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Welcome



It's been a strange kind of year. We've spent half of it either indoors or in very restricted circumstances. And while the summer brought us strange challenges as everything shut down, including the board games industry, it also bought us a little time to reflect on the hobby.

The Best Games of 2020 then sees a stranger mix of games than 2019. Party games and four or more player games are mostly absent as they were impossible to review for a great deal of the year, whereas solo games took a step into the limelight, as did gateway family games with hobbyists attempting to recruit their nearest and dearest to the gaming table.

2020 was also a good year for roleplaying games, with remote play of games through video chat becoming a staple. We saw some big releases with the first *Critical Role source book – The Explorer's Guide To Wildemount, MÖRK BORG and Alien: The Roleplaying Game.*

Looking at the titles in this magazine, you'll soon realise publishers everywhere were ready to celebrate their best games with deluxe rereleases, tweaked second or third printings, and lavish collectors editions. It was still a celebration, but at a distance. For gaming, 2020 was still a success – but here's to next year, when we'll be together again to remember it.

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Christopher John Eggett Editor

QUICKSTART

> "Summer Pavilion takes all that was good about Azul and reworks it into a greater game: more elegant, more intelligent, more engaging"

***Azul: Summer Pavillion*, p42**

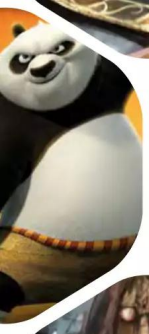
> "If the bright psychedelic neon art style of the game didn't give it away, I can confirm that the world is quite mad."

***Dungeon Degenerates*, P48**

> "For players looking for a wargame without war or an economic game without economics, this is an incredible game that will continue to delight and impress"

***Ride the Rails*, P161**








THE BEST GAMES OF 2020

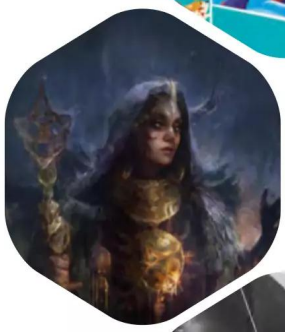
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NEMESIS

Intruder alert! Intruder alert!

Designer: Adam Kwapinski | **Artists:** Various

1-4 Hr | 1-5 | 14+ | £125



You are rudely awoken from hypersleep. There's a body on the floor nearby: one of your crewmates, horrifically mauled. And something nasty is lurking in the shadowy corridors, rooms and ducts of your big, echoey spaceship.

It's a familiar scenario. Reminiscent, of course, of Ridley Scott's *Alien*, to which Awaken Realms' latest, big-box, miniature-packed theme-driven game owes a great debt. But it might also ring bells to anyone who played the recent *Lifeform*, which also translated its reverence for xenomorphy cinema into an elaborate tabletop survival horror.

The core difference between *Nemesis* and *Lifeform* is here no player has to take the role of the alien. Or rather, *aliens*; there is far more than one slimy interloper. Yet this is not a straight cooperative game. Each character — captain, pilot, scout or scientist, among others — starts with a pair of secret objectives. One of these is personal, and the other corporate. The first time an extra-terrestrial Intruder appears on the board (usually as the result of making too much noise while exploring the board), every player has to choose which objective to commit to. Some will require a more 'heroic' route. Others demand some skulduggery: perhaps trying to sneak an egg off the ship, or even arranging for another character to have a little, shall we say, accident.

This *Battlestar Galactica*-ish twist ramps up the tension to a thoroughly entertaining degree. You all need to work together to survive — following your crewmates into rooms doesn't generate noise, for instance — and each character has its own strengths, represented by their own deck of 10 action cards. But you also never know if you can entirely trust your friends. They tell you they've fixed the engines... But maybe they've secretly sabotaged them. Perhaps they've programmed the ship to return to the safety of Earth... But really set the coordinates to Mars. Meanwhile, those terrifyingly toothy monsters keep springing out at you, gradually whittling down your health and resources, while the ship itself is on an automatic countdown to lightspeed, which will kill all humans on board unless they get themselves back into hibernation first.

Designer Adam Kwapinski (*Lords of Hellas*) has calibrated the game with a powerful narrative drive, delivering twists, turns, intrigue and climactic moments. Whether you're playing the game's superb solo mode (for the ultimate against-the-odds survival experience), or the regular multiplayer, it really does feel cinematic — something that's helped by publisher Awaken Realms lavishing its usual attention on the components, which are of incredible quality.

However, with a tricky-to-navigate 28-page rule book and heavyweight complexity, games do run slow, long and not always smoothly. Also, there is player elimination, with only the first player out given the option of taking over control of the Intruders. And you don't have to die to be out of the game: if you swiftly complete your objective and place yourself in hibernation or an escape pod, you'll have to sit out until everyone else is done, too. This is unfortunate, for sure, although it may come as some relief to hear that, with the game's action-horror theme oozing through so effectively, even being reduced to a spectator doesn't take as much away from the experience as you might fear.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

It's knotty, lengthy and involves player elimination, but *Nemesis* is still hugely impressive in the way it implements its sci-fi survival-horror theme.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Two-sided board
- 6 Character boards
- 1 Intruder board
- 1 Intruder bag
- 1 Scanner
- 20 Room tiles
- 2 Six-sided combat dice
- 2 Ten-sided noise dice
- 6 Character miniatures
- 20 Intruder miniatures
- 5 Plastic card holders
- 6 Coloured plastic rings
- 2 Room sheets
- 18 Status markers
- 50 Ammo/injury markers
- 30 Noise markers
- 8 Fire markers
- 8 Malfunction markers
- 12 Door tokens
- 6 Engine tokens
- 2 Five injury tokens
- 4 Escape pod tokens
- 8 Intruder egg tokens
- 20 Exploration tokens
- 5 Character corpse tokens
- 27 Intruder tokens
- 8 Intruder carcass tokens
- 1 Depressurisation token
- 1 First player token
- 60 Action cards (10 per character)
- 18 Objective cards
- 7 Soo/Co-op Objective cards
- 27 Contamination cards
- 20 Intruder attack cards
- 16 Serious wound cards
- 20 Event cards
- 5 Help cards
- 8 Intruder weakness cards
- 8 Coordinates cards
- 120 Item cards
- 6 Character Draft cards
- 10 Intruder action cards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... LIFEFORM

If you played that because you wanted Alien (or Aliens) in a game, then you must check Nemesis out, too.





ALIEN: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

The Terror of the Deep (Space)

Designer: Free League

392+ | 15+ | £39



There are plenty of horror games on the market, but few manage to tap into the unsettling, bone-gnawing terror that Alien: The Roleplaying game can conjure up with just a few well-chosen descriptions and careless dice rolls.

From an initial movie about a bunch of space-truckers and their run-in with a single monster through to the expanded timeline of *Prometheus*, the *Alien* universe has always revolved around fear of the unknown; the fear, appropriately enough, of the alien. This isn't the easiest thing to capture at the tabletop, but with a few clever decisions and a stark focus on cranking up the tension the *Alien RPG* does everything it can to summon up feelings of dread, whether you're in a darkened kitchen or a crowded convention hall.

This is achieved with a core ruleset based on the same, simple system used by several other games developed by Free League, including *Tales from the Loop* and *Forbidden Lands*. Skills and stats add dice to a pool, and when you want to try something risky you throw them all and try to get sixes. If you get at least one you succeed, whether that means sneaking past a handful of egg-sacs without rupturing them or clobbering a merc over the head with a wrench.

The biggest twist that *Alien* adds to the system is one that ties the rules neatly into the idea of rising, creeping horror. As characters press themselves or watch their friends be torn apart by monsters, they accumulate an extra pool of stress dice. These dice can generate successes just like their skills and stats – adrenaline pushing them to new heights – but if they roll poorly the terror can overwhelm their character, causing them to freeze, empty their entire magazine or run into the open.

It's a neat little addition to the rules that does a wonderful job of raising the tension, and not just in-game either. Passing checks with just your basic dice pool can be tough, so you're encouraged to push for re-rolls and stress dice right from the start of the adventure, but in the back of everyone's mind lingers the knowledge of what that stress can cause when the real dangers appear.

This isn't the only twist to *Alien*, however. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game is that it's actually two games in a single book. Kind of.

One of these is a fairly conventional sci-fi RPG designed for campaigns that might run for weeks or months at a time. The other – known as 'cinematic mode' – is specially built for one-off scenarios. You aren't really expected to ever run a second game using the same characters, because most of them are probably going to be dead.

The rules don't really change between the two, but while campaign mode is where the meat of the details and character options lie, cinematic mode is where strengths of *Alien* shine their brightest. It's here that the terror is at its most accessible, the rules at the slickest and the tone at its darkest.

Some of this can be attributed to the punishing, lethal nature of the pre-written cinematic scenarios, but a lot of the sleek efficiency comes from the careful decision of which rules and ideas to cut out. There's no character creation, no umm-ing and ahh-ing over weapon loadouts and no need to fiddle about with any systems that don't relate directly to the situation at hand. You just turn up, roll your dice and pray that you survive the night.

Of course, this ease of play is balanced out by the sky-high stakes when a campaign game eventually stumbles into a truly deadly threat, but the crew probably won't be facing these every week. For every tense showdown with monstrous aliens, you can probably expect a couple run-ins with pushy Colonial Marines or some corporate drones, and while these can still be fun they aren't exactly the reason why most of us pick up an *Alien* game.

When you're in one-shot cinematic mode, *Alien* is an incredible game. If you have just one night to play and are after some seriously scary roleplaying, it's one of the best choices out there. Campaign mode has the potential to eclipse even this, but if you go down this road you'll need to accept that between the peaks of an excellent horror game lie a few sessions of merely okay sci-fi adventure.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

An incredible horror experience that absolutely excels at one-shot scenarios.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... CALL OF CTHULHU

Though the settings are about as different as you could imagine, *Alien RPG* captures the same despair, dread and pile of dead characters created by classic *Call of Cthulhu* adventures.





PAUPERS' LADDER

Kleptomania is a virtue

Designer: Paul Stapleton | **Artist**: Paul Stapleton

60-90m | 2-4 | 14+ | £33

It doesn't get much more indie than calling your game studio Bedsit Games. Despite the small space though, Paul Stapleton has put together a game with really quite epic scope, even if it is set in a pocket universe.

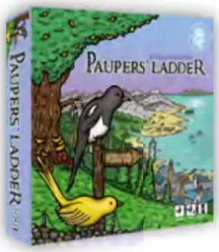
In Brighthelm the benevolent ruler has died, and the terms she has out for her replacement are for the most virtuous amongst the poorest in her realm. The game is one where you wander around as a giant pauper meeple (and bird companion) exploring a pleasing little map in an attempt to complete a number of 'virtues.' These are the long-term goals within the game – get three and you win. To learn a virtue you're probably going to need to upgrade your character by collecting potions or completing recipes to provide you permanent abilities. Exploration is fast as you get two moves every turn, using your bird and pauper independently – although, of course, the bird cannot use your equipment ("your canary can't use a sword" as we had to remind one another).

When it does come to canary-on-dragon combat, we turn a card from the outcome deck for your pauper, and if the number displayed matches or beats that displayed on the enemy encounter you win, and it gets added to your trophy room. Get enough mythical corpses and you can trade it in for a virtue. This collect and discard is the mechanism for cashing in any actions for virtues, whether that's quests, money, or knowledge.

If you didn't defeat that previously mentioned dragon, it hangs around in the region, forcing anyone who enters to fight it. As such, when you move into a region and place a region card, you're always in danger of laying something useless to you, helpful to someone else, or straight-up dangerous. Each player's turn the land shifts beneath you as locations turn up for quests, items you want for your recipe appear on a distant shore, and a region is suddenly guarded by a local beastie. It gives this great flowing sense of building toward something big that you've set your sights on – and while it's competitive there's no direct conflict, meaning it very much has a lazy afternoon vibe about it. While some games without direct conflict do feel a bit like playing separate games, this is more like sharing the Sunday supplements – and someone else has the bit you want to read.

The disarmingly wonky art is cohesive, holding this little world together while its layer of ever-changing cards on its surface offers the sense of a living board. Traipsing around the map can feel a little bit like the original *Pokemon* Gameboy games, or even *Earthbound* – finish your weird and personal goal to progress the story and change the world a little. This happy bouncing between roadblocks and crossing the board for your own particular quest gives players a sense of their own charming, emergent narrative.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board
- 4 Pauper cards
- 4 Bird cards
- 144 Outcome cards
- 36 Recipe cards
- 240 Region cards
- 50 Equipment cards
- 4 Rarity cards
- 35 Quest cards
- 4 Pauper meeples
- 4 Bird discs
- 50 Gems
- 4 Virtue markers
- 1 Charm dice



WE SAY

A gentle game of choosing your own destiny that will leave everyone around the board feeling a little more virtuous than they started.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TALISMAN

If it's the light, card-based combat and exploration of Talisman that you enjoyed, then *Paupers' Ladder* offers a new, askew, take on this kind of mechanic.

GANYMEDE

This sci-fi standout is Splendor in space, on steroids

Designer: Hope S. Hwang | **Artist:** Oliver Mootoo

40m | 2-4 | 12+ | £34





Space has provided fertile ground to game designers over the decades. From the diplomacy of *Cosmic Encounter* to the empire-building of *Twilight Imperium* and the far-future horror of *Warhammer 40,000*, the stars are packed with civilisations to discover and alien monstrosities to confront.

Ganymede is the latest release offering the chance to explore the cosmos. But where most space games set their sights on grandiose themes of exploration and conquest, this one's all about running a public transport service.

Named after one of the moons of Jupiter, it puts you and your opponents in the shoes of rival spacefaring corporations, all using Ganymede as a base to launch missions to the stars. As you play, you'll aim to recruit a variety of colonists on Earth – engineers, scientists, administrators and medics, all represented by different coloured wooden meeples – and ferry them to your far-off launch facilities.

Getting them to their destination isn't straightforward, though. From Earth, you'll first need to get them to Mars using shuttle craft represented by a row of randomly drawn cards. From there, you'll need to charter a second shuttle to Ganymede itself. It means your meeples move gradually along a sort of interplanetary conveyor belt, and getting them from A to B as quickly as possible takes some careful planning.

Different shuttles will only accept certain combinations of meeples, meaning you'll need to recruit the right ones and get them to the right place at the right time to get them aboard. It feels similar to the jewel trading game *Splendor*, with you and your rivals all racing to assemble the collections of colonists you need to claim the various spaceship cards. But while the two games might share a similar mechanical core, *Ganymede* adds a handful of other elements to consider.

Different shuttles grant a variety of bonus actions to the players who manage to charter them, letting you recruit extra meeples, transport extra travellers or enhance your company's reputation. It means that as well as thinking about the types of settlers you want to send to the stars, you'll need to work out which of the available add-on abilities are most advantageous to you at any given time.

Shuttles also come in various classes, and whenever you use one, you'll also set off the abilities of any of the same type you've already played. It adds what feels like a very subtle engine-building element to proceedings as you create chains of bonus actions – never powerful enough to skew or unbalance the game, but still helpful and undeniably satisfying when you pull it off.

Then there are your Ganymede-based starships themselves. They take off whenever you fill them with meeples, and each one you successfully launch boosts your score at the end of the game in different ways. It means your strategy is likely to diverge from everyone else's, and with everyone chasing their own goals, there's plenty of room in the solar system for a bit of tactical brilliance.

OWEN DUFFY

WE SAY

Ganymede may be a little thin on thematic immersion, but it presents a constantly evolving puzzle of the best kind. While the available options on your turn are simple, your decisions gel together over time to allow for real strategic flexibility. It's fast-playing and thoughtful, and its distinctive geometric art gives it impressive presence on your table.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 52 Wooden Settler Meeples
- 4 Wooden Cubes
- 90 Shuttles and Settlers Ship Cards
- 4 Player Boards
- 1 Rulebook

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... SPLENDOR

Like the beloved jewel-trading game, Ganymede revolves around building resources and chasing rewards over time. But it builds on this simple premise to offer layers of new depth.



NINJA ACADEMY



Designer: Antoine Bauza, Ludovic Maublanc, Corentin Lebrat, Théo Rivière | **Artist:** Jean-Baptiste Reynaud

Open *Ninja Academy's* box and you might wonder whether there are pieces missing. This tiny dexterity game comes with just a handful of cards and wooden bits. But its four-strong design team uses them in some inventive ways to create a collection of fast and furious mini-games.

The game casts you and your friends as students in a ninja dojo. Over a series of rapid-fire rounds, you'll compete in challenges for the honour of becoming the top student.

Each task uses the game's components in different ways. In one, you'll each place a meeple in a standing position on the back of your hand then try to shove your opponents' over without toppling your own. In another, you'll place a wooden log in the centre of the table before flicking ninjas at it, attempting to place yours closest to the target like a kind of tabletop lawn bowls.





Other mini games see you trying to throw ninjas into the game box from a distance, chucking them at a wall of logs trying to knock as many over as possible, or racing a rival to balance five ninjas on the tips of your outstretched fingers.

Some challenges involve everyone around the table, while others pit two players against each other head-to-head. But even when you're not included, you can still gain points by betting on the outcome of the contest. And with each mini-game lasting between a few seconds and a minute, the pace of the fun never slows down.

OWEN DUFFY

TUSSIE MUSSIE



Designer: Elizabeth Hargrave | **Artist:** Beth Sobel

Following *Wingspan* with *Tussie Mussie* feels like the tabletop-designer equivalent of directing a small, personal, indie flick after making a blockbuster. Where Elizabeth Hargrave's bird-collecting, engine-building debut came in a box packed with and 170 unique cards, her flowery second game is a small wallet holding only 18. But it is no less indicative of this rising designer's knack for theme and talent for elegant mechanisms.





Over three rounds, each player must create flower arrangements represented by a quartet of cards, which must be placed left-to-right and score according to each card's rule (such as "+1 point for each of your different colour cards"). Essentially, you're building a micro-engine. However, its construction is complicated by the way you play the cards. First draw two from the deck, then offer them both to the player to your side: one face up, the other face down. Clearly there'll be one you'll prefer to keep, but do you try to hide it, or put it on show as a bluff? The neat conundrum of this 'I pick, you choose' element is complicated by the fact that face-up cards are added to your arrangement face-up (forming your "bouquet"), while face-down cards stay face-down (creating your "keepsakes"). This further affects scoring, as some cards only synergise within bouquets, and others with keepsakes. Which means, despite the gentle, fragrant theme, *Tussie Mussie* can actually be quite cut-throat, as you guess at other players' strategies and try to subvert their arrangements.

Inspired by the Victorian trend of giving flowers a secret language, Hargrave also encourages players to read the flavour text of their face-up card when offering it, explaining each flower's meaning. A Snapdragon, for example, means: "You have deceived me." It's well worth doing, adding flavour to the game itself. And in the Snapdragon's case, what you're saying will often be true, in the most entertaining way.

DAN JOLIN

HORRIFIED

Doing the monster smash

Designer: Prospero Hall | **Artist:** Uncredited

60m | 1-5 | 10+ | £35

Ravensburger have really been knocking it out of the park and into the movie studio with recent Hollywood tie-ins. 2019's *Jaws* and the Disney based *Villainous* have shown us that it doesn't just have to be a cash-grab when it comes to bringing big names to our tabletops.

So then, in shambles *Horrified*, part of a Universal Studios deal that puts the classic monsters of the silver screen firmly in the centre of your attention. And it's really quite good.

The game is one of running around collecting items of specific colour and value to complete the selected monster's quest while trying to avoid said monsters. Each quest is defined by the monster card, presenting a kind of mini-game. This could be finding and smashing Dracula's various coffins around the town, playing a kind of slide-puzzle with The Mummy, or to teach both Frankenstein's monster, and the bride of said monster, a little about how to be human. While sometimes you can be blocked from completing quest by a bad series of draws, or an unlucky attack by a monster (your items are also a kind of health system in the game) it only adds to the overcoming-the-odds theme of the game.

All of the quests need to be completed not only against the clock – something set by the number of monster cards in the deck – but also against the monsters themselves who will cause terror by, er, terrorising you and the villagers. If a villager is killed or a hero hospitalised you move the terror meter up. While you take a number of actions each turn of your own choosing, at the end of your turn you flip a monster card to show you which monsters are on the move, and how much they're attacking for when they land on the same space as a hero or villager.

It's a light game that does a great job of not cutting off your options. You can do pretty much anything you can think of during play. As it's a collaborative experience you can work out the best plan together, share items, and even have really quite cinematic "leave me, take this and complete the quest!" moments as the cards tick down.

The monster design is quite nice, even if the figures are the most generic, but that's kind of expected. Certain monsters mark players and follow them, whereas the duo of Frankenstein and Bride can be drawn to one another. Thematically it's tight enough and the quests are simple to understand quickly enough that you'll want to set up a different combinations of monsters and heroes on the board as soon as you finish your first game. The second game in my group was the predictable "let's use all the most difficult monsters" option that saw the terror meter spike alarmingly quickly. Which is exactly what you'd expect when caught in something of a bro-hug between Dracula and the Wolfman.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A surprisingly replayable, jolly, collaborative game that lends itself to occasional cinematic moments. While not full of depth and complexity it has just enough moving parts to provide some tactical fun.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 6 Monster mats
- 7 Monster figures
- 7 Hero badges
- 7 Hero movers
- 10 Villager movers
- 20 Bases
- 60 Item tokens
- 1 Terror marker
- 1 Frenzy marker
- 30 Monster cards
- 20 Perk cards
- 5 Reference cards
- 1 Item bag
- 3 Dice



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ELDRITCH HORROR

And you want to get some of your friends or family into co-op monster defeating, before moving on to something with more depth.



DREAMS OF TOMORROW

Designer: Phillip Perry and Carla Kopp | **Artist:** James Masino

30-45m | 1-6 | 10+ | £28

From the description I hoped Dreams of Tomorrow was going to be one of those rare games where the future is dreamy, but instead the future is terrible as usual and must be saved with dreams. You play a Dream Engineer tasked with travelling the Collective Conscious, collecting dreams and weaving them into sequences to send back to the past.





Which is to say that this is a rondel game (you go round and round the board) with set-collection elements, pretty art and some of the least intuitive graphic design I've seen in a long time. It's a confusing muddle of more than twenty icons and symbols that aren't clear, attractive or well laid out. This isn't a game of weaving dreams, mostly it's trying to remember what the icon with all the rectangles lets you do.

A shame, because there are nice touches here, and the mechanics are intelligent, well balanced and varied. The Collective Conscious lets you gain resources to catch dreams and weave them, but it also lets you trigger the power of the topmost dream in your sequence, which can rearrange the pieces of the rondel, give you extra stuff or more moves, or let you swap dreams with other players.

But it's not as simple as collecting powerful dreams. If you can create a sequence of dreams with matching symbols you get points for resonance, and with the game's tight scoring it can often make the difference. And the conflict between the two leads to interesting choices and emergent strategies.

The game comes with two modes: pleasant night and troubled night, which unleashes a nightmare onto the rondel, plus a solo variant in which you compete against an algorithmic robot. It's a nice package for several styles of play.

Dreams of Tomorrow never engages directly with its theme but its tone is never fierce or combative, and collecting the dream-cards is a pleasant way to spend some time, even if they never add up to anything more than points.

JAMES WALLIS

PARIS LA CITÉ DE LA LUMIÈRE

Designer: Jose Antonio Abascal Acebo | **Artist:** Oriol Hernández

30m | 2 | 8+ | £19

Before electric lighting the streets of the world were either dark, or lit by a sickly gaslight. When Paris was shocked into life with electric lights it became a marvel of the world, painters flocked to paint the city in a way that was, before, more or less impossible.





As such *Paris la Cité de la Lumière* is one of the prettiest games we've come across recently. The two-player game is played in a diminutive box where you lay out tiles so you can later lay buildings on your colour, and more importantly set out the streetlamps. The buildings are Tetris-shaped double-depth cards which you can choose to pick up on your turn in the first round instead of laying cobbles. Once collected they're stored until the second phase where you lay out buildings in an attempt to set up the city to light up your own buildings. Place a lovely chimney meeple to say it's yours, and you're done. Unless you're activating one of the stunning action postcards around the board. These give you little bonuses, like adding in a painter, or an annex to a building, both of which may help you score points. An action can only be used once by one person, so choosing wisely is important.

Like all games with building, the most important part is that you feel good with what you have at the end. And you do – a little night time diorama of a city appears between the two players, and that's more or less enough. There is a sense of strategy in getting the right pieces, and laying your initial tiles effectively, and a few games in you're planning well ahead to block your counterpart and not be left with anything that will cost you points at the end of the game.

A lush, puzzly little game that will leave you happy you only had one person round for games night.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

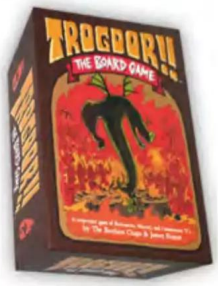
TROGDOR! THE BOARD GAME

Watch the World BURNINATE!

Designer: James Ernest, Matt Chapman, Mike Chapman, Mike Selinker | **Artist:** Various

30-60m | 1-6 | 14+ | £58





WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 16 wooden meeples
- 16 miniatures
- 25 double-sided cardboard terrain tiles
- Cardboard Trog-meter
- 36 Trogdeck cards
- 45 movement cards
- Nine Keeper of Trogdor cards
- Nine magical items cards
- Bag for stacking mini game

No fantasy story is truly complete without the presence of a dragon. Misty Mountain would be an inconvenient hike without Smaug, Harry Potter would simply be a boy on a broom without a Hungarian Horntail to guard the golden egg and Khaleesi would struggle to cross the Narrow Sea and fight for the throne in *Game of Thrones*. Now a new challenger descends to eat peasants and burn villages – Trogdor The Burninator, a comic character, an 8-bit video game and the epicentre of the board game with the same name.

If it isn't obvious from Trogdor's title – The Burniator – or its looks – a large green dragon with a bulging muscular arm – this cooperative game does not take itself seriously. Each turn players, esteemed members of the aptly named cult the Keepers of Trogdor, use their actions to guide Trogdor and burn, excuse me, burninate everything on a five by five randomly generated tiled board. In order to win the game Trogdor will have to lay waste to all tiles, huts and have eaten or burninated all villagers on the board. Unfortunately, pesky knights and archers stand in the way of this explosive endeavour. They travel around the tiles through AI deck drawn routes, trying to catch Trogdor and defeat him. Additionally, they can also repair tiles and huts that have already been burninated.

Every turn is a tug-of-war, where players play cards unleashing Trogdor using the action points displayed on them to move and burn, along with any other special abilities available, and then villagers, knights and archers move in an attempt to deal damage to Trogdor and also repair everything in their path.

Seasoned co-operative board gamers, who are used to the high-stake strategies that are involved in winning games in this genre, might find *Trogdor!! The Board Game* frustratingly luck-based. Very minimal pre-planning can be done as the villagers,' knights' and archers' movement is completely random each turn. Certain assumptions can be made on which tiles are less likely to be in their path, but these are not exact predictions.

Trogdor!! The Board Game is not about pin-point precision. It is about having a laugh. Starting with the rule book full of silly slapstick humour to its entire gameplay where burning villagers get Crowns of Flame and frantically run around the board setting tiles in their path on fire. Even if Trogdor is defeated, he gets one last chance at a win with a Fiery Rage burning everything along the path of five randomly deal movement cards. With any luck, this last hurrah can meet the win conditions, but even if not, it never feels like a let-down or a failing.

The deluxe version of the game comes with beautifully painted miniatures for all the characters as well as usual wooden meeples used in the standard edition. Seemingly just to underline, that *Trogdor!! The Board Game* doesn't like to take itself seriously, players can play a stacking mini game with the wooden meeples (reminiscent of *Meeple Circus* but simplified), the rules of play for which are included in the main rulebook. It has absolutely nothing to do with the main game but is fairly well done and entertaining!

With most modern co-operative games being as tough as nails, sometimes it's nice to play one that is about having silly fun with friends, rather than putting all team efforts into strategies and objectives. The downside of a game that leads with its humour is that any joke at some point will likely get old. *Trogdor!! The Board Game* may not have a long table-life, but it will lift spirits and bring laughter and joy with every play.

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

The main goal of Trogdor!! The Board Game is not to win, it is to have fun. That may come at the expense of robust strategies, that many have come to expect from co-operative games, but once in a while it's fun to be a big dragon with a muscly arm watching the world burninate.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... FORBIDDEN ISLAND

If you are used to the hard work of digging up flooded tiles, you may find that burning them instead is much more fun



TOY STORY: OBSTACLES AND ADVENTURES

It's not exactly flying, but it is falling with style

Designer: Prospero Hall | **Artist:** Disney Pixar

20-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £40

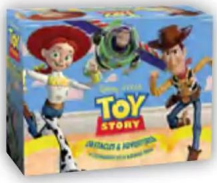


In the crowded boardgame market of today, one of the better ways to find titles you're going to enjoy is to follow the work of a particular designer. One name that's been increasingly prominent in the last few years is Prospero Hall, responsible for a bevy of licensed hits including *Harry Potter Hogwarts Battle*, *Bob Ross: Art of Chill* and *Disney Villainous*.

But *caveat emptor* because Prospero Hall is not a person, it's a Seattle-based company, part of Forrest-Pruzan Creative which in turn is now part of Funko. All the same, if *Toy Story: Obstacles and Adventures* comes from the same team who created *Villainous*, a tremendous blend of theme and gameplay that lets you be a Disney baddie bringing off your diabolical scheme while throwing heroes at your adversaries, it must be worth a look.

Plus, it's a campaign-based co-operative deck-builder with Disney Pixar's most loved cast of characters, Legacy-style gameplay for kids, and at the very least that's got to be interesting, right?

As it turns out *Toy Story: O&A* has less in common with *Villainous* and more overlap with another of Prospero Hall's titles: *Harry Potter Hogwarts Battle*. Because it's basically the same game, or at least the same game-engine, re-skinned with brightly coloured toys. There are five characters instead of four (and two girls instead of one) and six adventures instead of seven, plus some sweet adventure-track mini-boards with the dinkiest zinc tokens you've ever seen, but at its heart this is the Harry Potter deck-building engine – or what I'm fairly sure we'll come to recognise as the Prospero Hall generic co-op deck-building engine for licensed movie franchises.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 198 regular cards
- 21 oversized cards
- 4 dice
- 6 adventure boxes
- 1 rulebook
- 5 rule sheets
- 11 dividers
- 6 adventure tracks
- 5 player boards
- 6 zinc tokens
- 35 insight chips
- 25 imagination chips
- 5 health chips

Which is not to say there's anything wrong with it. This is a nice solid, balanced, engaging piece of game design. Everyone starts with their own deck of cards specific to their character, and builds it up to overcome a succession of group hazards and dangers, which must be beaten before the token reaches the end of its track. In the first adventure it's the removal van heading to the family's new home, in adventure two it's luggage moving through the airport, and so on.

The sense of risk is palpable, players work together to optimise their strategy and the whole experience zips along. The problem comes with the choice of licence the game engine is applied to.

You see, the *Harry Potter* world is filled with living, breathing enemies who must be defeated in a very literal way. The *Toy Story* world, not so much. So where the *Harry Potter* game has you spending resources to get new spells to beat Slytherins and Voldemort, *Toy Story: O&A* has you getting new toys, mainly three-eyed aliens, to overcome 'Trapped in a Crate' and 'Struggle with Jealousy.'

It doesn't gel. It never comes together to feel like an unfolding story, nor to make you feel like you're inside the world of the game. You're gathering a collection of cards with pictures of your *Toy Story* friends on them. Any sense of immersion never got on the removal truck. This is the wrong game-engine to tell these toys' story.

Having said that, my family had a thoroughly good time with it, and in the category of A Young Person's Guide To Deck Building it's an excellent introduction. The gameplay quickly becomes intuitive and although the first adventure is ludicrously easy to beat, the challenge ramps up pleasingly as you work through the different card packs.

In a nutshell, the game's subtitle – 'Obstacles and Adventures' – says it all. It's a little bit unwieldy for the job it has to do, and the adventures take second place to getting past random stuff in your way. But if you know a family with kids who are looking to jump from casual games into something a bit more meaty, this is a cracking late Christmas present.

JAMES WALLIS

WE SAY

The gameplay is absolutely solid, but the Toy Story theme feels like it's layered on top rather than properly integrated. Still, the pleasure of playing as Woody, Buzz and Jessie shines through.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... HARRY POTTER HOGWARTS BATTLE

If you're looking for more of the same but with a different theme, this is literally that.



EBERRON: RISING FROM THE LAST WAR

Weird, Wonderful New Worlds

Designer: Wizards of the Coast

320 | 13+ | £38.99

It's been said that the art of originality lies in taking something that everybody already knows and putting a twist on it. By this definition, *Dungeons & Dragons*' Eberron must be one of the most original game settings out there – one that's perfect for spicing up a table growing tired of classic fantasy tropes.

Rising from the Last War is easily the most substantial and robust setting guide to be added to D&D since its latest edition launched five years ago, and aims to give players and GMs alike a whole new world to play about in. This means a heap of new rules, including races and class options, as well as a pile of magic items and monsters to pick from, but the meat of the book is a big pile of worldbuilding.

And what a world it is.

The simple elevator pitch for Eberron paints it as a world still recovering from the horrors of the titular 'Last War,' both enjoying the arcane technology it spawned and reeling from the industrial-scale violence their creations wrought. However, this only covers the slightest sliver of what makes the setting great – its commitment to creatively ripping off pop culture.

If that sounds like an insult, it really isn't. As you read *Rising from the Last War*, you get the impression that writers asked a hundred different people to think up something cool, and then tossed the results into the game world regardless of how well it seemed to mesh with the game's sword and sorcery aesthetic.

Magical trains? Done. Shapeshifting assassins? You bet. Halfling dinosaur-pirates? Here are some ideas for playing one.

The result is a mash-up of steampunk, noir, pulp adventure and high fantasy that is – in all honesty – a bit of a mess. However, you'd be hard pressed to deny that it's a gloriously enjoyable mess, and one that somehow seems to work. Every nook and cranny of the game world is stuffed with ideas all-but guaranteed to get someone at your table excited about the upcoming campaign.

