intrinsic part of the appeal of the game for me.

So Many Actions and Choices...

When you're not playing a faction card, you're assigning an action cube to perform a single action each turn – these actions will range from colonising a planet (or developing one you've previously colonised), trading and generating resources, completing research to obtain additional options and technologies, buying a seat on the Galactic Congress (for prestige / VPs), manufacturing cruiser ships, or using said ships to explore anomalies on revealed and 'reachable' galaxy cards.

Of the available actions, all of them have their merits, although if you're forced to perform a Scavenge action (which just gets you a single credit) you've probably gone wrong somewhere – it does happen, it is mighty frustrating, and it will feel like a wasted action, but needs must as they say...

Regardless, every action does something positive and will further your position in the game, with the Research action probably being one of the strongest – not only opening up more options going forward, but often providing extra resources as well.

While you're struggling to decide what to do with your action cubes and which resources to spend each turn, you'll also have subsequent phases and rounds to think about, because once resources are gone they're not coming back – that's a wee fib, because you do gain credits at the start of each Production phase, but that's your only 'income' from one round to the next. When they're gone, they're gone, as they say...

As well as completing your actions there are other factors to consider, because if any Trade cards become 'full' during your turn it will trigger a Golden Age, at which point all players with action cubes on those cards will have them immediately returned (max. 3 per player), giving them the tangible possibility of 3 additional actions for this round, which is a huge boon. Additionally, bonuses are available for the player with the most cruisers in the War phase (did you remember to build any?) – they'll become the Overlord for that phase and can effectively 'steal' a planet from someone else. Cruiser counts are also reset each round, and limited by the strength of your faction(s) – which is just another resource you'll need to keep propping up from one round to the next!

Conclusions?

By now you've probably guessed I was very impressed with this – it's a lot of game in a tiny box, and very much worth the time investment required to learn how things work. If I do have a gripe it's that trying to keep track of everything can be challenging, mainly because of the numerous resources and other bits you need to keep tabs on, but that's a small price to pay for such an engrossing game. And it doesn't outstay its welcome, either – there may be an element of multiplayer solitaire here, but the stuff you do each round will often affect other players, and overall the game always seems to finish much sooner than you'd ordinarily expect.

All in all this is a cracking game, although I wouldn't blame you at all for jumping on the ***Age of Galaxy (2nd Edition)*** bandwagon, because as far as I can tell it's an all-round better production, but over and above that, it has a better and more accessible rulebook.

I do have a small confession to make here, and that's because someone else pointed me to a free, instantly accessible online version of this which plays in a single broswer window (it's brilliant, frankly – it not only plays in half the time, but does all the admin and score tracking for you). Moreover, you can play against AI bots or other players (sharing the same screen); either way it's a fantastic conversion and I'd love to chat to whoever's behind it.

You can find the online version of ***Age of Galaxy*** with this link:

— Age of Galaxy online —

Age of Galaxy online

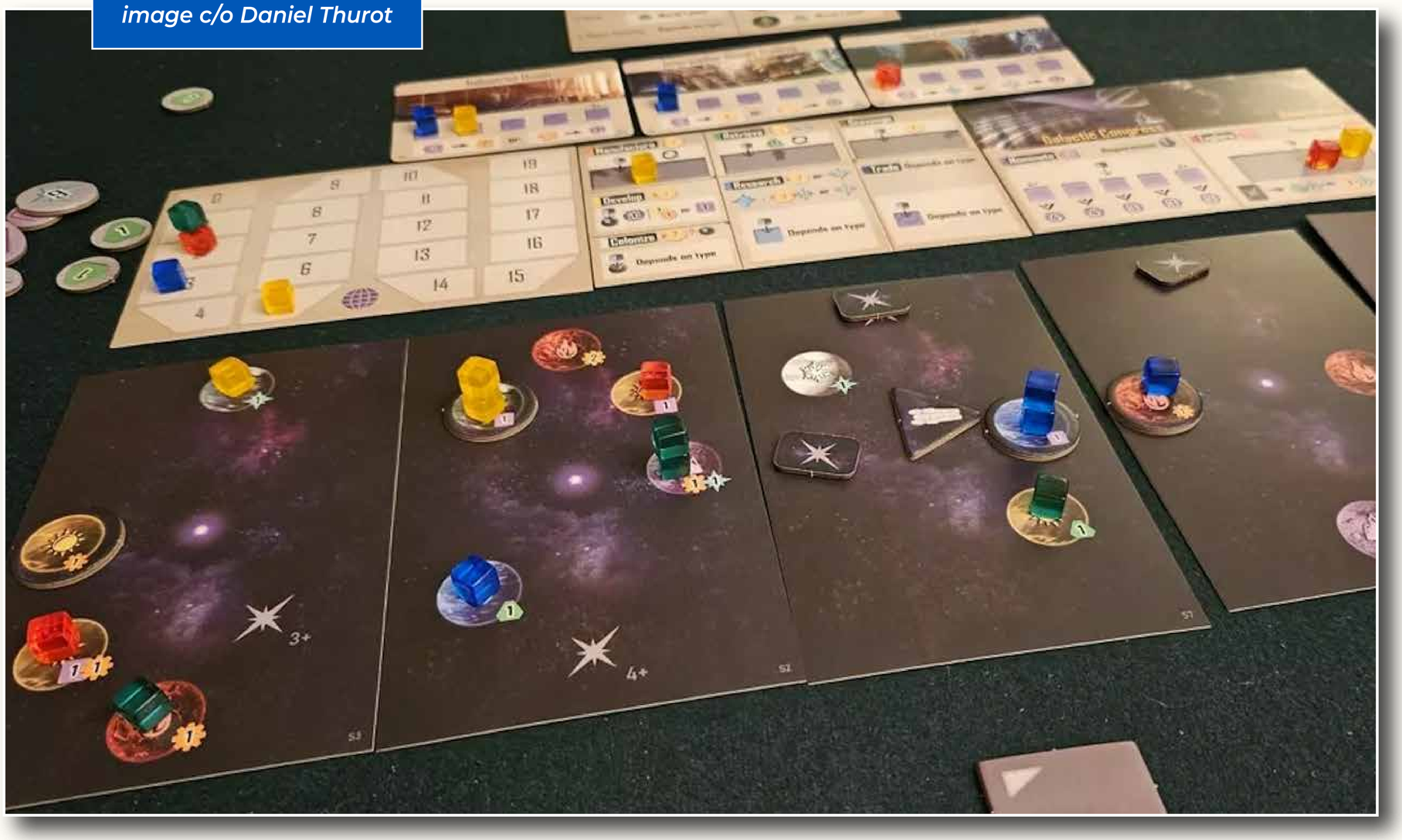


image c/o Daniel Thurot

DESIGNED BY

Andrew Haught

PUBLISHER

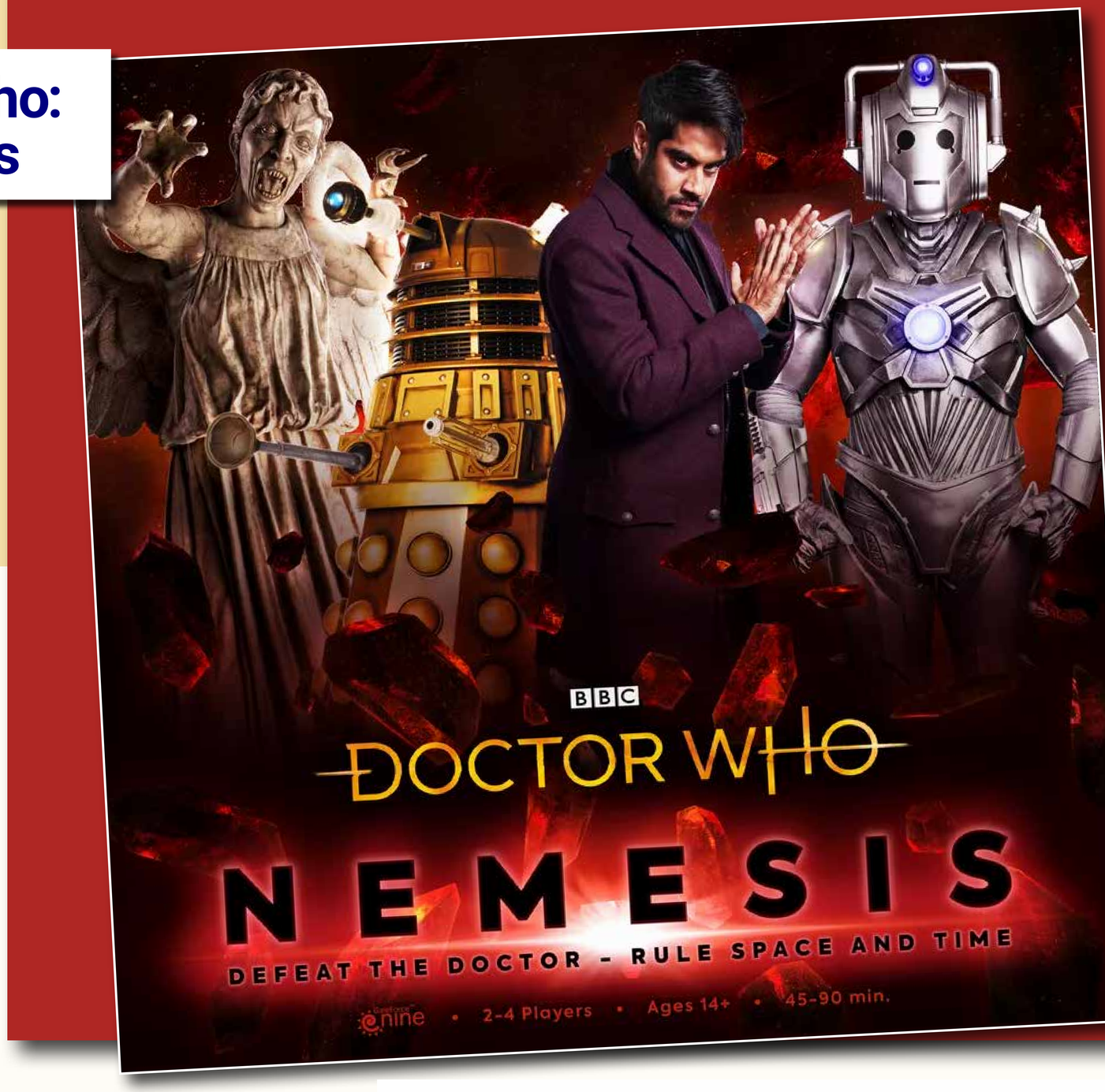
Gale Force Nine, 2023

REVIEWED BY

Max Standring

Doctor Who: Nemesis

2-4 players
60-90 mins
(approx)



Okay, so you're a Doctor Who fan, right? You also just happen to be in the mood for a bit of a card battler? The obvious go-to here would probably be to go and pick up a bunch of* Commander *decks from the* Magic: The Gathering Universes Beyond – Doctor Who *set, but when you look at the availability and the price, you wish there was something out there that was cheaper and scratched the same itch...

Enter ***Doctor Who: Nemesis***... or maybe not; unfortunately, this game has a crippling identity crisis – a bit like a timelord that has regenerated one too many times. The game does not really recreate the feel of the show, and the only reason you play as the titular Nemesis is to try and justify attaching a game to an IP that is a bad fit for it, but I'll expand on all that shortly.

Components

While I am not a fan of the control boards (which I will also get to), the other components are pleasing enough. The tokens and cards are standard, and none of my players had any issues with readability. The box also includes one of the better inserts I have seen, with enough room in each component to sleeve all the cards in *Dragon Shield* sleeves and still leave room for potential expansions. The game includes satisfyingly chunky dice for each of the playable factions, and the art is mostly just still shots from the show (cheap and cheerful?), but then the Doctors also get a mix of what appears to be mostly portraits of the actors which look a bit odd next to their faction icons. I didn't like the standee you need to move around to select which location you are activating, either, because we had to be careful not to knock it over when trying to place cards – a simple token would have made a lot more sense.