For some people this will come in the form of the setting itself, while other will be drawn in by the new characters options, which include a handful of races and the first full class to hit this edition of D&D. Of these the robotic warforged are perhaps the most instantly fascinating – who doesn't want to play a kick-arse steampunk adventurer? – but the shapeshifting changelings also instantly inspire countless takes on old stories.

The magical tricks and tools of the new artificer class also allow players to play out a grab-bag of steampunk tropes, which can range from mad scientist to gunsmith depending on what choices you make. It's possibly the most flexible class available to adventurers at the moment, and while this comes at the cost of some complexity it makes up for it by feeling incredibly fun and thoroughly embedded in the high-magic world of Eberron.

Indeed, the section immediately following the rules for the artificer are all about a new way to get your entire campaign tied neatly into the game world, with a dozen or so ideas for patrons that could lead – or force – the party into adventure. This is a wonderful set of concepts, many of which turn the old "you meet in a tavern" idea firmly on its head.

While there's plenty of room for traditional adventuring parties, *Rising from the Last War* also set out plans for playing as a band of roving tabloid reporters, a squad of crime-busting investigators or a team of spies. It's hard to guess how many of the ideas would play out in a long-term campaign, but every single one of them provides a jolt of inspiration squarely to the part of the brain that plans adventures.

The weakest part of the entire book might actually be the parts that look to explain and explore the nitty-gritty details of Eberron itself. Part of this is the inevitable dry tone, and part of it is a rather boring layout. If you want to bone up on the politics of the world you need to plough through 50 pages of mostly plain text that feels like more of a primer for returning players than something made for newcomers.

Behind this, however, you'll find a truly exciting world that can bring incredible flavour to your D&D table. It's not quite the classic dungeon-crawling heroism that most newcomers expect from the game, but if you're after something new it's hard to beat.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

An absolute delight of a setting that comes with a slice of new rules that you can drop into any world you feel like. Just be prepared for a lot of reading.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... GUILDMASTER'S GUIDE TO RAVNICA

If you liked the cosmopolitan, high-magic weirdness of Ravnica then Eberron is probably right up your street.





DALE OF MERCHANTS: COLLECTION

Deck building for all

Designer: Sami Laakso | **Artist:** Sami Laakso

20-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £40

In the kingdom of deck-building games, *Dominion* rules proudly, rarely being bothered by other pretenders to the throne. That isn't to say there aren't other worthy contenders, but through the test of time *Dominion* has remained the exemplar by which all deck-building games are measured. *Dale of Merchants*, originally released in 2015, may not have come to usurp *Dominion's* position, but it certainly offers an alternative for players who crave the smoothness of the latter's gameplay but are not entirely satisfied with its fairly pastiche theme.

Dale of Merchants is set in a world resembling Brian Jacques' *Redwall* novels, with anthropomorphized animals illustrated beautifully on the cards with a whimsical fairy-tale approach. Each deck has its own unique character that reflects the nature of the animal it belongs to. For example, the Black-Headed Gull focuses on filling opponents with junk cards, low-cost cards that saturate their deck, making it hard to draw cards with useful abilities and higher values. The Tasmanian Devil is very playful and likes to mess up other players' plans, making them discard cards or mixing up their decks, so it is harder to plan ahead.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 120 animalfolk cards
- Two wooden dice
- Clock
- 20 junk cards
- 27 deck selection cards
- 20 trap cards
- 55 character cards
- 42 specialty cards
- 32 dividers
- Market board
- 40 coins
- 40 tokens



There is a deck for every type of player. Those who are feeling a bit mischievous will find characters that have high levels of player interaction and take-that powers. While others who do not like confrontation and want a more pacifist game experience will be able to do that as well.

The gameplay will be familiar to anyone who has played deck-builders before. Players start with basic decks that include junk cards and animal cards from each set used in the game. They will buy more powerful cards from the market and during the course of the gameplay use their abilities – techniques – to eventually create stacks of cards in numerical order. The first player to place eight stacks of ascending value wins the game. The gameplay loop, although simple, is very satisfying and while some thinking and planning ahead is beneficial, players will not suffer from analysis-paralysis.

Dale of Merchants Collection acts as a standalone game and an expansion at the same time, introducing new animals to the game as well as adding a couple of mechanics and variants. These decks can be played completely on their own, but *Collection* also unites all previous games together, but in more ways than simply providing enough space for them in the same box.

On the gameplay level, it adds almost boundless replayability. The game varies not only based on the decks, but players can also pick from the large collection of characters, whose unique powers make the gameplay easier or harder. For an added layer of challenge, players can also include trap cards, that spice up the gameplay again. Each new element is more of a flavouring and doesn't overburden the core of the gameplay, keeping it swift and easy-flowing.

On a practical level, *Collection* includes everything to make set up and play as effortless as possible – from dividers to special cards that summarise qualities of all the decks ever released, including their ease and style of play. It makes the already gorgeous cards feel special, and the game a joy to take out and pack back in the box.

A lot of effort and thought has been put into making this collection inclusive, suitable for all types of players. Seasoned deck-building fans and newcomers alike will find something in the game that fits their play-styles. That together with adorable animal illustrations is why you should really consider adding this game to your collection.

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Dale of Merchants Collection does not stray too far from the establish deck-building format, but it does a great job at making sure that it's gameplay and artwork are appealing and memorable to players of all types and levels of experience.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... DOMINION

Dale of Merchants Collection has an elegant, swift gameplay reminiscent of *Dominion* but it's theming has more imagination.

ADVENTURE GAMES: MONOCHROME INC.

An engaging mystery whose puzzles are stronger than its plot

Designer: Matthew Dunstan, Phil Walker-Harding | **Artist:** Maximilian Schiller

90m | 1-4 | 14+ | £15

The growth of story-focused games has been one of the most fascinating developments in the tabletop hobby. From the intimate two-player improv of *Fog of Love* to the branching fantasy plotlines of *Legacy of Dragonholt* and the binge-worthily episodic *Pandemic Legacy*, a growing number of designers are experimenting with board games as a narrative medium.

The newly launched *Adventure Games* series is the latest addition to the bunch, and within a few minutes of getting it to the table it's clear that its co-creators must have spent a considerable chunk of the 1990s playing point-and-click adventure video games like *Broken Sword* and *Monkey Island*.

Like the revered PC titles, it sees players exploring mysterious environments, piecing together bits of information and attempting to solve a succession of puzzles to advance through an unfolding narrative, and it's impressive just how faithfully it replicates the experience in an analogue form. *Monochrome Inc.* – one of two standalone games released to kick off the series – casts players as a team of thieves and hackers engaged in a spot of futuristic corporate espionage, attempting to steal valuable secrets from a shady pharmaceutical company.

As you play, you'll reveal a collection of locations within the company's HQ, picking up an array of potentially useful items and trying to figure out how to use them to sneak your way into top-secret laboratories. In some cases it's pretty obvious: keys fit into locks, pilfered security passes override electronic entry systems. But others are less clear-cut; how are you supposed to overcome high-tech security measures using a length of rubber hose, a cigarette lighter and an empty soft drink can?

Working it our requires observation, logic and lateral thinking, and cracking each problem feels like a little triumph. As you sneak through the building you'll incrementally open up more of the environment, and there's a real sense of discovery as each new room brings you more information, with new characters to talk to and new clues to guide you through the deepening mystery.

This atmosphere of exploration is reminiscent of publisher Kosmos's other small-box series, *EXIT: The Game*, which attempts to recreate the experience of a real-life escape room. But where those games focused primarily on puzzle-solving, the new *Adventure Games* come with much more of an emphasis on plot. And for the most part, *Monochrome Inc.* makes a decent stab at presenting an engaging techno-thriller.

While its evil-corporation-vs-band-of-outlaws premise isn't exactly groundbreaking, it knowingly and lovingly embraces genre tropes. It lacks the deep characters and living setting of *Legacy of Dragonholt* – unsurprisingly as it's a much smaller game. But it compensates with puzzles which really draw players in to its air of mystery, contributing powerfully to the atmosphere around the table. It's a one-and-done adventure, and once you've run through it there's no point going back for another go. But with no legacy-style torn-up cards, you can always pass it on once you've finished. It's an intriguing start, and it'll be interesting to see how the series develops from here.

OWEN DUFFY

WE SAY

Monochrome Inc. stumbles in places, particularly with some clunky dialogue and characters who lack real personality. But it makes up for it with puzzles which tickle various bits of your brain. There's a sense of exploration as you steadily reveal more of its environment, and it also offers a compelling single-player experience, and its optional companion app streamlines things by saving you looking up chunks of text in the accompanying story book.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Story book
- 4 cardboard character standees
- Adventure cards
- Level cards
- Rulebook

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TIME STORIES

Like the time-travelling series, Adventure Games recreates the feel of classic point-and-click adventures. But where *TIME Stories* suffered from some clunky repetition, this latest take on the concept is a little more elegant.



LAST BASTION

Release your inner Leonidas

Designer: Antoine Bauza | **Artist:** Nastya Lehn, Piero

45m | 1-4 | 14+ | £40



Last Bastion is a re-work and a re-theme of *Ghost Stories*, a co-operative game beloved for its toughness. The former has a more modern aesthetic and its playtime is slightly less, however, the main principles of the game largely remains the same.

Set in a fantasy setting, players in *Last Bastion* are a group of eclectic heroes trying to defend their four-towered bastion from the horde of monsters assaulting it. The bastion is composed of a random three by three grid of tiles, each with their own unique ability that help heroes keep waves of enemies at bay. Each character also has a special power that is either a passive ability or activated as a bonus action. While that's plenty of power to throw at the enemy, players will need to take full advantage of all of it, because the monsters hit back just as hard – and they have the numbers.

In fact, as the game begins, it is easy to be lulled into a false sense of security. You feel all-powerful and are just about managing to dispatch monsters as soon as they come up. But as the horde of monsters grows around the bastion the first semblance of panic begins to set in. They also have special abilities: some are triggered when the cards are first added to the board, others have an ongoing effect and even with their last dying breath some monsters can send additional nastiness the players' way. One unlucky draw or ability that was not dealt with in time can cause a cascade that overruns the whole board. Suddenly, players find that their resources are too few and their own abilities, as powerful as they are, barely manage to dispense the most dangerous enemies.

Last Bastion is not a game players will likely win on their first try. In fact, it may be many games later that they will secure their first victory. As in any tough co-operative game, there are many ways to lose and only one to win – defeat the powerful warlord that appears towards the end of the game. Doing so will require tactical precision and preparation from players, where every move is meticulously planned, and every available resource accounted for.

This is slightly undermined by the dice combat, as the element of luck adds frustration to gameplay that is already tough. To kill monsters, players will need to roll the number of symbols matching the monster card or failing that, supplement it with resource tokens. The probability of rolling the colour you need is low, so having resources as back-up is always a good idea, yet they come in limited supply as well. Failing to defeat a monster essentially wastes players' turn, and when every move matters, this can be devastating.

In some ways, *Last Bastion* could be an entry-level game. Its rules are easy to learn, iconology is clear and the rule book (a big improvement on the *Ghost Stories*' rule book!) does a really good job of walking players through all the minutia. However, it requires the experience of seasoned co-operative players versed in their strategies and with well-oiled teamwork to win. It is easy to understand what you need to do in the game, but extremely hard to learn how to do it well.

In many ways, that is a positive for *Last Bastion*. Players will want to come back and try their luck at beating it, experimenting with character combinations and being more mindful of monster behaviours. However, sometimes the fight can feel tough, unfair and even impossible, discouraging players from returning. *Last Bastion* may not be a game for those who are looking to relax for an hour, but it welcomes those are ready for a challenge

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Last Bastion is one of the toughest cooperative games out there. To win it, one will need a robust plan of action, well-coordinated teamwork and just a bit of luck, a challenge that many will relish.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Nine bastion tiles
- Four enclosure tiles
- Four horde boards
- Eight hero boards
- Four colour bases
- Eight hero figurines
- 47 tokens
- Four combat dice
- Corruption dice
- 64 cards
- 3 equipment figures
- 15 Grasp of Evil figurines



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... GHOST STORIES

A modern remake of *Ghost Stories*, *Last Bastion* successfully recaptures its essence while being more approachable and offering a new theme.





MARVEL: CRISIS PROTOCOL

Like popcorn – enjoyable, if a bit bland

1-4 Hr | 1-5 | 14+ | £125

Designer: Will Shick | **Artist:** Carlos Cabrera

Crash! Zoom! Thock! Pow! As comic book adaptations continue to hold sway over popular culture, Atomic Mass Games have sought to enter the world of miniature gaming with the force of the Marvel IP behind them. The result is *Crisis Protocol*, a skirmish game that sees players assemble a team of 3-5 characters and duke it out in suitably epic fashion whilst pursuing various objectives like retrieving cosmic cube fragments or rescuing civilians.

The real meat of combat is the energy system. Each character accumulates energy tokens, which are spent to activate one of their special abilities or team tactics cards. A character only receives a single energy token per turn, which is rarely enough to afford a power on its own, so more have to be earnt either through special effects or through taking damage. At first glance it's a little counter-intuitive to imagine damage conferring anything but penalties on a character, but it arguably makes sense thematically, in that inexplicable way in which superheroes always seem at their most powerful after having several shades of shit kicked out of them. More to the point, it's the core mechanism by which combat remains varied and avoids becoming an I-hit-you-you-hit-me-back affair, and is one of the two gameplay features which stops the losing model from suffering cumulative disadvantages as a fight wears on. The other is the dazed mechanic, in essence a device for giving characters two lives. After taking a certain number of hits a model becomes dazed and can no longer activate that turn. However, their character card gets flipped and the following turn they're right back in the action, sometimes slightly weaker, but other times with buffs depending on the character in question. It's an innovative feature that allows characters to get back up swinging and – more crucially – prevents heroes getting one-punched out of the game.

Aside from this, the only other notable feature is the role terrain plays in the proceedings. Whilst there is a limited cover and line of sight system (often ignored anyway by the characters' various powers), terrain's real purpose is as a weapon in combat, either as something to be thrown or have figures thrown against. It's a fun and characterful feature, conjuring up images of the archetypal comic book battle in which heroes and villains throw debris and one another around the environment like rag dolls. Though it's slightly odd that of all environmental effects, fall damage isn't one, it's nonetheless undeniable fun bouncing a character off a wall or lamppost like a costumed pinball.

Much of the rest of the game is pretty standard fare. Turns use alternating activation, with each character being able to perform up to two actions each round. Some attacks confer statuses (things like bleed, stun and so forth) and movement and attacks are measured with custom range sticks of the kind you'd find in *Star Wars Legion*. None of it's revolutionary, so take that as you will. If you're looking for an entirely new approach to skirmish games you're going to be disappointed, but if you take a 'don't fix what ain't broke' attitude the basic mechanics will get you along just fine.

Besides the gameplay are the box's contents themselves. The game's hard plastic 40mm miniatures are larger in scale than standard figures such as those from Games Workshop, being obviously aimed at a more casual audience who may not be used to painting figures. Detail is crisp and the visuals are all appropriately on-brand, although assembly can be a bit finicky. One strange quirk of the box is that the rules are split between a physical rulebook and an online version; only in the latter will you be able to find the pre-game setup instructions, for example. Besides this, however, the box offers much more of a complete experience than many other miniatures games starter boxes. It's worth noting that a game of *Crisis Protocol* out of the box has the same qualitative feel as one where you'd purchased more miniatures. Compare this to the fact that for many miniatures games, especially wargames, starter sets often only give you a shallow taster of the game's mechanics.

Overall *Crisis Protocol* is best described as a solidly built game. The dazed and energy token mechanics are its most innovative features, whilst the rest of the gameplay is competently put together if not exactly groundbreaking. Undoubtedly fans of the IP are going to be the ones who'll get the most out of the game, though if you've got an evening to spare and even a passing interest in pretending to be a superhero you'll like as not have a good time.

JAMES WINSPEAR

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Black Widow
- Captain America
- Captain Marvel
- Iron Man
- Spider-Man
- Baron Zemo
- Crossbones
- Doctor Octopus
- Red Skull
- Ultron
- Nine terrain pieces
- 170 tokens
- 20 team tactics cards
- Three map cards
- Two affiliation cards
- Ten character stat cards
- Six crisis cards
- Three movement tools
- Four range tools
- 10 dice
- 16 Serious wound cards
- 20 Event cards
- 5 Help cards
- 8 Intruder weakness cards
- 8 Coordinates cards
- 120 Item cards
- 6 Character Draft cards
- 10 Intruder

WE SAY

A competent if fairly standard skirmish game, *Crisis Protocol* offers an entertaining way to see your favourite comic book characters duke it out on the tabletop for 90 minutes. It may not push the boat out much, but hey, how can taking out Red Skull by beaning him in the face with a trashcan not offer entertainment value?



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
RAGNAROK: HEAVY METAL COMBAT IN THE VIKING AGE

Forget the obvious link of Thor and Loki; this skirmish miniatures game sees mighty warriors infused with Godsparks (superpowers by any other name) duke it out amidst a fully destructible environment, and is worth a look if you want to play a superhero game where you get to design your own characters.

KUNG FU PANDA: THE BOARD GAME

We all know kung-fu

Designer: Nick Fallon, Rob Harris, James Sheahan, Kristian Amundsen Østby | **Artist:** JJ Ariosa, Michal E. Cross

10-30m | 2-4 | 8+ | £45

Kung Fu Panda: The Board Game is one of frantically rolling dice against the clock. While the box describes it as a cooperative game, it's cooperative in the way a bouncy castle is a team sport. You move your characters through each scene using dice rolls, spending and saving matching rolls against the task at hand. That could be a simple single movement roll to enter an open room, or matching harder rolls to break down a wall or climb on to a rooftop. You do all of this as fast as you can while a sand-timer trickles away. This speed can be your undoing of course, as rolling the claw symbol ends up moving your dial on one more segment, which in turn can trigger further enemy spawns or damage your hero. The way this all comes out on the board is a lot of shouting what you're trying to roll so that someone else doesn't aim for the same target, a loud clattering of dice, and snatching away defeated enemies from the board and placing new ones as they spawn.

It's a kind of chaotic, fun nonsense which ends up feeling like the more kinetic scenes of the films. This is reflected in board states are all set out for you nicely in the rule book, so a variety of authentic feeling missions can be tackled straight out of the box. Some are ingenious, like a scenario where you're taking part in a rickshaw chase in which the play area extends as the chase continues, while others do feel a little samey with repeated objectives from one mission to another.

The downside is that it does feel extremely light. This is in part to with some of the mission design – the missions can feel focused and linear, so there's not much in the way of making strategic choices together. There's little of the "we should split up" conflict you might expect, although a few of the missions include multiple switches that have to be hit to progress, or items that need to be moved to locations. Throwing switches and moving carts is something that can be done collaboratively however, meaning that often the best policy is to move room to room as a kind of kung fu blob, consuming everything in your wake.

All of this does provide some funny narrative elements however. Climbing on to the roof, finally, to find that your team has just beaten everyone and leapt into the next room does seem fitting considering the source. It does also feel good to come together as a team and defeat a boss against the odds, expressing a high amount of intention in a game with a lot of ricocheting about.

With a variety of modes available it's possible to make the game easier or harder depending on the group. The low barrier to entry in any case makes it ideal for mixed groups, making it a great family game. And who knew you could get a sweat on rolling so many dice?

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

If a light and chaotic afternoon where it only sometimes feels like you're working together suit you, and let's be honest, some younger members of your gaming circle – then this with whittle away the hours. Just don't expect to be playing campaigns in it for years to come.



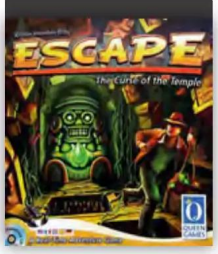
WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 6 Character figures
- 6 Character boards
- 2 Boss figures
- 28 Minion figures
- 20 Double-sided scene tiles
- 16 Action dice
- 12 Special move cards
- 4 Double sided dials of destiny
- 3 Enemy reference tiles
- 6 Spawn tokens
- 6 Wall tokens
- Coloured base clips



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ESCAPE THE CURSED TEMPLE

When it comes to real-time action dice games, this is where it all started.



YGGDRASIL CHRONICLES

Norse Mayhem Reaches New Heights

Designer: Cédric Lefebvre | **Artists:** Maëva da Silva, Christine Deschamps

90m | 1-5 | 14+ | £40

The time for Ragnorok is nigh. Fenrir is set to bound from his cage whilst other unyielding forces of evil descend upon the nine worlds. Together, the mighty norse gods of Asgard must prevail against the imminent onslaught and save Yggdrasil, the world tree.

Hot from Essen this year is Cédric Lefebvre's bold reimagining of 2011's much lauded but long out of print *Yggdrasil*. More than a fresh lick of paint, *Yggdrasil Chronicles* comes packed with new mechanics, campaign play and a gloriously imposing new look. Not content with merely transcending realms, publisher Ludonaute has opted to transcend dimensions, with gameplay bounding to life atop a new 3D board. Like a totem honouring the exciting world of modern board gaming, *Yggdrasil Chronicles*' World Tree stands tall and proud, its branches grasping out at inquisitive passers by and sprouting seeds of curiosity. It's certainly got our attention, but how does it play?



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 3D World Tree board
- 12 Enemy standees
- 7 God standees
- 44 Meeples
- 18 Artifact cards
- 18 Creature cards
- 18 Iotunn cards
- 7 Double sided god sheets
- 1 Wheel of Enemies
- 5 God dice
- 13 Vanir dice
- 3 Runic stone tokens
- 7 Devestated World markers
- 25 Life Point tokens
- 9 Promise tokens
- 4 Hel's Limb tiles
- 1 Pad of experience charts
- 1 Sagas Book



Yggdrasil Chronicles is a cooperative game for one to five players. As one of seven gods, each player will take turns in any order as they fight against evil forces invading the nine worlds of Yggdrasil. Turns will usually involve moving around the board and preventing certain enemies from either advancing too far up the tree or becoming too powerful. Being on the same world as an enemy offers the opportunity to fight and repel, but combat can be a dangerous business. If a god is ever reduced to zero health all players lose. Often players will make use of the various action spaces on each world, which can empower the gods with mighty artefacts, Elven warriors, or aid from brave heroes bound for Valhalla.

Turn-by-turn gameplay is dynamic and tactile, as standees and meeples flitter about the tree and its rotating mid section. It's thematic too, with each unique enemy activation cleverly evoking aspects of Norse lore. Loki, for example, appears out of nowhere on the active player's location, summoning Frost Giants to meddle throughout the nine worlds and increase his strength.

Yggdrasil Chronicles makes use of an innovative 'wheel' system to handle the encroaching evil forces. At the start of each turn all players will play the top card of their personal enemy deck to the centre of the wheel facedown. The chosen first player will then reveal their card and place it in the wheel's corresponding slot. Whenever two matching enemies appear on the wheel, that enemy will activate. If ever an enemy can't carry out it's action - either by invading Asgard or reaching their full strength - the game is lost, reducing Yggdrasil to ashes. There's a *Pandemic*-esque tension to this mechanism, relieved only by the appearance of Nidhogg, whose movements along the track in the game's saga book usually push the players ever closer to victory.

Nidhogg's movement also plays into the game's various modes. In an easy game, Nidhogg skips along the track without too many hiccups - perfect for getting a grasp on the rules - whereas hard mode has players dealing with multiple enemy activations as the game advances.

Making things even more interesting is the campaign mode. Stretching over six games made up of various 'steps', the campaign game lays out new win conditions which players must fulfil before Nidhogg comes to a punishing halt. Each chapter of the campaign also introduces new components and mechanics which helps keep things fresh whilst piling on the tension.

Whilst the game succeeds at providing a unique and challenging thematic experience, it is not without its faults. Setup can be a bit of a chore and there are some discrepancies between the quality of some of the design choices and components. At first glance the standees can look very similar, often getting lost in the midst of the busy 3D tree. Furthermore, the game relies on a fair amount of iconography meaning plenty of trips back to the rule book in early play-throughs. That aside, *Yggdrasil Chronicles* is a tense and explosive romp through Norse mythology, with enough clever mechanics and variety to keep its relatively short campaign ripe for repeat plays.

CHAD WILSON

WE SAY

Yggdrasil Chronicles admirably lives up to its table presence, offering a deeply involved and unique cooperative experience. Getting to grips with all the moving parts can be overwhelming at first - especially with the game's over reliance on symbols - but get stuck in and turns will soon zip by, giving *Yggdrasil Chronicles* a great sense of momentum.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PANDEMIC LEGACY

Its gripping campaign mode may not share the Legacy mechanics, but Yggdrasil Chronicles' edge of your seat tension and reliance on teamwork will appeal to fans of the cooperative classic, whilst still offering something new.

You will get your money's worth.
You're gonna play a lot of it!

Zee Garcia of The Dice Tower





cge.as/ufsi

Merry CHRISTMAS and GOOD GAMING from the CGE team

This game's fantastic. It is a breath of fresh air in both worker placement and resource management... and deckbuilding and card draft – it's everything really cool!

Dan King of Game Boy Geek



cge.as/ari



Czech Games Edition



NECROMUNDA: DARK UPRISING

Guts and glory?

Designer: Games Workshop design team | **Artist:** Games Workshop art team

60-180m | 2+ | 12+ | £175

Amidst the clanking machinery of the manufactorums, the soot-streaked back-alleys of the lower hives and the stinking sewers of the city's underbelly, something sinister is afoot. Hulking, savage cultists jibber and howl in service to fell powers as a full-scale rebellion breaks out. With typical ruthlessless, the Imperium responds with the long arm (or more aptly, fist) of the law, attempting to bringing order to the chaos through a rain of shotgun shells, bolter rounds and shock maul blows.

Thus is the setup for the latest expansion of Games Workshop's popular skirmish spinoff of *Warhammer 40,000*, and they've spared no expense in pulling out the stoppers. For many, the box's main draw will be the contents first and foremost, but it's worth spending some time looking at rulebook as well. A massive 124-page tome, the book spends considerable time establishing the lore of the uprising, in particular the new faction the box introduces – the brutal Corpse Grinder Cult.

It's with the Corpse Grinder Cults that the biggest complaint lies. Former workers from Necromunda's corpse recycling industry, the Corpsegrinders are cannibalistic maniacs in service to the Chaos God Khorne (the lord of bloodshed and war), who's sole aim is killing and consuming others. Though the Warhammer 40,000 universe has always defined itself by its famous 'Grimdark' tone, the fluff for the faction comes across as being in poor taste (no pun intended). It is not particularly pleasant to read endless accounts of victims both alive and dead being torn apart into bloody chunks, and the vivid prose often pushes descriptions to pornographic excess. It may seem arbitrary to draw a line in a setting focused on mass conflict, but the tone is a marked departure from the slightly tongue-in-cheek approach *Warhammer 40,000* has taken to violence in the past, and not for the better.

The rules themselves are broken down into several chapters, covering basic principles of play, game rules, campaign play, scenarios, faction composition lists for the Enforcers and Corpse Grinder cults and weapon and skill lists. The rules themselves remain unchanged from the base *Necromunda* system and the campaigns and varied scenarios offer a meaty (again, no pun intended) amount of variety, though it's a singular shame that for a box of this size and price rules for the other *Necromunda* factions weren't included as well. Additionally, whilst the Enforcers have a large arsenal of tactical weaponry at their disposal, on occasions the Corpse Grinder cults feel comparatively limited, being focused squarely on melee only.

Finally there's the miniatures and scenery. In contrast to their vivid descriptions, the Corpse Grinder miniatures themselves are a rather bland affair, consisting of muscled behemoths in skull masks wielding chainsaw axes, a look that by now is pretty much de rigueur for the *Warhammer 40,000* setting. The Palanite Enforcers, by contrast, are an existing faction based on the old Adeptus Arbites miniatures, though they've swapped the barely concealed Judge Dredd knockoff look of their predecessors for a more 'tacti-cool' look with bulky ablative amour, grenades and weapon rails. Both sets of miniatures are up to the usual flawless Games Workshop standard, though the big hook is the vast amount of plastic modular scenery the game comes with. It's a truly massive amount, though there are times when you can't help but wonder whether cardboard might have been a more feasible option. Then again, from a certain cynical perspective, it seems that both Games Workshop and its core customer base have come to a tacit agreement that large amounts of plastic terrain are a best seller, and the core attraction of boxes like these.

Necromunda: Dark Uprising is one of those games most clearly aimed at existing Games Workshop fans, and it should always be borne in mind that there exists non-Games Workshops games of a comparable physical size and price that offer far more depth than what's offered here. If you're onboard with Games Workshop and *Necromunda* this'll likely be a blood-soaked wonder of plastic, though if you're new to the world of Warhammer it may be worth looking at other, cheaper starter sets to begin with.

JAMES WINSPEAR

WE SAY

A Games Workshop signature style plastic extravaganza, Dark Uprising is a super weighty expansion to *Necromunda* that'll appeal to fans of the setting, but whose price may prove too rich a meal to the unconverted.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Double-sided play surface
- Deck of 70 Game Cards
- Range Ruler
- 16 Necromunda Dice
- 15 Corpse Grinder miniatures
- 11 Palanite Enforcer/ Subjugator miniatures
- Six frames of Zone Mortalis columns
- Four frames of Zone Mortalis platforms
- Frame of Zone Mortalis doors
- Frame of Sector Mechanicus thermic plasma conduits
- Frame of Necromunda barricades and objectives

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... WARCRY

Another weighty Games Workshop box set, *Warcry* contains a comparable amount of miniatures and terrain to Dark Uprising, and offers a fast, tactical and satisfying fantasy conflict experience to boot.





ROAM

Lost in Arzium

Designer: Ryan Laukat | **Artists:** Ryan Laukat

40m | 2-4 | 8+ | £30

Ryan Laukat is a game designer who just wants you to explore. First, we were invited to go *Above and Below* in his colourful and attractive fantasy world of Arzium, and then *Near and Far*, before he tempted us to head off to *Islebound*. Now… Well, the clue is in the title. But despite the expansive, open-ended promise of Roam, this latest Laukat doesn't have the thematic breadth or depth of any of its Arzium-building predecessors. In fact, it is his most compact, and abstract, game yet.

The theme, such as it is, inflicts a sleeping sickness on the diverse residents of Arzium (goat-people, warthog-people, lizard-people, people-people), who now wander aimlessly around the land, somnambulantly performing quaintly strange little tasks, such as "building a restaurant near a sulfuric geyser" and "breaking priceless gems with a hammer." It is up to the players to head out into the wilderness, find them, and gently bring them back into reality.

Each sleepwalker is represented on the underside of a card, whose top-side depicts a fragment of landscape overlaid with a two-by-three grid. Six of these cards are randomly placed at the centre of the table, forming a larger six-by-six square grid. When one is claimed, by a player placing the majority of explore markers on the card, it is flipped to reveal the character, who then joins that player's starting three characters in the search, adding their special searching ability to the group and earning them victory points, which will be totted up after one player ends the game by building their team to 10.

Essentially, then, everyone is building an area-control-primed engine. Each character card depicts a specific configuration in which explore markers can be placed (without being rotated), turning each turn into a *Tetris*-esque puzzle, as you have to figure out the best placement – taking into account the other players' tokens – to both collect character cards and also pick up coins off the map (these can be spent to create more placement opportunities with certain configurations). It's not particularly complicated, and is a cinch to learn, but it does require a lot of thought and attention during play. This makes most games of *Roam* surprisingly silent and characterised by furrowed brows.

To add a little flavour, Laukat offers the option to include magic artefacts, which can be bought to gift your team with bonus powers, such as moving explore tokens on the map, or rotating a character's placement configuration. Our advice is to include these from the start, unless you're playing with younger children, as they mix things up in an interesting way.

If you're looking for another big, narrative-driven Laukat game, you might find *Roam*'s abstraction a little odd, perhaps even disappointing. But it is so rooted in his appealing, picture-book fantasy world, it will at least feel familiar and welcoming, rewarding his fans by packing its deck with characters from all his other titles. More importantly, its neat mechanisms make for an absorbing, thinky and rewarding little experience.

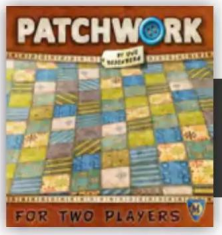
DAN JOLIN

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 43 Land/Character cards
- 12 Starting cards
- 24 Artifact tiles
- 96 Explore markers (24 in each of four colours)
- 36 Coin tokens
- 4 Player aid cards
- Outpost card

WE SAY

As long as you don't go in expecting another *Near and Far*, and embrace its abstraction, *Roam* is sure to please.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED… PATCHWORK

While you're putting down counters in patterns rather than tiles, *Roam* has a similar feel to Uwe Rosenberg's light, shape-arranging game in the way it makes you think hard about each placement.

AZUL: SUMMER PAVILION

Diamonds are a tile-layer's best friend

Designer: Michael Kiesling | **Artist:** Chris Quilliams

30-50m | 2-4 | 8+ | £35

Azul was Michael Kiesling's beautiful, million-selling and Spiel des Jahres-winning game of placing tiles to ornament the palace of Évora, and *Azul: Summer Pavilion* is the third part of the trilogy.

Trilogies have an interesting place in gaming: there aren't many successful ones, as hit titles have a habit of spawning spin-offs until they outstay their welcome, and one weak entry in the series can undermind the reputation of the others. Recently both *Century* and the *Western Kingdom* games have produced three cracking games, but perhaps the most respected is the *Masks* trilogy (*Tikal, Java* and *Mexica*) from twenty years ago, the first of which also won the Spiel des Jahres They were created by the legendary Wolfgang Kramer and his at-the-time protégé, a chap called Michael Kiesling.

He's got form in the area, is what I'm saying.

Though they're dressed up with a theme of decorating Portuguese palaces with intricate tile mosaics or stained glass, the Azul games are fundamentally abstracts, and *Summer Pavilion* is no exception. The structure of the game is largely unchanged: each turn you're still selecting a subset of tiles from one of the factory displays, and then using them to fill spaces on your board. But the boards and tiles are what's changed: instead of squares within squares we have interlocking flowery stars or starry flowers made of diamonds, and it is gorgeous. You thought the original was pretty? This leaves it in the dust.

The tiles aren't individually as nice but the cumulative effect, and the tactility of making patterns, combine in a glorious swirl of delight. Chris Quilliams' graphics work remains some of the finest in the field. And the new mechanics and systems are just as attractive and elegant.

Summer Pavilion has six colours of tiles, against the original's five, and over the game's six rounds they take turns to be the wild card, letting that colour stand in for any of the others. You're trying to fill as much of the seven stars on your board: they match the six tile colours with a seventh star in the middle, which must be completed with six different tiles.

The spaces between the stars are interesting too, because they give bonuses if you can surround them – extra tiles of your choice, which can be extremely valuable.

It's hard to fault any part of the gameplay. Everything is elegant and fits together, the strategies are intriguing, the length is perfectly satisfying for everything to come to an end and yet you feel the urge to try it again, and the physical production is so high that it demands to be played with.

If there is a fault, it's in the rules which could be better explained and laid out. I've noticed this problem with other Plan B games: they have some urge to fit everything onto a single (albeit large) sheet of paper, at the expense of clarity. An eight-page booklet would have given the text room to breathe a bit more. But there's always Youtube for explanations on how to play, and if you've tried either of the earlier *Azuls* then you'll recognise much of what's here.

That isn't to say it's the same game again. *Summer Pavilion* takes all that was good about *Azul* and reworks it into a greater game: more elegant, more intelligent, more engaging, a genuine improvement on a title that's already a classic. If you enjoy the original then I strongly recommend this, and if you've yet to try any of the series then it's a fine place to start.

JAMES WALLIS

WE SAY

More than just a remix, this is a reinvention of the original's systems to create a game that's familiar but demands a whole new set of strategies to succeed.













WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 4 Player boards
- 132 tiles in six colours
- 9 Factory displays
- Scoring board
- 5 Wooden markers
- Tower
- Cloth bag
- First-player marker

tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... SAGRADA

Well, *Azul* too obviously, but there's more than a thematic overlap between this and the game of making stained-glass windows from a selection of dice.





REAVERS OF MIDGARD

Welcome back to a broader, more dangerous Midgard

Designer: JB Howell | **Artist:** Yaroslav Radeckyi

1-2h | 2-4 | 14+ | £50

Reavers of Midgard sees Grey Fox Games storming back to the vibrant viking world established in 2015's acclaimed *Champions of Midgard*. Taking the key elements of worker placement and dice rolling from Ole Steiness' first game, and giving them a fresh twist, new designer JB Howell has ramped up the complexity and scope, to deliver an impressive blockbuster sequel.

As masters of battle scarred longships, players will traverse both sea and land seeking fame and riches. Your heroic crew will come and go as you face off against both man and beast in brutal sea battles, and plunder through the various villages and keeps across the land. There are territories to subdue and destinies to fulfil, all whilst building an admirable haul of pillaged treasure.

Whilst *Champions of Midgard* sat comfortably at the lighter end of worker placement games, alongside titles such as *Lords of Waterdeep* and *Stone Age*, *Reavers* elevates itself to somewhere between mid and heavyweight. Despite a total of only six action spaces to place a single worker each turn (two workers in the two player game), the game still manages to offer an often overwhelming level of choice. Add to that elements of set collection and engine building, *Reavers* quickly joins the ranks of other crunchy, weighty Euros.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Double sided game board
- 4 Player boards
- 66 Reaver Cards
- 62 Village Spoils Cards
- 76 Keep Spoils Cards
- 24 Sea Journey Cards
- 45 Sea Battle Cards
- 34 Prophecy Cards
- 2 Reference Cards
- Start player marker
- 4 Score trackers
- Round tracker
- 8 Longship pawns
- 1 Honor Ship token
- 15 Farm tokens
- 15 Wall tokens
- 15 Tower tokens
- 25 Favor tokens
- 40 Food tokens
- 14 Terror tokens
- 12 Ship Upgrade tiles
- 54 Conquered Territory tiles
- 60 Crew Dice
- 6 Combat Dice



This jump in scale is notable in the game's setting too, with the action departing from the small harbour town of *Champions* to *Reavers'* wider, more dangerous lands. Indeed, there are loftier goals to pursue here on your path to glory, exemplified by the game's generous wealth of choices and rewards. This generosity comes through in the sheer volume of riches players will receive throughout the game, with each turn regularly doling out dozens of cards and dice. Whilst overwhelming at first, this abundance quickly leads to a satisfying and evocative sense of progress.

The path to becoming a successful Reaver plays out largely through the use of dice and cards acquired through a neat spin on worker placement. Each round will see the starting player choose a space on the board with their longboat meeple, before taking that space's action and receiving a generous bonus. All other players have the option to take that same action, receiving sequentially lesser bonuses until the next player places their meeple and the process repeats. It's a great mechanism that reduces downtime and keeps everyone invested.

Action spaces typically dish out cards used for set collection, monster cards to fight, and Reaver cards to gain crew dice, alongside resources and end of round scoring territory tiles. Reaver cards are collected in pairs and immediately give players a specific number of coloured dice to roll. The results are placed on personal ship boards, ready to be spent on future action spaces or combat resolutions. The multi-use Reaver cards are then chosen to be either discarded for more dice, promoted to leaders for immediate bonuses and dice mitigation options, or added to players' 'engines' beneath their personal board, making actions more powerful.

Occasional splashes of theme come through in the form of Terror. These negative point scoring tokens are bestowed upon those feeling dastardly enough to pillage that little bit extra from villages. Of course, there's always the option to settle for less, but what aspirational Reaver would succumb to such timidity? Aside from this, the game's mechanics do little to truly justify the viking theme. Thankfully, the gorgeous artwork from Yaroslav Radeckyi brings Midgard to life upon the tabletop.

Reavers of Midgard proudly possesses that perfect combination of easy to learn but tough to master. Exciting and unexpected moments of intense decision making are regularly thrust upon players. Clear cut paths to victory are suddenly thrown off course, encouraging the pursuit of new ones or the interruption of an opponent's. It is this level of dynamism across the game's relatively swift six rounds that sets it apart from other similar sized but more gently paced Euros. Pair this with an enticing setting and a bright aesthetic often missing from Euro-style games, and you have a recipe for game-night success.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

Reavers of Midgard is a triumphant sequel, stepping up the complexity and strategic options whilst still remaining accessible to casual players. The exciting uncertainty of how your game-plan might play out, paired with how the game generously churns out cards, dice, and options without feeling bloated is a testament to its careful design.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... CHAMPIONS OF MIDGARD

If you're looking to venture into the heavier side of Euro games but don't fancy swapping your mighty warrior lifestyle for that of a Mediterranean trader, then *Reavers of Midgard* is a safe bet.

BABYLONIA

New theme, same Knizia

Designer: Reiner Knizia | **Artist:** Jonas Hassibi, David Prieto

1h | 2-4 | 14+ | £43

There aren't many designers that can be recognised by playing just a couple of rounds of their game, but *Babylonia* is unmistakably a Reiner Knizia's game from turn one. Its tile laying, area-control and pattern recognition mechanics have been perfected through games of *Samurai*, *Through the Desert*, *Tigris and Euphrates* and others, coalescing in the elegant, if somewhat familiar, gameplay of *Babylonia*.

Players are transported into southern Mesopotamia in the period of expanding irrigational systems that brought prosperity in trade and flourishing of urban life. The game is still predominantly abstract in nature, but the Western Asian setting adds its own distinct flair in ziggurat temple tokens and the map of Babylonia, impressive in both size and looks.

Each turn, players will be placing some of their wooden tokens next to ziggurats, towns or crop fields, each of which will help them score victory points in different ways. Again, in true Reiner Knizia tradition, playing *Babylonia* is easy: chose either noble or peasant tokens, decide between three types of locations on the map and then score if possible. However, succeeding in *Babylonia* will take some finesse: players will need to be good at recognising patterns, spotting the most lucrative spots on the board and take advantage of ziggurats, which grant special powers to those who have control of them. There is a certain element of luck as players draw their tokens blindly from the supply, but there is always ample opportunity to turn any hand dealt into a move that will yield results later in the game.

Almost everything in *Babylonia* is balanced to near perfection. The game flows quickly but gives enough to puzzle with, engaging all players completely each turn. There is plenty of player interaction, but it never feels forced as they naturally gravitate to compete for high-earning spots on the map. Components are simple, yet effective, generating a visually impressive smorgasbord of symbols, colours and token types on the board at the end of the game. The only misstep is the player-token stands which are meant to hold – yet never do – the tokens upright, hidden from opponents.

Yet among all the praise there lingers a concern: has *Babylonia* done enough differently to set itself aside from its distinguished predecessors, like *Tigris and Euphrates* and *Through the Desert*? Unfortunately, it has not. Its mechanics are not the exact replication of the previous Knizia's titles with new stripes, but it satisfies the same game need as previous titles and in much the same way. Those who love clever area control games and pattern-building will rejoice in what *Babylonia* has to offer, but equally, they can play *Through the Desert* instead and get the same gameplay fulfilment.

Babylonia is a great recommendation for two groups of people: the fans of this prolific game designer, who will never tire of his snappy brain-scratchy abstract gameplay and those who never played a Knizia game before. For newcomers, *Babylonia* is a perfect board gaming sampler with flavours of challenges, puzzles, luck and strategy mixed together perfectly. It is a high bar for any board game to reach and a rare designer can boast having several under their belt.

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Babylonia will not bring any surprises to players who are familiar with other games in the repertoire of Reiner Knizia, but for the first-timers, this game is a perfect introduction.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Board
- 32 Location tiles
- 9 Ziggurat cards
- 120 Clan tokens
- 4 Stands
- 5 Ziggurats
- 4 Scoring markers

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... THROUGH THE DESERT

Babylonia has ziggurats and tiles and *Through the Desert* has candy-like camels and oases, but in terms of gameplay they have a lot in common. In both games, players are puzzling out patterns to control areas of the board to score the most points.





ANKH'OR

Life is bazaar

Designer: Frank Crittin, Grégoire Largey, Sébastien Pauchon | **Artist:** Gaël Lannurien

30m | 2-4 | 10+ | £18

Pleasing two-player games that feel as if they have been actually designed for two people are rare and valuable gems. It can often feel like many games are aimed at larger groups (or rather, foursomes, truth be told) and when they are played with less it feels a bit too roomy on the board, too plentiful in resources, and too much like a reminder that it's really hard to get friends together these days isn't it?

Thankfully, Sébastien Pauchon, the creator of market-trading hit *Jaipur*, is here (with two friends, ironically) to give us twosomes something to spend our tabletop time doing. *Ankh'or* is a similar market game to *Jaipur* in that you're making trades with an automatic market, providing speedy, quick play across or around the table. The lovely, replayable, smart thing here is the use of the price markers. There is a central fold-out board with small holes for price tokens to randomly be slotted into. What this does is randomize the market each game, making every time you play feel different. This might sound minor but it's a central pleasure of the game. In one game you might need to pay two charcoal for something, whereas in others you may only need one, but with something else – making charcoal a safer bet to pick up from the resources pile.

Picking up from the resource pile is a tough choice in itself. You can only hold three resources in your hand at the end of your turn, and the most expensive item will take three tokens as outlined in the wonderfully readable marketplace.

But what are we buying from the market? Being set in some kind of genericised ancient Egypt, then it's usually a scarab, some kind of dog statue, a bird statue, a scribe (who gives you a bonus turn) or, er, a desert. Really it doesn't matter though. They're all lovely looking and once you have one, you play it in front of you. Add more to it, matching colours and types for points at the end. Interestingly you can stack another tile on top where four tiles meet, meaning the puzzle of points in front of you becomes a little 3D. In that, there's a matching game that feel reminiscent of smartphone games without the feeling of losing your mind.

The titular ankh tokens are used to take control of the board. This refreshes the market and removes the first item, shuffling everything down and dealing new items in. This means you can ruin your opponent's plans to buy a certain item with the tokens they're holding, and move items you want to cheaper slots. As a game of timing and matching, this taking control is a simple mechanism that brings a great depth to the game.

Between two players the game offers a really nice back and forth, and the speed of the games at 30 minutes (although, it can be a lot quicker when you're in a flow) makes for games with swings that can then be forgotten about in the next board set up. This lightness makes it perfect for a quiet night in, and it will be, with the slightly 'thinky' elements of the games' strategy sometimes reducing chatter.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

Ankh'or is an almost perfect two-player game, only slightly diminished by the fact that the game can be a little quiet across the table. But then, maybe that's what makes it great for company you can be quiet in.





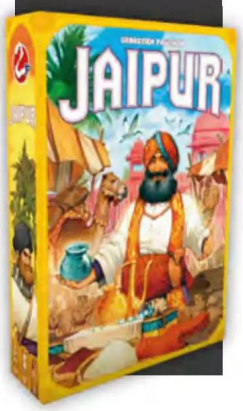


WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- Price Board
- 15 Price markers
- 36 Tokens
- 12 Bonus tokens
- 55 Tiles

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... JAIPUR

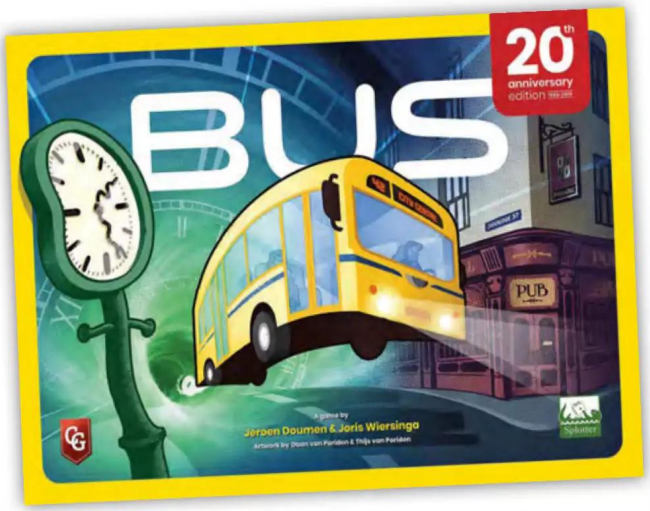
The wildly popular market trading board game has a new companion on your shelf.



BUS

Designer: Jeroen Doumen, Joris Wiersinga | **Artist:** Daan van Paridon, Thijs van Paridon

2h | 3-5 | 12+ | £85



To most gamers the name Splotter Spellen may mean nothing. It's a boutique games company from the Netherlands, with a reputation for brain-burning games, 22 years of history and 25 published titles, many of them long out of print. But it's also responsible for *Food Chain Magnate*, currently the 27th-highest rated game on BoardGameGeek, and that's brought a bunch of new fans to their table.

Bus is one of those earlier Splotter titles. Originally from 1999, this is a 20th-anniversary release, with new graphics (thankfully – Splotter games are notorious for their idiosyncratic art) but unchanged rules.

It's a game about building and running rival bus companies in a rapidly expanding town whose population rotate between their homes, their offices and the numerous pubs. Also there's a time machine which can pause that cycle but if overused will blow up and end the game. Oh yes.

The game itself is sort-of worker placement, as you build up your routes in a sort-of *Catan*-like way but with more double-deckers. Each player only gets twenty actions in the whole game, and you only score points by actually transporting passengers on your buses, and that sounds like it should be a recipe for a few minutes of untaxing fun. The map's not complex. There are very few rules exceptions. How hard can this be?

You read the rules, and almost every paragraph has something to make you go, 'Oh that's clever – a little fiddly, but clever.' And then you get the required three to five players round a table and start, and in a couple of turns your brain is on fire, and will stay that way for a couple of hours. This is a game that takes no prisoners. It demands concentration, and rewards it.

It's not for everyone, particularly not at that price, but if brain-burners are your thing then *Bus* will take you where you want to go.

JAMES WALLIS

THE AQUICORN COVE BOARD GAME

Designer: Tom Ben Eisner, Tim Eisner, Steve Ellis, Tyler Tinsley | **Artist:** Katie O'Neill

30-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £34

Katie O'Neill's insatiably charming graphic novels first transitioned to the tabletop world as the family-friendly deck-builder, *The Tea Dragon Society Card Game*. The second venture inspired by her works, *The Aquicorn Cove Board Game* focuses on the same audience and keeps Katie's signature the too-adorable-to-handle art style, but digs much deeper, both in gameplay and its theme.

In this co-operative board game, players take the role of one of the characters from the graphic novel as they build a small fishing village next to a cove of Aquicorns, benevolent reef guardians. The game is split into phases, during which players fish, plant crops, feed the village, build and generate income. Each round can be aided by the Aquicorns or hindered by the weather conditions, especially during the winter season!

There is no victory-point-pat on the back from feeding the whole village or bonuses for the most buildings constructed because this isn't what *The Aquicorn Cove Board Game* is about. In fact, there is no 'winning the game' in the traditional sense. The main focus of the game is on the delicate balance between the growing industry of the village and the natural world around it.

If players catch two of the same kinds of fish it leads to overfishing. This decreases the variety of fish, making it easier to overfish and harder to feed the village in the future rounds. Performing certain tasks will cause pollution to the cove, which, if uncleaned, will once again make it harder to sustain the village in the future.

This gently presented cycle teaches in a simple, yet incredibly effective and entertaining way, that nature's resources should not be taken for granted – we rely on its resources to survive and prosper, but we can't keep taking and never giving back as it will only lead to our own demise. Players succeed in *The Aquicorn Cove Board* Game by understanding their impact on the environment and maintaining the balance, resulting in prosperity for the village and in nature.



ALEX SONECHKINA



ZOMBIE KIDZ: EVOLUTION

The kidz are alright

15m | 2-4 | 7+ | £20

Designer: Annick Lobet | **Artist:** Nikao

First released in 2013, *Zombie Kidz* has been around in some form for a little while. This version, *Zombie Kidz Evolution* is an attempt to bring legacy style gameplay to the seven-and-up bracket – and all in 15 minutes of gameplay.

For those unfamiliar, the game is about a group of Nickelodeonish looking cartoon children attempting to secure their school from the onslaught of the living dead. Why do the zombies want to get into the school? Brains, of course. These shuffling zombies spawn into each room after the roll of the die which contains one, merciful, blank side. Conflict is resolved by simply being in the room with a zombie – although you can't clear and move. Once you've cleared zombies from the outer gates, you can put a lock on it, which will stop the advancement of the vitality-disadvantaged. Lock down all four before you run out of zombies in the supply and you've won. Run out of zombies and you lose.

Simple stuff then, with a lot of good lessons about teamwork. The legacy element comes in with an ingenious 'passport' that the owner of the game should be carefully filling in as they play. They're incentivized to do this by the missions, which include playing at different group numbers, or with rules modifications – and even more importantly a brain sticker to the back of the passport. When enough games have been played a new envelope can be opened which contains... more stickers. They're not just any kind of sticker though: they slot into the passport-cum-rulebook and provide modifications to the way the game is played. This can be in the form of new powers for heroes, and rules like rolling multiple times on your turn, causing more zombies to appear. The videogame-style 'achievements' system is the beating heart of the experience. It's hard to argue that opening a secret package is anything other than a direct pleasure, its one of the things that people cite as a joy *Gloomhaven*, and it's equally as valid here, even if there's a lot less plastic.

Later envelopes contain some really wild modifications, and in four player games, by the end, you'll all have to work really hard to keep the zombies completely under control. And that is to say, the game is in no way easy. While the age bracket and simple rules are easy to grasp, it requires fully integrating all of the rules and powers you've unlocked into your playstyle. This leads us to the main criticism, which is that the central dice rolling mechanic can feel a bit unfair to some players, and leave them a bit cold when they roll the game into an unwinnable scenario. It's usually a lack of caution which leads to these situations, but it doesn't necessarily feel like that.

For the most part though, the game is one about solving the board together. It can feel great to look at a board that you think you're about to lose the game to, before another player smartly clicks together all the mechanics in their head and explains exactly what you have to do to survive. While not complex, the fun of opening the secret envelopes makes for a hugely engaging and replayable game.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

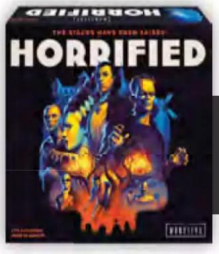
WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- Double-sided game board
- Zombie dice
- 4 Hero tokens
- 8 Plastic standees
- 13 Sealed Evolution envelopes
- Rulebook/passport



WE SAY

A light legacy game for kids that, just like in a real zombie apocalypse, requires everyone around the table to work together to survive.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... HORRIFIED

When it comes to family based area and monster management games, *Horrified* feels like the next natural step on from *Zombie Kidz: Evolution* – although without the legacy element.



GENESYS: EXPANDED PLAYERS' GUIDE

More More More!

Designer: Fantasy Flight Games

112 | 13+ | £28

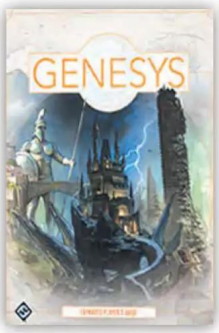
A big part of the appeal of setting-free RPGs lies in their flexibility, and while Genesys has always had a solid base of options to play around with, the *Expanded Players' Guide* doubles down on the scope of games in almost every direction imaginable.

Where previous supplements for the generic RPG have focussed on specific worlds or genres, such as cyberpunk and swords n' sorcery fantasy, this latest book proudly embraces its amorphous heritage. The result isn't instantly exciting in the way a more focussed product might be, but within its modest page count you'll find dozens of little ways to spice up adventures and build new worlds.

For example, when you're just skimming through the rules a lengthy section on how to brew up vehicles may seem a little dry and plodding. However, as you flick through the examples it's hard not to be struck by the wealth of possibilities it brings.

With just a little bit of work you can use the systems to drum up an anime-inspired mecha campaign where heroic pilots batter monstrous foes with giant robots. If you're feeling a little less fantastical you could just as easily conjure up tanks and zeppelins for WW1-era pulp heroics.

Honestly, if you wanted to you could easily just skip over the details for making vehicles on your own and simply fiddle about with the 30-ish sample creations listed in the book. They span everything from war chariots to interstellar cruisers, so there's a good chance that something close to whatever weird airship you feel like grabbing in in there somewhere.



The same could probably be said of the section on building NPCs for players to battle and buddy up with, which focus less on creating creatures from scratch and more on tossing something together from templates. Again, very few of the entries are exciting on their own, but though sticking the 'mage' skill package onto a 'smart person' base doesn't sound exciting it's a lightning fast way to brew up an adversary for your party.

Of course, the GMs aren't the only one to get new goodies to play with in the *Expanded Players' Guide* – which isn't too surprising considering the name. These include some expanded rules for spellcasting and options for social combat, but most of the exciting new stuff is tied to the handful of new settings sketched out in the book.

These include rules for playing around in a *Fallout*-esque post-apocalypse and a mythical age of heroism, complete with options for demigods as player characters, but perhaps the most intriguing of the trio is the so-called "Monster World."

This slightly hand-waved name stands in for creating worlds of gothic and pulp horror – think *Dracula* through to *Underworld*. The ideas it throws about aren't just a great source of dumb fun, but also offer a slightly darker, more dangerous approach to the game.

Within just a dozen pages the *Expanded Players' Guide* offers up ideas for a truly exciting campaign that would have been tricky to cobble together without the new options and items it brings to the table. There's still plenty of flexibility, but it makes it incredibly easy to toss together a game about stalking the streets of Victorian London in search of werewolves, or raiding the lightning-warped castles of mad scientists.

Of course, none of this is particularly original stuff, and perhaps the book's greatest weakness lies in the fact that it doesn't really offer much that you couldn't already hack together with a bit of time and effort. There are rules in the corebook for bodging together monsters and none of the settings are beyond the imagination of a dedicated homebrewer.

However, it would be foolish to ignore the amount of time and effort you can save by simply letting the designers do the work for you – and probably in a slightly cleaner fashion than most of us would manage at home.

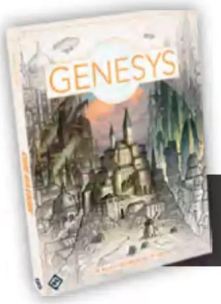
Ultimately, perhaps the greatest recommendation for the *Expanded Players' Guide* lies in the simple fact that it inspired me to start filling up notebooks with ideas for a half-dozen different campaigns. It's debatable whether any of them will get off the ground, but that is both the blessing and the curse of a system as wonderful flexible as *Genesys*.

If you already own the corebook and feel like growing your game, the *Expanded Players' Guide* should be an easy purchase.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

More ideas, more rules, more fuel for your imagination. Everything you want from an (admittedly generic) expansion.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... GENESYS

It's not the most inspired choice, but if you are a big fan of the base game there are few better ways to expand your options.

TRIAL OF THE TEMPLES

Designer: Wei-Min Ling, Michael Mihealsick | **Artist:** Maisherly Chan | Publisher: EmperorS4

30-60m | 2-4 | 14+ | £32

The art in *Trial of the Temples* puts you in mind of a generic MMO, a mishmash of mythology and sci-fi that amounts to "pyramids, but more space". Some may like this, but for me it was a warning that the contents might also be a little directionless.





But quite the opposite is true, even if the direction it goes in is around in circles. The game is played on a circular board with randomly placed tiles around the edge. A number of these are flipped to day or night side, depending on the round tile drawn. You then place your arch-mage to claim what is on the tile, and to the left and right of you until you meet another barrier or player.

This is the essence of the game then; slicing the pie of resources in a way that allows you to take everything you need to make moves around the inner tracks. These each ask for a cost to move onto them, although you can skip ahead if someone is on the tile ahead of you. While all this is happening, you're building up a spell board of extra powers, giving you an engine of bonuses in resources. Your mana here also allows you to carry out some other generative actions. Get three or four spells in a row (but they can't be placed, sudoku style, in rows with the same colour) and you get some bonus points at the end. Oh, and you have to spend an action point to initiate a move on the board. It sounds bonkers, but it flows effortlessly.

This makes for a surprising set of choices for players – do you want to greedily go for everything you can, and hope other players don't block the vital resource, or will you slice it close to a barrier so as to secure that item, making it not worth another player placing between? Can you risk moving ahead of your opponent if they're then able to leapfrog you to victory?

For a light resource management game, there's a lot of back and forth over the table. It's worth an afternoon even if the styling of the game might leave you cold.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

THE FOX IN THE FOREST DUET

Designer: Joshua Buergel/Foxtrot Games | **Artist:** Roanna Peroz

30m | 2 | 10+ | £15



Attention games publishers: if you're going to call two-player versus games 'duel' and two-player co-op games 'duet,' can you stop using foofy fantasy fonts for your logos? It's confusing. Thank you.

The original *Fox in the Forest* was a well-liked 2017 two-player trick-taking game with a small custom deck of cards and a loose fairytale theme. The new one adds a board and a different frame: you're walking along a path in the woods picking up gems, but the cards tell you how far and which direction you move because of reasons.

The main gameplay is around the cards and the tricks. There are three suits, one of which is trumps, and each card also has some paw-prints on it. If you win the trick you move the player-marker on the board towards you the combined total of the two cards' paw-prints, and pick up a gem on that space.



If you can clear the board in three rounds (each of 11 tricks), you win. If you don't, or go off the end of the board too many times, you lose. And some cards have special – usually optional – powers that let you change direction, trump suit, distance to move, and stuff.

The card illustrations are gorgeous. Drink in the artwork, because that's as far as the game engages with its fairytale theme. Beyond that it's a strategic, clever but very dry exercise in trying to move in very precise ways without talking to your partner. Because that's the other thing: you can't talk about cards, rules or tactics while you're playing, and that turns it into a cut-down version of *The Mind*, which does it no favours.

If you enjoyed *The Fox in the Forest*, there's enough new gameplay in here to make it worth a go. If you never tried it, start with the original. And if you're intrigued by the foxes and the fairytale, look elsewhere or risk disappointment.

JAMES WALLIS

TERRAMARA

Bronze place, but not third rate

Designer: Acchittocca | **Artist:** Michael Menzel

2h | 2-4 | 12+ | £49

You don't get much more Eurogame than this. One huge board, which is variable and flips at the end of each turn. Three different tracks to manage, which all allow you different access points along the way. A way to do some light engine building in your own personal village. Four different kinds of meeples, and then some other ones you can hire for a bit. And all of this? In service of victory points, of course. One in our group described it as playing a gateway game like *Carcassonne* with all of the expansions from the start.

And yet... it was great. Not one of us, even those of us who had made the above comments, finished the game without thinking of exactly what they'd like to do next time. This is *Terramara*, a game about being a bronze age chieftain along the river Po who gets to be the boss of everyone if they get the most victory points. Or something; it really doesn't matter once you're into it. There are three tracks: culture (giving you a range of artifacts you can buy), trade (which gives immediate benefits), and military (lets you bully people into using their space). All of these are races, but each allows you to place your workers on the main board in particular places. Your worker placement options will be somewhat randomized each game, with multiple tiles that can be slotted into the windowpane of 12 letterboxed shapes.

Time passes with each turn, with tiles flipping for the level you're on and everyone gets their workers back from that tile. This make commitment to a better reward or effect from a further land a tricky choice. Do you want to commit heavily now for a number of resources or additional movement on track in exchange for not getting your explorer back until a later turn, or never? It creates an interesting and uncomfortable set of choices to make, as the benefits might be good for the short term but give you less manpower going forward.

This commitment risk also speeds up play, meaning there is a sense of momentum as turns become shorter with players throwing more of their workforce into higher yielding locations. Because only two explorers can be at any location – and not of mixed type unless you have greater military strength – it's important to either secure the furthest lands or be prepared for war. And this is where we get into some of the weaknesses of the game. The military track can seem low value as it's the only one which is spent when used for actions like raiding or muscling in on other's territory. The other tracks yield points and can be managed more directly, although looking after two caravans which affect where you can place on later boards can see players annoyed with their initial urges to race ahead. These caravans allow you to activate other victory conditions such as the numer of cards collected of a certain type, or placement on the river. For some this is a fun way to unlock more ways to win the game as you play, for others, it's all a bit arbitrary. It is a complex game, and while the rules are clear, there are simply so many that all interact with one another that newer players will be initially overwhelmed.

But that's the best bit. It is a game that doesn't feel solved the first time you play it. There will be a different set up each time you play the game, meaning you'll need to relearn it, and each new combination of players sees wildly different tactics being implemented. You can't win every race in the game, so choosing where to put your efforts is key. Find the right group, and *Terramara* might become one of your favorites – but it will scare off everyone else.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

Assuming you know you're in for a long game *Terramara* is a powerful distillation of what makes Euros fun. It's complex, unwieldy, and wonderful when you get it just right.



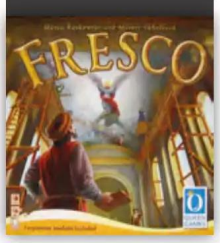
WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- Game board
- 24 Territory tiles
- 4 Homeland tiles
- 16 Flag tokens
- 4 Military meeples
- 4 Canoe meeples
- 8 Caravan meeples
- 4 Chieftain meeples
- 24 Explorer meeples
- 7 Character cards
- 17 Worker tokens
- 18 Bonus tiles
- 52 Artifact cards
- 64 Resource titles



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... FRESCO

Fresco is a game all about ensuring your lazy assistants don't leave you, and makes for heavy euro fun.





HOMEBREWERS

Two hobbies make for a joyful brew

Designer: Matthew O'Malley, Ben Rosset | **Artist:** SaRae Henderson, Adam Rebottaro

45-60m | 2-5 | 14+ | £39

Homebrewers are a community of artisan spirit crafters, built on competition and experimentation, but also a mug full of comradery. *Homebrewers*, the board game, has managed to represent the spirit of this community without spilling a drop.

It has a healthy dose of competition as players are brewing stouts, ales, porters and IPAs to climb up the prestige rankings, collecting rewards and victory points along the way. Yet, there is also the spirit of sharing and helping, as players also get to exchange dice to get the most out of their actions each turn. Brewing is at the heart of everything the players do, whether that's through keeping their equipment clean and ready, or by throwing a mad mixture of sweet, savoury and fruity flavours into a still to see what happens.

Action dice determine everything a player can do in a turn. While there is always the luck of the roll in play, it never feels restricting as players have numerous ways to manipulate the outcomes of the dice to get to the result they need. For example, spending money to switch to a more useful dice side or a free re-roll if the first try yielded the same result on all dice.

However, the main mechanic is the trade between players themselves. Competition in *Homebrewers* is created through decisions players make and not from the scarcity of resources or limited spaces on the game board. While all players want to climb up to the top of the rankings, refusing to trade with someone for an action as a means of denying them progress within the game doesn't work. A trade is always mutually beneficial – a player getting rid of an action that is not useful for them this turn for one that is, and vice versa. Having played many games, where players race to get that one good spot on the board or collect a resource before someone else snatches them from right under your nose, *Homebrewers*' built-in generosity is very pleasantly refreshing.

However, players can still get ahead by using their ingredient cards wisely. Once a flavour has been added to a recipe, it will start the game engine that generates a specific benefit each time it is brewed. The more ingredients one recipe has – the better the eventual pay-off. However, there are various mechanics in the game that encourage a variety in alcohol types and flavours, like bonus point cards and intermediate scoring turns.

Joyful to play, *Homebrewers* is equally so in looks and components. Especially delightful are the player tokens in different shapes of beer glasses, one type for each colour. *Homebrewers* has the standard myriad of fiddly cardboard components. The upside of this, however, is that extra pieces increase replayability and spice up the game with new challenges, making it slightly different to play each time.

Everyone from a brewing aficionado to someone who has never had a sip of alcohol in their life will find *Homebrewers* a delight. While ales and IPAs play an important part in the game, at its heart *Homebrewers* celebrates a community of people from the same hobby, who want to share it, make it better and learn, all while having fun. As board gamers, we can definitely relate!

ALEX SONECHKINA

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game Board
- Medal tile
- 7 garage boards
- 7 character cards
- Start player token
- 20 Wooden player pieces
- 5 Wooden score trackers
- 5 Player power tokens
- 16 Action dice
- 10 Charlies' cards
- 52 Money tokens
- 40 grain tokens
- 54 flavour cards
- 12 quality track tiles
- 8 Event tiles
- 11 Judging category tiles
- 5 sanitisation tiles
- 5 reminder cards

WE SAY

It is rare to find the game that has exciting competition, while also encouraging players to share and help each other. *Homebrewers* took these seemingly unfitting ingredients and mix them into a deliciously fun brew.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PIONEER DAYS

When you rely on the luck of the dice for your actions, it can feel pretty unfair at times. However, both *Homebrewers* and *Pioneer Days* figured out how to utilise dice action mechanic, while giving players options to manipulate the outcomes through strategy, rather than luck.