Gameplay

The objective of the game is to meet the criteria of one of your scheme cards (or any Doctor's scheme cards in play that can be completed by anyone). These scheme cards start off in your deck and need to be found and played first, sometimes other players can remove them from play, sometimes they can't and just have to play around them, or more likely if it's one of the Doctor's schemes they can try and complete it before their opponent does.

When you start a game, you pick one of 4 factions which dictates what deck and control board you play with, and then choose which side of your control board you want to use (which also decides which of two sets of cards get added to your deck). You also

The lemon may or may not be a visual double entendre!

get randomly assigned two incarnations of the Doctor (which adds two additional sets of cards) – these will complete the deck you'll be playing with.

Your control board contains a special ability you can use, and 4 different areas associated with your Nemesis. At the start of your turn, you need to pick one of these areas to move to; this dictates which actions you can take and what cards you can play for the rest of your turn. Other players can send their minions to each of these zones to shut down these actions and / or eliminate your minions there. When fights happen, you add the power of your character to a dice roll and see who gets the highest. The character with the lower amount gets eliminated. At the end of your turn, you draw back up to your maximum hand size.

I find the schemes that the Doctors have to be rather weird, thematically. Mechanically, they add an interesting risk vs reward element as the Doctor's schemes can be completed by any player (not just the person who played it), so an opponent can potentially win the game using it before the person who initially played it can, meaning players do have to think carefully about the timing of when to play these cards. However, winning in this way feels like winning a battle against the other players for the Doctor's affections, because you're not competing to defeat the Doctor but instead battling to help them, which just feels a bit 'off'. I can see how this makes suitably twisted sense as a victory condition for The Master, but it feels like we are entering bad fan fiction territory for any of the other playable factions in the box. Unfortunately, the schemes often reward you just for having a collection of specific cards in your hand rather than achieving anything thematically appropriate to your faction, which turns the game into a poor man's version of ***Fluxx***.

If you try and ignore The Doctors' schemes, I feel the game gets the feel of the playable factions right. You can play as the Master, the Cybermen, the Daleks, or the Weeping Angels, and each faction has a scheme that requires having a certain amount of plot tokens. Each faction also has different conditions for generating plot tokens which is thematically appropriate to that faction, so when you do focus on trying to win this way, the game reminds me more of ***Keyforge*** with the way it handles resource and hand management. My issue with the factions is that they are not created equally – we found the Weeping Angels to be the most fun to play as they have access to a unique blink mechanic that lets them relocate their minions to surprise opponents – none of the other factions have anything quite as unique as this mechanically (or as fun).

Am I Right to be Upset?

I appreciate hat they haven't just tried to copy ***Magic: The Gathering***, but none of the game's systems feel particularly well developed. I do like the idea of the player having to choose a different group of actions each turn and other players being able to influence what you can and cannot do. However, I still detest the physical control boards: they take up too much room for what they do, and as someone who has spent a lot of time with ***Keyforge*** (which also makes you pick from a limited group of things you can do on your turn, but doesn't require anything like a control board to function), the control board sticks out as both unnecessary and frustrating. They could have done with being smaller, or replaced by a proper sized larger playmat so you could stick cards into the various zones: this would allow you to have permanent cards at some locations that help you win (but they might need defending, reminding me of ***Android: Netrunner*** – another game I used to love). Mashing these two systems together has created something cumbersome and unintuitive, and it slows down the gameplay.

Ultimately, as a game, ***Doctor Who: Nemesis*** tries to slam together elements from a silly party-style game like ***Fluxx*** and more serious competitive card games like ***Keyforge*** and ***Netrunner***. The result is a classic case of trying to please everyone and pleasing nobody, producing a Frankenstein's monster of a game that does not contain any new ideas or innovative twists on existing concepts. As someone who is a fan of the games I think it's trying so desperately to mash together, I feel like it's tried really hard to appeal to me personally, and am slightly offended by its lazy execution.

People who are interested in picking this up who are serious card gamers are going to be frustrated with the dice rolling and other random elements. And as a *Doctor Who* tie-in, it does not really try to recreate the feel of a *Doctor Who* episode, so I'm not convinced fans of the show are going to get much out of it either. And I'm not sure either camp is going to be happy when the game ends on an anti-climactic note because someone managed to help The Doctor play his recorder by having 5 cards of the same type in their hand, for example…?

Alternatives?

As for alternate recommendations, you'll have to decide if you want a fun *Doctor Who* game or a good standalone card battler. If you're in the former camp and like the idea of a game with shifting win conditions, then get ***Doctor Who Fluxx***. If you're in the latter camp, go for something like ***War of The Ring: The Card Game*** instead.

image c/o www.boardgamesextra.info

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Great Western Trail: El Paso

DESIGNED BY

Alexander Pfister & Johannes Krenner

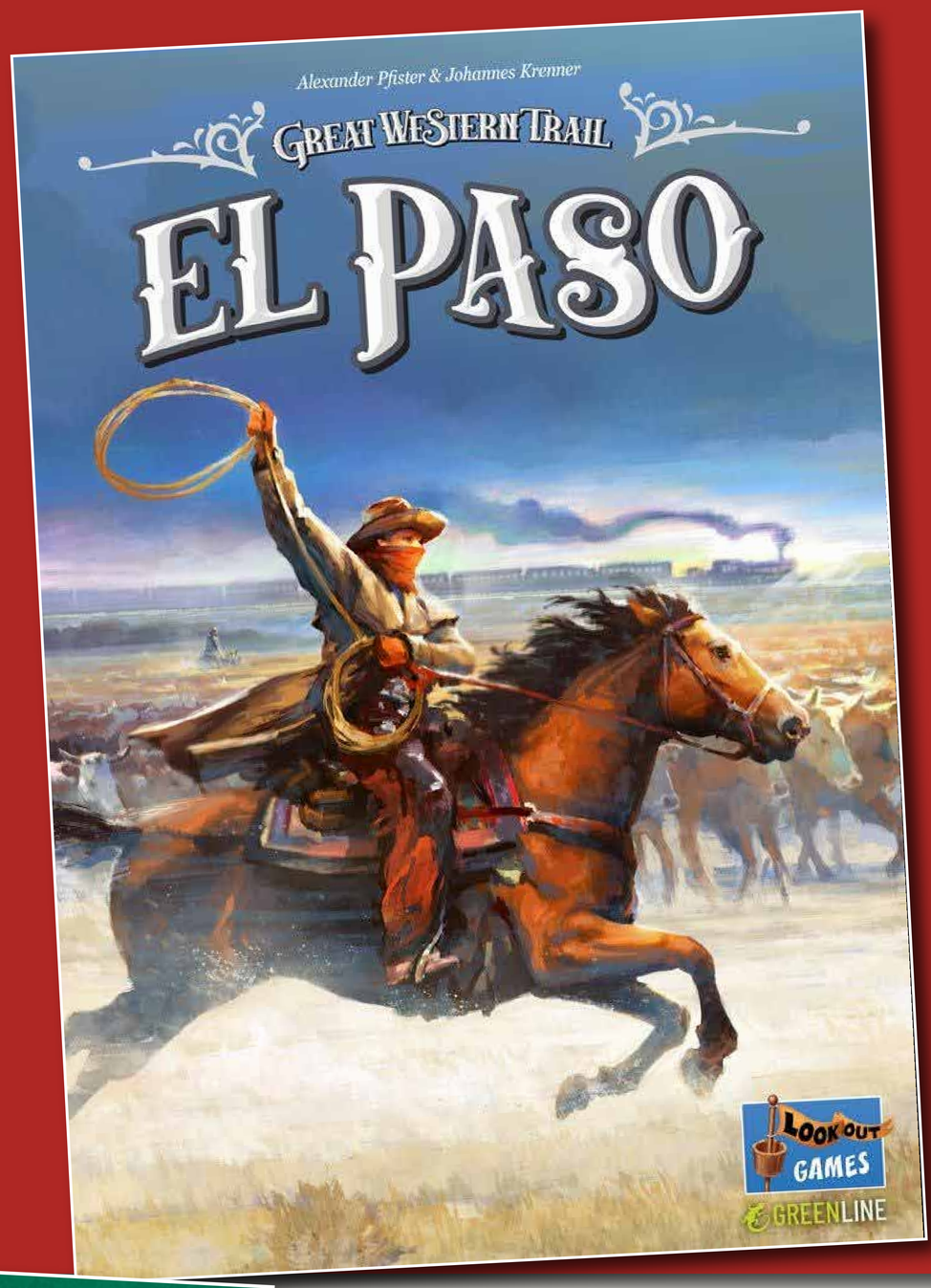
PUBLISHER

Lookout Games, 2025

REVIEWED BY

John Humphries

1-4 players
75-90 mins (approx)



El Paso is best described as the little brother of Great Western Trail. It was during the COVID lockdown that Johannes Krenner (one of the designers) realised that although his girl friend liked to play Great Western Trail, she did find it quite difficult. He therefore contacted the designer of the original game and together they came up with this shorter and somewhat simpler version.

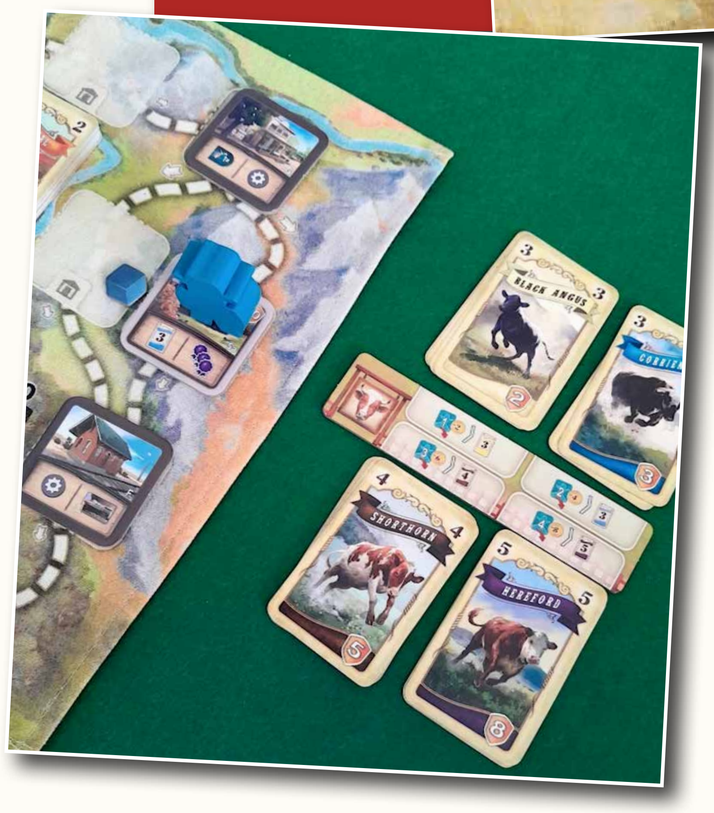
Unboxing

No, the publisher has not enclosed a handkerchief as an extra gift - that is the small, cloth gameboard. There are also four, large herder meeples, cards representing workers, and of course cattle, bonus, objective and building tiles, along with five flat-pack boxes in which to store the various tokens and counters. A well-illustrated rulebook completes the contents.

Gameplay

For those not familiar with ***Great Western Trail*** here is a brief overview of the gameplay.