RUN, FIGHT OR DIE: RELOADED

Well hello Mr. Fancy Pants

Designer: Richard Launius | **Artist:** Ryan James

20-40m | 1-4 | 10+ | £50

tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

Perhaps what makes the humble zombie such an enduring monster is his inevitability; no matter how many you kill, they'll always be more behind him shambling relentlessly forward. *Run, Fight or Die: Reloaded* attempts to capture this with frantic, fast-pasted action that sees players fending off never-ending waves of undead hordes. A reboot of 2014's *Run, Fight or Die!* from Greyfox Games, Reloaded brings a streamlined rules system and a more cartoony art style. Having not played the original title, I can only judge the game on its own merits, though the basic premise remains the same between both.

At its core *Run, Fight or Die* is about taking calculated risks and allocating resources. Each player gets a board divided into three areas representing distances from the survivor; zombies that make it to the player's character do a single wound each. During their turn the player rolls six d6s with different results on each side. The undead die spawns a zombie, a baseball bat kills two in the nearest zone and a gun kills one in any zone. A run shifts zombies back a pace, and players can shunt them onto another player's board if they're on the furthest zone. Loot results let players draw follower or item cards, whilst maps force players to draw a new location. Depending on how many map results are rolled, a new location will confer a negative or positive effect, or both. A player can make up to two rerolls per turn, except for zombie dice, and at the end of a turn all zombies will shuffle up one zone. Players may also accidentally unleash the mutant zombie, who'll generally make life more difficult. A game ends when one player dies, the mutant zombie reaches the bottom of his hit point pool or when the Town Line card is drawn from the location deck.

This, in a nutshell, is the game, and it can be picked up within the space of five minutes. It's clearly been made for lovers of the zombie genre, and it takes every opportunity it can to reuse the old familiar tropes with bare-faced glee. The characters are all iterations of stock archetypes – the grizzled army vet, the prom queen, the sexy ex-cop – whilst many of the cards and tokens pay overt homage to *The Evil Dead* films.

Where *Run, Fight or Die* occasionally stumbles is in its execution. As simple as the rules are, a number of omissions and ambiguities leave them feeling slightly slapdash at times. It's not clear, for example, how character special effects that show only two lines of dice work, and it took a thread on boardgamgeek.com to reveal the answer (the bottom result is changed to the top). Nor, again, is it clarified whether discard decks are reshuffled when the main deck is exhausted, although it seems obvious to assume they are. Though flaws like these aren't game-breaking, you get the impression that they're likely down to the game being Kickstarter-funded, and that the designers have assumed players will already be onboard with the mechanics as a result.

Other niggles include the fact that you'll likely run out of zombies by the late game if you're playing a full four-player match, and that the game's solo campaign mode requires additional purchases to play, which both come across as a bit cheap. One missed opportunity as well was not having the mutant zombie spawn in on the following player's turn when activated, which would have sped up play by incentivising players to draw map cards more frequently.

It's hard to let these negatives detract from the game too much, as what *Run, Fight or Die* offers in spades is sheer, addictive fun. It's a light-hearted affair, and it makes a great afternoon killer with some friends if you've got nothing planned. This is in spite of the fact that there's really only one way to play *Run, Fight or Die*, which is to always use loot rolls to draw followers whenever feasible. Since followers not only offer the main way of scoring victory points but also a supply of ablative wounds, in the vast majority of cases it makes sense to hoover up as many as you can as quickly as possible and tank the negative effects of the sucky ones. But its lack of playstyles is made up for by the tactical planning it offers on a moment-to-moment level, and letting players choose what order they activate their dice results offers a great deal of strategic flexibility. Besides, there's something childishly appealing about mowing down the legions of zombies with a well-played card or dice roll.

A zombie-killing splatter-fest that's rough around the edges with plenty of heart, *Run, Fight or Die: Reloaded* apes the zombie B-movies that inspired it in the best sort of way.

JAMES WINSPEAR

WE SAY

Despite some loose threads in its rules design, *Run, Fight or Die: Reloaded* provides an experience that can truly be said to be... Groovy.



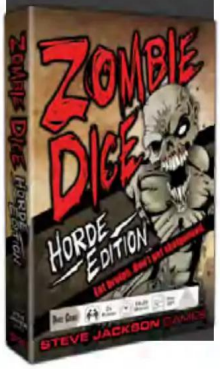


WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 6 Custom dice
- 70 Zombie minis
- 4 Zombie boards
- 5 Character boards
- 30 Follower cards
- 7 Reference cards
- 22 Loot cards
- 23 Mutant zombie cards
- Mutant zombie token
- 60 Wound tokens
- 24 Leadership tokens
- 30 Zombie tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... ZOMBIE DICE

If you're itching for more ways to dice with the dead, this beer-and-pretzels zombie game puts you in the scuffed shoes of a shambling ghoul as you roll bones, munch brains and try not to get shotgunned.





NIBIRU

Remember, Remember...

Designer: Federico E. Sohns

201 | 13+ | £40

Can an entire game be carried by just one idea? Well, if that idea is as compelling, creative and exciting as *Nibiru*'s memory-building the answer might well be a "yes".

On a very broad level the game's a sci-fi adventure that's a little bogged down with beautiful but star-dense lore, but that description misses out the coolest part of the entire game. Where most RPGs ask you to start off adventures with a solid idea of your character already pinned down to the sheet, *Nibiru* instead sends you out into the world with something close to a blank slate.

You start as a vagabond somewhere in the steel hallways of a vast, planet-sized space station. You have with no stats, no gear and, most importantly, no memories.

As the game plays out you get the chance to add to these memories and use them to completely shape and re-shape your character on the fly. If you're pinned down in a firefight you might invoke a hazy recollection an afternoon nailing cans with a BB gun, for example, allowing you to instantly pop one foe in the head and gain a permanent bonus to shooting.

Similarly, you might be climbing a dangling rope and suddenly think about how cool it would be if your rough-and-tumble brawler, long-plagued by the memories of dead AI servants, had a horrible memory of falling into the void somewhere in a past life. You'd fail the roll and incur an ongoing penalty to climbing checks, but taking on the negative memory gives you more points to spend on happy ones elsewhere.



The possibilities that the system offers are damn-near endless, though they do require a fair bit of friendly give-and-take between players and GMs if everything's going to work smoothly. None of the categories you can invoke memories for – what would be called skills in most games – are nailed down and the advice in the rulebook is a little hazy. It would be easy for players to try and break the game with over-broad categories – "talking" or "fighting", say – but it's also annoying to sink valuable memory points into playing the harp and then never have them come up.

Despite this, the MEMO system – as it's labelled in the rulebook – is a truly fascinating little idea and the shining, sparkling heart of the game. Honestly, it can be easy to spend so much time thinking about the possibilities of playing around with memories that you almost forget about the rest of the game.



That would be a shame, however, because *Nibiru* is a fascinating, imaginative and thoroughly weird place to play. The lore behind the vast space-station takes up almost half of the core rulebook's 200-ish pages, going into incredible detail about the social inequalities that plague its society and weird creatures that lurk in its depths.

Wonderfully, there's even a chapter contributed by a genuine astrophysicist brought in as a consultant. This deals with explanations of some of the game's more science-ey elements, such as the surprisingly involved system for tracking artificial gravity levels as the party travels, and is a fascinating read.

The downside to the beautiful, complex nature of the world is that the endless chapters devoted to explaining it are dense as all hell and stuffed to the gills with a complicated new lexicon to memorise. Unless you have a better memory than most, you're going to be constantly bouncing back to the glossary to remind yourself who the En□su and Silu are, and why the Umbra is so different from the Antumbra.

You can probably ignore many of the details as you play, as the game's set-up virtually demands that the heroes are a little shady on the world's details and even the GM only really needs the specifics of the area they're currently adventuring in. However, the sheer volume of densely-written material to absorb can be pretty damn intimidating, especially if your players are the kind who like to get invested in the world they're exploring.

Honestly, *Nibiru* sometimes feels like a game that could have benefitted from a bit of a trim and some polishing. Most of the ideas are top-notch and the MEMO system is an absolute gem, but the book as a whole is a little rough around the edges.

If you're a fan of the truly fascinating, however, this shouldn't stop you from checking the game out and making some memories of your own.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Incredibly intriguing ideas tied to some beautiful – if dense – lore makes for one of the most interesting games of recent years.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... THINGS FROM THE FLOOD

If you enjoy moody sci-fi and the storytelling side of RPGs, *Nibiru* is going to be right up your alley



A WAR OF WHISPERS

The war of wits

Designer: Jeremy Stoltzfus | **Artist:** Tomasz Jedruszek, Dann May

30-60m | 2-4 | 14+ | £58

As board gamers we are not novices in controlling armies over the expanse of a tabletop battlefield, managing strategies, supply lines, objectives and battling opponents one turn at the time. *A War of Whispers* has all of that, but it doesn't put players in charge of an army on the battlefield. Instead, players are the shadowy figures that whisper in the ears of queens, emperors and leaders.

A War of Whispers takes place over a circular board divided into five empires. Each turn players assign their agents to one of four roles in each empire – sheriffs, stewards, marshall and chancellor – and perform the associated task, like recruiting more soldiers, attacking other territories and picking up cards, which can be used as bonus actions later in the game. The tasks vary slightly from one empire to another, accounting for the difference in their location, the number of not-so-friendly neighbours and the capabilities of each nation. The animals representing each empire give hints as to their strengths, which become even clearer through card abilities.

The snowy empire with the polar bear as their emblem is ferocious in their attacks. Although they don't have much recruitment power, they start the game with the biggest army and their actions and cards reward aggression and brutal play. Whereas the horse nation starts with no army units at all but use their vast territories and resources to endure through the years of conflict. There are also eagles who have good manoeuvrability, elephants who are strong soldiers and lions who are efficient at mobilisation.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board
- 4 Player boards
- 20 Loyalty tokens
- 40 Empire cards
- 100 Banner cubes
- 36 Agent tokens
- 4 Turn trackers
- First player token

Players might be able to spot locational strengths and weaknesses of each empire just by looking at the map. However, learning how to best utilise their actions and cards will take at least several turns, if not several games. Especially, since each action can be used not only to make that empire stronger, but also to sabotage it.

A War of Whispers' last twist that is that players are routing for different empires to succeed. At the start of the game, tokens representing each empire are randomly assigned to multipliers of positive and negative values. This encourages players to try to manipulate events in such a way, that empires that earn them the most points are doing the best, while territories with minus modifiers get defeated, so they don't give them negative points.

While the tokens can be revealed throughout the game, for the majority of *A War of Whispers,* players only know for certain about their own goals. Some assumptions can be made by observing actions of other players and which empires they seem to be favouring, but the games' strategies are broad enough that moves can easily be misleading. There is depth within the game for short-term and long-term strategies, and even bluffing, if players are skilful enough manipulators of the board.

To get the most out of *A War of Whispers,* players will need to fully embrace their roles, utilising their actions, powers and army locations on the map to try to fool and maybe even secretly manipulate other players into helping them with their goals. This will require not only deep game knowledge but a certain tactical finesse. Less skilful or knowledgeable players, therefore, might suffer and overall the game enjoyment perhaps over-relies on the players' complete commitment to the roles.

Despite all these complexities, *A War of Whispers* is not a long game, lasting only four, fairly snappy, although intense, rounds. This tension ramps up, especially in the last round, when any remaining pretences are discarded, the best cards and combos are played in order to secure the territories and get the most points.

All that scheming, planning and manipulating is enough to cause a headache, however the satisfaction from pulling a master strike from behind the scenes, while outwitting and out bluffing your opponents around the table, just might be worth it.

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

If you ever wondered what it would be like to be *Game of Thrones'* Littlefinger, manipulating kingdoms and armies to achieve your secret goals, then play *A War of Whispers.* This game allows to be as cunning and clever as one wants, without, hopefully, getting stabbed in the end.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... A GAME OF THRONES: THE BOARD GAME

Those who enjoy the scheming and the switching allegiances of *A Game of Thrones: The Board Game*, but don't want to spend the whole day playing one game, will find what they are looking for in *A War of Whispers.*

QUEENZ

The beez kneez

Designer: Bruno Cathala, Johannes Goupy | **Artist:** Vincent Dutrait

30m | 2-4 | 13+ | £49

This is Bruno Cathala's second gardening game of the year. We reviewed *Ishtar* a couple of months back as an extremely tight tile layer about making the desert bloom. This is a similar affair. Players play as 'famous beekeepers' (according to the box) and as such they are trying to create a garden which scores them the most bee points.

While not exactly *Wingspan* in terms of habitat building – you're just picking flowers from the row that the gardener is currently on, and strategically placing hives – it's still satisfyingly personal to you. You take turns picking flowers, with a few restrictions – you can't pick three of the same colour, but you can pick two matching orchids. Once this is done they go into your personal supply, and the gardener is moved on equal to the number of orchids picked.

The other action you can take, when you have enough orchids to fill a tile, is to take one of the *Tetris*-ish tiles and place it front of you. Score points for matching colours, and if, you've used a hive for one space, think about the placement of bee-encrusted flowers. At the end of the game you'll score points for the number of bees around a hive. Diversify your production, which is probably the least sexy way of describing having a complete set of different honey flowers in front of you, and you get some end game points.

A lot of 'group solitaire' games don't have strong interactions. And while there's no conflict here, you can keep an eye on your bee-bothering counterparts and shift on the gardener one more than you imagine they'd like. Equally, you can be smart with your flower and hive placement, and a late-game slotting of a hive into a high scoring area can cause last-minute panic amongst your friends.

The design is impossibly nice and vaguely psychedelic in its mix of vibrant colours and intricate, natural patterns. The art has a lino-print look about it, which gives it an authentic charm. The making of your own little fiefdom of bees and honey is distinctly pleasurable. And like all games where you want to build an empire, it's nicer when it's just yours and there's not a chance of someone else sneaking in and taking it from you. If we were being uncharitable we could talk about how the lack of interaction leads to a less chatty game. There's less on the line than in other, similar tile layers too, but it is very hard to make such comments when the game looks this good and is blissfully simple to pick up.

Games can move fast and the eager attention to the board is something that certain types of gamers will enjoy, and the satisfaction of your own garden growing in front of you is undeniable. It's not the sweetest thing, but it's very close.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

Queenz is a charming tile layer which can best be described as a *Carcassonne* of one's own. Elevated by its vivid design and puzzly pieces, this is a tile matcher worth adding to your hive.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- Main board
- 4 Player board
- 4 Player markers
- 125 Orchid tokens
- 24 Field tiles
- 12 Hive tokens
- 20 Honey pot tokens
- Gardener pawn
- 4 Diversified production tokens
- Score board



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... ISHTAR

While the arena isn't shared and the nuances aren't as tightly negotiated *Queenz* has the same feeling of doing-a-nice-thing-for-points.





VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - THE FALL OF LONDON

Capital job

Designer: White Wolf Entertainment

249 | 18+ | £35

The first full campaign for *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s latest edition weaves a haunting story of blood and betrayal intimately bound to the streets and skyscrapers of the capital. At times, however, it feels like the authors rather forgot that *The Fall of London* is meant to be played rather than read.

Honestly, though, this shouldn't really come as too much of a surprise. Throughout its history *V:tM* has been a game that wobbles its way between artistry and indulgence, and in many ways *The Fall of London* is simply following in that tradition.

Perhaps the reason it feels so grating this time around is that the core theme for the campaign, known rather grandly as a 'chronicle', revolves an absolute classic RPG conceit – the fetch quest. Within a few minutes of the game kicking off the party are given a shopping list of five ancient artefacts to retrieve from around London, a handful of potential contacts and a not-so-gentle prod out of the door.

It's not the most inventive plot line out there, but it works rather well as an excuse to get the players exploring the busy streets and interacting with the city's nocturnal inhabitants. This is good, because simply wandering about town and getting to know the area is where *The Fall of London* absolutely excels.

The book simply does an incredible job of seizing on everything that makes the ancient, sprawling capital feel special. It blends fashion-design drama with the mysteries of Roman Britain, drags the players through encounters with punks and aristocracy, and propels them from abandoned tube stations to the most exclusive floors of the Shard.

This all works beautifully thanks to another of *The Fall of London*'s other conceits, which firmly suggests that the players all slip into the coffins of pre-generated characters who have all been unconscious since the 1940s. With this, the players are given free reign to explore the city as strangers, removing any requirement that they already be familiar with either London itself of the wider *V:tM* history.

So many aspects of the book seem designed to make it easy for players and GMs alike to slide easily and comfortably into the campaign. It's a little unfortunate, then, that the heart of the book – the writing – leaves a rake lying in the middle of the road.

The issue isn't that the writing is bad. Indeed, much of it is beautiful and bubbling with dark, bloody imagination. It's just that there's so damn much of it.

For example, somewhere in the middle of the campaign the characters have a chance to run into an enchanting vampiric costume designer who makes her lair in the walls of a theatre. The likely encounter with her is a delightful display of everything that makes *V:tM* great, but the background information on this relatively minor NPC spans about two and a half pages of text.

When you're sitting in your armchair, scanning over the book in preparation for tomorrow's session, this depth is something you can revel in. However, when you get to game night and need to quickly look up a vital nugget of information with actual impact on the adventure, it can be hard to pluck it from the paragraphs detailing how many brothers they had or their dealings with their accountant.

Even in the main body of the adventure, every scene is fleshed out with as much detail and background information as possible, and while this seems like it should help the GM out, the sheer weight of options and facts it presents can instead feel restrictive. Unless your GM is very confident when it comes to picking and choosing which bits of the text to use, you can expect them to spend a rather worrying amount of playtime with their head buried in a book.

There is an argument to be made that this lush, detailed style is something fans expect from *V:tM*, but as a gaming tool it's hard to feel that the book doesn't toe over the line into indulgence.

At its beating heart, *The Fall of London* is a well-crafted story and a beautiful exploration of circles that few other RPGs would cross into. If you're adept at picking your way through walls of prose, or actively prefer the wordier style it's a wonderful way to embrace the night. Possibly, though, you might find it a rather frustrating one.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A beautifully bloody exploration of vampiric London, hampered by a bit of overwriting



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - NEW BLOOD STARTER PACK

If you've ripped through the new starter set for V:tM and want to explore something a little meatier, *Fall of London* is a solid place to get your vamp on.



DARK DOMAINS

Feeling villainous?

Designer: Jeff and Carla Horger, William Baldwin, Joseph Roush

90m | 2-5 | 14+ | £75

Being the bad guy is pretty good fun. Really the only way to improve the experience is to have some equally awful friends around you. And that's where *Dark Domains* comes in.

It's a game about the local town council being controlled by an evil necromancer. But kind of low key, because no one seems to have noticed. You are playing one of the council members, charged with the desire to become the most evil, so that you can curry favour with the necromancer and live deathlessly. But how? Well, by placing custom faction meeples on certain spots across the town to gain their benefits. Yes, it's a worker-placement game, but with something that this reviewer loves in their meeple allocation sessions – conflict.

You gather resources, cash, and evil to build locations on your own personal domain board. These can be locales like 'Wizard's School' or 'House of Healing' or, less excitingly, 'Lake'. These are all built normally and give you resources and bonuses throughout. At any point however, you can place a meeple on a location, and turn it... Evil! Instead of the above you have the 'Dark Tower', the 'Torture Chamber' and the 'Black Lake' (there's quite a lot of "Black whatever-was-on-the-other-side-of-this-card").

But there is, of course, no rest for the wicked. A set of adventurers set out to, ideally, go lay siege to some evil buildings. They won't attack good buildings, so there's an element of carefully choosing when to flip locations. There's a fairly pleasing if/then statement that can be used to calculate where they attack. Results are sorted out with some dice rolls on the adventurers' part.

And then comes the conflict. There are spells you can joyfully cast on each other's buildings and henchmen, there's spells for swapping around meeples on the board or taxing your fellow councillors. You can also remove your opponent's meeples from the board with an assassination attempts. That last part is very pleasing, especially as the board has to be solved in a certain order, making it entirely possible for you to snipe an opponent's meeple before they draw more spells or collect resources.

There are so many options for being evil that your strategies can vary wildly. One in our group won a game by using the seer, a way to peek at, and change the order of, the next few cards in the event deck. This meant they could move major game events back until they were ready. Others won through big buildings, or a bouncer tactic of every location having a monster on it to boost its stats. Others applied a scorched earth policy with spells cast on their opponents' domains.

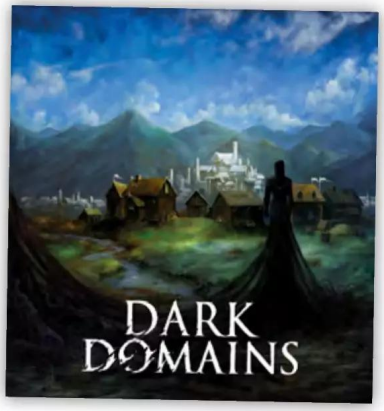
What this leads to is a disruptive, fast Eurogame which lets you actually play against your opposition in exactly the way you might want to. Losing in *Dark Domains* only makes you think about your next playthrough and winning doesn't feel solved. If you're looking for a big Eurogame that gives you evil thrills, this is it.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 1 Game board
- 5 Domain boards
- 1 Phase marker
- 1 First player token
- 27 Minions
- 62 Fortune cards
- 48 Adventurer Cards
- 40 Henchmen Cards
- 94 Building cards
- 156 Spell cards
- 10 Masters of the domain
- 68 Monster tokens
- 30 Condition tokens
- 92 Element tokens
- 55 Coin tokens
- 65 Evil tokens
- 116 Resource tokens
- 8 Polyhedral dice





WE SAY

When it comes to being evil, *Dark Domains* is a robust blend of scheming, backstabbing and ruthless annihilation. In turns thrilling and desperate, *Dark Domains* provides the perfect playground of wickedness

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED VILLAINOUS...

For a tightly focused and asymmetrical kind of evil, there's no better place to kick off from than *Villainous*

MINECRAFT: BUILDERS & BIOMES

Never mind the blocks

Designer: Ulrich Blum | **Artists:** Nikoo Jorjani, Nicolette Suraga

30-50m | 2-4 | 10+ | £35

Tabletop versions of video games have always seemed a bit odd to me, because the bits that get transferred onto the cardboard version are almost never the bits that made the digital version interesting, because although the underlying notes of what we enjoy in games are universal, video games and tabletop games have different strengths.

Minecraft, possibly the best-selling computer game of all time, already has a tabletop version: it's Lego. Like Lego, *Minecraft* is a sandbox, more about exploring, experimenting and expressing rather than trying to 'win'. So how is a physical and much more gamey version of the game going to work?

Microsoft has trusted its adopted baby to the safe hands of Ravensburger, a company with a proven record of successful licences, from recent hits like *Villainous* and *Jaws*, to versions of *Enchanted Forest* with some Disney princesses chucked in. But while its recent tie-in hits have come from the prolific game-factory of Prospero Hall, this time the venerable German publisher has handed the design reins to Ulrich Blum, creator of a few mid-level Eurogames. How's that worked out for them?

If you ask a Eurogame designer to make you a *Minecraft* game, you'll get a Eurogame about *Minecraft*, and that's what's happened. *Minecraft: Builders & Biomes* has biomes, it has mobs, it has the signature characters Steve and Alex, and it has 64 chunky wooden blocks in five types. But the mechanics and the experience are traditional tabletop.

You 'mine' blocks from the stack of 64 (arranged in a 4 × 4 × 4 cube) to buy building tiles, which you add to your personal playboard, or weapons which you can use to fight mobs, which give you extra moves or score bonuses. Each time a layer of the big cube is exhausted there's a scoring round, where you check the tiles on your playboard for contiguous groups of the same biomes, materials, or building type.

The cardinal sin is that there's no actual mining and no actual crafting. You take the enticing, tactile blocks from the big cube, and then you trade them for things. The only building is by proxy; you can swap a sand block and a wood block for a tile with a picture of a desert house on it.

It feels like the designer had a friend describe *Minecraft* to him, or possibly read its Wikipedia page, and based the game on that, not on how it actually plays. The tropes are present and correct. The gameplay is almost completely different, and *Minecraft's* unique tone of 'if you build it, you'll have fun' is nowhere in the box.

Gameplay-wise it's so evenly balanced that it's almost impossible for one player to run away with the win. The only randomness is in the combat system, and we found that the players who won the game were usually the ones who'd had the most luck in fights.

We had fun. The kids got a big kick out of blowing up witches with TNT. But at the end we didn't feel like we'd built anything or done anything memorable. It's a thoroughly competent and well balanced Eurogame with some clever mechanics and a lot of nice bits in the box. But it's not *Minecraft*.

JAMES WALLIS





WE SAY

This is a decent game being sold under false pretences. It can be a lot of fun, but if you're after the *Minecraft* experience on the tabletop, this isn't it.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 64 Large wooden blocks
- 64 Building and mob tiles
- 16 Weapon tokens
- 4 Sets of 5 player tokens
- 4 Experience counters
- 4 Player pieces
- 4 Player boards
- 8 Overview cards
- Block base card

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PLANET

Blue Orange's charming ecosystem-maker with its dodecahedrons and magnetic tiles lets you shape biomes and populate them with cute animals. Just the thing for your budding terraformers.





IN THE HALL OF THE MOUNTAIN KING

Tunnels and trolls

Designers: Jay Cormier, Graeme Jahns | **Artist:** Kwanchai Moriya

90m | 2-5 | 12+ | £38

A troll's life is not a simple one. There is always so much to contend with. Digging tunnels, for a start. Uncovering ancient statues, precious to your clan. Then carting those statues around the recently excavated tunnels and popping them onto pedestals to make them look more impressive. That's when you're not toiling in a workshop, hammering away at persistent rubble, or casting spells to get the edge on your mountain-mining competitors. It can all get rather bewildering at times, and you'll often find yourself scratching your big troll head, wondering what on Earth (or rather, under earth) you should do next.

In The Hall of the Mountain King is a handsome tile-laying game, blessed by the distinctive art of Kwanchai Moriya, which offers a neat twist on the tableau builder and packs a lot of impressive detail into its box. It keeps you thinking and on your toes. But if you're prone to the agonising, game-slowing stasis of analysis paralysis, or simply prefer your rulesets to be simple and slick, then it might not be for you.

Each player takes the role of a troll leader, returning to their ancient homeland beneath the crags of a mountain peak. Generations earlier, your people were sent into exile by their hated gnome enemies. But the gnomes have now themselves fled, after the mountain fell in on them. Each of you must carve a new kingdom out of the mess, recruiting trolls from four different clans (Fire, Ice, Moon and Mud) and excavating your ancestral halls, hoping to earn the most honour and be crowned the new trollish King.

The core process of achieving this is deeply satisfying and great fun. Tunnels are represented by Tetris-y tiles, which must be purchased using mineral resources (stone, iron and heartstone) and placed on the board to form your own subterranean network. Tunnels will give you access to honour-earning pedestals and statues, as well as key resources. But the best and surest way to earn resources is by recruiting trolls to your trollsmoot. This is represented by a gradually growing pyramid of troll cards (neatly echoing the mountain itself) whose completion by one player triggers a two-round endgame.

The best thing about this is the tableau's resource-cascade effect. Whenever you recruit a troll to your moot, you must place it above and between two other cards. This activates not only the new troll, but also any trolls directly beneath it, enabling you to gain any resources they're holding. Which means some thought must go into not only which trolls you recruit, but also how you arrange them. It also gives the game a cool sense of escalation: the higher you build your trollsmoot, the more resources you will reap, in turn allowing you more flexibility with your tunnel building.

This engine-building/tile-laying combo would have made a great game with no further additions. Whether *In The Hall of the Mountain King* is hindered or improved by all its other elements – activating rule-tweaking spell cards or workshops, moving statues by spending cart resources, positioning those statues on pedestals for game-end points – depends on how weighty you like your game complexity. It's a shame it doesn't give players the option of a 'lite' mode, like *Agricola*'s family variant. At the very least, it would make your first few mining adventures more welcoming and far less troll-blesome.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

A fine game with a great central idea, but which overcomplicates things via several arguably unnecessary, and conceivably optional, elements.

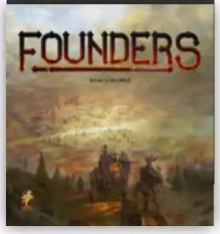


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Double-side game board
- 5 Player mats
- 52 Tunnel tiles
- 6 Great Hall tiles
- 5 Gate tiles
- 22 Workshop tiles
- 3 Pedestal reminder tokens
- 15 Pedestal point tokens
- 2 Coronation tokens
- 17 Spell cards
- 30 Starter Troll cards
- 55 Troll cards
- 21 Statues
- 18 Pedestals
- 35 Stone resource cubes
- 35 Iron resource cubes
- 30 Heartstone resource cubes
- 45 Carts
- 20 Hammers
- 25 Runes
- 35 Coins
- 5 Score markers
- 2 Team storage cards
- 1 Crown
- 1 Draw bag

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... FOUNDERS OF GLOOMHAVEN

If you're a fan of the fiddly, tile-laying/city-building *Gloomhaven* spin-off, then you'll feel right at home here. But if you couldn't stand that game, don't worry – *Mountain King* is far better.



TINY EPIC TACTICS

Never judge a game by its box size

Designer: Scott Almes | **Artist:** Nikoletta Vaszi, Naomi Robinson, Benjamin Shulman

30-60m | 1-4 | 14+ | £27

Ever since the first game in their series, *Tiny Epic Games* have continued to prove that a board game should never be judged by the size of its box. They have been challenging the premise that microgames need to sacrifice gameplay depth and complexity in favour of simple mechanics and a small footprint. The latest addition to the series, *Tiny Epic Tactics* easily surpasses expectations of how much gameplay, and how many components, can fit in a single tiny box.

As the name suggests, this game focuses entirely on tactical combat and area control, streamlining both to make them accessible. Yet, that does not mean that the game is simple or small. The four classes in the *Tiny Epic Tactics* – warrior, rogue, wizard and beast – play very differently and have a collection of characters, all with their own unique powers, strengths and weaknesses, ensuring that players will have plenty to discover and master for many games. The rolled-out cloth mat contains several terrains that give various tactical advantages and disadvantages for the units present on it. Finally, the game utilises several smaller boxes to create an impressive 3D landscape and adds elevation to battlefield.

Many other board games that strive for the same gameplay depth as *Tiny Epic Tactics* come with a multitude of tokens, board pieces, trackers and figurines to support it. The designers have managed to utilise every single component in the game to its full potential to ensure that it is both compact and functional. For example, the boxes that act as the elevated ground can be turned over to reveal a dungeon inside, which is used for cooperative and solo modes.

Tiny Epic Tactics is a game for those who enjoy tight, every-turn-matters mechanisms. Fans of turn-based video games, such as *Final Fantasy Tactics* will also feel very much at home with this game.

As the core mechanics are designed to fit all different modes, some of them feel more successful than others. Cooperative mode can become a bit over-prolonged if the enemies, through the sheer lack of the random draw, keep spawning on top of the same box, requiring players to either clear them or push them off before they can explore the last dungeon. Competitive mode is more fun with three or four players, although it also makes it easier to gang up on one opponent.

Despite these relatively small short-comings, *Tiny Epic Tactics* comes through on all its promises. It packs a lot of replayable, ambitious gameplay in a small box, utilising every mechanism and component to the fullest potential. It rewards players that think well, tactically and consider their surroundings and assets carefully. While asking for thoughtfulness from the players, *Tiny Epic Tactics* demands no less from itself, resulting in the game that is delight to both look at and play.

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Packing an impressive, punchy amount of gameplay, Tiny Epic Tactics is another great instalment in the series, proving once again that it can tackle big board game themes in a tiny box.





WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Map scroll
- 6 Map boxes
- 16 Unit tokens
- 32 Unit cards
- 16 Tactical cards
- 3 Action dice
- Control card
- 3 Control tokens
- 10 Weakened tokes
- 32 Tracker tokens
- 9 Solo enemy cards
- 6 Solo crystal cards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TINY EPIC KINGDOMS

If you are familiar with any games from *Tiny Epic Games*, then this new instalment should really be a no-brainer! Although every game in the series tackles a different big theme, the size of the boxes remain pleasantly tiny but the gameplay no less epic.



TAINTED GRAIL: THE FALL OF AVALON

Hit and myth

Designers: Krzysztof Piskorski, Marcin Swierkot | **Artists:** Piotr Foksowicz, Ewa Labak, Piotr Gacek

1-2h | 1-4 | 14+ | £70

The myth of King Arthur is a story so often told, retold and reinterpreted, that you'll be forgiven for thinking there's little left to do with it. Even on the tabletop it feels potentially hoary, after the likes of *Pendragon*, *Avalon* and *Shadows Over Camelot*. But, having remixed *Alien* for *Nemesis* and given Greek myth a sci-fi spin with *Lords of Hellas*, Awaken Realm now takes Arthurian Legend, brews it up with Celtic mythology and gives it an almost post-apocalyptic twist to deliver an incredible narrative-driven campaign game.

It is set in Avalon, an ancient, magical land colonised by Arthur's people generations earlier. But something's gone horribly wrong. A dark, corrupting force known as the Wyrdness is encroaching. Once this was kept at bay by towering arcane statues called menhirs, but their power is now fading.

All this is beautifully and atmospherically depicted in a vividly written, branching-narrative journal, which makes for a superb virtual Dungeon Master, despite all the page flicking required. Just as compelling are Awaken Realm's typically well-wrought miniatures and impressively detailed Tarot-sized location cards, which are placed as your characters explore this wretched, ailing realm. In order to make the lands passable, menhirs must be revived at the cost of precious resources (food, wealth, magic and energy), but even then they only provide temporary access to adjacent territories. So as well as contending with all the nasty encounters thrown your way, you must always be mindful of your menhir maintenance.