Each turn. players will move their herder meeple along the track from building to building and when they end their move, carry out the actions associated with that particular building. Actions include hiring more workers, erecting buildings, buying and selling cattle, and gaining certificates. However, if you stop on a building owned by another player, you must take one of the auxiliary actions shown on your player board. Each time you reach El Paso you must stop and undertake the three actions shown there, including revealing your hand of cattle cards in order to calculate their breeding value.



There are nine different breeds of cattle represented in this game, including the Simmental which originated in Switzerland, with each having its own breeding value. This value can be increased by adding any certificates gained and actioning any appropriate bonuses that you possess. Finally, players will draw cards from their deck to replenish their hand back up to four cards.

What are some of the differences between ***El Paso*** and the full-blown original game? Well, there are no longer any hazard, outlaw or station master tiles, and the train has been reduced to four cards, each of which can be purchased as an action. Building tiles must also now be bought from a central supply, and the starting herds have been reduced by four cards to just ten cards per player.

Setting up is relatively straightforward, although I would recommend ironing the game board the first time you play and placing it on a cloth covering rather

than a shiny tabletop, just to help prevent it from sliding about during the game. I would also recommend storing it loosely rolled in the box rather than folded.

One significant change in this game occurs following the calculation of the total breeding value upon visiting El Paso. Players place one of their discs from their player board onto one of the trading posts on the game board. These are numbered from 0 to 20 and the disc must be placed on a trading post whose number is equal to or less than the total breeding value. Each post will provide a reward, with the higher numbered ones giving VPs.

Taking the last Simmental cattle card triggers the end of the game which occurs when the next player reaches El Paso. The scores are calculated from seven different sources including points from your cattle and worker cards, the buildings you placed, and the aforementioned trading posts.

Here are a few pointers to help you get your cattle to market. Acquiring workers as soon as you can is always beneficial as you will require cowboys to purchase cattle from the market, engineers to use the train, and builders to place buildings. Collecting as many different breeds as possible helps because, remember, when it comes to valuing your breeding stock at El Paso, you will only have a hand of four or possibly five cattle cards, and the value of each breed is only scored once regardless of how many cards of that breed you hold. Of course there is an element of luck regarding the position of cards within your draw pile. Upgrading your herder movement from three to four spaces increases your options, while upgrading your hand from four to five cards gives you the chance of better breeding values. Don't ignore the Objective tiles, either, as they could give you valuable points in a close fought contest.

Summary

Once players are familiar with the actions associated with each building tile, the game moves along quite smoothly and swiftly. For some reason this game has become quite addictive - on one occasion we played three 3-player games in succession!

Whilst the majority of the components are of good quality, the cloth board lacks definition and the colours do appear somewhat faded. I know that it is lighter in weight than a traditional board and probably more eco-friendly, but I am not a fan. Although the rulebook shows cubes and what appear to be wooden counters, they are all actually cardboard counters of different shapes, and an illustrated sheet showing the actions for each building tile would have prevented the need to keep referring to the rulebook.

El Paso is a game that I am very happy to play at anytime. If you are unable to persuade anyone else to ride the range with you, you can always turn to Sue and her deck of cards to give you some competition in the solo variant.

Is this game worth buying if you already have one of the original ones? In my opinion, yes, because playing this compact version is quite a different experience. ***El Paso*** also serves as a good introduction to the three senior versions of ***Great Western Trail***, although it cannot really be classed as a family game.

The Hanging Gardens

DESIGNED BY

Grégory Grard & Matthieu Verdier

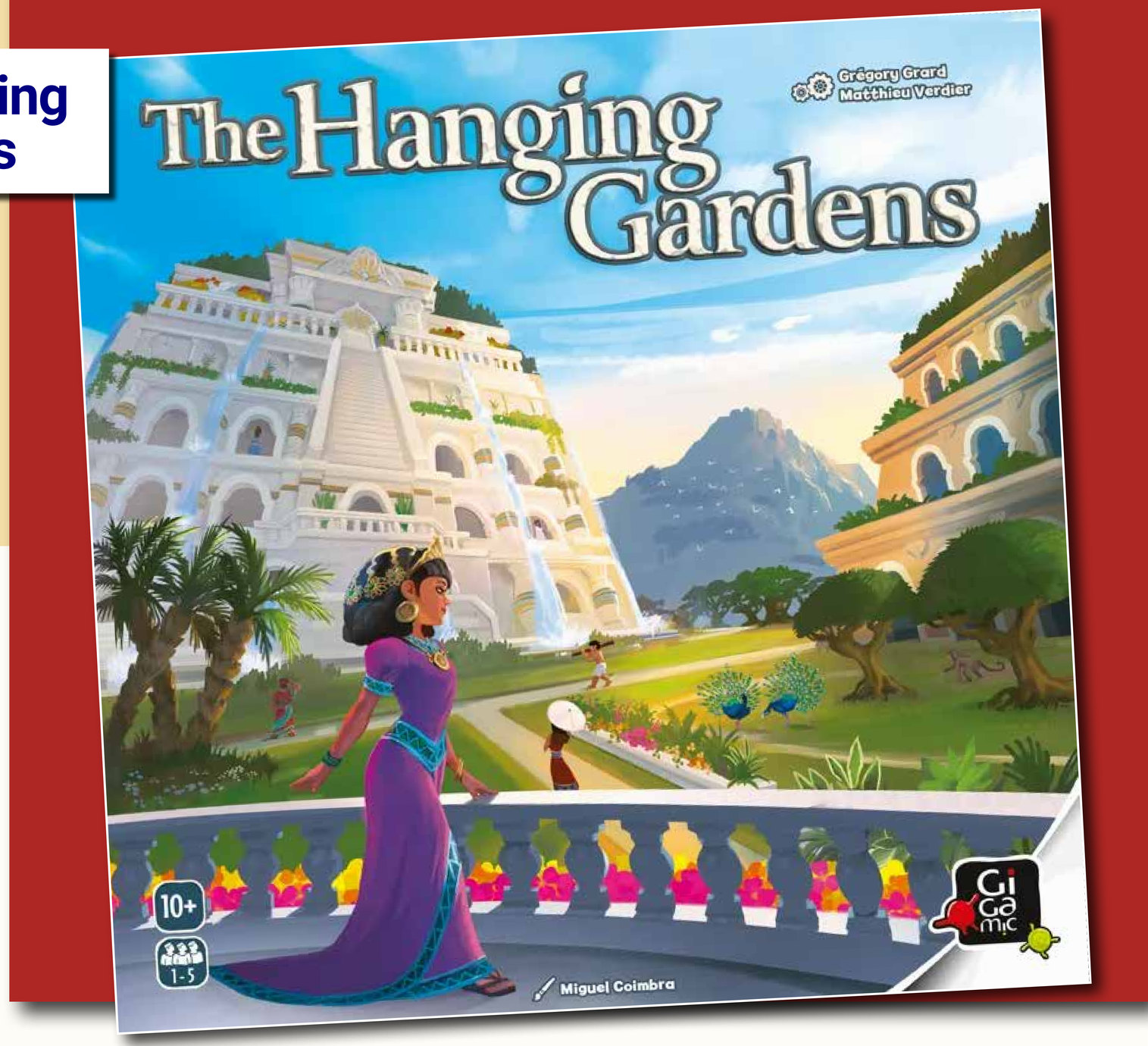
PUBLISHER

Gigamic, 2025

REVIEWED BY

John Humphries

1-5 players
30-40 mins (approx)



There have been numerous games based upon the Hanging Gardens of Babylon. What does this one offer that the others don't?

A Quick Round-up...

This game has two currencies: coins and tools. There are 75 Garden cards, each illustrating a tree, an animal, a visitor or left blank. Many of the cards also contain flowers, some indicate irrigation, a number give players additional coins or tools, and a few show a crown, the importance of which we will see later. There is also a double-sided game board showing three columns with spaces for four cards in each column, with space at the top for royal Objectives and Enhancement tiles. Each player receives three little wooden gardener meeples and four markers at the start of the game.

The objective is for players to construct their own pyramid-shaped tableau using Garden cards and thus scoring points at the end of the game. It's played over four rounds, with three turns in each.

At the start of the game, Garden cards are randomly dealt onto the main board and a small board is placed below the main one. This shows the number of spaces available in each column where players can place their gardeners. A turn comprises placing your gardener meeple on a space at the bottom of each column, taking a Garden card from it (paying with any additional tools if required), and then adding that card to your tableau before replacing the chosen card from the deck. As mentioned above, some cards are blank allowing you to spend coins to purchase an Enhancement tile; this is placed on a blank card to upgrade it to a scoring animal, tree, etc. Each game also has four shared Royal Objectives, and at the end of your turn you'll check to see if you've met any of these to score more points.

How does it play?

The Hanging Gardens is all about taking the right cards from the board and placing them in the most advantageous position within your tableau. Cards must be adjacent to one another, with five in the first row, four in the one above, and three in the top one. Everyone will be given an Irrigation card which shows the positions within your tableau to lay those cards containing an irrigation symbol in order to gain the higher scores. Animal cards score according to the level on which they are placed, and trees need to be in sets for the higher scores. Visitors score points at the end of the game depending upon their likes and preferences, of which there are 14 different combinations ranging from '1 point for each blue flower in your pyramid' to '3 points for every set of 1 animal, 1 tree, and 1 visitor', for example.

image c/o Wouter Debisschop and @Tabletopping

Okay, so what about that crown symbol? You have to decide how you choose the starting player for the first round, but from then on each time a player selects a card containing a crown they'll receive the starting token and become the starting player for the next round.

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The order of play is very important in this game and the holder of the token at the beginning of each round is in a powerful position, probably too powerful in my opinion: they get first choice of which column to select from for the next three turns. In a 4-player game for example, the starting player has a choice of 12 spaces on which to put their gardener, the second player 11 spaces, and so on; on the second turn the starting player is faced with 8 empty spaces, the second player 7 spaces, etc. which means the options diminish quickly, with the fourth player being left with little choice at the end of the third turn. Although this would be no problem if the starting player moved around or got swapped more often, on three occasions in one of our games the same player started each round, leaving the third and fourth players as virtual spectators with no real hope of gaining a good score. The other benefit to having the start token during a round is that it enables the holder to more easily achieve a Royal Objective – we decided the holder of the token should just start each turn (rather than each round as well), and that seemed to work better. Also, by filling all the spaces with meeples, a column can be completely blocked and on more than one occasion a column was closed off after the first turn which didn't add much to the enjoyment of playing, either.

On the positive side the rulebook is well illustrated which makes the game quite easy to learn, and it is relatively quick to play. There are numerous ways to gain points, and you'll need to decide on your best pathway quite early on as you'll only be collecting only twelve cards during a game.

There is of course a luck factor when it comes to drafting cards on to the game board which can influence the outcome, and one never seems to have enough of any of the currencies. Although the Garden cards and Royal Objectives will differ each game, we felt that you are doing the same thing every time, giving it limited replayability. There is also the distinct feeling that the designers had an idea for a basic game and various elements were just added during development to make the game more appealing to a publisher, but the relationship between this game and the actual Hanging Gardens is somewhat tenuous.

My Conclusions?

The Hanging Gardens is a lightweight game which could appeal to families and casual gamers, and as with so many games these days, a solo version has also been included. I have not played this, and in fact I never play the solo version of any games as I believe the main purpose and pleasure in playing board games comes from the social interaction with other players.

images c/o Wouter Debisschop and @Tabletopping

Harmonies

DESIGNED BY

Johan Benvenuto

PUBLISHER

Libellud, 2024

REVIEWED BY

Alex Bardy

1-4 players
40-50 mins
(approx)

With a title like HARMONIES you'd be perfectly within your right to expect this game to provide a pleasant experience: something quite relaxing, maybe a bit chilled, possibly designed to calm the nerves a little, perhaps? Yeh, scrub that – in this game you're competing against everyone else to build a board that's going to net you more points than everyone else, because you're just a naturally better planner and organiser than the rest of those bozos, right? Yeh? Erm...

Chunky Components and Pretty Cards

The overall production quality of ***HARMONIES*** is very good, with chunky terrain tokens (extra thick, coloured wooden discs), decent double-sided player boards, gorgeously illustrated oversized tarot cards depicting the various animals and their preferred terrain patterns, and 70 small crystal-like cubes to keep track of scoring and pattern-matching on your board. There is also a sizable cloth bag for all 120 terrain tokens, a central double-sided board (which is where available terrain tokens are constantly being taken and then replenished), 4 x handy summary cards, and a pad of scoresheets.

Included are 10 x Nature's Spirit cards that are meant to enhance the gameplay, but we didn't like playing with them at all, and are not convinced they're well balanced, either. Speaking only for myself, I honestly felt the Spirits often disrupted the flow of the game by pushing players into sabotaging their nicely sculptured landscapes to chase potential points from their Nature's Spirit card rather than from the animal cards they'd chosen. Some of the Spirit cards clearly worked better with selected animals and terrain patterns, too, but speaking of the few times we used them, we just felt they got in the way of what is already a pretty decent game, truth be told.

Ironically, the 12-page rulebook is also generally very good, except when it comes to explaining how some of the Spirit cards might score.

What's Your Role?

HARMONIES puts you at the helm of your own island (or collection of much smaller islands if you choose to use the flipside of the player boards), and charges you with the job of putting together

a fantastical landscape / habitat for various forms of wildlife by pattern-matching your board to their preferred terrain types.

It's probably worth saying at the outset that this game certainly has the whiff (or flavour?) of a 'point-salad' about it, because you'll score points for almost everything at the end of the game.

There'll be points to be had for all the various features you've built on your landscape, whether that's multiple mountain ranges, trees of varying heights, numerous individual fields and buildings, or for your longest river (or if playing with the flipside of the player board, for the number of separate islands you create).

You will also score points not only based upon your individual landscape features, but also on which animal cards you may have chosen to collect during the game, although you can only have a maximum of 4 going at once. Besides being gorgeously illustrated, these animal cards depict a 3D pattern of terrain unique to that animal which can potentially be achieved multiple times, increasing the overall points you'll score from that card at game end.

Playing the Game

Turns are beautifully quick and simple – you have to choose one of the sets of 3 terrain tiles on the central board and place them on your personal board (landscape), and may then optionally take just one of the available animal cards (from the 5 that are always face up and available – replenished accordingly once taken) and fill it with the relevant number of amber cubes. Then, if you've already pattern-matched the terrain for that animal somewhere on your board — or do so at any point later in the game— place one of the cubes (or multiple cubes) from the animal card onto the relevant space(s) for each one you've matched.

As an aside, we did find the available animal cards could become 'static' during some games, so as long as the rest of the players all agree, it's worth having some form of system in place whereby they can all be replaced at once (if for example, no one has picked up a card in the previous round, or is interested in any of them).

You can have a maximum of 4 animal cards in play at once, although if you've pattern-matched it enough times to clear all the cubes off, you can keep the completed card tucked under your board to make space for something else – you'll already score the maximum points you can for it at the end of the game.

Apart from that, it's pretty much a case of rinse and repeat until the game ends (and all players have had the same number of turns).

The game end trigger? When there are no more terrain tokens in the bag to replenish the central board, or when any player has only 1 or 2 unoccupied spaces on their personal boards.

A Harmonious Experience?

Harmonies is a pleasant diversion, although I'd hesitate to call it anything like harmonious, mainly because of the tighter and tighter corners you'll paint yourself into as you try and satisfy multiple animal cards and your landscape / board starts to fill up.

Needless to say, it doesn't get any easier to take turns and make choices once things get going, so if you've got players in your group susceptible to a bit of AP (Analysis Paralysis), it might be worth employing a timing mechanic or egg-timer in the latter stages of the game, otherwise you could be there a while...

Path of Civilization

DESIGNED BY

Fabien Gridel

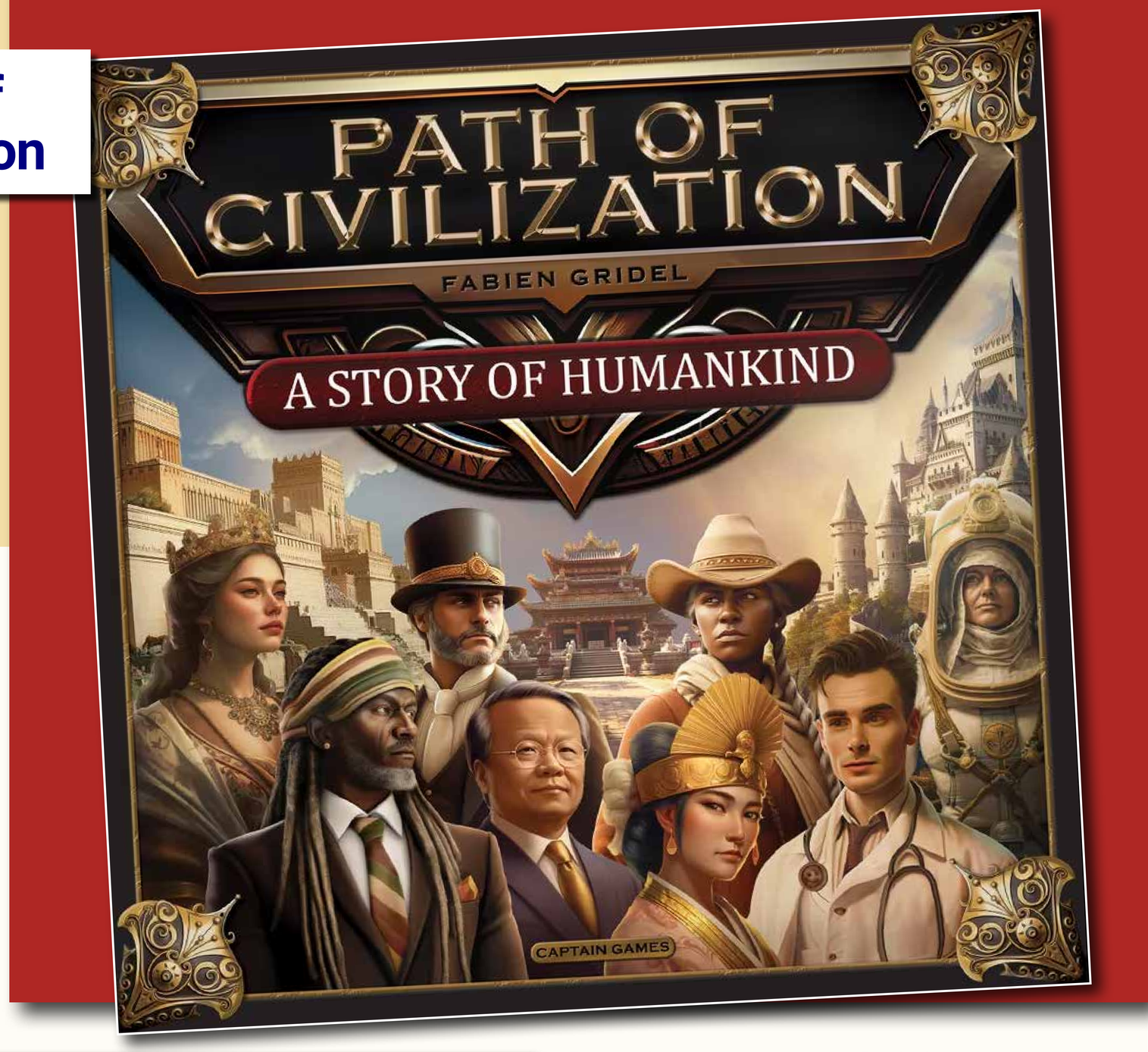
PUBLISHER

Captain Games, 2023

REVIEWED BY

Ben Bateson

1-5 players
60-120 mins
(approx)



Age 0 - Origins

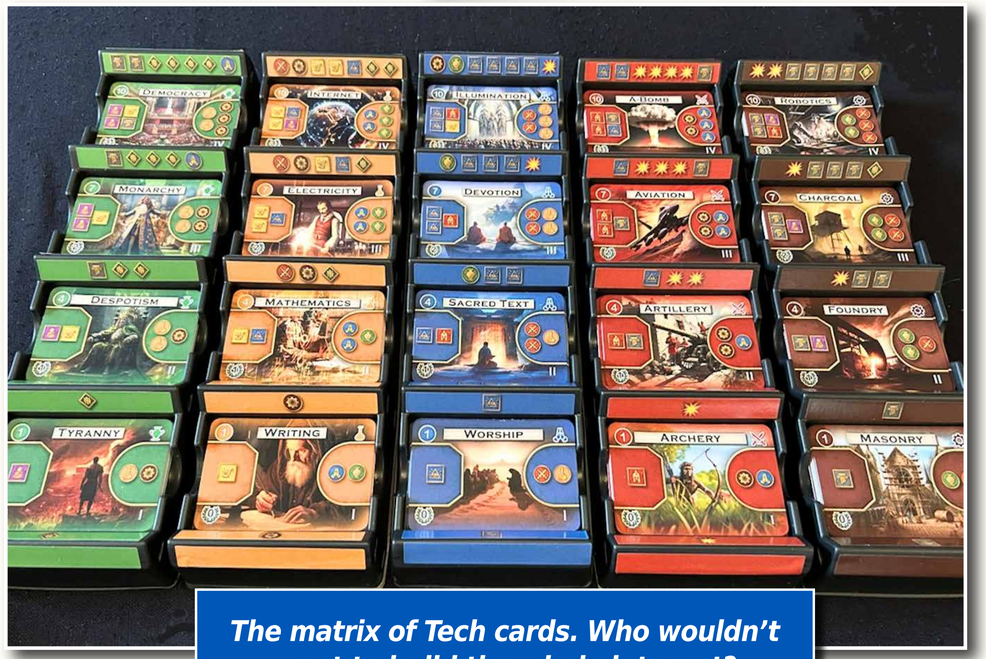
In many ways, it feels like my last 20 years of games collection have been an ongoing search for a good civilization board game, or at least one which is half as good as* Sid Meier's Civilization *on PC (which itself has been adapted into at least three different board games, each iteration slightly better than the last, but none of them terribly dynamic). Although I have lingering respect for Francis Tresham's original CIVILIZATION game, and enjoy THE GOLDEN AGES (which is a thoroughly oddball spin on the genre), I have yet to find the game which scratches all the itches of complex tech development, expansion, conflict, and evolution.

To be fair, PATH OF CIVILIZATION doesn't accomplish most of that. But it does do a lot of other things very, very well...

Age 1 – Hunting and Gathering

Call me a cynical old fart, but I don't understand the current trend for packing things in bigger and bigger boxes. Having to make extra room on my shelves for ***BLACK FOREST*** and ***CIVOLUTION*** was hard enough, and then I bought the ridiculously over-sized ***VILLAGE: BIG BOX*** and had to rearrange everything again. Won't somebody think of the shelf space? Who will pay for my hernia operations?

Anyway, yes, ***PATH OF CIVILIZATION*** comes in a frankly enormous box. There is a reasonable amount therein: good chunky cardstock tracker mats and dishes, the inevitable bags of player-bits-in-five-colours, and the usual mélange of Euro-style game components. But it doesn't feel like you're getting more hardware than in any of dozens of other games, so the reason for selecting the huge box is something of a mystery.



The matrix of Tech cards. Who wouldn't want to build the whole internet?

Potential purchasers should also be warned that if their moral consciousness is offended by AI Art, they may want to steer clear. The publisher has been very transparent on the subject, however, and according to the credits at least two human graphic designers have been gainfully employed. I make no further comment on the subject.