Not that your characters feel particularly qualified for such a tricky task – at least initially. Whether a hallucinogen-addled druid or a cursed mercenary-turned-farmer, they are all flawed and of questionable hero material. In fact, all your village's true heroes left weeks earlier to try and solve the problem of its failing menhir, and now it's down to you, either as a lone wanderer (the game is a dream to play solo), or a not-so-crack team, to find out what happened to them.

The story unfolds smoothly and organically, requiring some suitably tough choices which leave you certain that, on a replay, you'll be able to take very a different path with different world-affecting outcomes. The game also benefits from an ingeniously innovative encounter system, whereby cards (combat or diplomacy, depending on whether you're battling or gabbing) are laid down to form a chain in such a way that you connect 'keys', each representing a relevant stat (Aggression, Empathy, Practicality, Caution and so on), to have an effect.

However, it is very difficult – often brutally so, to the point where at times it feels disproportionately harsh. The 15 Chapter narrative is so involving and epic, you don't want to have to keep restarting as the result of a few bad hands. There is also no quarter given between quests, no chance to recuperate before you move on; if you gave it your all in one chapter, you'll be stuffed for the next. The rulebook does grudgingly allow a character-resurrecting easy-mode variant, but even this inflicts horrible, progress-impeding penalties.

It can become frustrating, but is forgivable at least for being appropriate to the theme and setting. This is, after all, a tale of desperate survival in a dying world – Arthurian Legend gone horribly sour, in the most novel and entertaining way.

DAN JOLIN



WE SAY

Despite being savagely difficult at times, *Tainted Grail* is a triumph. The sleek combo of its deep, branching narrative and its nifty card-chaining combat system make it a compulsive and ultimately rewarding experience.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 4 Player boards
- 160 Combat cards
- 160 Diplomacy cards
- 120 Encounter cards
- 60 Item cards
- 100 Event cards
- 40 Secret cards
- 36 Universal ability cards
- 64 Location cards
- 8 Help cards
- 4 Hero miniatures
- 3 Menhir miniatures
- 1 Foredweller miniature
- 10 Dials
- 1 Open & Play Guide
- 1 Exploration Journal
- 4 Intro letters
- 4 Paper Adventure maps
- 1 Save Sheet pad
- 80 Universal marker cubes
- 8 Time markers
- 6 Quest markers
- 4 Health trackers
- 1 Guardian die
- 1 Standard die

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... THE 7TH CONTINENT

The way *Tainted Grail* so slickly handles exploration and uses cards to resolve challenges suggests *The 7th Continent* was a big influence. It is also as blissfully quick to set up, put away, and save progress.





FATE OF CTHULHU

Give me your pants and your tentacles

Designer: Evil Hat Productions

256 | 13+ | £29

You can't fling a tentacle into a gaming store without having a sucker latch onto another re-imagining of Lovecraftian horror, but *Fate of Cthulhu* manages to distinguish itself from the herd with two tools: explosions and time-travel.

The time travel thing isn't just an excuse for the setting, which reads like an eldritch take on Terminator, but also feeds into some of the game's coolest ideas. The result can be a little mind-bending to begin with, but once things start flowing – and you stop worrying about which tense to use – you can appreciate how this little shift in perspective beings so many fresh ideas to the table. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the structure.

Like many other games drawn from Lovecraft's writing, *Fate of Cthulhu* is all about trying to prevent the arrival of some terrible cosmic horror fated to destroy the world. However, this time around the party has time-travellers on their side, and they're armed with the most powerful weapon in the world – information.

This means that each mini-campaign in the book, which should take maybe a dozen nights of gaming to get through, gives the players a to-do list of pivotal apocalyptic events that need to be disrupted. The details of the missions will always be murky and there are still plenty of secrets to uncover, but the players still enter every adventure with a few names, dates and locations already in the bag. In other games it would be like they hadn't exactly read the adventure cover-to-cover, but had skimmed enough to get the gist of what's going on.

When this works well it can be an absolute blast. It can give you the tools to pull an Ocean's 11 on the bad guys, infiltrating organisations and planning extraction routes, but the wibbly-wobbly nature of time travel means there's still plenty of room for things to go wrong.

It's a little irritating, however, that after handing out such a cool toy, many of the pre-written campaigns immediately try to snatch it back. Several of the evil entities looking to chew up the planet have weird temporal powers of their own and work to change things up wherever possible.

Yes, it works as an effective way of ramping up the tension and keeping the party off balance, but it also feels like the game should embrace the power of time-travel rather than shy away from it. It's not like a bit of forewarning is going to help an adventurer stand up against shambling dimensional horrors, anyway.

Actually, that last bit might not quite be accurate, as another theme that distinguishes *Fate of Cthulhu* from its more restrained brethren is the toughness and general badass-ery of its heroes. Rather than the vain socialites or stuffy college professors of classic Lovecraftian horror, players step into the shoes of time-travelling soldiers, modern day spies and reformed cultists capable of tossing fire from their hands.

When deformed monstrosities burst through the door, the characters are expected to whip out shotguns and scream defiance, not cower and gibber in the corner. Despite the apocalyptic themes there's an air of frantic, furious energy to *Fate of Cthulhu*. The party doesn't investigate; the party gets things done.

All this action is channelled through a slightly tweaked take on the incredibly free-form Fate system. The core rules about fighting bad guys and making checks are incredibly simple – albeit reliant on custom dice that some might find annoying – but a lot of customisation comes into play with aspects and stunts.

There are little flourishes that help to define your character and the world around you. In practice they stand in for the special powers and abilities used by other RPGs, so you could use them to make a hero an excellent navigator, for example, or to give them a special crushing attack with their mutated claw.

The twist, however, is that the players don't simply pick from a pre-written list buried in the rulebook. Instead, they write their aspects and stunts themselves. Essentially, they get to write their own rules.

There's enough guidance to keep this from being too overwhelming, but it can still be a rather daunting prospect – especially if the players are new to RPGs. If the players can embrace it, however, the limitless options can quickly become inspiring rather than intimidating.

Between the time-travel, the mutations and the free-flowing rules *Fate of Cthulhu* is just about weird enough to work. If nothing else, it brings something new to the rather crowded table of Lovecraft's roleplaying spawn.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Tired of Lovecraftian tropes? Try shooting them with a rocket launcher alongside time-travelling super-soldiers.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PULP CTHULHU

With a similar tone but very different playstyles, if you enjoy the nonsense of *Pulp Cthulhu* but wish it was a bit more sci-fi then *Fate of Cthulhu* has you covered.



CAYLUS 1303

If it ain't broke, give it a polish

Designer: William Attia | **Artist:** Andrew Bosley

60-90m | 2-5 | 12+ | £39

Way back in the dark ages (of board gaming) worker placement didn't exist. Sure, there were workers but they had nowhere to be. They bumbled about aimlessly on stumpy, rigid legs – usually around the French hilltop town of *Carcassonne* – or lay hopelessly in fields, leading lives without purpose. But elsewhere in France something was stirring. At the border of English occupied Guyenne, a castle stood in a vulnerable state of disrepair. Master builders called out across the nation for help. Come the year 2005, hoards of eager workers rose from their fields to march upon... *Caylus*. Worker placement was born.

There may be some discrepancies between that story and fact, but nonetheless, here we are fifteen years later revisiting the grandaddy of worker placement games in the form of *Caylus 1303*, a refined and modernised descendant of its elder.

French designer William Attia has stepped up to rebuild the foundations of his classic 2005 game, tearing down the bloated and unnecessary details and replacing them with slick new features. Despite the makeover, fans of the original will be pleased to find that the core gameplay remains the same, with players competing to score the most points by delivering resources to the castle and constructing buildings. Each new building constructed along the winding road to the castle opens up a new worker placement spot, broadening the players' options as the game progresses.

Aside from the updated art direction, one of the most notable changes from the original is the streamlining of currency. Money is no longer included as a resource in the game, with players now surrendering precious extra workers to pay for particular actions. This exercise in efficiency not only quickens the pace of each round but also introduces some new, interesting resource management decisions.

Also new is the introduction of characters. These new faces offer powerful bonuses such as extra victory points when constructing buildings or additional workers every round. Aside from giving players a sense of strategic direction, *Caylus 1303* also uses characters as a means of player interaction. Snatching up The Chamberlain character might offer some flexibility when providing goods to the castle, but like it or not, it has also painted a target on your head.

You see, despite its serene Euro stylings, *Caylus 1303* is not a kind game; characters can be swiped from your hands quite easily, leaving you seething for revenge. Fortunately revenge is never too far away. Each turn, players will have the option of moving the universally maligned Provost meeple. This meddlesome crook trots up and down the road, blocking any actions that lay between him and the castle, regardless of whether a worker has been placed there or not. This mechanic prevents *Caylus 1303* from becoming a multiplayer solitaire game.

At lower player counts it is possible to enjoy the game without resorting to dirty tactics. Enjoyment can come from simply watching the town grow and flourish upon the board, helped by the improved chunky building tiles and hoards of miniature meeples. The original game's resources have also received an upgrade, evolving from measly cubes to more thematic, shapely forms – although I can only describe the food tokens as looking distinctly testicular.

With such influential heritage and renown casting its shadow over the game, one might expect *Caylus 1303* to reinvent the worker placement genre. But thankfully it hasn't.

I look forward to *Caylus 2303*.

CHAD WILKINSON

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 90 Wooden resources
- 34 Building tiles
- 12 Character tiles
- 75 Worker meeples
- 50 Houses
- 1 Provost meeple
- 1 Round Marker token
- 1 First Player tile
- 120 Prestige Point tokens



WE SAY

Modern titles in the worker placement genre might be flashier and more original but they cannot contend with *Caylus 1303*'s hark back to more brutally competitive times. Its bullyish nature might not appeal to everyone, but for those who fancy a scrap in the deceptively pastoral French countryside, it's a treat.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... CAYLUS

It might seem obvious but for fans of the long out of print 2005 original, this is a no-brainer.

THE MIND EXTREME

Designer: Wolfgang Warsch | **Artist:** Oliver Freudenreich

20m | 2-4 | 8+ | £10

Of course there was going to be a sequel. When a game sells a million copies it's going to get a sequel whether it needs one or not, and so it is for 2018's surprise hit and Spiel des Jahres nominee *The Mind*.

The Mind is the poster-child for Marmite games: you love it or you hate it. I'm a lover, but I can understand the criticisms of the haters, many of which come down to it being a simpler version of Stefen Benndorf's *The Game*, a 2015 release from the same publisher, also nominated for the Spiel des Jahres. *The Game* is also a co-op of playing cards in number order, but the cards go on multiple piles, and some are going up while others come down.



That's pretty much what *The Mind Extreme* is – half-way between the original game and *The Game*. Instead of a deck numbered 1–100 it has two, both running 1–50, and you have to play the white cards in ascending order and the red cards in descending order, at the same time. Some rounds you have to play one or both decks 'blind', putting the cards face-down, so you don't know until the end if someone's gone out of sequence. This expert mode was included in the original game, but here it's codified on the cards.

This is more than a simple sequel, it's a genuinely more taxing version of *The Mind*, though paradoxically we didn't find it harder to do well. Your brain has to split its attention between the two piles, and a large part of the fun is trying to guess what colour cards other players are waiting to reveal.

This is cleverer and more taxing, but there's a piece of pure magic in *The Mind* that seems to have got lost in the sequel. If you like *The Mind* then this will amuse you, but its differences are not an improvement over the original..

JAMES WALLIS

CAIRN

Designer: Christian Martinez | **Artist:** Vincent Joubert

25m | 2 | 10+ | £30

Where the sea meets the forest, shamans duel, infused by the powerful presence of mysterious Megaliths. As intriguing as it sounds, *Cairn* doesn't say much more about the world in which it is set. This theme, like a magical coat of paint, is only tangentially related to the gameplay but serves as a perfect base for absolutely stunning components and art.





It is unusual to see quick, strategy-driven two-player games, put so much care and resources into its components, yet *Cairn* does not hold back. The art feels appropriately whimsical and warm as if you just wandered into the edge of the forest on a sunny autumn's afternoon. Every component has a unique design, including the impeccably detailed shaman figurines. The creature design is so stunning, it makes one wonder more about the nature and the history of the world that *Cairn* is set in.

Splashing out on the looks, Christian Martinez, *Cairn*'s designer, kept gameplay, swift, simple and strategic. *Cairn*'s closest brother is chess, although the former streamlines the gameplay of the elder strategic behemoth to have only five figurines and a set of moves that can be chosen by all pieces to traverse the board. When one player conjures three Megaliths by either making it to the opposite side of the board or completing one of the two special arrangements, the game is over.

The light gameplay might not satisfy all, but it is perfect for newcomers or young board gamers to learn the basics of strategy – the importance of positioning, formations and planning future turns and moves – all in less than half an hour.

Cairn does not usurp your time or try needlessly complicated combat systems or intense strategic elements. Taking certain inspirations from a big classic and adding its own flare of fairy-tale magic, it is a beautiful board game in looks and in the elegant simplicity of its gameplay.

ALEX SONECHKINA

DUNGEON DEGENERATES: HAND OF DOOM

Intricate, rewarding psychedelic madness

Designer: Sean Äaberg, Eric Radey | **Artist:** Sean Äaberg, Eric Radey

30-360m | 1-4 | 10+ | £79



As board gamers, we are not unfamiliar with the term 'RPG in a box'. This usually describes a game that takes inspiration from the expansive gameplay offered by role-playing games, packing campaigns, ambitious storytelling, adventures and character growth in a board game box. *Dungeon Degenerates: Hand of Doom* takes that to the next level, delivering something very exciting but at the cost of tremendous initial frustration.

Players are prisoners who have just escaped the infamous dungeons of Brüttelburg. They are travelling through the world of Würstreich, avoiding the law, completing quests and fighting monsters to earn experience and gold. If the bright psychedelic neon art style of the game didn't give it away, I can confirm that the world is quite mad. It has a unique setting and lore, making exploring and discovering Würstreich a treat for any adventure lover.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board
- 8 Adventurer characters sheets
- 8 Adventurer character stands and standees
- 150 Monsters
- 60 Encounter cards
- 12 Epic monster cards
- 84 Loot cards
- 12 Epic loot cards
- 28 Doom cards
- 36 Skill cards
- 36 Sanger cards
- 14 Triumph cards
- 24 Weaknesses cards
- 6 Dice
- 392 Counters
- 2 Reference cards



The combat finds a nice balance between straightforward dice rolling and managing equipment and skills to manipulate the results to mitigate the associated luck elements. In *Dungeon Degenerates*, rolling low is actually advantageous as checks pass if the sum of two dice is below the skill being tested. However, the attacks take the value of the highest dice rolled, making players strive for an interesting balance of rolling low enough to pass, but having one dice value high to deal a significant attack.

However, before you get to all the aforementioned goodness, players get to feel like a bit of a degenerate themselves by playing an entirely different game called 'I need to check what this means in the rulebook.' The variety and gameplay richness come at the expense of a lot of intricate rules and a myriad of terms and symbols that, despite two (A4) reference cards, are not always clear. It is not unusual to dive into a rule book looking for one clarification and finding an answer that raises further questions and inspires more flicking through the pages. The first plays of the game consist of constant stops and starts, that understanding the core gameplay does not prevent. Monster abilities alone have two pages in the rule book. Through one fight you may have learnt what monsters with 'pursue' quality do, however, the next unfriendly creature has a 'frenzy' ability and here you go diving into the rulebook once more.

Dungeon Degenerates is a game that requires investment. Its biggest request is right from the onset as learning the game is not a smooth experience. Overcoming the initial stunted pacing of the game as it is interrupted by the need to refer to the rulebook will be the biggest hurdle. The next commitment – to the campaign – is the fun one. Würstreich is a beautifully mad world, crafted with so much detail and wonder. If you figure *Dungeon Degenerates: Hand of Doom* out, you will not regret it!

ALEX SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Dungeon Degenerates: Hand of Doom's psychedelic neon coloured world is wonderfully peculiar in setting, characters and gameplay. To appreciate the full richness of this game, players will need to make it past the first and the greatest enemy of the game – the rules!

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... ELDRICH HORROR

Two worlds that are enticingly mad in their own ways. Both games succeed at drawing in players by the beautifully grim crafting of their setting and through challenging gameplay.

QUARTERMASTER GENERAL SECOND EDITION

An army may march on its stomach, but this game is no crawler

90-120m | 2-6 | 13+ | £48

Designer: Ian Brody | **Artist:** Nick Avallone

Logistics, as the old adage goes, is the lifeblood of war. For every plane, ship and soldier there exists an entire network of complex organisational chains designed to keep them supplied and in the field. *Quartermaster General WW2 Second Edition* acknowledges this essential truth and creates a lean, fast-paced game out of it.

The game approaches the Second World War at a grand strategic level, with players assuming the roles of nations fighting across the world stage. This premise – and the game's admittedly rather stodgy name – initially call to mind the kind of sprawling, token-laden affair that's more of a lifestyle choice than a game, but this couldn't be further from the truth. Instead, *Quartermaster General WW2* is essentially a card-driven game with a map that has players making crucial tactical decisions without any bookkeeping or referring to tables of any kind.

Each nation is equipped with its own deck of cards and armed forces comprised of tank (land force) and ship (sea force) tokens. The sizes of these armed forces vary in keeping with the historical realities of the conflict; Germany and the United states have the largest militaries, whilst Italy has the smallest. Likewise, the decks are tailored to each country, and consist of cards that allow them to perform one of eight actions – build a navy or army, fight a sea or land battle, conduct economic warfare or play a status, event or response. Events usually result in something happening the turn they're played, whilst response cards are played facedown and can be triggered during an opponent's turn. Status cards are used almost like passive buffs, and have to be played first before their effect – either one off or continual – can be used the following turn.

The crucial thing to understand about *Quartermaster General WW2* is that it's not really about the battles. Fighting is as simple as playing a battle card and removing an enemy token in a space adjacent to one of yours, unless your opponent triggers a response card to prevent it. Instead, the real meat of the gameplay comes from resource management and timely decision making.

Several mechanics are chiefly responsible for this. First, army and navy tokens represent just as much a link in a logistical route as they do a fighting force, and after being placed can't be moved around the board. As a result, players have to daisy-chain their way around the map with what tokens they have their disposal. Key nations in the conflict are marked as supply spaces, and forces that get cut off from them disappear the following turn. Secondly, a country's deck is itself a resource. A new deck isn't created from the discard pile when a deck runs out, so each nation only has access to a limited number of actions in a game, making choices about which cards to use and discard, and when, vital. Lastly, that the effects of response and event cards only occur after they've been placed from a hand means players are forced to devote time to forward planning.

The result is a game that captures the titanic feeling of the Second World War, where victory comes down to a mixture of preparation and making tough choices at the right time. Thanks to the smart design of the decks, the size of the various militaries and a fixed turn sequence that determines which country goes when, each nation follows the broad brushstrokes of its historical counterpart in terms of how it plays and the challenges it faces.

The second edition of the game adds only minor tweaks, the most significant being making the formerly optional rule of giving victory to the side that's 30 points ahead at any time standard, further speeding up play and avoiding a drawn-out defeat. With this new version out, anyone who's ever wanted to play a game about war in the big picture owes it to themselves to play *Quartermaster General WW2*. The game is a tight, polished experience that emphasises stragetising and planning whilst providing gameplay that feels weighty and realistic, without having to rely on a tome-like ruleset or cumbersome minutiae to do so.

JAMES WINSPEAR



WE SAY

Quartermaster General WW2 is an extraordinarily well-designed game, successfully capturing the feeling of playing out all of World War Two in the space of an hour and a half.

tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 4 Victory point markers
- 23 Wooden navy pieces
- 33 Wooden army pieces
- 220 Cards
- Game board
- Game round marker
- Player aid

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... AXIS AND ALLIES 1941

This entry into the venerable World War Two strategy series is a slightly lighter affair than other versions, providing an entry point for those looking to assume the mantle of command again.



VILLAINOUS: PERFECTLY WRETCHED

You see… I'm a really terrible person

Designer: Prospero Hall | **Artist:** Uncredited

40-60m | 2-3 | 10+ | £25

The *Villainous* series seems to have cracked the best way to do expansions. Why not, rather than skew a whole game with a new set of rules, just add a few new characters to your roster. It's a Capcom fighting game approach that is much appreciated, and allows the sequel-expansion-standalone of *Villainous: Perfectly Wretched* to be played on its own terms.

In this box we have Pete the antagonist from Micky Mouse's earliest outings, Mother Gothel of *Tangled* fame, and the obvious star of the box – Cruella De Vil. This feels like a crunchier box of baddies compared to previous Villainous boxes, with slightly more fiddly victory conditions for each villain.

The game follows the same format as before – a kind of worker-placement meets tableau builder game where you place your villain on a location on your own board to perform those actions, which in turn can be partially blocked by heroes set on you by the other baddies you're playing with. Nothing new there, thankfully.

The new characters, with their particularly lovely abstract plastic sculpts, continue to do what the previous games did and offer a hint that ties everything back to their character. Cruella is split black and white in a fur coat, Pete looks like an aggressive potion bottle, and mother Gothel looks like a kind of plant pot. That last appraisal might have something to do with this reviewer's lack of knowledge about the *Tangled* film.

Pete seems to be the fiddliest of the new characters, with a series of goals to complete which are randomly allocated to different locations. These are hidden from other players, so part of the mystery and (fitting) chaos of his character is that you don't know quite what he's going to do next. Cruella is also fairly crunchy, with a need to first gather pups to board locations then use her henchmen (of which there are only two) to capture them. Most of the hero deck for her is one that removes puppies from the board or her capture, making for a fittingly enraged player.

Mother Gothel is the simplest but also the most self-contained – if this game could be played solo it is her that it would work with. Her goal is to encourage Rapunzel back to her tower, and have gained ten trust (converted power tokens). Each turn sees Rapunzel moving further away, and Mother Gothel having to use guards and allies to move her back. It's a tug of war, which make sense, you know, with the hair.

They work well together, but have a distinct air of frustrated plans about everything they do. For fans of this particularly wide timespan of characters it's an easy pick up, and even more so if you're interested in introducing some additional complexity into your *Villainous* evenings. It's tense, back and forth fun, which when the dust has settled, you'll have to ask yourself whether you've just won the battle, or won the wardrobe.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

Is it the place to start? Maybe not, but it wouldn't hurt either. One to pick up for boosting the number of ways you can be evil of an evening.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 3 Villain sculpts
- 3 Villain boards
- 3 Villain decks
- 3 Fate decks
- Power tokens
- 5 Objectives
- 22 Puppy tokens
- 1 Rapunzel hero

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED VILLAINOUS...

Really, there's nothing quite like it, except more of it.







STAR WARS: DARK SIDE RISING

Let the dice flow through you

Designer: Patrick Marino, Andrew Wolf | **Artist:** Various

25-40m | 2-4 | 8+ | £45

Star Wars: Dark Uprising is another game in The OP's 'Rising' series, with this instalment giving players the opportunity to battle the Empire and try and prevent the Death Star from being completed. With familiar faces from *A New Hope*, *Rogue One* and *Rebels*, players must build their team, slow down the completion of the six key Death Star components, and defeat Imperial forces across three planets, all under the watch of a menacing bust of Darth Vader.

The gameplay is simple, with the rulebook quickly being placed to one side after a few turns. Despite the apparent ease of the game, it does still prove to be a challenge as players need to ensure that they are working cooperatively to balance the different objectives, with one victory condition and three conditions that lead to defeat. It is incredibly easy to get hooked on one objective and you may find yourself having already lost. The dice system makes this a game that can be both kind and cruel. An unlucky roll at the wrong time can stop your rebellion in its tracks.

Turns begin by choosing a location to visit with your team, a simple choice that holds a lot of bearing as each turn there is a one in three chance that Darth Vader will visit the sector a player is visiting. Roll randomly to see which of the six Death Star components nears completion or if one is already activated then it triggers a unique ability, which adds an additional dynamic as this can really hinder you as more components come online. Next comes the part of the turn that can, towards the later stages of the game, becomes the tensest roll of the turn, seeing which direction Darth Vader will rotate.

This certainly leads to a few of these rolls being made with closed eyes. Once that potentially traumatic roll is done with it comes time to fight back! Roll a dice to recruit new Rebels or attack Imperial assets by matching all symbols on the card. This is a simple system, but the four different coloured dice each having a higher chance of rolling one of the four symbols (as well as a double result) does provide a tactical element as players can choose their targets to recruit or attacked based on the dice available to them, as well as making it crucial to acquire more dice through recruiting key rebels.

Whilst it doesn't delve deeply into the Star Wars universe or offer players a more in-depth experience of galactic rebellion it really is entertaining to play a few rounds of in an evening. With three different types of dice used across the turn it is a game that is heavily based on chance, which may not be for everyone, but is part of what makes it enjoyable as each roll becomes a make or break moment, with the promise of glory on the other side. Particularly if, like me, your first few attempts end in crushing defeat.

BEN JOY

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Darth Vader die
- 1 Death Star die
- 15 Rebellion dice
- 1 Darth Vader centrepiece
- 1 deployment zone tile
- 4 team deployment tokens
- 30 Alliance tokens
- 30 Death Star components
- 60 Damage counters
- 1 Death Star centrepiece
- 6 Death Star component tiles
- 4 Team base/summary cards
- 51 asset (Rebel and Imperial) cards





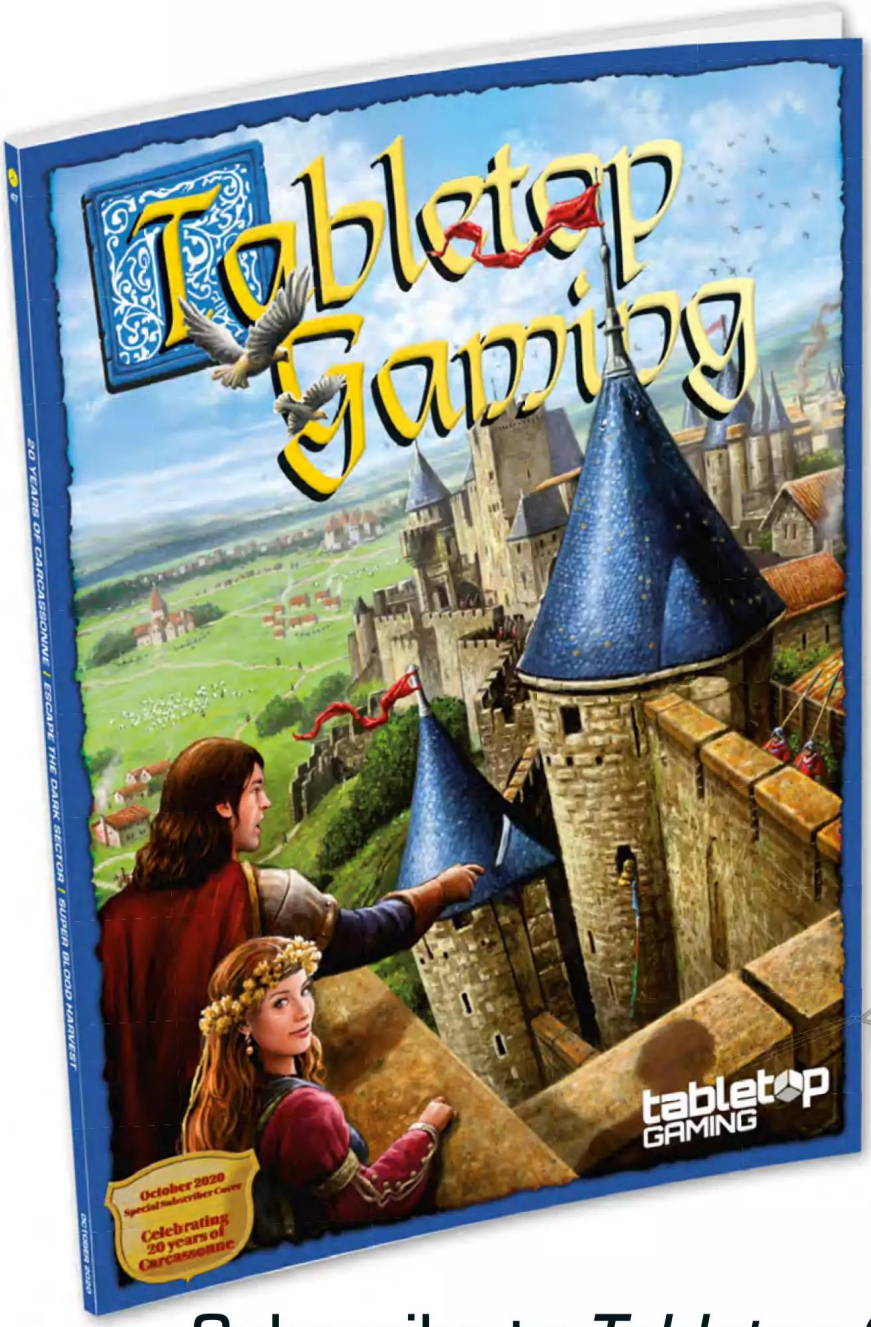
WE SAY

You won't find anything really nitty gritty, but you will find yourself playing this until you prevent the Empire from unleashing the power of this fully armed and operational battle station. (Wait, wrong film...)

PLAY THIS IF YOU LIKED... ESCAPE: THE CURSE OF THE TEMPLE

If you're a fan of classic cooperative dice game, *Escape: The Curse of the Temple*, then *Dark Side Rising* should get your midi-chlorians going.

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WORMLORD

Worms, armageddon

Designer: Jonathan Bittner, Andrew Cedotal | **Artist:** Gyom

25-40m | 2-4 | 8+ | £30

Dexterity games don't often get the love they deserve in the boardgame community. Occasionally something breaks through, like *Klask*, or *Rhino Hero*, but for the most part they're given a second-class status of being a bit too much like sport. And while some focus on the skill of a game, this is not the case here, this is the brutal, muddy attrition of a rugby scrum.

Wormlord is a game which asks you to take over territory one space at a time, leading out from your base across a modular, tiled board. Simple enough. You advance by tying a knot in a small shoelace of your colour and placing it on the tile you want to take. You, like your legless competitors, are aiming for the castles. Control three, and you will become the titular lord of the worms.

But, ah, what is this? You have bumped into an enemy worm, knotted as yours are. To take this space you must first knot your worm, place it on that location, and then take the opposing worm and undo the knot. You then return the worm to their player.

While the rules state not to tie your knots too tight, and not to throw the worms past the player you're returning it to, this is exactly what will inevitably happen. It's a raucous game and one where you'll often find yourself in desperate back and forth of desperately tying small knots quicker than the person who is removing your worms. This can feel like a real battle of endurance, as, you soon realise, you probably only tie a knot once a day, after all – a good knot is one that doesn't come loose.

There's a number of different board layouts that can be easily created and swapped around. There's a ludicrous team mode that asks each member of the team to only use one hand. It's only for four pages of rules, which is mostly just diagrams of set ups.

And there's forward bases you can apply which adds additional pressure to these standoffs. These can't be moved, except by the owning player, making placing them close to the goal of the fortifications a constant point of conflict. The way to win, often is to not be noticed, or just be somehow quicker than the other worm-contortionists around you. If the former is true, it's quite likely your quietness will be noticed eventually and attentions will turn to you, and your advances will be repelled. Eventually someone's smart moves will be enough to push them over to owning the require fortresses and they will claim victory.

Games are short, often over in a matter of minutes, which means that winning or losing a round is of no great consequence. This doesn't take the fun out of the strain while you're in the game, but allows for breezy back and forth in between rounds. It's got that bar sports competition feeling without the exclusion that comes with requiring a large amount of dexterous control, and as such, it makes for a profound piece of nonsense.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

Wormlord is a deeply silly game that does everything a good dexterity game does, with the addition of really equalising out the skill level for most players by removing the usual 'control' aspect of these games. Accessible and highly competitive.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 60 Earthworms
- 4 Headquarter cubes
- 1 Modular game board



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... KLASK

Sure, *Wormlord* isn't a sports game at first glance, but for fans of the endless back and forth of Klask, we shouldn't be making too much of a differentiation.





MÖRK BORG

Doom has come

Designers: Pelle Nilsson & Johan Nohr

86 | 18+ | £30

From its name to its tone to the design of its rulebook, everything about *MÖRK BORG* is pushed far beyond what common sense tells you the limits of conventional RPGs could – and possibly should – be. The result is a pile of punkish occult weirdness splattered in ink-black and neon yellow, beautiful to look at and hilariously bleak to play.

On a very fundamental level, the game is an incredibly lightweight take on old-school, *Dungeons & Dragons*-esque fantasy roleplaying, but with the grim and gritty dial turned all the way up. And then twisted a bit more. And then bashed off with a bit of broken femur.

The result is a world so monstrously dark and brutal that it wouldn't look out of place on a death metal album cover. Everything from the trees to the player characters, who can't really be described as anything even approaching 'heroes,' are decayed, corrupted and limping towards a miserable death.

However, rather than being a depressing slogfest, a read through the *MÖRK BORG* rulebook is utterly captivating, simply because it's a work of art. More Hieronymus Bosch than Picasso, to be sure, but art nonetheless.

Every single page in the book is a uniquely designed labour of love intended to provoke a reaction beyond simply explaining rules or background settings. Medieval woodcuts mix with ink-spattered sketches, while silvery



inlays pick out warped and decayed titles. There's no attempt to keep fonts, sizes and layouts even vaguely consistent – indeed, it wouldn't come as a surprise to find that the designers had deliberately ripped out anything that threatened to make a pattern.

This gleeful dismissal of conventional design practise makes a book that's damnably tricky to use at the table or as a teaching tool, but honestly that doesn't seem to be the point. *Mörk Borg* describes itself as "rules-light, heavy everything else" and it isn't wrong about that.

The core of the gameplay will be familiar to anybody who's ever touched a variation of *D&D*, with most tasks being conquered with a 20-sided dice and a sprinkling of addition, but in the same way that a fire-gutted house is familiar. Every rule and sub-system that wasn't needed to keep things standing has been ripped out, and what little that's left is scorched black.

There are no magical races to play as, no tangled tables of saves and bonuses and no levels. Characters might get an advancement when the GM wills it, but to be honest it seems tough for any of them to survive long enough for this to come up too often.