It's a rather underwhelming unboxing if you had no idea what to expect, and you'd be forgiven for thinking that you're looking at just another spreadsheet-y Euro game at this point. And, indeed, if depth of theme is what you're looking for, then you'll be disappointed. But the game does flourish in other areas...

Age 2 – The Age of Language

Before looking at the gameplay, it's worth diversifying into a quick discussion of ***Path of Civilization***'s presentation and user-friendliness. The whole interface is by far the biggest and best credential of the game and is apparent from the first read-through of the manual. It's evident that both the designer and the publisher have carried out extensive playtesting and made numerous improvements during development, to improve both the flow of the game, and the accessibility. The phases of the game are replicated on the player mats to reduce reliance on lookup. The symbols for different resources are shape-coded, colour-coded AND come with iconography too, although I'm not exactly impressed by a disclaimer in the rulebook that denies any admiration for the historical foibles of various depicted characters, but can at least see how some consumers might deem it necessary. What clearly started as a Religion tracker has also been de-emphasised and re-named Philosophy in an attempt to avoid any negative connotations…

Although there are edge-cases and a ***Libertalia***-style tie-break for certain conflicts (the original ***Libertalia***, not the *Stonemeier* reprint nonsense), much of the gameplay is simultaneous, which means you can wrap up a full game in well under 2 hours. This is clearly an idea that has emerged during structured playtesting, and it is as clear an exemplary as I have ever seen of why playtesting should be constructive and not just an exercise in balancing or breaking.

Lastly, the whole timeline of the game is set out in advance from the beginning. Assuming you're in the hands of a competent games teacher, there are very few surprises, neither in the progression of the game or in the strategic decisions that need to be made.

The conscious and focused attempt to satisfy a wide band of target markets is commendable, but it means nothing without the gameplay…

The 'timeline' of the game. Yellow stands contain the challenges; red stands contain the wars.

to put citizens in, and your own personal player mats and research trackers. But you start with the barest of cupboards: just five technology cards, each with a single icon. From this you must grow!

It's worth noting that —after the random setup with its hundreds of permutations— there is remarkably little luck in ***Path of Civilization***. You are very much encouraged to analyse the future events, decide which of them will score you the most points and develop your engine accordingly. The need to develop a resource strategy reminds me of a bigger version of ***The White Castle***, which has a relatively light interface but requires long-term planning to play well.

Without dragging through all the rules, the basic concept is to leverage two of your technology cards to get workers, two to get research points, and to discard the fifth. Your workers —through various ***Civ***-type mechanisms— will earn you VPs, and your research points will enable you to buy a better technology

The game mid-play; reviewer's elbows not included.

Age 3 – The Age of Enlightenment

There is plenty on the table at the start of any game of ***Path of Civilization***: a library of technology cards, a row of events and wars that guide you through the game's nine rounds, Philosophy and Military Strength trackers, various dishes

card for the next round. This is the balancing act that drives the whole game: it's easy to shoot-the-moon for technology cards and score nothing, and equally easy to leave yourself short of a resource that will cripple your technology engine.

One of your significant sources of VPs is through the Challenges and Wars that are part of the randomized setup. Challenges are particularly worthy of note as they reward you for holding a particular colour of card. The technology cards (as well as the leaders and wonders), are colour-coded to the five research tracks and you'd be forgiven for making a common assumption that you need a bit of everything. Many games of this type require you to balance your endeavours in various areas (think ***Nations*** or ***Through the Ages***) because neglecting one of your tracks will inevitably doom something else. ***Path of Civilization*** doesn't do this – if you want to collect dozens of ~~Religion~~ Philosophy cards to pursue a big payout from the final Challenge, then you are quite welcome to do so. If you want to be militarily bombastic and get points from the Wars (the Wars are non-destructive and — following an idea from ***Nations***— are more a case of the players competing to beat a nominal 'military strength' score), then this is quite possible too.

The decision propagation within the game is deep but, crucially, calculable. Although putting four cards in four slots on your player board sounds relatively simple, the knock-on effects of those choices can affect your game in subtle ways that are not readily apparent until you are up to speed. Of course, it's not possible to do everything you like, and sometimes you're forced to generalize through the old 'no better option' approach, which will lead to a loss of efficiency. But it's very much a loss that has derived from your own decisions, not from intangibles within the game.

How your player board might look after a few rounds. Who knew Moses was devoted to despotism?

Age 4 – The Age of Reasoning

Path of Civilization has had —at best— a muted response, which strikes me as undeserved. In part, there has been a backlash against the AI-generated art, and again I have no wish to wade into this discussion, although I will note that one of the Challenge cards is entitled 'Aggressive AI', presumably as a knowing piece of self-flagellation. Also in the deficit column, there is a rather peculiar implementation of the game on ***www.boardgamearena.com*** *(BGA)* to contend with. While the *BGA* implementation is no doubt a time-saver for very experienced players or people interested in crunching strategy positions, it reduces so much of the game to automated transactions that even intermediate players would be forgiven for not following what was going on. *BGA* is an excellent try-before-you-buy option in many cases, but if you're interested in the ***Path of Civilization*** *boardgame*, I strongly advise you NOT to start with *BGA* in this instance.

For me, the game comfortably does enough to rise above the detractors. It's hard to put one's finger on what the exact appeal is, but the simple actions of accelerating and improving one's engine are often enough to pull new players in. Plus, there is easily enough strategic depth to keep you coming back for more: this is a game of (perhaps unattainable) perfectionism rather than optimization.

Both the designer and publisher are relative newbies on the scene, but what they have created here is an immaculately fine-tuned, coherent and fluid game, and all gamers I've introduced it to have found something to like. It doesn't tick the classic ***Civ*** boxes, and it is derivative in parts, but the flow and simultaneous play make it a great game-night option over flabbier ***Civ*** games.

There is talk of an expansion which I'd love to see come to fruition, although it's hard to see what could be added without the length or fluidity suffering. The experienced players and *BGA* number-crunchers have already developed an understanding that certain opening moves are more powerful, so item 1 on my wishlist would be something to shake up the opening game – I imagine that more asymmetric civilizations or starting technologies would break any existing opening theory.

Prime Minister

DESIGNED BY

Paul Hellyer

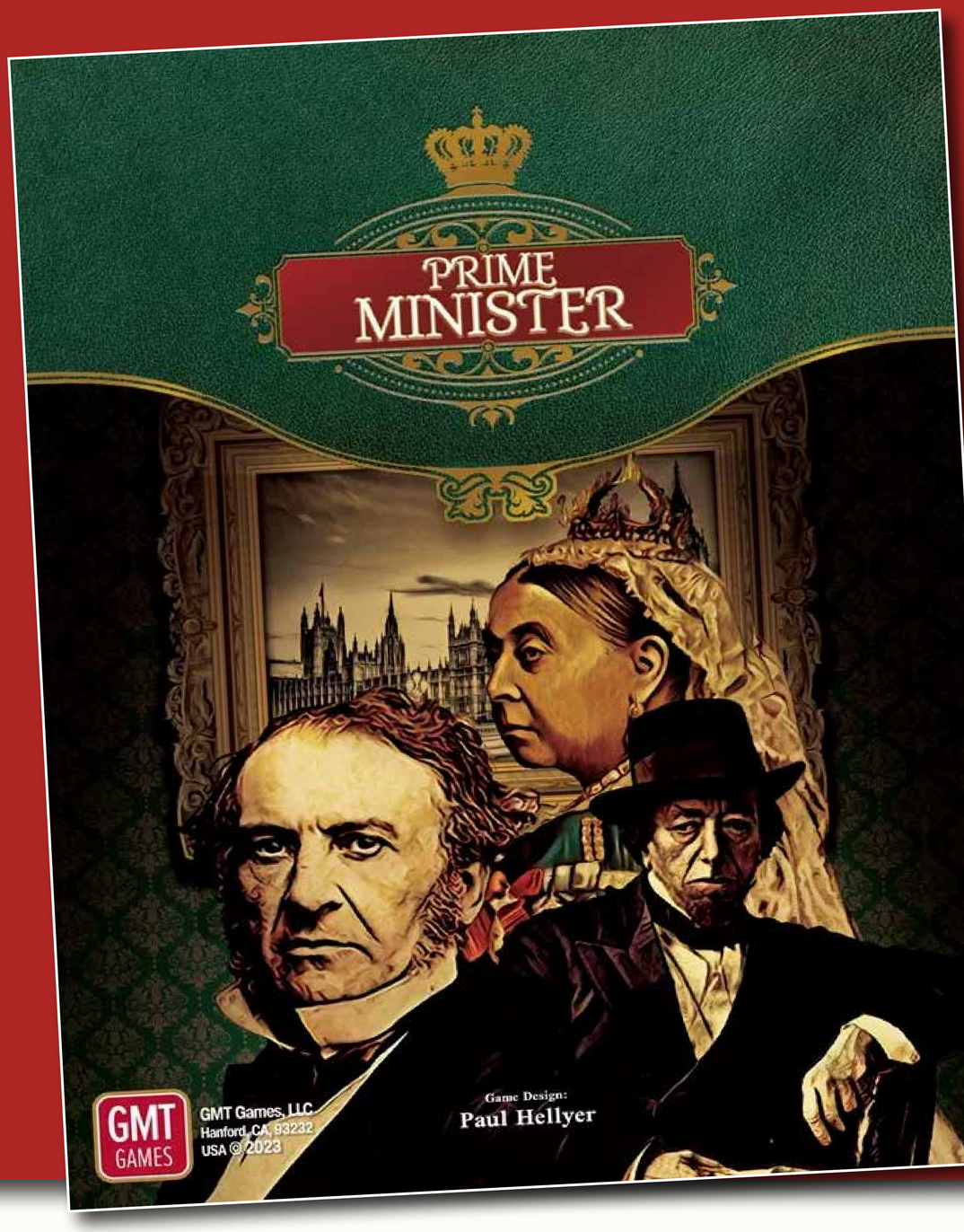
PUBLISHER

GMT Games, 2023

REVIEWED BY

Ben Bateson

1-4 players
150-180 mins
(approx)



Winning the Election

American politicians have not done too shabbily when it comes to games. The most highly regarded of the crop is the tense 1960: The Making of the President (2007), but I also enjoy the 3M classic Mr President (1967), and admire its 21st century namesake, the behemoth solo game of Mr President (2023). Those with more modest ambitions can relive Nixon's deceptions in Watergate, or the scandal-ridden election in Revolution of 1828 – two excellent and surprisingly rich 2-player Euro-style games from 2019.

But the cupboard has been relatively bare for those gamers who wish to delve into British politics. Until recently, that is. Released —in true GMT style— with very little fanfare a couple of years ago, Prime Minister puts you into the shoes of Victorian politicians, thrown in and out of reluctant co-operation and fleeting allegiances, each battling for the highest office of all.

Getting to Grips with Legislation

The box contents won't come as much of a surprise, nor are they likely to get anyone (except, maybe, ardent Excel enthusiasts) wildly excited. There are a variety of boards with various things to track, a few decks of cards, and a handful of tracking markers in various shades of neutral, as well as the two party colours: orange for Liberals and blue for Conservatives – the Labour party is not due to come into existence until the year 1900.

And then there are the rules. Oh boy, there are indeed a lot of rules. A significant chunk of the box weight is given over to a 60-page book on the multiplayer game, and another 60-page book on the solo (Clockwork) game. And, like many *GMT* rules, they are illogically presented, out of sequence with the gameplay, and with only occasional reference to the structure of the game. If you're anything like me, you'll be carrying the book around for a couple of days' casual reading.

But let's not be intimidated. Only half of each book is actually given over to the rules manual. The other half is a tutorial gameplay, fully annotated, and this should be considered essential reading. Not only is the tutorial well-written and comprehensive, but it also throws in some thematic explanation, strategy considerations, and a handful of light jokes. Because it narrates a coherent plot behind the whole game, it's a pretty good political novella in its own right.

The other effect of the tutorials is to soften the apparent complexity of the game. ***Prime Minister*** isn't actually a very complex game at all; it's just that the rules are written badly enough to make it appear that way. Once you have read and digested the tutorials, you should consider teaching the game by tutoring the entire first round in a similar manner. It has the benefits of being able to manage the rules coherently, being able to advise on basic strategy, and not having enough of a spoiler effect to ruin the game for anyone.

Reducing your mandatory reading requirements even further, there are a bundle of scenarios in each book which enable you to relive various political events of the 19th century. The general feeling on the scenarios (derived from the BGG forums) is that they prioritise historical accuracy over dynamic gameplay and are probably best not explored early on.

The game's artwork has a rich, luxurious feel, incorporating various contemporary portraits among the deep reds and beiges that are universally understood to be the hallmark of serious politics. The iconography is limited to a handful of easily-learned symbols representing the various 'currencies' of the game.

Representin'

Although ***Prime Minister*** has adaptations for 2- and 3-player games, it is clearly designed as a 4-player, and you really should attempt to play it as such. And I apologise to solo gamers: not being a soloist myself, I haven't taken time to explore the 1-player version.

Two players will play Liberal MPs and two will play Conservative MPs. All MPs will come with an asymmetric set of skills, so you will need to adapt your gameplay not just to the game state but also to your character. The senior Liberal MP starts as Prime Minister, the junior is a Backbencher, and the Conservative MPs similarly constitute the Leader of the Opposition and an Opposition Backbencher. You should of course be prepared for these roles to change. The victory condition is simplicity itself: as soon as any player is Prime Minister and in possession of at least 100 VP then they win immediately.

The most important political currency in the game is 'Standing', tracked on your personal player mat. As the Prime Minister you want to reinforce your Standing by passing various Acts of Parliament. As Opposition Leader, you want to gain Standing by causing them to fail. Backbenchers gain Standing every round simply by being good constituency MPs and not having their names smeared all over the popular press. As soon as your Standing exceeds someone else's, you can Challenge them at the end of a round and force them to swap roles.

If your Standing were the only thing you needed to worry about, then things would be simple! You also need to campaign and make sure your party can get a majority when one of those pesky elections are called. You need to press the flesh of Supporters who will smooth your passage through parliament (the delightfully-entitled 'Hobnob' action). You need to reconcile the extremists in your party with the more moderate centre. And you should seriously consider maintaining a good status with the Queen, who is known to interfere with elections and offer a minority government to the loser. Of all the game's mechanics, Queen Victoria's interference is perhaps the most contentious – no-one likes big, game-changing decisions being made on the turn of a card. But you can mitigate against the card's effects (by either being more in favour with the Queen, or by getting a sufficiently large majority that the Queen can't overturn it), so it's far from broken.

If you like your games to be demographically diverse, then perhaps this isn't for you!

And you have surprisingly few actions to do all this with. Even as the Prime Minister with maximum Standing, you only get four actions per round. Backbenchers start the game with only one action per round and a meagre selection of things they can do, although this is quickly boosted by taking on various party roles such as Chief Whip or Campaign Chair. The game typically goes 12-15 rounds but there are no guarantees with a player-driven ending, so timing your political career is the strategic cornerstone.

Some of the varied historical characters with whom you can hobnob to boost your campaign!

And what of the all-important VPs? You get Victory Points in a variety of ways, including sponsoring various Bills and just being in Government at the start of every round. One intriguing feature of ***Prime Minister*** is the concept of VP-pooling, whereby all points scored will score points for both members of that party (at least, until the Backbencher has a strop and rebels, which is a viable strategy later on). All four players can also enter a cross-bench pact, which means that everybody scores all the points gained, regardless of who gains them. And if this sounds all too nice and co-operative, bear in mind that a canny Opposition Leader can enter a pact, staying on even

terms with the government, while campaigning behind their backs and giving himself a nice big majority in the next election.

To make a slightly odd comparison, the way in which your ministerial career develops reminded me most strongly of Uwe Rosenberg's ***Nusfjord***. When ***Nusfjord*** came out, it was notable for only having three different resources, but also an engine that related the three to each other in an asymmetric and complex way. ***Prime Minister***, to some of its detractors, is merely a game of balancing the various sliders, but the interaction between those sliders has much of the same honed and unusual balance as ***Nusfjord***.

The overall length of the game could raise eyebrows. Although there is an acceleration curve, it starts off at a pretty sedate pace. Your early actions undoubtedly have an impact on the climax of the game, and there are long-term strategic considerations to take into account, but a lot of new players could easily conclude that the first hour is little more than marking time.

Of course, the whole thing is enormously thematic, and I defy anyone not to indulge in the worst habits of weaselly politicians while playing. Do you want to bray at each other in debates, ask pressing questions of the Prime Minister, or recline on the front bench like an incompetent cabinet member who's decided the government are out of touch? Be my guest.

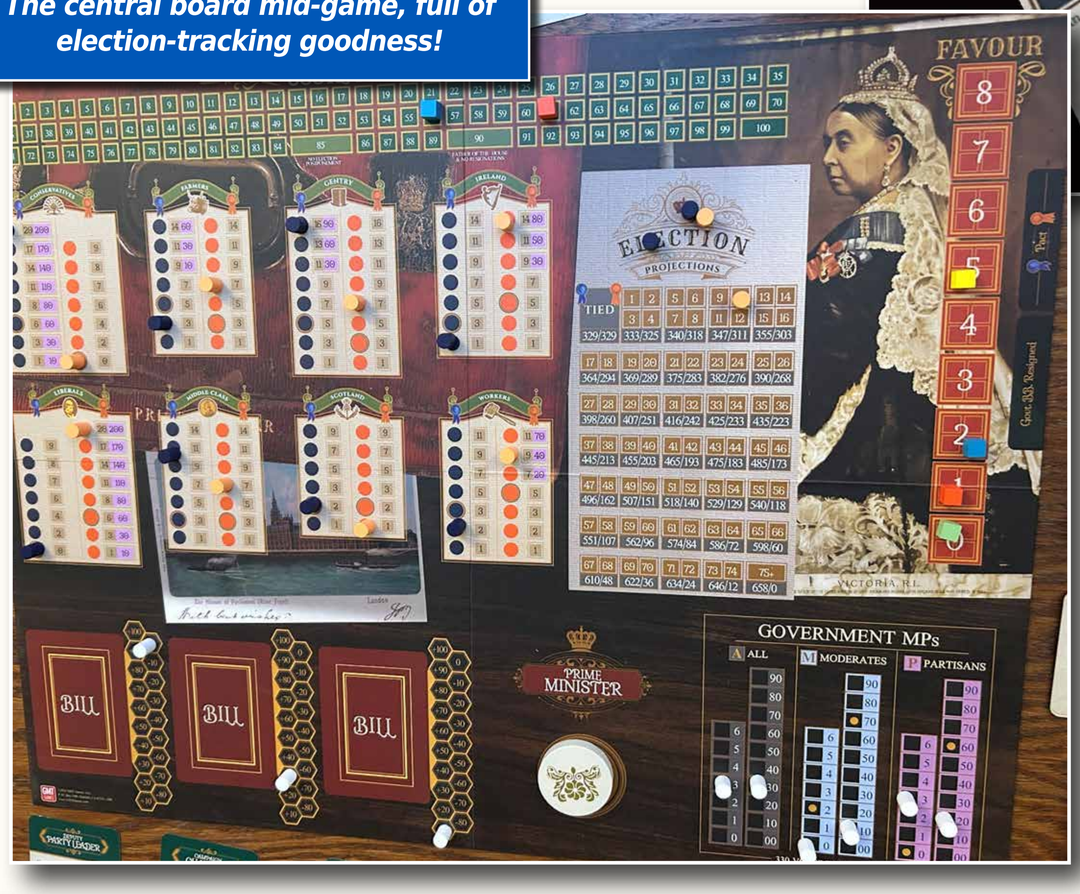
Royal Assent?

If you struggle to engage with politics (historical or modern) or can't regularly arrange a table of exactly four players, I'd hesitate to recommend ***Prime Minister***. If you are strongly opposed to ANY element of co-operation in games, you might want to look elsewhere. But if you enjoy operating in political shadows, exercising fragile allegiances while biding your time for a swoop at the top job, and have an eye for the absurdities and wrangling that lie behind political power, then this could well be for you.

For me, the clincher was something that is difficult to do well in games: the integration of theme with mechanics. Do you —as the Conservatives— want to campaign heavily with the gentry? Then you should expect a bunch of partisan toffs to join your party in the election who won't co-operate at all with the opposition. Want to enact the reasonable-sounding Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Bill? The farmers will stop voting for you when they find out they can't shoot rabbits.

I know some gamers who will fall foul of all three of these acts!

The central board mid-game, full of election-tracking goodness!



This integration is not just clever and immersive, but seamless and without additional gloss. The wry humour arising from event cards such as 'you have arrived wearing the wrong tie' and 'your wife is divorcing you' is a fun pastiche, but of course derives directly from the Victorian societal norms of the era.

If you're in search of a copy of ***Prime Minister*** then, at present, there is only the first run of 500 copies to get your hands on. *GMT* have promised a 2nd printing, but anyone who follows *GMT*'s P500 model will be aware this doesn't constitute any sort of guarantee or time-frame. Like all games publishers, *GMT* have been thrown into a world of uncertainty by the global political situation (oh, the irony!) and are appealing to their customers to help out by being patient. This is one game that would certainly be worth the wait.