The biggest question that springs to mind as you read the rulebook and parse pages of weird prophecies and rules about spitting phlegm in your enemies' eyes, is that of quite how serious the writers are being.

You could easily read the entire thing as one big joke – a setting so grim and depressing that it passes out the other end and becomes weirdly funny. However, you could very easily treat the either thing as completely sincere; as a world and a game filled with genuine horrors and soul-sapping tragedy.

This is perhaps *MÖRK BORG*'s greatest strength. If it was obviously a pastiche of grittier-than-thou fantasy settings the endless nastiness and hopelessness would quickly become depressing. Likewise, the game wouldn't be anywhere near as fun to squelch through if there weren't so many entirely serious attempts at its dank medieval horror squatting on game store shelves across the world.

Indeed, as both a setting and as a game it only really makes sense within the wider context of roleplaying in general, and old-school *D&D* clones in particular. There aren't any real guidelines for what the players are doing in this world or even an explanation of what being a game master entails. Instead, *MÖRK BORG* makes the rather reasonable assumption that everybody picking up an art-punk RPG decorated in shades of angry wasp already have the basics buried in their brains.

On a logical, reasoned level this makes it rather a mixed bag. The layout is tough to navigate, the rules are functional but nothing you can't bodge together from a dozen other old-school *D&D* clones, and the world is hopeless to the point of being nonsensical.

MÖRK BORG isn't much into logic or reason, though. It's about style and energy; grim humour and gritty imagery. And no, it doesn't really tick all the boxes of a well-built modern RPG, but it absolutely nails everything to do with being one hell of an experience.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

If it was any darker it'd be a black hole, but there's a sackful of twisted charm and disturbing style in this slim little book.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *ZWEIHÄNDER*

Same grim, gritty tone, love of old-school ideas and ever-present umlaut, but with more stripped-down rules and prettier design

COURT OF THE DEAD

Court tomb drama

Designer: Patrick Marino | **Artist:** Tom Gilliland & Various

90m | 2-5 | 14+ | £90

Death has had enough of the daily grind of soul collecting for both heaven and hell. They want out. Or rather, they want to put an end to the war between heaven and hell. But it'll have to be a kind of low key, because if heaven or hell notice the guilds in support of the court of the dead, they'll get punished.

Court of the Dead is a worker placement and area control game with a few drafting and push-your-luck mechanisms integrated. Almost every part of the game has some kind of over-the-table interaction. The initial distribution of etherea (i.e. fantasy cash) comes in the form of making even or uneven piles and having those piles picked by players in order. Cards are drafted in a pick-and-pass method. The celestial tithe is paid in blind bidding. Placing a guild member on a location exposes both players on that location to a potential wipe out. Each of these interactions gives players the chance to kick out against others around the table specifically, or spoil things for everyone.

The major threats to your pieces in the game come in the form of player acting in their own interest. The game ends when the board runs out of unity tokens, a victory point currency and an interesting timer. These tokens are collected quicker the better everyone around the table works together.

In short, players can slow down the action by being selfish. A great example of this is the celestial tithe, this is a cost to be paid between players worked out by a track on the board. This track can be pushed up easily through playing out minions and activating locations. Paying the tithe comes in the form of secretly collecting up the amount of etherea you want to contribute and holding it in your fist over the table at the same time as others. The game encourages players to give any impression of what's in their hand they want. You can tell everyone not to worry, you'll pick up the tab, and put nothing in.

Then there's the dreadsgrip track, which dictates the number of guild figures allowed in a single location. If this is exceeded, then each figure over the threshold has to roll to remain on the board. This is important as you only collect the effects of locations at the end of the round. There's always a chance someone could pop a figure into a location you control in the hope of wiping you out. It could backfire, but those looking for a bit of chaos in their game will be well served.

It's an interesting game that asks you to take stock of all of its systems at once. Play is fast, but considered. Players are all working towards creating the end board state that falls out in their favour. There's a certain elegance to hiding the effects that players are going to have on different tracks that keeps the game interesting from turn to turn – you have to be able to read other players and this is where the devious fun comes in.

If a highly interactive, but accessible, big centrepiece is needed for you games evening, then *Court of the Dead* is bang to rights.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

An intricate game that reveals itself as straightforward, with enough dramatic flourishes to offer a little bit of over the table theatrics. Oh, and gorgeous to look at.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 1 Game board
- 48 Guild figures
- 1 Death figure
- 1 Malavestros figure
- 40 Guild mover bases
- 14 Court cards
- 27 Mourner cards
- 36 Wallows cards
- 12 Objective cards
- 4 Reference cards
- 4 Player boards
- 50 Etherea pieces
- 45 Unity tokens
- 12 Faction tokens
- 1 Dreadsbane token
- 24 Wooden trackers
- 14 Tracker pieces
- 4 Dice



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *ABOMINATION: THE HEIR OF FRANKENSTEIN*

If you're looking for kind of goth worker placement, and enjoyed the slightly bonkers ideas of *Abomination*, then *Court of the Dead* will suit you perfectly



ON MARS

Yes, we can confirm there is most definitely life there. But it's hard

Designer: Vital Lacerda | **Artist:** Ian O'Toole

80-150m | 2-4 | 14+ | £100

As any scientist will (probably) tell you, a sure way to lose weight is to move to Mars. Given the Red Planet's surface gravity is only 38 percent of Earth's, anything on Mars will be almost two-thirds lighter than it is here, right? Yet, for all our dusty neighbour's light and bouncy appeal, it does seem to attract distinctly heavyweight board games.

Following *First Martians* (4.18/5 complexity rating on *BoardGameGeek*) and *Terraforming Mars* (3.24/5), we now have *On Mars*, the latest, ultra-crunchy Euro game from the Portuguese Count of Complexity (not his real title) Vital Lacerda. Anyone familiar with Lacerda's ludography – which includes *Lisboa*, *Escape Plan* and *Vinhos* (see page 9) – won't be surprised to hear that *On Mars* has a whopping 4.61/5 complexity rating on *BGG*. It comprises a multiplicity of intricately interlocking mechanisms which both bear out its ambitious frontier-pushing theme (colonising another planet is *bloody* difficult) and combine to make a game which has a mile-high barrier to entry but once all its rules are fully absorbed, in turn proves rewardingly absorbing.

There is so much going on, it often feels like you're playing three or four cube-pushing, tile-laying, meeple-placing, resource-managing games at once. Each player runs a company expanding out from Mars Base Camp after the first settlers arrived in 2037. As in *Terraforming Mars*, you all work together, to a degree, to make life on Mars viable. Here, that's all about levelling up the colony, which happens when a certain number of buildings are established, regardless of who constructs them. Rewards are given to the players who build the required structures – by spending the relevant resources and laying them as hex tiles on artist Ian O'Toole's striking map board – while levelling up the colony expands options for everyone and provides an end-game trigger.

But the game is more likely to end before that happens, when all three randomly assigned missions have been completed by the players as a group, with the final scoring taking in how many building complexes each player has constructed, how many rocket ships and colonists they've welcomed up from Earth, how much they've developed their technology (represented by tiles that move along an upgrade track on each player board), how many advanced buildings they have, and how busy their scientists have been, among other things.

But while there is always a lot going on, and game progress will often be slowed by repeated rulebook checks and studies of the reference guide (mostly there to explain all the action icons, as there's barely any text on the board or cards), each turn is actually a relatively simple matter of taking an action and then perhaps spending resources to gain a bonus 'Executive' action. These actions cleverly depend on whether you're on the orbital Space Station, developing tech or buying resources, or down on the planet's surface with your industrious Bots and Rover. So there is a lot of short-term planning to be done; you don't want to be stuck up in orbit after the shuttle's just left when there's a mine to be dug, for example.

Of course, this neat, theme-driven board-dividing mechanism only focuses your choices to a certain degree, and you will often find your brain spinning as all the possible strategies pile up. But that is the great joy of *On Mars*. It is so deep and broad and multi-layered that you never settle into a routine or think you've got it cracked. As such, it is a game that you'll crave returning to again and again – assuming, that is, you don't mind things getting heavy.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

On Mars is an impressive looking Euro, and one which is both challenging and rewarding to play. But be warned: it's strictly for heavyweight game lovers only.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 4 Player boards
- 4 Astronaut markers
- 4 Point-tracking tokens
- 16 Bot meeples
- 32 Advanced building markers
- 48 Colonist meeples
- 4 Rover meeples
- 20 Ship markers
- 20 cubes
- 6 Scientist meeples
- 1 Colony level marker
- 1 Shuttle marker
- 4 LSS Track markers
- 55 Building tiles
- 1 Removeable building tiles display tray
- 100 Resource tiles
- 30 Crystals
- 8 Research tiles
- 19 Discovery tiles
- 20 Tech tiles
- 3 Mission cubes
- 1 Remaining missions tracker
- 3 Mission markers
- 8 LSS reward tiles
- 6 First Colonist tiles
- 12 First Colonist cards
- 1 Scientists and Earth contracts board
- 24 Blueprint cards
- 6 Scientist cards
- 12 Earth contract cards
- 16 Private goal cards
- 9 Mission cards
- 12 Solo cards
- 4 Player aids



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *TERRAFORMING MARS*

Same theme, same blend of cooperative and competitive, similar level of complexity





TAJUTO

A game about Buddhism with inner pieces

Designer: Reiner Knizia | **Artists:** Damien Colboc, Maxence Burge

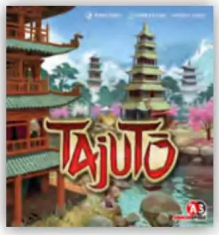
40-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £50

There's been a new movement in games over the last year or two, with titles that are more about the way they make you feel than about winning. So hearing that Reiner Knizia's latest is about maintaining mindfulness while constructing Buddhist pagodas, and the winner is the one who attains the highest level of spirituality shouldn't be a surprise. He is, after all, the master creator, the most prolific game designer of all time.

Unfortunately, we're not going to learn if the market is ready for games of mental calm because in *Tajuto* 'meditation' and 'spirituality' aren't things you feel, they're numbers you try to increase. Specifically they're currencies.

There's a subset of Eurogames that follow the same meta-structure, with two currencies. The first comes easily, and players have to work out how to spend it in the most efficient way to gain the second currency, which are often victory points. It's not a new design (*Catan* uses the same template) and in fact it's a bit long in the tooth. And in a nutshell, that's what *Tajuto* is.

Knizia knows this of course. In the language of games mechanics, he is the closest thing there is to Shakespeare: eloquent, innovative, multi-influenced, influential, and prolific. He'd be the first to tell you this is not a game that will help you along the eightfold path. The theme is a wrapper, no matter how pretty the bits in the box – and they are pretty.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Gameboard
- 8 pagodas (6 floors each)
- Cloth bag
- 4 monk meeple
- 32 offering cubes
- 12 action tiles
- 15 wisdom tiles
- 4 transcendence tiles
- 6 additional action tiles
- 8 objective tiles
- 8 inauguration tiles
- Rulebook



You start the game with three tiles in front of you, each with three possible actions on it. Activate a tile to use one of its actions, except that two of the tiles cost mediation points so you can't use them until you've got some. The actions are: spend meditation points to buy a new tile, which gives extra actions, or bonuses, or spirituality points, or the chance to score if a particular pagoda gets finished; or place an offering in a pagoda, which earns meditation points; or draw a piece of a pagoda from the bag.

The pagodas are at the heart of the game. You build them. There are eight, and each one has six floors of declining size, and all of these 48 bits of plastic start off in a bag. You can usually identify which floor you want by touch, but you've no idea what colour you're going to get.

You can also place a piece on a pagoda for free, as long as its colour matches, and complete one of eight possible objectives that score bonus points. You can only keep one pagoda-layer in your hand at a time.

For a game about spirituality, it's surprisingly material. The gameplay is solid: it's clever without being inspired, and there's no dazzling innovation here, but it is perfectly balanced, intriguing and strategic. It doesn't start well, forcing you into drawing and placing pagoda pieces for the first few turns to gain enough points to do anything else, but once it's into Act 2 then every choice is an interesting one, and you'll spend lots of time calculating the odds of drawing a pagoda-piece you want and basing your strategy on that.

It's not Knizia at his strongest but it's thoroughly entertaining and doesn't outstay its welcome. If you can get past the way you acquire and spend 'meditation points' like they're £20 notes, there's plenty to enjoy here.

JAMES WALLIS

WE SAY

If you like Knizia games then this is the sort of thing you'll like. If you haven't tried a Knizia game then it's about time you did.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *TIKAL*

Wolfgang Kramer and Michael Kiesling's masterpiece of exploring central-American ruins has you building multi-storey ziggurats, though with less talk of spirituality.



FLYIN' GOBLIN

Goblin lobbin' fun

Designers: Corentin Lebrat, Théo Rivière | **Artist:** Tomasz Larek

30m | 2-4 | 8+ | £35

This should have gone so wrong. This should have been a game that gets reviewed as being about picking up meeples that have been flung across the room. This should have been about the game not being as deep as others in the Iello family game catalogue.

And yet, here we are. It's great. Yes, there is a *small* amount of goblin-fetching from the floor. And certainly, it's not a *deep* game. But it is highly competitive, and feels a lot better than it has any right to.

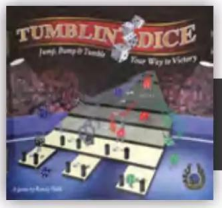
It's a dexterity game about using a well-proportioned catapult (the seesaw kind) to chuck some custom goblin-shaped meeples into the castle of the king. The castle is built into the box, a tidy trend in gaming we're happy to welcome in this case. The castle remains robust because of this, and there's almost no set-up time beyond dishing out the different coloured goblins.

Each room you land in has an effect, such as collecting gold or diamonds.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 4 Catapults
- 4 Army boards
- 20 Goblin soldier pawns
- 6 Goblin captain pawns
- 8 Goblin looter pawns
- 16 Totems pawns
- 50 Coin tokens
- 50 Diamond tokens
- 1 Integrated castle
- 1 Tower



Some effects are negative, like losing diamonds, while others influence your army board – the area you use to recruit your other, sometimes more advanced, goblins. This area is also where you buy in your totems, which, if they remain standing on the roof of the castle, allows you to claim victory.

The game is played out of the box, with some punch out inserts quickly forming a tower and the various rooms of the castle. Then the catapulting begins, all at once.

You simultaneously lob your goblin meeples over the castle walls and into the various rooms, with each declaring they're done as they run out of goblins. The last person flinging (if you miss and the goblin lands near you, you can re-shoot) gets one more go and then everyone activates the rooms they're in. Taking their bounty, or penalties. Next, players can buy things in to play from their board like captain goblins that double the effect of a room.

And most importantly, players will be buying and then placing parts of their totem on the castle. You can only buy one piece at a time, so your totem has to survive a round of goblin barrages to remain on the castle. There's usually a concerted effort to knock off the leader's totem at any one time.

It's surprisingly quick to get to grips with, and soon you'll be taking meaningful shots at your opponents' towers, or into the room with the bonus that's going to help you the most. Once you do, and knowing that your competitors are probably doing the same, it's very much a game of praying your totem doesn't fall in the chaos. With highs and lows in any single round, *Flyin' Goblin* provides edge-of-your-seat moments as well as the desire to do a premier league level celebration for smashing the winner's tower down with one, perfect, shot. It's a game of 'having the knack' in some ways, which might put some off, but once you've got the faintest grasp on it, it'll give you back catapults full of fun.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

Hopefully this is how all worker placement games will ask you to place your meeples in the future. Fast, highly competitive, and just feels right – which is pretty much exactly what you want from a dexterity game.

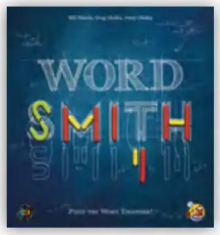
TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *TUMBLE DICE*

Falling, rather than flinging, *Tumble Dice* offers some of the high-flying family fun of *Flyin' Goblin*

WORDSMITH

Designer: Bill Eberle, Peter Olotka, Greg Olotka | **Artist:** Annika Brüning

20-30m | 1-4 | 10+ | £29



It seems almost impossible to create a 'new' word game. Yet, the creative minds behind *Cosmic Encounters*, Bill Eberle, Peter Olotka have joined Greg Olotka to attempt a fresh take. The approach itself is simple, yet effective. Players compete against each other to make words, but before they can commit their many-lettered beast to paper to score points, they will have to assemble each letter by arranging them from fragments.



In *Wordsmith*, all players begin with the same pool of eight available pieces – sticks of two lengths and semi-circles of two sizes. Combining these shapes (there is a guide of the letter composition on the side of the box) creates the letters and which can then be arranged into a word. Once the word is scored – based on the number of letters it has – players can use the same shapes to create a different word or roll a die that determines the piece they can pick up and add to their personal pool. There is only one catch – unused pieces become negative points as the game progresses, discouraging players from hoarding or spending too much time on creating long, elaborate words.

Players are unlikely to experience the level of satisfaction equal to scoring 'Oxyphenbutazone' in *Scrabble* when creating words in *Wordsmith*. This is not a game about regurgitating the most impressive word you know from a dictionary. It focuses on the economy of available pieces: using them efficiently to be the first to create six words without wasting to many pieces. This approach focuses on agility and ingenuity, making the game more accessible to a wider range of players. It 'levels' the playing field for erudites, novices and even those who don't have English as their first language.

ALEX SONECHKINA

HARRY POTTER: DEATH EATERS RISING

Designers: Patrick Marino, Andrew Wolf

45-90m | 2-4 | 11+ | £47



When the wizarding world meets the cube clearing *Pandemic*, *Harry Potter: Death Eaters Rising* is born. It would be very tempting to disregard this game as a cash grab, which overly relies on the core area-control and area-management mechanics that sees the *Pandemic* series still going strong. And an argument can be made in support of that statement.



The Ministry of Magic, Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley are under attack by Voldemort and his Death Eaters, corrupting locations (i.e adding bad cubes to the area) with each onslaught. Sound familiar? Players work together as members of The Order of the Phoenix, Hogwarts and Dumbledore's army, to capture Death Eaters, clear corruption and defeat Voldemort. The theme of the licence just about fits the gameplay, but its seams can be easily spotted.

Yet, a couple of rounds into *Death Eater Rising* and the scepticism dissipates. The original criticisms are still there but fade away as you're busy having fun with the game. The mixture of character abilities and dice rolling create fluid gameplay that is shaped by player decisions. Luck averse players can pick characters that can manipulate dice outcomes, while others can go for a bigger dice pool or abilities that combo for more high risk, high reward actions per turn. The game is still tough, but even though the bad guys hit hard, victory against the Death Eaters and Voldemort feels achievable.

Of course, the love for the universe plays a part: for fans of the franchise, it is hard not to rush to save Sirius in the Ministry of Magic from the next Death Eater attack. Even if parts of *Death Eater Rising* can feel derivative, the character power synergies elevate the gameplay, mixing strategy, luck and a dash of nostalgia to make an enjoyable experience.

ALEX SONECHKINA

CORSAIRS OF VALERIA

High seas, low stakes

15-30m | 2-5 | 8+ | £20

Designer: Wouter van Strien | **Artist:** Mihajlo Dimitrievski

According to board games, the only thing pirates love more than plunder is racing. Games like Jamaica and *Extraordinary Adventures: Pirates!* have brought the hijinks of Wacky Races to the high seas as players scramble to set sail to prove their piratey worth. Whilst these games can comfortably take centre stage in a gaming night, *Corsairs* is a light and breezy dice game designed to warm up your cockles or fill a short lunch break with a sprint for silver.

2-5 players set sail to the legendary Skull Island, pillaging ports, merchant ships and each other along the way as they compete to be the first to own six chests full of silver. To do this, each player's turn starts with them rolling five custom wooden dice, deciding if they want to spend grog to reroll any of them, before finally resolving the actions on all dice. Each die has the same set of six faces, including actions to gain silver coins, sail their ship across the board, gain grog for future rerolls or lose silver to the mighty Skull Island, sweetening the pot for whichever sea dog lands there first.

At the end of their turn, if a player owns five silver coins they can trade them in for a chest of silver, banking them away safely from all but the most determined of buccaneer. For in addition to players being able to use the cannon face to rob neutral merchant ships, rolling three cannons will let you take all loose silver from any other player, whilst rolling a full Yahtzee of cannonades lets you steal a whole treasure chest instead, cementing your status as luckiest (and most hated) bilge rat at the table.

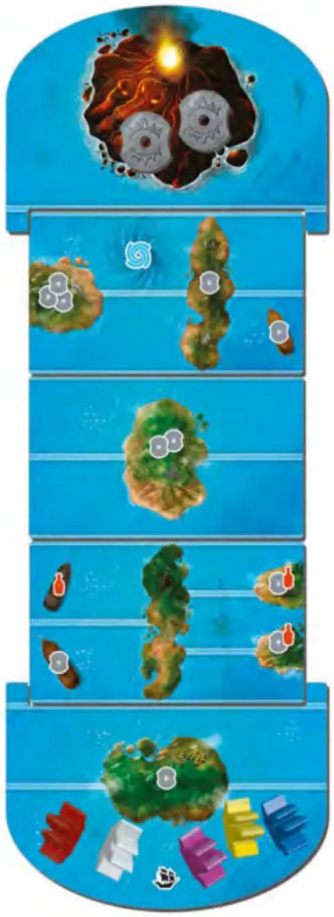
Much like how *Love Letter*'s first western edition was set in the world of heavy strategy series *Tempest*, *Corsairs* is a reimplementation of the designer's previous game *Wacky Pirates*, now set in scurvy seascape of the Valeria franchise. Van Strien has made great use of this refresh to improve upon the original's design, adding a randomized tile-laying board design that helps create a different race track for each game, which when combined with a wealth of unique pirate captain power cards gives the game a generous amount of replay value.

These additions may help keep the game fresh, but they fail from distracting from the biggest flaw that *Corsairs* suffers. For all the love that's gone into creating a game of action and treasure, the main mechanic of push your luck dice rolling is both too random, yet somehow not random enough. Because each die face is different, it's hard to ever have a real choice in what you do. The one-in-six chance of any given face showing up means that, despite the game's generous rerolling system, you'll often be stuck with whatever fate had in store. The unique captain powers may help each player to combat this differently, but sadly they only manage to transform a game that should be about risking it all on the roll of the dice to a simplistic task of risk aversion. There is always "best" and "worst" way to play each captain, meaning that experienced gamers will soon see through the game's spirited attempts at randomization and optimise the fun out of the game.

That's not to say this game doesn't have its charms and those with younger scallywags or who are new to board games will definitely appreciate the game's light hearted rules and playtime, but if you've been rolling bones for a few years now you may find the novelty wears off quicker than watered-down rum.

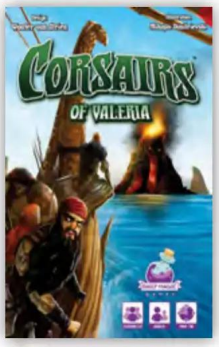
MATTHEW VERNALL





WE SAY

If you're new to push your luck dice games it's a fun casual title with plenty of replay value. But if you don't like the mechanics or care for pirates this game won't change your mind.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX:

- 5 Wooden dice
- 5 Ship tokens
- 5 Ship boards
- 35 Cardboard silver coins
- 11 Captain cards
- 1 Starting island tile
- 1 Skull island tile
- 4 double-sided sea tiles

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *BANG! THE DICE GAME*

This adaptation of the gun slinging classic captures the tension and thrill of a wild west shootout, making each roll of the dice a tense experience for everyone around the table.



CRAZY TOWER

Designers: Alexis Harvey, Félix Leblanc, Mathieu Auger, Manuel Bergeron | **Artist:** Chris Setra

30m | 1-4 | 10+ | £29

Watching the increasingly ridiculous evolution of *Jenga* over the past decade has been interesting to say the least. No longer sated with just stacking wooden blocks like their forebears, children are instead expected to play the game on a handheld platform in *Jenga Pass*, with tetris pieces in *Tetris Jenga*, or on a plinth that shakes in *Jenga Quake*. The latter of which is much easier than it sounds. But the constant reinvention goes to show that there is still a world of possibilities in stacking wooden blocks and Synapses Games' *Crazy Tower* shows off a few of the less explored possibilities.

Starting with a selection of polyominoes, each player has a set colour and has the goal of putting all their pieces on the tower without being the one to knock it down. Bigger pieces like the five square L block are worth more points and with a golf-like scoring at the end, the race is on to get rid of the big pieces as best you can. As the game progresses, you'll draw floor cards that restrict the placement of blocks and force the tower into strange and awkward shapes. And with the floors blocking sight from above, *Crazy Tower* requires a bit of memorisation as well as skill.

Where *Crazy Tower* really spices things up is with the special spaces that, when covered, give the active player the ability to play again, remove a piece from one of the lower levels, or exchange one of their unplayed blocks with another player. Which is great for forcing the better players into awkward moves. And in the saboteur mode, this is a vital part of the tactics just like placing new floors as far off the tower as possible.

And it even comes with a great solo mode!

ANNA BLACKWELL



LETTERPRESS

Designer: Robin David

20m | 1-6 | 14+ | £15

Finding a new way to have fun making words can often feel like a fool's errand. We've surely covered all the bases. Aren't you just going to make a game that is '*Scrabble* but this…' every time?

Yes, you probably are. *Letterpress*, from Osprey in this usual vein, but not in a bad way. The best way to think of it is as poker-scrabble. Players have a hand of cards that are drafted in a pick-and-pass method. A 'river' style arrangement of five cards – vowels, consonant and challenge cards – is placed across the play area. These can be used to create a word with those in your hand (doubles can be assumed, but not for extra points). This is done secretly and reveled at the end of the round. Points are scored like *Scrabble*'s tiles.

The winner decides which of the played cards they would like to take into their collection. Challenge cards can be collected if the prerequisite is met, and they usually contain something useful like an 'ing'. The final round is played with your stashed cards, and it is from this the game's winner is decided.

It's a deceptively deep word game with an interesting amount of strategy. Choosing the letters as you go through, or deciding to meet a challenge with a sub-optimal word, is sometimes a difficult choice to make. After all, if someone beats you and meets the card's demands, they'll be able to take it before you. Also, the choice to go for difficult letters in the drafting round might be a risk worth taking. It all depends on how clever you're feeling at the time. The competitive element, while not exactly fiery, does make itself known as players take cards being eyed up by others around the table.

If a word game doesn't need to be more than accessible, novel, and fun, then *Letterpress* has a font-full.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT





SANCTUM

The devil you know

Designer: Filip Neduk | **Artists:** Jakub Politzer, František Sedláček

1-2h | 2-4 | 12+ | £50

Another trip to hell. Haven't got the right gear for that? No problem, we'll pick something up on the way. Meet *Sanctum*, a tabletop attempt to emulate hack-and-slash videogames like *Diablo II*. And it very nearly does it.

This adventure begins as many do. Players take their character boards (depicting different classes with slight variations) and matching coloured minis, and begin their travels across variably placed boards towards the inner realms of *Sanctum*. The sculpts are nice enough, and the art lavish. Players can, once embarked, decide to move forward – hopping to the front of the queue – and collect some demons, fight said demons already collected, or rest.

The demon collection feels odd at the start, but actually makes more sense as you move on. As you explore, more enemies might spot you, and therefore attack you, seems to be the logic. You choose which pair to take from the board and add to your personal demon punching zone, ready for confrontation. Combat, when it happens, is an attempt to match the dice on the demons, tracking hits with tokens. If you fail, they hit you for what can seem like massive damage. This is where your gear and skills come in. The gear you wear provides modifiers for dice rolls, or ways to absorb attacks. Take your stamina and focus tokens and place them on the matching gear to use their effect. These will need to be cleared by resting or with potions, so it's mostly about token management.

Your skills are laid out in columns with their gems on, defeating a demon allows matching gems to be moved up. Cleared skills can be used, but this makes the next layer that much harder to clear. It's an elegant solution to creating an experience curve.

The other thing demons do is give you loot when dispatched. On the back of each demon card is a piece of armour or weaponry that will give you bonuses. Quickly the game becomes 'that demon has some shoes in it' rather than 'fighting the darkness.' The use of enemies as loot-bags that you have to cut open is another nod to the hack-and-slash influences in the game.

All these systems interact in a fairly intuitive way, and the game ends up playing quite fast. You will, of course, be using whatever equipment you can get your hands on. So, while you may start off dressed as a barbarian or ranger, you're going to have to deal with your armour not matching your shoes. But then, this isn't 'fashion souls.'

To win the game players must not only survive, but survive by the most. Health is the decider for who did the best at killing the demon lord, which seems a strange way of measuring such feats. It's also another game that's competitive presenting as cooperative, without any player engagement. Are we working together thematically? It's unclear, we certainly can't help each other along the way.

It's an attempt at fidelity to some of those videogamey systems that is, at the very least, impressive. The translation loses little for coming to the tabletop, and while we're well aware that 'doing dice maths to kill demons' isn't necessarily for everyone, for those that it is for, you're in for a treat.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 3 Double-sided act boards
- 1 Hoardes board
- 1 Achievements board
- 4 Player boards
- 4 Health counters
- 18 Double-sided potion tiles
- 5 Rage tiles
- 12 Skill tiles
- 24 Skill cards
- 12 Achievement tiles
- 3 Divine intervention tiles
- 6 Starting bonus cards
- 84 Demon/item cards
- 51 Demon Lord cards
- 85+ Round plastic stamina, focus and hits token
- 84 Plastic gem tokens
- 4 Plastic miniatures
- 24 Wooden dice
- 4 Quick reference sheets

WE SAY

Fans of the genre will appreciate all the nods, and the retained inelegancies in *Sanctum*, for those looking for a bit of demon bashing, there may be better options.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *DESCENT*

If you're looking for a dungeon crawl, this is one of the best places to start, with slightly less token shuffling

SORCERER CITY

Tile laying. Deck building. Groundbreaking.

Designer: Scott Caputo | **Artists:** Damien Mammoliti, David Kegg, Mr Cuddington, Justin Chan

45-60m | 1-6 | 14+ | £40

With a seismic rumble, the foundations of the city shift beneath your feet. Things that once seemed so stable and secure are suddenly thrust skywards; your home. Your hopes for a quiet life. This is the world designer Scott Caputo has created in his latest game *Sorcerer City*.

Tasked with constructing their own city district, players will draw and place coloured tiles from a personal deck, gathering resources and scoring points through careful placement of Goal tiles. Some of which score for clusters of the same colour, whilst others score only in a straight line or for each other goal on a neighbouring tile. Each round will end with players tearing down their districts ready to start anew, with the player scoring the most prestige after five rounds earning the title of Head Wizard.

Of course, there are some similarities to *Carcassonne* in that brief summary, but this is where they end. Indeed, *Sorcerer City* is intent on straying from the usual framework for tile laying city builders, swapping calm and considered tile placement for an intensely chaotic two minute scramble. Included with the game is a sand timer used to time each of the five building rounds, with an optional app timer offering easy (three minutes) and difficult (one minute) modes and a tension building soundtrack. Revealing one tile at a time, players will add to their districts as best they can, ever cautious of time ticking away. The fearful glances between the constant trickle of the sand timer and the dwindling piles of your opponents' tiles gives *Sorcerer City* an astounding level of competitiveness without the need to resort to direct conflict or take-that mechanics. These design decisions keep the game feeling light-hearted whilst still encouraging fierce competition.

Offering respite from the frantic building phase is Caputo's ingenious adoption of deck building mechanics, seamlessly sandwiched between each round. Whilst the game starts with each player scrambling to build their districts from identical sets of tiles, later rounds will see players' stacks growing ever larger with tiles bought from the market display or acquired through special abilities. Each round opens up more opportunities for customisation. Where one player might focus on tiles to generate gold to acquire more powerful tiles, another might gradually expand their point building engine, scoring increasing amounts of Prestige each round. Of course, being wizards, the option to build districts optimised for Magic or Influence production is also tantalising, with the former acting as a wild resource, convertible into any other, whilst the latter decides who gains each round's bonus points and abilities.



With tiles appearing in a random order and time ticking away, things don't always go to plan. Fortunately, much of the thrill of *Sorcerer City* lies in making the best of what is given to you and is handily packed with variability thanks to a generous selection of monsters, influence rewards, and artefacts, making each playthrough feel like a new challenge.

Despite its thrilling setting, *Sorcerer City*'s gameplay is unashamedly abstract as is most of its graphic design. Whilst the component quality is excellent and text and symbols are clear, city tiles only vaguely resemble patches of buildings beneath the bright blocks of colour, with monster tiles largely sharing this same design albeit with an added illustration. Undoubtably, this simplicity aids the fast and frantic gameplay, but it lacks the thematic sense of actually building something that other tile laying games have. That aside, Caputo has nonetheless produced an exhilaratingly innovative game that manages to stay fun and fresh game after game.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

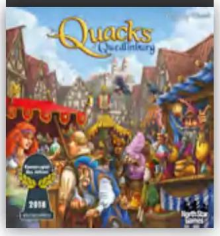
Mirroring the turbulent districts of the titular city, Caputo has torn up the foundations of tile laying and deck building, and reshaped them into something new and exciting for players to explore. With its simple rules, fast and intense gameplay and generous replayability, *Sorcerer City* is a quirky addition to the city building genre.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 313 game tiles
- 62 cards
- Market and Influence Reward boards
- 6 Annual progress tracks
- 24 Annual progress markers
- 24 Annual progress tokens
- 80 Prestige tokens
- Sand timer

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *THE QUACKS OF QUEDLINBURG*

Similarly quirky, colourful and chaotic, *Sorcerer City* sits well beside Wolfgang Warsch's own novel approach to deck/bag building.



SPICY

Designer: Zoltan Gyori | **Artist:** Jimin Kim

15m | 2-6 | 10+ | £13



Some of us wasted much of our studying time at school playing card games. This reviewer's preference was a game we termed Cheat. Play your cards face down and make a claim about what they are, and opponents challenge. It's a completely lawless game that provides its fun in the 'getting away with it' aspect.

Spicy is a version of Cheat, but it might be the nicest looking version you could possibly own. The cards have gold foil effect on their backs, the art of various tigers enjoying different levels of spiciness from chillies, pepper and wasabi. It's all very pleasing to look at and hold.

It's been slightly civilised with the laying of only one card a turn, and the challenger having to be clear about *what* is wrong about the card which was laid. Is the spice wrong, or the number? Players play cards higher than the last, or a one, two or three on a ten.

If you empty you hand unchallenged you take the played pile and that counts toward your score at the end, and a bonus card. The box includes six variant cards that add a new rule to the game, sixes that can be played as nines, the ability to change suits on a one, two or three, and so on. It's nice to have the option to include some rules and not others as it can become chaotic when everything is in play.

The game also has an ingenious way of limiting play time too, simply placing the 'world's end' card beside the deck and slipping it in at the point marked with the number of players. Once you see this card the game is over and the scores counted.

It's light, fun and has some well thought-out constraints that turn it from the festival of lying which is Cheat to something a little more refined. It won't blow your socks off, but it'll provide a nice bit of heat.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

BRUXELLES 1897

Designer: Etienne Espreman | **Artist:** Vincent Joassin

45-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £25



Reputations are not built overnight. They take around 45-60 minutes of gameplay. Here we join the architects and patrons of 1896 Brussels as they build their reputations through architectures, nobility and prestige.

It's a card game where players buy in their desired items (be they building materials, art, buildings or patrons) from the market-grid for a price of their choosing, placing one of their payment cards down. Why would you want to pay more for something you ask? The grid at the end of the round becomes a majority scoring tool – win a row and get the bonus shuffled beneath, like the chance to bring a card back from jail, or to gain more prestige (which acts as a score multiplier). You're also trying to create majorities in the sets of cards at each corner of the grid. If you own the crossroads, you gain further victory points.

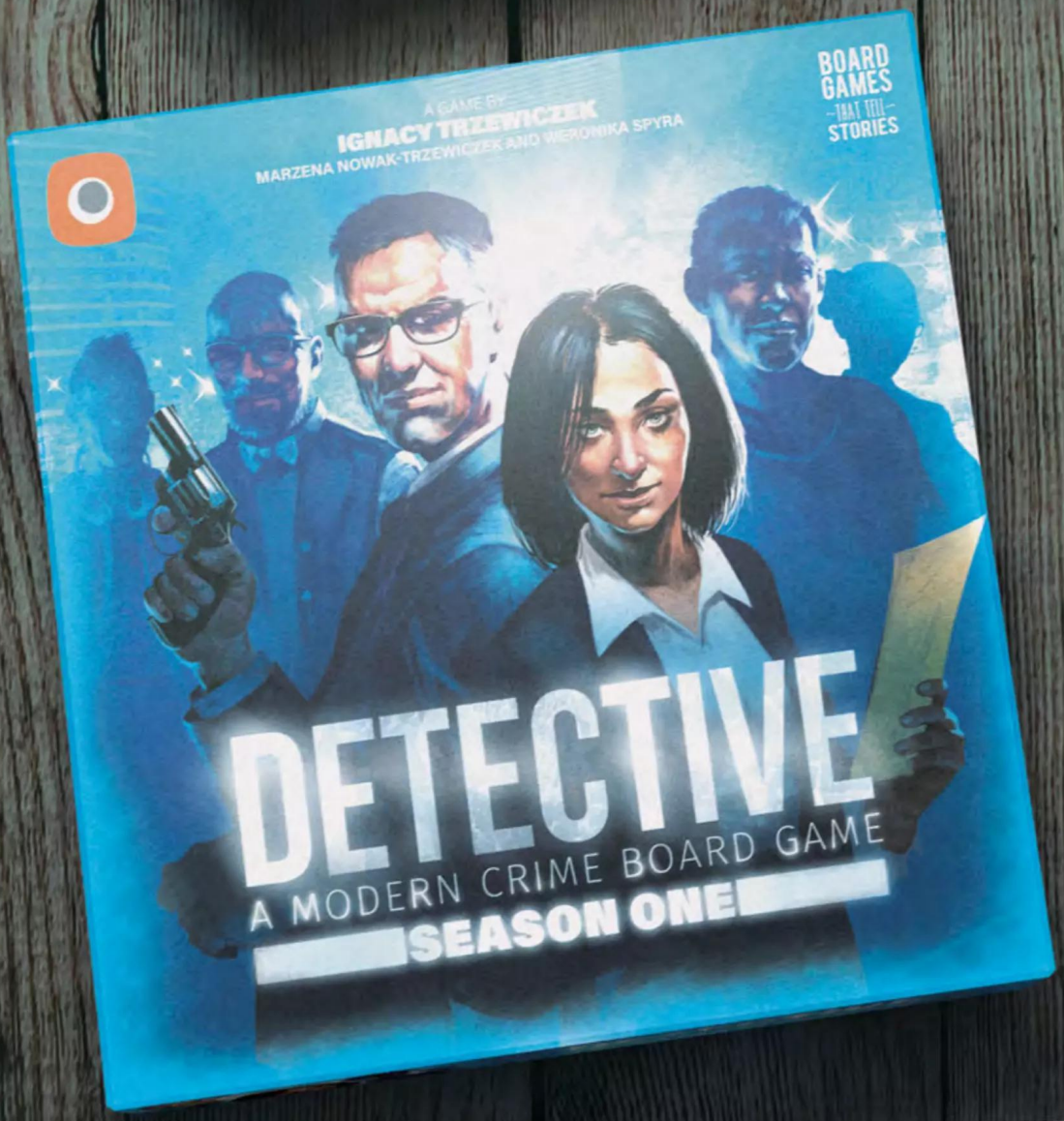
There's a whole system of exhibitions, art sales, and use of the nobility which are intuitive and all contain their own risks. There's a set of actions that avoid the main market that can be taken for free, with the risk of that card being jailed. It's more complicated to explain than play.

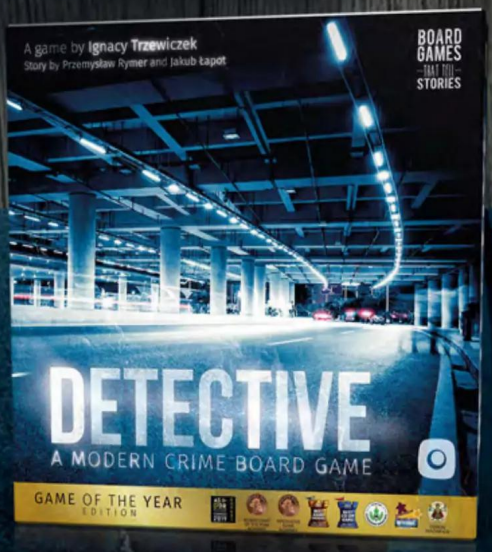
But the result is a Euro-style market game that makes you feel like all the interactions are worthwhile, with meaning beyond the simple buying in. You're always playing a couple of games here which adds surprising depth and flavour, like a good Trappist beer.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



A game of deduction, cooperation and searching for clues for 1-5 Detectives.





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BEST GAME THEMING
BEST GAME OF THE YEAR
BEST CO-OP GAME
MEEPLE D'OR
2019



POSTHUMAN SAGA

We are only Posthuman after all

Designer: Gordon Calleja | **Artists:** Mark Casha, Arjuna Susini

30-120m | 1-4 | 14+ | £70

Posthuman Saga plunges players into a post-apocalyptic wasteland, leaving them to fend for themselves among the hordes of mutant creatures. This is a game about survival that even when playing among a group can feel lonely.

The set-up will be familiar to anyone who has played an action miniature game before. You begin by popping out an impressive pile of tokens, sorting out decks and collecting all the pieces required for your character. Sorting out components, while a slightly daunting task, especially at the start of the very first game, will immensely speed up the packing up and future setups. Luckily, the game comes with enough compartments and bags to get organised.

Then players select their individual objectives for the game which essentially boil down to laying down a specific terrain, going there and defeating a monster. Do that a required amount of times and it will trigger the end of the game, as well as give victory points along the way. This slightly repetitive gameplay is interspersed with events and story elements – read from the storybook – that build up the world and let players make decisions within the game, reap the rewards or suffer the consequences. While these narratives are small, individual scenarios, they do a good job of grounding players into the world and giving them agency in the stories of their characters.

Posthuman Saga has various gameplay modes, including single-player, two to four-person and team versus modes. However, with the exception of team versus mode, there is largely no direct player interaction. Everyone is secluded to their own quadrant on the board, exploring their piece of wasteland and fighting monsters by themselves. Only bidding for terrain and global events affects all players, but even that feels minimal. For most of the game, you perform actions, wait for the opponents to do theirs, rinse and repeat.

Even when the game tries to introduce co-operation between players in team versus mode, it feels forced. The gameplay remains essentially unchanged except the players in a team must complete objectives together and may share equipment. Overall, *Posthuman Saga* feels predominantly like a single-player game.

During the first plays, the gameplay loop and discovering the world of *Posthuman Saga* will keep players engaged. It is fun to see the different types of mutant monsters that come out, even though you may not be the one fighting them. Equally, reading story scenarios out loud keeps the interest of the group going. However, this may become harder to sustain after several plays. The monsters will soon become familiar, losing their novelty, and the story bits will start repeating themselves. Granted this will take some time to happen - there are around 70 mini character scenarios in the game alone - but there will be a point when *Posthuman Saga* will run out of new content.

However, the time you will spend in this world, where everything is trying to kill you, will be, despite the grim theme, enjoyable. The game doesn't pull its punches. Story decisions, how you equip and upgrade your character affect your chances of survival against the mutants in the post-apocalyptic wasteland. Combat, while having elements of luck, gives players a level of control through the character's custom decks. The core of the game and the setting are well put together. It is only a shame that this is a world better experienced alone... even when exploring it with friends.

ALEX SONECHKINA

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Journey board
- 4 Character boards
- 5 Character miniatures
- 12 Dice
- 8 mission objective cards
- 16 Mission progress cards
- 5 Character cards
- 28 Marker pegs
- 12 Boost cubes
- 20 Counter cubes
- 2 Mission score cards
- 60 Enemy cards
- 4 Mutant boss cards
- 40 Weapon cards
- 20 Equipment cards
- 26 Mutation cards
- Solo mission board
- Storybook
- 64 Terrain tiles
- 2 token bags
- 335 Various tokens

WE SAY

Posthuman Saga easily immerses players in its mysterious mutant world full of wonder and danger. It is a lonely experience for the player and their character, but can also be a rewarding one.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *ZONA: THE SECRETS OF CHERNOBYL*

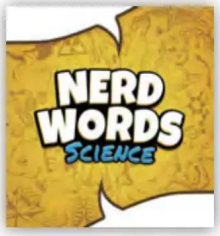
Posthuman Saga tells of a different path of humanity's demise than *ZONA: The Secrets of Chernobyl*, but both agree on this: discovering and surviving the world-gone-wrong is fun. As long as it's kept to the gaming table, of course.

NERD WORDS SCIENCE



Designer: Eric Slauson and John J. Coveyou | **Artist:** Tomasz Bogusz

Blending games with learning is a tricky balancing act: too much fun and the education gets lost, but not enough and it turns from being a game into tedious drudgery. *Nerd Words Science* hits the dividing-line dead on and dances along it like a tightrope.





It's a party-game of guessing science terms from one-word clues, which probably restricts it to a small subset of parties, and it's not likely to be pulled out after *Cards Against Humanity* any time soon. But it handles larger groups well (it can cheerfully go higher than the stated 2-8 players) and it's genuinely fun.

Players work in up to three teams. Each turn one chooses a science term from a card in their hand and gives the other teams a one-word clue to it, starting with one of the letters from the term. They write down their answers and get points if right, but if not then they get a second clue, then a third, and ultimately a fourth which must begin with the initial letter of the term.

It's fast and clever, and it makes you feel clever. The structure forces you to think around areas of science in an intelligent way, to find synonyms or piece the clues together. A timer keeps things pacey. The dry-wipe boards are solidly constructed and should last a long time.

Two gripes. There are two different decks of science terms with different difficulties, but even the simpler one can be confounding and nigh-impossible to guess ('vesicle'? 'endocytosis'?), and the scoring system is over-fiddly, though on the other hand that does allow parents to throw the game in a convincing fashion so that the kids can feel good about winning and everyone can pretend this wasn't actually homework.

An educational game that doesn't feel like one is a rare thing, and *Nerd Words Science* is still fun if you left school ages ago. Expect to see versions for other subjects soon.

JAMES WALLIS

KODAMA 3D



Designer: Daryl Andrews, Erica Hayes-Bouyrouris | **Artist:** Kwanchai Moriya

Kodama 3D is the latest arrival in the Kodama family, a series of games about building trees – one tree per player, not the groves and forests of *Photosynthesis* and *Bosk*. In the original 2016 game by Daniel Solis you used branching paths of cards, but this new version by the two designers behind *Bosk* you build the trees by slotting together branches.

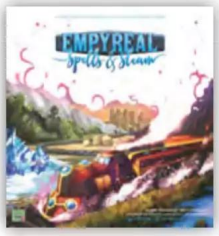
Each turn is in two parts: move one of your two kodamas (tree spirits) around a grid of piled-up branches to collect them, then slot the branches together to fulfil the conditions of the goal cards in front of you. Each branch is marked with one of four symbols – flowers, mushrooms, fireflies and caterpillars, plus kodama in various colours – which must be combined or connected within the tree to score you points. More goal cards can be acquired by connecting branches that share no matching symbols.

This part is very visual and satisfying to play. The branches are robustly cut and slot together in interesting ways, the trees become interesting shapes and threaten to topple over but rarely do, and the kodama themselves are colourful and cute. However most of the gameplay is in the grid, which is more strategic but also more abstract and decidedly more 2D.

It didn't enthrall us. Younger players loved building the trees but found the tactics of acquiring branches dry and occasionally frustrating, while the older ones were the other way around. There was some confusion about whether you're allowed to attach multiple sub-branches to a parent branch, which the rules don't cover or illustrate.

It's fun enough but nobody was shouting to play it again, and it lacks the tone and sense of place that *Bosk* achieves so well. The 3D element, while visually exciting, doesn't add much to the gameplay. All in all, it's a bit take-it-or-leaf-it.

JAMES WALLIS







CTHULHU DARK AGES

The hard times of old England

Designer: Chaosium

270 | 13+ | £38

Gamers from across the globe can testify that facing down *Call of Cthulhu*'s eldritch abominations with little more than an old service revolver and a wind-up torch can shake you to your soul. Now imagine doing the same thing, except with an iron dagger in place of a gun and the torch switched out for the flickering light of a burning taper.

This is the world of *Cthulhu Dark Ages*, which aims to capture all the horrors of H.P. Lovecraft's conveniently copyright-free creations and translate them to the wild woods and dirty streets of 10th century England. The result is something fascinating and eminently readable, though it's a little tricky to picture the table that will take full advantage of the writers' obvious love for the real-world history.

In fairness, though, there is rather a lot of this love on display. Huge sections of the rulebook are dedicated to giving both GMs and players a crash-course in living and dying like an Anglo-Saxon, ranging from details about literacy through to a rather lengthy list of period-appropriate popes (and occasional antipopes).

As you might expect, the absence of anything spookier than the threat of excommunication can make the raw history a little dry in places. However, it says a lot about the quality of the writing that even those of us without a burning passion for the period can leaf through the book and almost accidently absorb a smattering of details.

It helps that Lovecraftian horror translates rather well to the dark ages. The idea of ever-present corruption and rot meshes quite neatly into a world so concerned with plagues and crop failures. On top of this, there really is something rather special about taking on tentacled monsters with so few of the meagre advantages held by more modern investigators. There are no convenient university libraries to consult, no rich uncles waiting at the end of a telegraph line and no last-resort sticks of dynamite sitting somewhere in the heroes' backpacks. Instead you get burning torches, iron blades and whatever knowledge might be sitting in the local monastery.

While it might seem like this would make every game of *Cthulhu Dark Ages* an exercise in futility and early death, the rules are more-or-less balanced to keep investigations highly dangerous but not suicidal. While you could certainly choose to turn things into a gritty slog where the entire team is laid low by infections every other session, there's no obligation to run things this way.

As far as the rest of the rules go, it probably says rather a lot that we've gotten so far through the review without mentioning them.

The game bases the core of its ruleset around the latest edition of *Call of Cthulhu*, which has been merrily plodding along with the same framework of simple percentage-based skills for a few decades now. This feeds into a system that's simple to grasp – roll under the score, and you succeed – but not terribly exciting or particularly tied into the game's themes.

Of course, few people flock to Lovecraftian horror for the complex or highly honed game systems, but rather for the mysteries, the unsettling air of dread and the setting itself. Here, we run into another potential sticking point with *Cthulhu Dark Ages* – the possibility that players might struggle to spot the instant appeal of a small village in the Midlands.

This is especially true when it's so directly contrasted with the opportunities to explore the cocktail parties and jazz clubs so popular in *Call of Cthulhu*'s default timeframe of the roaring 20s. Getting the most out of the game still requires a group that genuinely enjoys the historical details of the book, and that can be a rather tricky thing to find.

Tricky, though, isn't quite the same as impossible. If you can find a group that bonds over their ability to correctly pronounce Æthelflæd you're onto a real winner. Heck, even if you can't entire your friends into a multi-year campaign, *Cthulhu Dark Ages* is still a great book to read through and a wonderful tool for spicing up your more conventional Lovecraftian games.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Come for the chance to stab abominations with pointy sticks, stay for the loving guide to dark ages England



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *CALL OF CTHULHU*

It's a shade obvious, but outside of history nuts the ideal audience for *Cthulhu Dark Ages* is the experienced investigator looking for a new twist on all the old Lovecraftian tropes



DUNGEON MAYHEM: MONSTER MADNESS

In the eye of the be(card)holder

15m | 2-6 | 8+ | £20

Designer: Roscoe Wetlaufer | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

Monster Madness is the second expansion for the cutesified *Dungeons & Dragons* card game, *Dungeon Mayhem*. This expansion adds about the same number of decks as all the previous outings put together, doubling the size of characters you can play as. This time however, you take the role of the monsters.

This is a trope that often feels ripe for exploration, but sometimes leaves us in the tabletop world a little cold. Sometimes it's great being the monster, sometimes, it's handled badly and just feels like a reskin. That's not the case here however, as while the monsters are generically from the *D&D* universe, they've been brought to life with a great deal of character.

There's also been some smart choices in the characters available, Mimi Le Chaise is a grinning mimic of a chair (initially), Delilah Deathray is a beholder in a tiara, and Hoots McGoots is an owlbear in a tutu. All the characters have their themes fully expanded out, the aforementioned owlbear combos explosive chains of cards to KO other characters, while the mimic swaps players health around or copies other cards, while Deliliah provide area of effect damage to everyone.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 6 28 Card decks
- 6 Hit point trackers
- 12 Damage tokens
- 12 Divider cards
- 12 Hit point tokens
- 1 Token storage box

The game plays as an extremely fast and brutal attack-and-defend card game. You start with ten health, a handful of cards, some with unique powers, and on your turn you play out a card (or combo of cards, should the symbols allow it). The basic actions are to do damage to a player of your choice, play out a defence card which provides a shield value between the enemy and your health, 'play another' and draw a card. There might be a number of these on a card so in theory you can be doing damage, combing into other cards which let you draw and play those cards.

It's kind of like many living card games where the meta is hyper aggressive. You just want to knock the other players out as quick as possible, as once it's their turn, you'll never know if it's you that's going to get smashed to pieces.

Four player games are chaotic, and often it can feel that people are getting picked on. There are separate rules for five to six player games that provide a sphere of influence, reducing the range of attack to one person either side of you. It helps, but doesn't solve the issue entirely.

There is a problem here, which is that on your turn you're just hoping they can't do the damage to you that they need to. It's more of a gamble than a strategy. Often there' just not enough defence cards to turtle your way through to whatever the right combo is for your character. Good for its lightness, but misses out on having more back and forth.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

It's extremely light and highly aggressive, which can be great for certain situations. It's not something you're going to bring to a games night, but your mum won't mind playing it on holiday. If you own the original games, you'll want to buy it for the handy storage it provides regardless.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MARVEL CHAMPIONS...

If you liked elements of this marvel deck-smashing game, then *Dungeon Mayhem* might be a good gateway game to get others into competitive card gaming.

SHADOWS OF KILFORTH: A FANTASY QUEST GAME

You just can't keep a good Gloom down

Designer: Tristan Hall | **Publisher:** Hall or Nothing

1-4h | 1-4 | 14+ | £60

Three years ago, independent designer Tristan Hall treated us to a complex but immersive 'whole fantasy RPG campaign in a single game' with his ambitious debut *Gloom of Kilforth*. As enjoyable played solo as with a group (in either cooperative or competitive modes), and packed with finely illustrated cards, each featuring a unique piece of art, this demon-battling quester came out of nowhere to land in *Tabletop Gaming*'s Top 10 of the year.

Like Hollywood, Hall couldn't let a hit go without a sequel. So here's *Shadows of Kilforth*, in which it turns out all the travails of those Kilforthian adventurers years earlier amounted to naught, and that nasty, realm-choking miasma is back, knocking the land out round by round, region by region, in preparation for more *Hellraiser*-ish Ancients to come and defile the world.

Lore-wise, it's not so much an advancement as a remix, with a murky new corner of Hall's world to explore, a little more diverse than the last one, now drawing more on East Asian mythology in its heroes and monsters. As before, each player creates a race/class combo and embarks on their own race-against-time saga to complete before taking on those hideous, all-powerful Ancients. But now they can be a Samurai, Ninja or Yakuza if they like, while Hall's new races feel more Kilforth-specific than Tolkien-ripped: the winged Seraph, for example, or the Gloom-resistant Veilborn. Your foes are more interesting, too, such as the Kuei, a mind-controlling ghost that allows you to nab another player's ally, or the one-eyed, undead Buso.

Mechanically, however, there are fewer points of difference between *Shadows* and *Gloom*. It is still a matter of spending action points to move around the randomly assembled card-grid realm, encountering enemies and strangers to harvest keywords on cards and complete the chapters of your saga to level up. New players need no previous *Gloom*-y knowledge to get into it, but it will likely take them time to settle into the chewy rule-set, with its initially confusing differentiations between Actions (which cost an action point) and Deeds (which don't), and Rumours (cards you hold in your hand) and Assets (cards you've played down).

Shadows is also no less dice-rolly than *Gloom*, with each stat determining how many dice are tossed, and only a roll of five or six granting success. There is some in-built mitigation, via a limited supply of Fate tokens and the discarding of Rumours to add auto-successes, but it is still possible for a quest to be frustratingly scuppered by consistently bad rolls. It also remains a game that, despite its ticking-clock momentum, can stretch for hours, especially if you choose the cooperative mode, in which you have to contend with one Ancient per player (in competitive you're all racing to slay a single demon), but hey: didn't you sign up for an epic quest?

To be fair, Hall has tightened it by adding a setup rule where you cast a few regions into gloom before play starts, while there is some added flavour in making the players choose between two factions, getting different effects from certain events depending on which side they've taken.

He also includes a wealth of suggested variants, including two-versus-two team play, the swifter, Ancient-free 'Gold Rush' mode (great for first-timers), and versions which allow for greater randomisation of event and reward placement. This, more than anything, rams home why the *Kilforth* games are so enduringly entertaining: as well as mashing up *D&D* and *Arkham Horror* so elegantly, they are also built to be malleable, adaptable, utterly home-ruleable. This quest need never end.

DAN JOLIN



WE SAY

A second serving of questastic dark fantasy as accessible to *Gloom* nOObs as Ancient-battling veterans. *Kilforth* and multiply!



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Rulebook
- 81 Encounter cards
- 75 Reward cards
- 26 Location cards
- 25 Night cards
- 24 Saga cards
- 24 Plot cards
- 8 Race cards
- 8 Class cards
- 4 Ancient cards
- 4 Ancient Abilities cards
- 32 Skill cards
- 40 Card dividers
- 60 Gold tokens
- 32 Action Point tokens
- 32 Health tokens
- 24 Obstacle tokens
- 16 Fate tokens
- 4 Hidden tokens
- 25 Night Location tokens
- 42 Loot tokens
- 25 Reward Location tokens
- 15 Enemy/ Claim tokens
- 1 First Hero marker
- 8 Hero standees
- 6 Six-sided dice
- 1 Loot bag

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED GLOOM OF KILFORTH...

Not least because it's totally possible to mix the two games up however you like, and make your own Kilforthian cocktail.



THE CREW: THE QUEST FOR PLANET NINE

There's a trick to space exploration, you know

Designer: Thomas Sing | **Artist:** Marco Armbruster

20m | 3-5 | 10+ | £14



Space travel is all about teamwork. In order to survive in the cold, vast, merciless depths of the vacuum, an astronaut must be able to operate instinctively and smoothly alongside their fishbowl-wearing colleagues – sometimes with minimal communication. Most importantly, they must be really, really good at, um... trick-taking card games?

Casting its players as a group of astronauts, *The Crew* is intended to be a light campaign game with an even lighter story element, which takes you through no fewer than 50 missions on a journey to the far end of the solar system to confirm the existence of a ninth planet (not Pluto, that got downgraded to a moon, the poor heavenly body). However, in truth, this sci-fi story thread is little more than gossamer window dressing for what appears to be yet another trick-taker, in which cards are won by nothing more complicated or exciting than playing down the highest number in a given suit (or if you are able to, a trump card).

While the theme and gameplay don't ever really feel like they gel beyond a dash of added flavour, it should be made clear that *The Crew* is actually far more than 'yet another' trick-taker, and offers a really interesting new spin on the genre. Because it is a *cooperative* trick-taking game.

Each mission sets the group a task. For example, one player might need to need to win the Yellow 8 in a trick, while another might need to win the Blue 4. Which means everyone must work together to ensure that happens – deliberately losing, in effect, if they're not the tasked players. This is complicated by the fact that no verbal communication is allowed between players. All you can do, once per mission, is reveal one of your cards and indicate with a token if it's the highest card you have of that suit, the lowest, or the only one.

This limited form of signalling is guaranteed to get the entire group's brain-cogs whirring, adding a lot of deduction and also a tingle of psychology to proceedings. If someone signals that the Green 7 is their lowest card in hand, then you know you're not gonna win that Green 4 without a Rocket card (which always trumps, but can only be played if you don't have any cards of the relevant suit), or without the Green 7 player winning a few tricks to clear their hand first.

It is compelling and addictive stuff once you start vibing properly with the other players; similar to *The Mind*, but not quite so seemingly supernatural. And, after the first half-dozen or so missions, it becomes *very* challenging, with cards having to be won in specific orders, or certain cards being instant game-losers if played, or communication being disrupted in some way. Not that you need to play it as an escalating campaign; you can just dive in and pick any mission you like, in any order, and given the slightness of the story element, you're not missing too much if you approach it this way.

Of course, if you're just not into trick-taking games, then *The Crew* is tough to recommend. On the flipside, if you dig cooperative games, this is one guaranteed to generate some entertaining and interesting group dynamics around the table.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

If you love trick-taking games, or games which offer cool new spins on old genres, then you must seek this out. But if tricks are not for you, neither will this be.

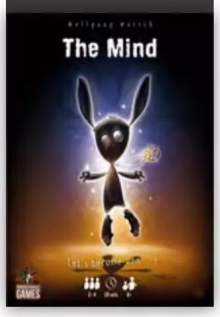


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 36 Colour cards
- 4 Rocket cards
- 5 Reminder cards
- 36 Task cards
- 10 Task tokens
- 5 Radio communication tokens
- 1 Distress signal token
- 1 Commander token

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *THE MIND*

There's both more and less to *The Crew* than Wolfgang Warsch's oddball hit. It's not quite so innovative, but it offers more range and depth.



HATS

Designer: Gabriele Bubola | **Publisher:** ThunderGryph Games

20-30m | 2-4 | 14+ | £23



Although, it is not a trick-taking game, *Hats*, a small card game with a very loose Mad Hatter theme, will require players to wear the same type of thinking hat. This is a game about recognising patterns of suits and numbers, planning moves ahead, adapting on the go, while figuring out what the opponent's strategy is.

During the eight rounds of the game, players are collecting cards of various suits and values to earn victory points. Cards can be played straight from their hand, but only as black hats, with a low one victory point value, or they can be exchanged with cards in the central board and then added to player's collection. Simple exchange rules, like needing to swap cards of the same suitor of a higher number value, ensure that there are some limitations to how players can use the central board.

The most interesting part of the game is that the scoring rules are ever-changing. The central board also determines how the suits score at the end of the game. As the players are swapping cards as the game progresses, a suit that was worth six victory points at the start of the game could become completely worthless at the end. The interplay between the board, what players have collected and what is still in their hand makes for a very brain scratchy gameplay.

It is a clever, quick little card game, that at the same time packs a lot of strategy and nuance with few components or fanfare. What the game has, it presents very well.

From a book-style board game box, as if an instalment of *Alice's Adventures in the Wonderland* to the cards with pretty illustration of different hats. It is a delightful package.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA



ANIMAL KINGDOMS

Designer: Steven Aramini | **Publisher:** Galactic Raptor Games

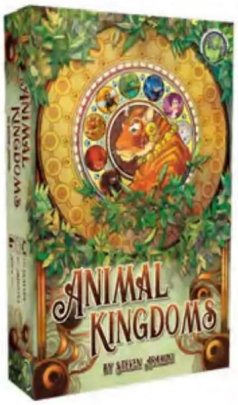
45m | 1-5 | 8+ | £35

Every kingdom has laws which must be followed without exception by anyone who steps across its borders. In *Animal Kingdoms,* many such laws exist. 'Only frogs and wolf', 'only odd rank animals' or 'only animals not present in other kingdoms'. However, the rulers of these kingdoms are flexible with their own laws, which they change every age. In any other context, such behaviour would be found questionable, but in *Animal Kingdoms*, a family-oriented area-control card game, there is no need to think too deeply into the theme. It is very light and is used mostly as an excuse to have gorgeous animal artwork on the cards.

In *Animal Kingdoms*, players are vying for control of the five kingdoms to earn victory points over the three rounds – or ages – of the game. To add their presence to an area, they must play a card out of their hand that satisfies the condition (some of which were mentioned earlier) of the kingdom. These are broad enough that players always have a choice to contribute to one of the areas on the board, but are also restricting enough, that they also need to stop and consider their options. They won't have to think for too long, however, because *Animal Kingdoms* is not a strategy heavy game. Purposefully designed for the whole family to enjoy, it gives enough of the challenge to keep players interested, but not too much to over-stay its welcome.

The biggest let down of the game, especially one so pretty, is the component quality. The cards are thin, the cardboard on the slotted game boards begins peeling after the first few plays and the cubes are roughly made and painted. A real shame considering that *Animal Kingdoms* feels perfect for frequent play as it is easy to set up, has high replayability and a wide appeal to different gaming groups.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA









MIYABI

Multi-level mulching scheme

Designer: Michael Keisling | **Publisher:** Haba

45m | 2-4 | 8+ | £35

There's a certain draw to gardening for board game designers. It might be something to do with how tidy they are. There's a sense of making minor edits now to reap rewards later down the line, which at its most basic level is what strategy is. There's also the fact that gardens are flat arrangements that things need to fit into.

Keisling's most recent gardening game, *Miyabi* we're making extremely tidy gardens on our own boards. When I say extremely tidy, it's not just a bit of excessive Ground Force style renovation with planters, it's a little more like a spreadsheet.

Players take tiles from a central reserve, randomly selected each round, and place these on their garden. These are a selection of Tetris shapes of grass with only one area containing flowers, bushes, pagodas, and so on. The bigger tiles contain more than the smaller ones (three koi carp in the pond for example). On the first layer the number is multiplied by one. The first layer you ask? Well, this is the fun bit. If you tile can be supported from below, you can go up a level.

This includes the well-worn gardening game trait of laying tiles that completely demolish what was there before. None of this 'I'll move that tree over the other side and dig in a pond' – we just bring the bulldozers in and plonk down our rock tile that uses its grass part to obscure a flowering bush.

You can only place a scoring features in a column once per round, moving a lantern in to show that this column has been used. This is where the puzzle bit comes in, and making the most of what's available to you becomes increasingly tricky.

In the gardening game genre, as much as there is one, the pleasure comes from the slow build up to massive points collection. Each round you are scored here, and then the final round includes most features of certain types getting a little extra. It's still tight scoring despite this, with only a few points in it.

Keisling seems to have wanted to make a very complex game, and instead made a very good simple one. With this though, comes the optional expansions for the game in the box. These are more or less new scoring modes for things like the biggest meadow, or, the one we would vote for inclusion in the main game, the frog expansion.

Because you're making tiers through the game, this expansion seems so obvious. Move a cute frost token around the board, and up into the next floor available, assuming it is grass only. When frogs hit level four, they can move through features too, allowing them to ascend to being top frog. This is a delightful mini game within the main box, and we'd suggest everyone play with this rule immediately. There's no point making a lovely garden if there's no frogs to enjoy it, after all.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 4 Garden boards
- 24 Wooden lanterns
- 6 Bonus tiles
- 1 Bonsai tree
- 1 Round marker
- 1 Score board
- 4 Frog markers
- 96 Garden tiles
- 5 Expansion tiles
- 16 Zen tiles

WE SAY

An extremely strong, strategic tile layer which leaves players puzzling over their board in a pleasant way. And as we said, always play the frogs.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ISHTAR...

The Cathala modern classic from last year that showed us how tight a game could be with so many ways to score points.



EXPLORER'S GUIDE TO WILDEMOUNT

Critical success for Critical Role

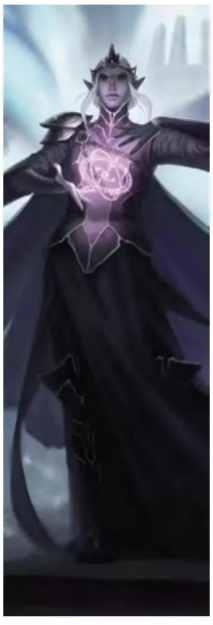
Designer: Matthew Mercer & Others | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

304 | 11+ | £39

Cracking open the pages of the latest tie-in between *D&D* and the Critical Role crew feels a lot like walking into an impossibly polished version of somebody else's homebrewed world. It's a book packed with the kind of plot hooks and alternate rules that fill a million tattered campaign journals, but rather than being scrawled in illegible biro they're all neatly arranged and backed up with the maps and stats needed to smoothly take them to the tabletop.