Tales of the Arthurian Knights

DESIGNED BY

Eric Goldberg & Andrew Parks

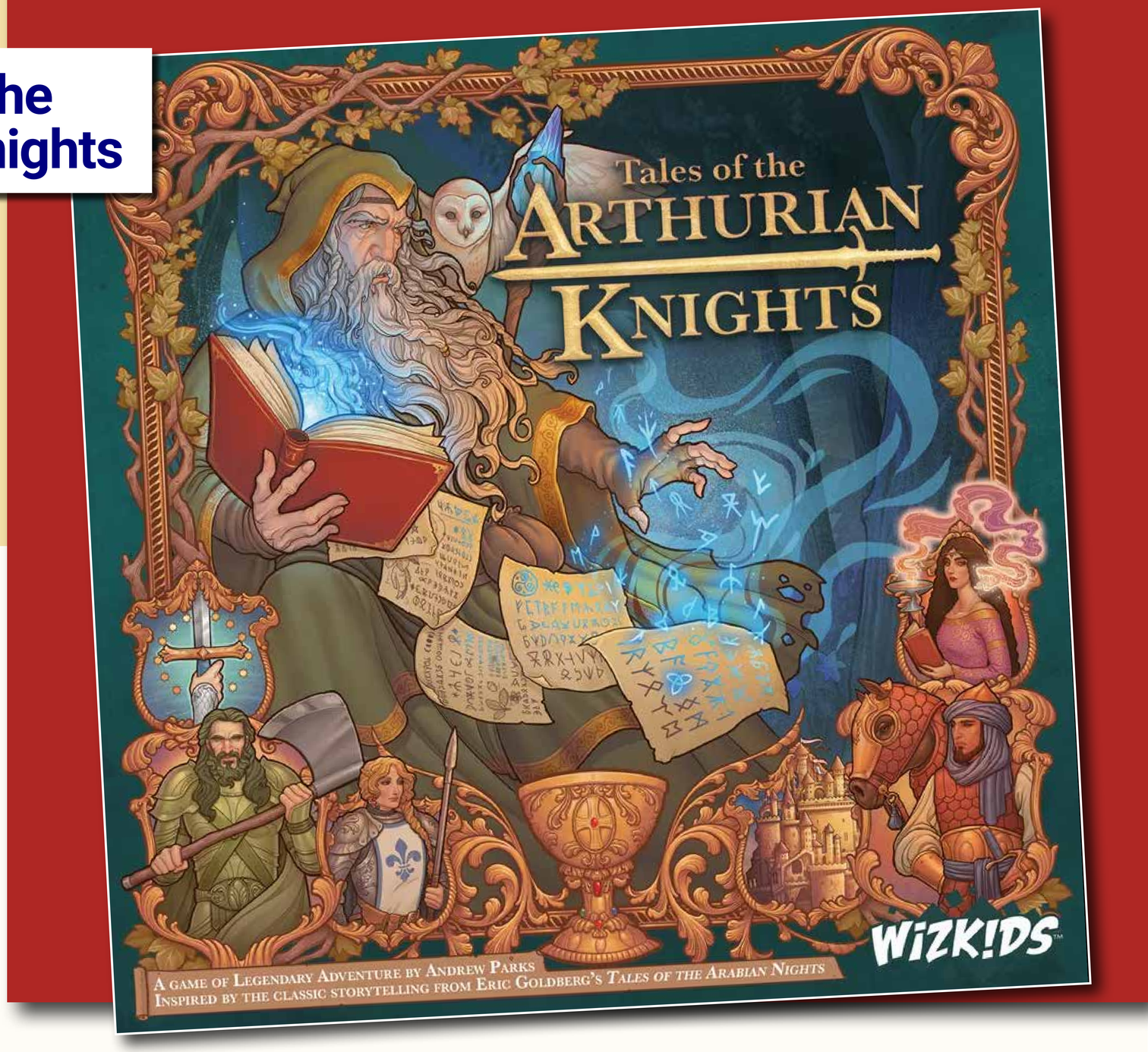
PUBLISHER

WizKids, 2024

REVIEWED BY

Simon Neale

1-4 players
60 mins / player (approx)



The Tale is Old

The tale of my interest in this game began many years ago in the distant past of my younger days when I used to 'read' the* Fighting Fantasy *novels from Steve Jackson and Ian Livingstone. These books allowed you to delve into dungeons, explore strongholds, and roll dice to defeat the monsters and evil sorcerers you encountered along the way. The books became known as 'choose your own adventures' where at various points in the story you had to choose from a list of options as to what action you would like to take —some of which may involve rolling dice— and then the book would reveal the outcome. I loved these books and the adventures you went on whilst reading them.

Move the calendar forward to 2009 and *Z-Man* published a game called ***Tales of the Arabian Nights***, which was basically *Choose Your Own Adventure - The Board Game*. Set in the folktales of the Middle East, you travelled the lands, encountered cultures and had adventures (and misadventures!), all driven by choosing an option and having another player reading out the result. The game was an instant hit with me and each play left memories of the experience that have lasted way longer than most plays of other games. It is the unexpected encounter outcomes (usually as a result of a poor dice roll) that are the most memorable: growing a monkey's tail or becoming besotted by a foreign royal always provided tremendous humour and table banter.

Despite being well received by a lot of gamers, ***Tales of the Arabian Nights*** also drew a fair amount of criticism on the awkwardness of the charts and tables in resolving encounters and also raising the question: was it a game? Despite being categorised as a boardgame, the discussion over any real choice in how you progress/ strategy / tactics continues to this day. To me however, I just really enjoy the experience of playing it, so whether it is a true game (by definition or not) does not matter to me at all.

The years move forward again, this time to 2024 and *WizKids* release ***Tales of the Arthurian Knights***, based on ***Tales of the Arabian Nights***. This time the action would take place at Camelot in the time of King Arthur and his knights of the round table. After over two years on my wishlist, my pre-ordered game finally arrived in May...

On the (Round) Table

The need for the impressively sized and heavy box containing ***Tales of the Arthurian Knights*** becomes obvious when you open it: the Book of Tales (the core of the game) is itself a large bound volume that would not look out of place on a coffee table for leisure reading. All the components of the game are well produced and the artwork is particularly thematic. The rulebook is thin as there are not a lot of rules, and the examples all well laid out, so we did not need to refer to the rulebook after the first few minutes of play. It's very clear that a lot of investigative research into Camelot, King Arthur, and the events from that Age has been carried out by the game designers, and it's to their credit that the encounters that unfold during the game feel as though they fit into the time period. Obviously, there has to be some leeway in what is included, but so far I have not found anything that doesn't fit into the setting.

The designers of the game have used the names of places and characters from the time in which the game is set, and it is a nice touch that they have included how to pronounce the names in the rulebook – adding to the

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amusement of the players as they struggle with some of the terms!

Each player takes on the role of a Knight of the Round Table and uses their player board to record the Knight's Skill level in various abilities, starting with 3 low level Skills at set up. The board covers a map of Logres (most of what is now England), Cambria (Wales), Scotland, Ireland, and northern France, with specific locations (e.g. Camelot – where all Knights start the game) connected via paths and intermediate locations. Players will move their Knights along these paths and have an encounter every time they stop, with the aim of gaining the most destiny points at the end of the game.

The Knights Go Forth

On a player's turn they move their Knight along any path (land or sea) up to their movement ability and then have an encounter where they stop. Quests will give specific tasks that need to be performed at certain locations and will vary in difficulty, but the simpler quest issued at set-up gives the player a good idea of where to begin their adventure.

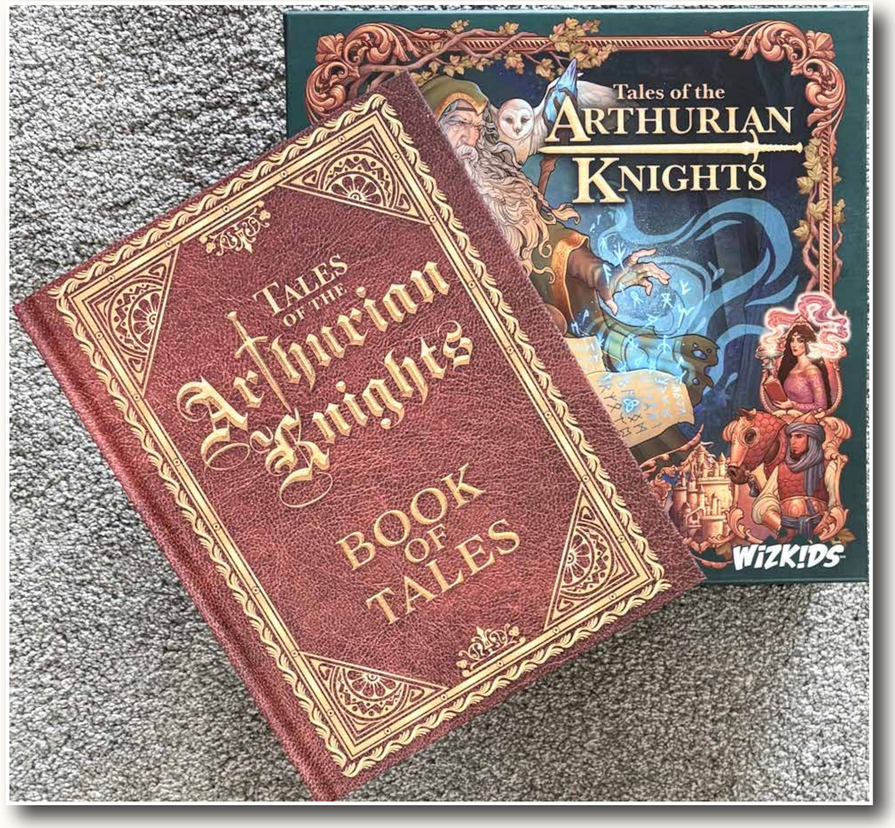
On arrival at a location, the active player draws the top card from the encounter deck, which will be either Characters, Milieu cards, or Locations.

Character cards

If a character is drawn (e.g. a dwarf, a king, etc), then a feature card is also drawn to describe the character (e.g. vengeful, lost). So, as an example, your Knight might have stumbled across a vengeful dwarf. The clever part of the game design is that when the character card is placed on top of the feature card, a paragraph number is revealed. The player to the left then reads out that paragraph from the Book of Tales and gives the active player various options, most of which will require using a skill and rolling a dice to determine if a target number has been reached. If the Knight has a skill level above zero then that is added to the dice roll to improve the chances of success. The player to the left then reads out the outcome from another paragraph, making sure that they do not let the active player know whether they have succeeded or not. The wording of the paragraph will make it obvious as to whether the Knight's action was successful but not announcing it beforehand adds to the tension and makes the outcome far more intriguing.

I don't want to include any spoiler information in this review, so I've made up this example.

> *"Sir Galahad encounters a vengeful dwarf sitting in the shade of a tree, sharpening his mighty axe. You may use your Diplomacy Skill to enquire why the dwarf is upset or your Warfare Skill to challenge the dwarf to a fight as you cannot leave angered dwarves close to a well-trodden trail where they may attack innocent travellers. What do you want to do?"*
>
> *"I'll use Diplomacy to talk the dwarf around."*
>
> *"A dice roll of 3, added to my Diplomacy of +2 gives a total of 5."*
>
> *"The dwarf listens as you tell him of the need for dwarves such as he, to defend the kingdom from the raiders of the east. He realises that his grievance is minor in comparison to the world at large and agrees to go on his way, ending the encounter."*



Milieu cards

The game plays through three Ages and a Milieu card has a different paragraph number depending upon the Age and the type of location of the Knight (e.g. forest). A similar process to resolve the encounter is carried out with the player on the left reading from the Book of Tales.

Location cards

These cards show a specific location on the board and are placed face up in front of the player, to be activated once the Knight stops at that location.

Once an encounter is complete then the result of that encounter is read from the Book of Tales and will say what impact the encounter has had on the Knight. If the encounter was successful then the results will be beneficial, such as gaining skills, destiny points or advancing up the Renown track. The Renown track follows a Knight's progress in divinity, romance and villainy, which can assist encounters in various relevant ways. I'll leave you to find out out which high levels of Renown in certain aspects will give you an easier or harder time in encounters. If the encounter ended in failure then the result is likely to provide a minor benefit, or maybe nothing at all.

There is another possible outcome of an encounter, and that is gaining a Status. This can be an advantage such as becoming bBessed (which will help in future encounters) or it may be a disadvantage like becoming Lost where another player can decide where you're moving to next!

The fundamental part of the gameplay are the encounters, the actions you try to take, their resolution, and the outcome. Gathering Renown and Statuses — either wanted or unwanted— as the game progresses provides the entertainment, humour, and often fires off the table banter. One poor dice roll can see even the most glorious Knight burbling incoherently as they fall under the spell of a mysterious looking frog!

Before departing Camelot to begin their quests, the players must agree the length of the game, whether it's to be one, two or all three Ages. A minor scoring of destiny points happens at the end of each intermediate Age, with a final scoring after the final Age of the game. Knights score additional destiny points for skill levels and Renown progression, and the Knight with the most destiny points wins the game.

How did the Quest go?

Firstly, let's deal with the length of the game, as it is long! If you play all three Ages which gives the best storylines and the opportunity to develop your Knight in the direction you wish (Renown and / or skills), then it's likely to take the best part of an hour per player. Choosing to play just one or two Ages still gives an interesting and entertaining game, but you will not be able to bring your Knight to their full potential. The Book of Tales contains a lot of well-written text, and you need to take your time reading the passages and immersing yourself in the storylines, as that is the core of this game. Choosing to skip-read through the book will speed up the game of course, but you will not get the same thematic experience at all. Luckily, everyone I have played the game with is happy just to relax into the gameplay, take their time, and create memories of their experience, making the runtime a non-issue. However, I feel that the sweet spot is probably 3 players where you have enough to ensure a good mix of adventures and the game can still fit into an evening session.

Tales of the Arthurian Knights includes solo and cooperative variants which work on the same basis of aiming to achieve a certain number of destiny points (depending upon the chosen difficulty level) by the end of the third Age. A deck of cards is used whenever another player would make a decision as to placement resulting from an encounter. I have not tried either of these variants as yet as I'm still enjoying the competitive base version where the Knights strive to best one another!

For those of you who have played the original ***Tales of the Arabian Nights***, here are some of the differences that have been made in ***Tales of the Arthurian Knights***...

- The game length can be easily tailored (number of Ages), and there is a simple way of determining the winner (via destiny points alone).
- In ***Arabian Nights*** players had to set their own targets for both story and destiny points to win, but can easily struggle as the result of encounters that may not give them the type of points they are seeking.
- The shorter paragraphs in ***Arabian Nights*** make reading them quicker, but the tables required to determine the paragraph number make it a longer process overall.
- Most of the Statuses in ***Arthurian Knights*** expire after a set number of rounds, which means any player suffering from a detrimental one will know exactly when it will be removed.
- The skills are also very easy to track and apply to the dice roll in ***Arthurian Knights***, making the encounter resolution feel a lot smoother.

Overall, I think the changes that have been made have improved the mechanics and gameplay significantly, and I really enjoy the storyline depth.

It will not surprise you that I think ***Tales of the Arthurian Knights*** to be a fantastic game experience and due to its similarity to its predecessor, I am sure the old discussion as to whether it is a true game or not will soon kick off again. The details in the storylines and how some of them link through the Ages is a credit to the designers and the remarkable work that went into writing the Book of Tales. Whether this game is for you is something that only you can decide, but I hope this review has given enough information to allow you to make that decision.

The now famous saying by Pierre de Coubertin (the father of modern Olympic Games) that "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not winning, but taking part," can be equally applied to ***Tales of the Arthurian Knights***.

Toy Battle

DESIGNED BY

Paolo Mori & Alessandro Zucchini

PUBLISHER

Repos Production, 2025

REVIEWED BY

Martin Griffiths

2 players
15-20 mins (approx)

Paolo Mori has been on a hot streak of quick 2-player games, with Toy Battle, co-designed with Alessandro Zucchini, following on from Blitzkrieg!: World War Two in 20 Minutes and Caesar!: Seize Rome in 20 Minutes! The title works both as a literal description of the theme —in which two bands of children's toys face off against each other— and in the sense of a toy model or simulation of a skirmish. While its look is colourful and family-friendly, Toy Battle has unmistakable wargame roots, even more so than the more overtly war-themed Blitzkrieg! and Caesar!.

Unboxing

There's no wasted space in this box, with a generous four double-sided boards offering different terrains to compete over, fold-out-and-assemble cardboard boxes to store each player's two dozen toy / troop tokens, and a solid wooden rack for each player to hold their hand of troops.

The boards depict various different settings from volcano to graveyard, each featuring a network of paths connecting bases where troops can be deployed, and an HQ for each player at opposite ends of the board. Certain areas are marked with victory point values which can be claimed by occupying all the surrounding bases. There are two objectives to pursue: either claim victory points equal to the board's requirement, or occupy your opponent's HQ for an instant win regardless of VP.

Each player has the same set of troops: three each of eight different types. They have a basic value from 1-7 (plus a wild) which is important because a higher-valued troop can be stacked on top of a lower-valued opponent one. Each type has its own special power, such as the toy soldier allowing an immediate additional turn when deployed, while others give you free draws from your supply, or allow you to discard tiles from your opponent's rack.

A turn is very simple: either play a tile to the board, which must be connected by an unbroken chain of your own troops to your HQ, or draw two tiles from your supply into your rack, which has a limit of 8 tiles.

Gameplay

The wargame lineage is already clear with troop effects, stacking and supply lines. Furthermore, certain bases on each board trigger their own special

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The units have something of a rock-paper-scissors relationship with each having their uses. You want to lure out your opponent's valuable T-Rex 7s so that you can discard them with your Robot 3s, while the wild Rubber Ducks can also spring a surprise as they can stack on top of anything, even a 7. The pirates are the only piece that can be 'parachuted' in regardless of supply, and are often used to cut off the enemy supply chain before they can reach your HQ.

terrain effects. On the 'beginner' board this allows you to take a tile from the board back into your hand, while more advanced boards offer options such as pushing an opponent's troop away to an adjacent space or drawing an additional tile from your supply.

Most of the troop and terrain effects revolve around manipulating tempo. If you run out of tiles in your rack then your opponent will get two turns in a row, which can be lethal, so tiles that provide extra draw are important in sustaining an attack. Both win conditions are very achievable, although the game can also end by a player running out of tiles to play, in which case most VPs wins. There's a choice to be made between going all out for your opponent's HQ or consolidating territory closer to home for VPs, but you can't win without taking at least some enemy territory.

There's certainly a luck-of-the-draw element as to how your tiles come out from your supply. Four are removed from the game completely at the beginning to maintain an element of surprise, and an early handful of toy soldiers can make for a true blitzkrieg victory as you march into your opponent's under-defended HQ. But even when it goes the distance, the game is unlikely to last more than 20 minutes, so if you do go down quickly it's very much a case of racking them up and trying again.

Summary

The first word that comes to mind when describing ***Toy Battle*** is *moreish* (Mori-sh?!) – it's hard to resist demanding a rematch after losing the first game, and soon that turns into the best of three, best of five, etc.

I don't think there would have been many complaints had it shipped with only one double-sided map, but the eight options presented give lots of variety to explore. As well as the unique terrain effects, there are some very interesting variations to board topology, and even one asymmetric board. That's not to say there isn't scope for further expansion – I'd be surprised if we don't see more boards and also new types of troops in the future; indeed, fan-created ones are already popping up on ***www.boardgamegeek.com (BGG)***.

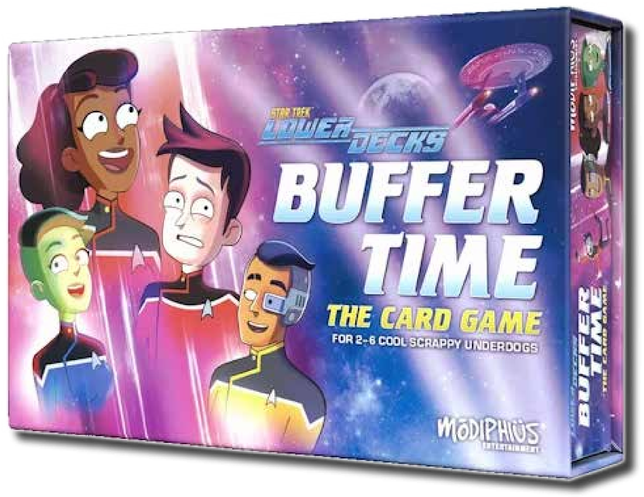
SPIRITED SNAPSHOTS...

compiled by Simon Neale

Star Trek: Lower Decks – Buffer Time: The Card Game

Designed by N/A?

Modiphius Entertainment, 2024
2-6 players, 35-45 mins (approx)



Anyone familiar with Star Trek has probably always wondered what happens on all the other decks that we never get to see in the TV series, whereas fans of the show will likely already be aware of the Star Trek: Lower Decks animated comedy TV series. Lower Decks is a rather amusing take on what it's like to do the real behind-the-scenes work on these huge federation starships, and there have already been five (5!) complete series of this show. It's won a lot of awards, is well worth watching if you're a fan, and even if you're not, there are a good few giggles to be had.

Alas, apart from the ridiculously lengthy game title, I'm sorry to say very little of that show's charm has carried over into this project. It's a push-your-luck cooperative game where players are tasked with completing menial jobs like removing Gelrakian graffiti, unjamming replicators, lubing turbolifts, etc. while also trying to sneak in some *real* leisure time for a relaxing sonic shower, band practice, quality holodeck time, and so on. And the way you do this as a team? By taking it in turns to flip cards and hoping not to 'bust' before you tally enough points to complete both the jobs that need doing and the additional leisure time players have tried to sneak into each round.

Score enough points (depending on the player count), and you'll win the game, although busting seems much more likely most of the time.

Yes, there is slightly more to it because there are special ability cards and a few other things you can do to 'rewind' or give yoursleves a second chance, so to speak, but it does boil down to just adding up numbers and hoping not to get caught by enough officer cards (literally, drawing cards that might have an officer symbol on them - you're allowed a maximum of four).

Overall, this proved something of a disappointing let down for most players, some of who are fans of the animated show. Publishers really should do much better with licenses like these.

— Alex Bardy

image c/o Daniel Thurot

Flatiron

Designed by Shei C. & Isra C.

Ludonova, 2024
2 players, 15-20 mins

The objective of this 2-hander is to construct a representation of New York's famous Flatiron building. Designed by the pair responsible for Red Cathedral and White Castle, there is more to this game than meet the eye.

By moving your architect between the four streets surrounding the building, you either buy a Street card which is added to your player board, Activate cards to perform actions, or simply gain money. Actions include buying, selling or building pillars and erecting floors. Each of your four streets can have a maximum of four cards and when activating a street all the cards contained therein are actioned, thus giving you several actions to perform. You may also visit City Hall to purchase Decree cards which can generate game end victory points.

As you travel along the scoring track you will encounter the Paperboy who will give you Newspaper tokens which can be used during your turn. Reputation tokens are also available as actions and will give positive or negative points at game end.

Decide between you how many floors you wish to build and the game ends when the roof is added. Calculate the value of each of your streets and gain 5 VPs for each positive score but lose 3 VPs for each negative one.

The game is rather icon-heavy with over 40 different symbols distributed between the Street cards, Decree cards, Floors and Newspaper tokens. ***Flatiron*** received mixed reviews with our group and of course there is the obligatory solo version included.

— John Humphries

Tic Tac Trek

Designed by Trevor Benjamin & Brett J. Gilbert

Alley Cat Games, 2025
2 players, 15-20 mins

Tic Tac Trek was a rare impulse purchase for me on spotting the tiny tin on the shelves of a bookshop and noticing it was designed by the reliable Benjamin and Gilbert (Great Plains, Mandala, Patterns). The other entries in this small tin line by Alley Cat Games are dexterity games, but this is a miniaturised tile-layer that draws inspiration from Carcassonne and Noughts and Crosses.

Inside the tin are 26 tiny tiles in a small bag, each of which belongs to one of five terrains and depicts an X on one side and an O on the other. On your turn, you draw a tile, which you must turn to show your symbol and then add it to the growing board, adjacent to a tile of matching terrain if possible (if not, you can place it anywhere). The goal is to form a line of three of your symbol (regardless of terrain), which allows you to place one of your cute 'campfire' tokens on the newly-placed tile.

Once all tiles have been placed you tot up the score, with each campfire scoring a point for every space around it which does not contain a tile. So, befitting the theme, you want to strike out to new ground on the edges of the board and establish your camps there rather than in the crowded middle.

The terrain restriction might be overly constraining were it not for the inclusion of two lake tiles. These can be placed adjacent to any terrain and have any terrain placed adjacent to them, allowing new areas of woodland, grass, etc. to form. Once camps start being established you often have the choice of trying to set up more lucrative ones for yourself or filling in the space around your opponent's camps to deny them points.

The listed time of 15-20 minutes is an overestimate if anything. ***Tic Tac Trek*** is a small game, but a charming one to while away a few minutes with, and it's perfect to toss into a backpack pocket on your own camping trip.

— Martin Griffiths

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Cover by Martin Griffiths (Toy Battle)

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