Of course, it makes sense that Wildemount feels like it was dreamed up by a fellow GM, because that's more or less what happened.

The entire world is the creation of Critical Role's GM Matthew Mercer, and the region laid out in the book is the setting for the incredibly successful



live-play show's second (and still ongoing) campaign. A lot of the writing within its 300-ish pages was supplemented by other folks on the D&D team, but the heart and soul of it's still the creation of just one person. Well, one person and his table of talented nerds.

This slow-burn method of creation has produced a world that sprawls and spirals in a rather charming way. It lacks the sharp, single-sentence summary required from settings that needed snappy pitches to editors and managers – the closest you could get is "high fantasy adventures, but with war brewing and a shedload of spiritual intrigue to uncover" – and while this does result in a pretty fuzzy core identity it also helps Wildemount to feel properly organic.

Indeed, perhaps the book's greatest strength is that it really doesn't concern itself with trying to shake-up the classic *D&D* formula too much. Where other settings, such as the steampunk madness of last year's *Eberron: Rising From the Last War*, try to take a battle-axe to the game's old clichés and tropes, the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* is more than happy to merely remix them.

The beautifully rendered maps stuck in the back of the book are littered with dwarven mines, monster-filled swamps and dragon-haunted peaks, any one of which could be neatly transplanted over to home games. Even the special character options, such as the undead Hollow One race, could easily be slipped into a standard *D&D* campaign with minimal fuss.

That isn't to say there aren't sparks of originality here and there, of course. The Krynn Dynasty, a nation of creatures



traditionally considered monstrous foes, is a fascinating creation, for example, as is the gravity- and time-warping magic they use. It's just that the most creative ideas impact things on a local level, rather than ones that radically shape the flow of the entire world.

Okay, you may not consider this to be a particularly positive thing if you're sick and tired of the fantasy staples. However, for those of us who want a solid D&D world to explore but want something other than the current edition's staple Forgotten Realms setting, it all works rather wonderfully.

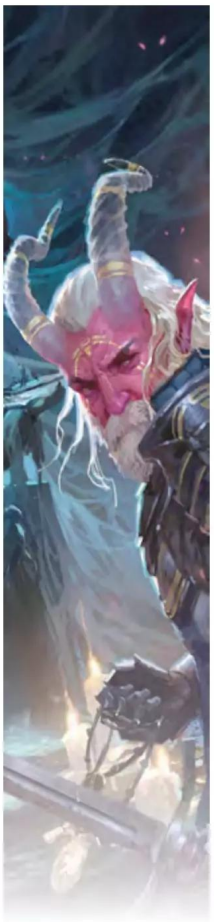
And in case you were wondering, this all applies even if you haven't even heard of Critical Role until you opened up this review. If you and your players are counted among the show's legion devoted fans, though, you'll probably be able to squeeze even more delicious story goo from its pages. On top of this, fans will probably be able to all-but ignore what's probably the biggest issue with the world's rather loose premise.

This is useful, as it really feels as though the book's first few vital pages are written mostly with existing fans in mind. Oh, there's plenty of words devoted to explaining politics and history, but you get a lot more careful nuance than the broad strokes that really allow newcomers to get a handhold on what makes Wildemount special.

It doesn't help that the map that accompanies the list of regional powers at the core of the setting doesn't actually label most of the nations you've just been reading about, either. Instead you get a geographical map that seems to assume you'll fill in the border markers yourself.

It would be sad if this caused any potential converts to bounce off the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, as once you get your initial reading squared away it really is a very impressive piece of work. Within its pages you get huge amount of content, ranging from new adventures and magic items to long lists of important NPCs and the secret history of the world.

By far the lengthiest section of the book is an incredibly extensive gazetteer that runs through the details of dozens of towns, forests, dungeons and cities stretched from one end of the continent to the other. The writing is snappy and packed with little titbits of information ranging from who runs the local government to what kind of gear you might able to pick up in the shops.



Almost every single one of the locations it outlines manage to have something that makes them stand out from the crowd and feel worthy of hosting an adventure. What could easily have been just another trading post is instead home to a special breed of silkworms cultivated by dwarven clans, rife with struggles between farming families and spies trying to claim their secrets.

On top of this, almost every one of these entries comes with at least one idea for a plot hook or an adventure for GMs to seize on, with many offering a handful of suggestions depending on your party's level. There are well over 100 of these scattered throughout the book, and while some may represent a quick diversion that adds a bit of local flavour to a session, others can form surprisingly deep and creative quests that might reshape an entire campaign.

It's no exaggeration to say that you could potentially run an entire game about adventurers roving through Wildemount using nothing but these story prompts. This is one hell of an achievement, and one that sets a rather high bar for future setting books to aspire to.

Of course, these aren't the only adventure ideas nestled within the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*. There are also a quartet of solidly written quests, each of which aims to cover a party's first handful of sessions and get them exploring a different part of the region.

A couple of them are given to the hand-holding found in many adventures aimed at brand new players, but they're a wonderful way to ensure that your heroes always have a way to get going in whatever part of Wildemount you want to focus on. The downside to all this is that it can make it tough to actually use all four of the adventures, as they're all aimed at the same, fairly narrow, set of early-game levels.

Accompanying all these glorious tools for the GMs among us are the near-obligatory handful of new character options for players to try out. Actually, calling it a handful might not be quite fair, as between the magic items and the plethora of racial options you get rather a lot of new toys to choose from. Few of them seem particularly ground-breaking, but they represent rather good value for money – especially if you're looking to pick up all the monstrous and rare races scattered across *D&D*'s back catalogue.

The coolest and most potent new powers all come tied up in the funky 'dunamancy' magic found in the Krynn Dynasty. This gives both fighters and spellcasters a few ways to start messing with things like time, gravity and fate and, honestly, really drives home the fact that Wildemount got its start as a homebrew setting.

This isn't because it's bad or even silly, mind you. Rather, it feels like something ripped from a homebrew because it's so unselfconsciously cool. Warriors who can fight using time-echoes of themselves as allies is just the kind of thing a thousand GMs sitting at home have sketched out in the margins of their notebooks. However, it the *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount* was just what it took to get those ideas written up, playtested and put into an official *D&D* product.

This is the heart of the book, and perhaps of Wildemount as a whole. It's a world that so many of us could imagine creating, one settlement and dungeon at a time, but with slick production values and a bit of actual editing. Even if you aren't a fan of Critical Role, this is a book well worth checking out and one that sets a high standard for the game's future releases.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A world so beautifully messy it feels like you could have made it yourself. That's a good thing.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED D&D ESSENTIALS KIT...

If you hopped into *D&D* aboard the Critical Role train, this is a wonderful place to head after getting your toes wet with the starter set

ORIFLAMME

Is this the banner of a new champion?

Designer: Adrien and Axel Hesling | **Publisher:** Studio H

20m | 3-5 | 10+ | £15



The 'Oriflamme' was the golden battle-standard of the King of France in the middle ages, and signified that no prisoners would be taken. *Oriflamme* – not to be confused with the banner or the French games company *Oriflam* of two decades ago – is the first major release from Studio H.

New games labels are two-a-euro right now but Studio H is part of Hachette, the third largest publishing company in the world, which has begun buying up games businesses and distributors in a way that looks very Asmodee circa 2010. The signs are that Hachette doesn't plan to take any prisoners either, if *Oriflamme* is anything to judge by.

Oriflamme is a card game from two first-time designers that's already picked up the As D'Or at the International Games Festival at Cannes. It's set in an undefined medieval world where 3–5 families vie for influence after the sudden death of the king. In game terms, it comes on like *Love Letter* meets HBO's Game of Thrones, on steroids, in a nice box.

Each player gets an identical ten-card deck, and discards three randomly before play starts. Then they take turns to add cards to the start or end of the 'Influence Queue,' and then in the second phase they either reveal and activate each card in turn, or leave it face-down and add influence chips to it.



Each card has a unique character (which stay in the queue) or power (which are one-use), from lords, heirs, spies and shape-shifters to ambushes and assassinations. Placing and revealing them is a combination of guesswork, bluff, short-term and long-term tactics, plus trying to remember what the cards you played last turn are. Deciding what and when to reveal is deliciously enticing, and pulling off a combo or tricking someone into attacking an ambush has a sense of reward that goes far beyond an influence chip or two.

After all that, it's almost a shame the game is a points-chase at its heart, and the battle of wits comes down to a scrabble for tokens. After six rounds the game's done (your final card remains unplayed), and the player with the most influence chips wins. It's a little bit of an anti-climax that diminishes the game's atmosphere and weakens the story that's built up from the interplay of the cards.

The gameplay is strong, tactical and enjoyable, but it's not perfect. One curious rule gives influence points to players for eliminating their own cards from the queue, which let me grab a bizarre victory by destroying most of my own forces in the final turn. That's easily house-ruled out, but it shouldn't have been in there to start with.

But those are minor quibbles, like the slightly odd player counts or the occasional typo in the rules. Overall *Oriflamme* is a thoroughly engrossing mix of influences and play styles that hits all the sweet spots in a focused, fast-paced six-round blast of fun. It's one of those games you pull out to start the evening, and look up to realise you've been playing all night.

A couple of rough edges can't detract from the fact this is a hell of a debut by the Hesling brothers – and Studio H.

JAMES WALLIS

WE SAY

A small number of cleverly combined elements create complex gameplay and interesting tactical choices. Or you can just wing it, and it'll still be a blast.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 50 Influence cards (5 sets)
- 70 Influence point tokens
- 1 First player tile
- 1 Resolution direction tile



tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

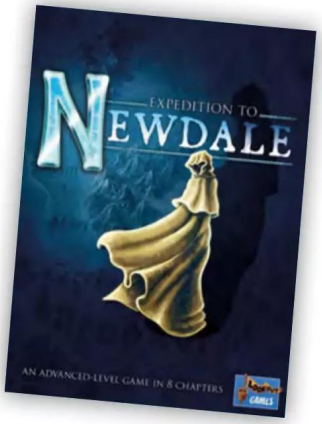
TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED LOVE LETTER...

Oriflamme is to *Love Letter* what *Lord of the Rings* is to the *Hobbit*, if George R R Martin had written them. Get in.



SOLO REVIEW





EXPEDITION TO NEWDALE

Goodness gracious me, just me

Designer: Alexander Pfister | **Publisher:** Lookout Games

90m | 1-4 | 12+ | £48

Before we start it is worth pointing out that, because of the time it came to review *Expedition to Newdale*, was reviewed exclusively on solo play. Luckily it's almost exactly the same game, although, a lot quicker and frankly, a lot tougher. Beating your friends, or rather, outrunning them in the victory points race is one thing, hitting the goals set out to you by the solo game in Alexander Pfister's recent follow up to *Oh My Goods!* is and entirely different bucket of coal, and flour, that can be chained into bread...

Expedition... is a heavier game than *Oh My Goods!* and comes with a host of boards to play with, rather than just cards – although, there are a lot of those too. Following on from *Escape to Canyon Brook*, your adventure to produce things continues. Why? It barely matters, but it's something to do with stopping some ice giants killing everyone by using diplomacy. But we're not here for the narrative, as novel as it is.

It's a campaign Eurogame about constructing building that can then apply the randomly drawn labour market to certain effects, and more interestingly, be used to chain together certain materials into others. So, you can take your cows to the abattoir to produce meat, or coal and flour to produce bread, for example. Doing so means that your coal, worth one coin while sitting on the mine card of your player-board engine, is now worth five on the bakery. You're much richer than you were by the application of labour.

Solo play works like a pleasantly frustrating puzzle. It teases at your brain in a satisfying way for the most part, but occasionally veers into unfair 'tough luck' situations. This usually comes from not being able to build your engine quick enough with plenty of cards to generate the goods required to meet the quota. There are actions that you can take to increase the cards in your hand, but because the game is played over only a handful of rounds using the (cleverly) build event decks, these actions are often a sign you're just not going to make ends meet in the particular run through. It's fine, but just having a bad hand with few options can be off-putting.

That, however, is the only gripe with the game. The sense of progress is palpable, you change locations and situations regularly, you meet characters that, while you don't get to know and love exactly, do become something like familiar faces during play. And most of the time, like any good Eurogame, the disappointment is only with yourself – when you realise you should have done something else already.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

An extremely good, light, engine-building Eurogame with great depth and challenge at its heart. The campaign elements expand the longevity of the game and make the solo mode feel like something worth working through.

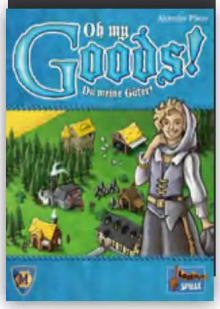


WHATS IN THE BOX

- 3 Double-sided game boards
- 1 Action board
- 4 Double-sided player boards
- 40 Bonus tiles
- 8 Progress tiles
- 4 Bridge tiles
- 4 Victory point markers
- 1 Winners' cup
- 44 Hourses
- 16 Action tokens
- 4 Ship tokens
- 22 Figures
- 50 Goods markers
- 1 Bag
- 1 Sticker sheet
- 220 Cards
- 1 Chronicle book

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED OH MY GOODS!...

The previous instalments, while a bit lighter, are a good indication of whether you'll gain pleasure from chaining your good together, or find it all a bit tedious.



ODYSSEY OF THE DRAGONLORDS

A marvellous mess of myth

Designer: James Ohlen, Jesse Sky, Drew Karpyshyn | **Publisher:** Modiphius

466 | 15+ | £40



'Epic' is a word that gets thrown around pretty loosely these days, but it really is the only accurate way to describe *Odyssey of the Dragonlords*. By smooshing the world-shaking heroism of Greek myth into *Dungeons & Dragons*' high-powered fantasy it manages to conjure up a titanic adventure about battling vast monsters, treating with gods and claiming your place in the annals of history.

And, yes, despite carefully not mentioning it by name anywhere, *Odyssey of the Dragonlords* is explicitly meant to be played with *D&D*'s wildly popular fifth edition ruleset. It's just rather than being put out by the official *D&D* team, the book comes from a trio of writers drawn from the ranks of Bioware, one of the biggest names in RPG videogames.

The result is a chunky slab of a book that manages to bring a flavour of its own to the rather crowded world of fantasy adventuring. Part of this is the beautifully realised mythical setting, which comes with an absolute stack of new options for players and GMs alike, but the writing and design also manage to feel slick and snappy in a way that few other campaigns manage.

This might be the conformation bias talking, but you can kind of tell that the main body of the writing came from folks who cut their teeth in videogames. The structure of the campaign, which starts with the party being hailed as destined heroes and has them slowly unlock more of the world to explore over time, feels as though it could have been ripped right out of Mass Effect or Baldur's Gate. Even the climactic final showdown, which may well be one of the most dramatic, high-powered battles in any *D&D* campaign ever published, feels like something that could be accessed by clicking on a map screen.

Honestly, this is both a good and a bad thing.

For example, there's no denying that the linear design of the first few chapters – which translate into a couple dozen hours of gameplay – does a great job of keeping things zipping along at an impressive pace. Plus, the feeling of unlocking a whole new array of islands to visit or cities to explore is just satisfying at the tabletop as it is on any computer screen.

However, this does come coupled with an element of the dreaded railroading – the feeling that once the heroes start their journey, they're bouncing their way down a corridor rather than forging their own path. For long sections of the game the party head from one dungeon-crawl to another, retrieving magical McGuffins and having plot-relevant encounters when the book decides they're ready.

Indeed, the whole adventure opens with the party being named as the destined heroes, prophesised to save the world of Thylea and kick some titan arse. This is all supported by clever new rules that tie their epic destinies into the story, but all the talk of fate can sometimes feel like an excuse for leading the players around by their nose.

Still, if they are happy to tread the road set before them, the heroes are probably going to be in for a rather lovely journey. The book is stuffed with cool characters and clever little adventures, all of which are supported by a truly impressive array of Grecian-flavoured rules and tools.

Every single core *D&D* class, for example, gets a new sub-class to try out with an appropriately epic flavour. Barbarians, for example, get to wrestle and shoot like Hercules, while rangers get access to an Amazonian sub-class that turns them into an off-brand version of Xena or Wonderwoman.

It's a little hard to tell exactly how these stand up against their official brethren, but at the very least they look both fun and incredibly flavourful. Just reading through the book is enough to fill your head with ideas for cool characters, and even if you don't want to go full Grecian myth the hand-waved nature of the world means that you could very easily play a newly-arrived wandered from a more traditional fantasy world.

The Odyssey of the Dragonlords is a truly impressive piece of work that can offer multiple years of action-packed roleplaying that really does blend the epic heroism of Greek myth and the easy action of *D&D*. At times the writing might be a little too tight and the plot a little too slick, but if you're happy to be swept along in the current there's a whole lot of epic adventuring to be had with it.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

An incredibly ambitious piece of work that adds epic Grecian flavour to D&D's wizards and warriors.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: STORM KING'S THUNDER...

Go fight big things, save the world and bounce across the planet while doing epic nonsense.



ADVENTURE MART

Lose yourself in the magical world of retail

Designer: Sam Taylor | **Publisher:** HUB Games

45-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £28

Given our current global predicament, many of our usual distractions are unavailable – dining out, socialising, retail therapy. Fortunately, we can always look to the tabletop for a taste of harmless consumerist escapism.

In this fantastical land of anthropomorphic adventurers, literal pop-up shops magically materialise at the feet of those in need, ready to serve the growing queues of adventurers with an imaginative range of wares. Up to four competing store managers will rush to line their shelves with the finest necessities as they attempt to attract the most customers and boost their net worth. After five days, the stores will pack up as swiftly as they appeared, but not before crowning the player with the most profit as Manager of the Week!

In *Adventure Mart*, running your store – or engaging in what the designers refer to as 'adventure-capitalism' – involves a breezy but original mix of deck building and auction mechanics. In each of the five rounds, players will take turns either spending gold in the Depot Area to acquire new Stock, Fixtures, and Staff, or starting a sale with a customer. Once all of the adventurers from the town have been served, play proceeds to the next day, beginning with the next Daily Bulletin which adds theme whilst making subtle changes to how each round plays out.

In typical deck building fashion, each player will start out with the same deck of nine cards. Throughout the game these decks will become bolstered by more valuable stock cards. Each adventurer that comes to town will have a preference for the type of goods they wish to purchase, made up of a mixture of Martial, Magic and Exotic. The player who initiated the sale will put forward an opening offer in the form of a number of cards matching that adventurer's desired stock types. After tallying up the other players will then choose to either pass or beat the offer, with the winner of the auction receiving gold before discarding their cards.

Now, a successful store manager won't usually thrust all their stock upon a startled adventurer. Not only would that be wasteful in regard to their dwindling deck, but also their stock's potential for profit. Whilst each stock card does have a gold value, it will only retain that value for as long as it takes for the customer's purse to empty. Some adventurers may be willing to spend up to ten gold but anything exceeding that is essentially given away. Aside from being nicely thematic, this rule also affords *Adventure Mart* a lot of potential for strategic planning and even a hint of bluffing. It plays out relatively fairly too, as there are no penalties for losing an auction, giving players a chance to succeed next time. Fixture and Staff cards also open up a level of strategic personalisation to players' stores. More than just playful nods to anyone familiar with the convenience store workplace, cards like 'Aether Slush Fountain' and 'Worker of Nights' open up clear cut strategies through discounts to certain stock types and interruptions to opponents' sales.

The deck building genre is a crowded market nowadays, with each release seemingly requiring justification. Oftentimes, this thirst for uniqueness results in complex or bloated experiences likely to deter casual gamers or newcomers. *Adventure Mart* manages to avoid this largely by keeping things simple. There isn't an overwhelming amount of card interactions here, just enough to keep things running slickly and smoothly, paired with an addictively clever mash-up of auction mechanics and deck building.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

With its charming and relatable theme, solid interaction, and a tight balance of familiar and innovative mechanics, *Adventure Mart* is the perfect step up from other gateway deck builders.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 185 Cards
- 13 Tokens
- 60 Coin tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED VALLEY OF THE KINGS...

Like *Adventure Mart*, *Valley of the Kings* manages to provide so much excitement with so few components. It also doesn't hurt that they both admirably succeed at spicing up their solid deck building foundations with other innovative mechanics.







D-DAY DICE SECOND EDITION

Do or Die

Designer: Emmanuel Aquin | **Publisher:** Word Forge Games

45m | 1-4 | 14+ | £45

Many games put you in the general's seat, ordering countless soldiers to battle across continents, but few games put you in the boots of said soldiers, living on a knife-edge as you fight for every second of survival. Even fewer games capture this sense of bravado and desperation better than *D-Day Dice*.

In this co-operative push-your-luck dice game, each player takes the role of one of the four Allies as you storm the beaches of Normandy. In every round players roll their set of six custom dice to gather soldiers, courage, specialist stars and items. Players are restricted on which dice they can reroll and how many times they can do it, with any skulls showing at the end of the round negating a non-skull die in a player's pool, further reducing their options.

Every resource you roll matters. Soldiers are each player's health, with losses at the end of every round based on player location. If any player runs out entirely, everyone loses the game. Courage moves players forward from the beaches to their final goal of the enemy bunker. If any player doesn't have enough courage when they have to move, their unit is destroyed and everyone loses the game. Whilst not as essential, specialists and items provide continuous and one-off bonuses respectively, massively changing the tides of fortune to help you and your teammates survive.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 6 Double-sided battle map boards
- 4 MGF six sided dice
- 24 RWB custom dice
- 4 Unit marker dice
- 104 Cards
- 30 Tokens
- 4 Player aids
- 4 Resource trackers
- Scenario Book

Teamwork is paramount. Whilst you always choose when you move and where, you'll want to stay together as long as possible, as only when sharing a sector can you freely trade any of the above resources to one another. Need an extra star for a medic whilst your friend needs soldiers to make it to the next round? One quick trade and you're both in better standings. In addition, the game rewards "Red White and Blue" bonuses if you roll a matching set of three die symbols across the three colours, with an even bigger reward if you can roll one of each different face on your six dice. These bonuses are so powerful that you have to go for them, with each success or failure potentially making or breaking an entire game.

This core loop of roll, reroll, compromise and trading is what makes this game superb. It's hard for anyone to roll perfectly or abysmally, but you can always watch out for one another, plan together and, should disagreements happen, have the final say in what you want to do.

Each of the twelve unique battle maps included provides slowly scaling difficulty, presenting new challenges that will force you to rethink how you play each time, giving the game plenty of longevity. The production quality is also brilliant, improving on the previous edition with larger and clearer battle maps whilst maintaining the standard for cards and custom dice.

For me, the only flaw this game has is the accessibility of the full rules. The game's fantastic tutorial teaches the core rules wonderfully, but once it fully unleashes everything it has to offer, the sheer volume of options available will lead some players into a near perpetual state of decision paralysis.

Whilst this is easily one of the best co-operative dice games I've ever played, the potential for scaring off less confident players (or worse, having one player order others how to play) means it's not for everyone. Had the game come with a scalable difficulty for every battle map, it would be a must play. However, if your group loves to share a challenge and each player is confident in their decision-making skills, then I cannot recommend this game enough.

MATTHEW VERNALL

WE SAY

With incredible efforts made to present the D-Day landings and a core game loop that will have players cheering and cursing in equal measure, this is definitely worth a go if your gaming group loves co-op games or wants to start playing them.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ELDER SIGN...

If you enjoyed fast paced battling against unknowable horrors, you'll no doubt find this game as engaging, as even though you know what you're fighting this time, it doesn't make it any less challenging.

FAFNIR

Designer: Jun Sasaki | **Publisher:** Oink Games

20m | 2-4 | 9+ | £15



Fafnir is a chicken that lays gems. For some reason, two brothers have decided that those who can display wealth by throwing away gems can have Fafnir's gems. But the problem is, that as soon as the gems are thrown away, gems of the same type are worth less than they were.

Players take their cute dividing screens, which we feel would be ideal for very small RPGs, and keep their gems secret. Each turn a blind bid is made for the gems that Fafnir has laid, and the victory point that comes with it. The blind bid is made by clutching, secretly, the number of gems you want to bid in your fist, before revealing at the same time. The gems you throw away are added to the market, which will tell you what each is worth at the end of the round (less gems, more points). That end is also dictated by the number of gems in the market, a row that reaches seven (for a three player game) ends that round, and then the gems are scored based on what you kept behind the screen.

There's bit of bluffing involved, and blind bidding is always fun with the right crowd – and it's all designed as a very social game. Fafnir uses a number of gambling mechanics to create a kind of relaxed, jovial pub game. It calls out for a bag of pork scratchings, and a long afternoon with some equally tactically minded friends. Sparing that, it's a game with replayability for a long evening indoors or a caravan buffeted by unpredicted rain.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

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VIDEO VORTEX

Be kind, rewind

Designer: Mitch Ryckman & Trevan Haskell | **Publisher:** Mondo Games

1h | 2-4 | 14+ | £40

The world of VHS rentals is one not consigned mostly to the discounts bin of history. Evocative and salacious covers on chunky video store boxes, that really bore no resemblance to the films inside and the now strange sense of physicality were subsumed in the most important aspect of a video rental store: genre. Sliced up into horror, sci-fi, action, romance, comedy and so on, this is – for some of us at the right age – one of the first ways we understood the territorialism of pop culture.

And that is the heart of the post-apocalyptic world that we're smartly dropped into for *Video Vortex*. It's a highly thematic deck building card game that uses a mix of buying cards from a market, combos, and action points to do damage to your enemies. 'FWD' your opponent to beyond their life total (run time) using action cards (SP) or permanent ones (LP) and you've gained one of their 'be kind, rewind' tokens. Gathering a full set of three is a win. Each round starts with choosing a power from a 'sun' to implement and use through the round, making strategies highly varied from moment to moment. These range from card draw to using LP powers additional times. This free action makes switching tact mid-game quite easy, or at least, working out when to transition from building up a strong combo in your deck as quickly as possible, to using the extra damage available to finish off your opponent.

There is the downside of downtime of course. You have to wait out your opponent's turn, and often that can consist of watching them work out if they can kill you with each draw. It's a natural part of any combative card game, but it feels so mathy here that some of the edginess of the design is dampened. The combos you play feel good to play, but because there's a chance to draw into further cards, watching someone draw and then decide they can kill you is less fun. But then, when has that ever been a highlight?

There's a depth and variety in the characters that make for interesting choices in future games, although some powers do feel a little unbalanced. Games are long enough for the most part that there's room for trying things out, which is refreshing for card combat games. From the totally wild introduction to the game, to the rich art and character names (Count Geiger anyone?) *Video Vortex* lives off its style, and if you're ready to give over to its good looks, then you're going to have a Blockbuster of a time.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Vortex board
- 216 Cards
- 4 Runtime dials
- 4 Player boards
- 8 Sun cards
- 12 Mutant character sheets
- 24 Energy cubes
- 16 Charge cubes
- 12 Be kind tokens
- 4 Player aids



WE SAY

While possibly containing a little too much 'watching your opponent math you to death in their head' *Video Vortex* is an extremely strong deck builder.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED D&D DUNGEON MAYHEM...

Like the grown-up version of this fast paced card game, *Video Vortex* takes us down a crunchier nostalgia path.



HERO MASTER: AN EPIC GAME OF EPIC FAILS

Not all adventurers are created equal

Designer: Jamie Noble-Frier | **Publisher:** The Noble Artist

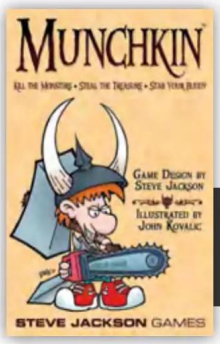
1h | 2-5 | 14+ | £35

With art and game design by Jamie Noble-Frier, *Hero Master: An Epic Game of Epic Fails* is a one man labour of love. Through witty illustrations and crafty take-that card play, *Hero Master* tells the tale of an unfortunate team of misfit adventurers working together through a series of perilous encounters to finally confront Crackletooth, the legendary dragon. But this is no cooperative game. Each hapless hero also intends on escaping the dungeon with the most gold and a greater chance of joining a 'real' party, and will do so at any cost.

All of this plays out through the use of cards, a pair of D20s and a lighthearted sense of humour. At the start of the game players will be dealt a random race and class card before receiving the related attack decks and combining them. Each class also starts out with a pair of weapons and a set of armour which are placed on their lovely neoprene player boards. After determining the first location and laying out the enemies and other components, the party leader will choose an enemy for the part to encounter.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 198 Cards
- 5 Player boards
- 1 Game board
- 2 D20 dice
- 5 Gold tokens
- 3 Special action tokens
- 2 Smithy tokens
- 8 Party leader token



Each player decides whether to partake in the encounter by laying an attack card in the first attack slot on their player board. This same process occurs for the second and third attacks whilst also allowing players to now play 'bungles' on other players' cards, weakening their attacks and increasing their chances of a critical fail. Heroes must first score a hit on a monster by rolling the green dice before choosing one of the monster's four elemental defence values to match or beat with their attack cards and weapons. A black D20 represents your foe's attack, with any result matching or beating your armour value resulting in damage and other nasty effects. Play continues until someone defeats the monster, winning gold and treasure, or until the monster – seemingly embarrassed by your efforts – buggers off.

There's a generous amount of replay value here thanks to the, numerous location cards and enemies, randomised race and class combos and hoards of collectable and equip-able treasure. For players really wanting to make an evening of it, there are extra components included to test your heroes' mettle in campaign mode.

Surprisingly, *Hero Master*'s fun, caricatured art belies a reasonable amount of tactical depth and brutal take-that elements. This is exaggerated at only two players, making your impending misfortunes that much more predictable, forcing you to prepare for retaliation. Presumably, higher player counts will spread out the hate resulting in quite a different game.

Then again, even without the input from your untrustworthy companions, *Hero Master*'s dice keep the game's mean streak going. Although, in the context of the game's theme and target audience, the reliance on dice-based luck for combat resolution is apt rather than unfortunate. In the midst of *Hero Master*'s ridiculous dungeons, it's reassuringly familiar to grasp a couple of D20s with the hopes of tossing an elaborate critical success, knowing full well that they're eventually going to bite you in the ass. Unfortunately this does mean that some players will lag behind simply due to bad luck, with the game's catchup mechanic of powerful 'protest' cards often doing little to balance things out.

Even for those who seek a more serious tone from the art and themes in their games, it's hard not to appreciate the absurd and colourful tableau *Hero Master* spreads across the table as more cards are played each turn. Whilst every unique card features its own illustration and humorous flavour text, the joy comes from imagining the plight of your adventurers through the clusters of cards on the player boards. Tie this together with fun but occasionally fiddly gameplay and you've got a solid card game with its own distinct feel.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

Hero Master offers plenty of theme for those willing to engage, with plentiful farcical nods to the fantasy and roleplaying genre. Much like its characters, *Hero Master* does display some flaws, with some occasional fiddly moments affecting the game's pace.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MUNCHKIN...

Hero Master displays its dungeon crawling and roleplaying theme in a more satisfying and involved manner than Steve Jackson's divisive classic, whilst retaining a similar approach to eye-catching art and tongue-in-cheek tone.

FUJI KORO

An eruption of components, a mountain of fun.

Designer: Jerome Demeyere | **Publisher:** Game Brewer

1-2h | 1-6 | 12+ | £75

Fuji Koro tells a tale of shogun heroes escaping from the epicentre of the erupting volcano. They run from the centre of its crater, treading carefully on the shaky ground that threatens to crumble into molten lava with every step. As they rush to uncover that magical rope that will get them to safety, they will need to gather materials to craft their protective gear and infuse them with powerful spells. They will also encounter helpful monks and deadly dragons. Because, of course, there are dragons.

Fuji Koro doesn't always make a lot of sense, but don't let those lapses in logic detract from the bags of fun this game has to offer. The game is divided in two main parts. In exploration-like phase, players search the volcano, gather resources, fight and craft gear. As soon as one of them reaches 30 victory points, the eruption will commence, and players will need to try to escape before every stone under their feet turns into deadly lava.

The main source of victory points is, of course, defeating dragons. Players will need to craft their gear made up of resource cubes, in a *Minecraft*-style on their individual boards. For example, a one-handed sword will need two cubes of wood (representing the sword hilt) and some metal or dragon teeth cubes, arranged in any order players desires as long as they are connected. However, players can try to match the equipment cards' cube arrangement for extra



victory points and additional powers. Once sufficiently equipped players can attempt to take on a dragon or even fight amongst themselves.

None of the elements of the game are particularly complex or layered. Crafting is simple: collect resource cubes and keep in mind that attack or defence is based on the types of resources collected. Combat is straightforward: roll the dice and distribute the damage. Exploration is equally uncomplicated: add the tile in the right zone and avoid stepping into the lava. However, there are small touches that link all these elements together. For example, match an equipment card and get an ability that grants you an extra movement or resource, or, delve into the third circle of the volcano and you might discover the tile that will allow you to escape.



Even though your characters are stuck in an about-to-erupt volcano and are attacked by powerful dragons, the stakes are not remarkably high. Failing, for example being defeated by a dragon, is not a major set-back and has little consequence.

It could have been a joyful experience of fitting the pieces of the board together. The building of the board begins with the outer border that also serves as the victory point tracker. The central piece is the characters' starting point and the board grows from there connecting to the edges towards the latter part of the game. The pieces are quite intricate and precise, so having even one out of place immediately throws the whole game out of sorts. That is in addition to hundreds of small cardboard tokens (many of which blend in with the board making them hard to spot) and the 3D temples, that while looking beautiful, have the practical purpose… of holding two cards.

The fun of playing *Fuji Koro* is undermined by the frustration with dealing with its components. Certain elements of it, like the board tiles, are over-thought: they look beautiful but are fiddly to handle. There is something so appealing in the simple gameplay that takes the shogun heroes on an epic journey: from crafting their weapons and gear, to facing the mighty dragons, to escaping, last-minute, as the ground turns to lava under their feet. Yet, this will also take time and effort to set up, assembling the temples and sorting the components, and then will have occasional frustrations along the way. More patient and forgiving players will find a lot to love in *Fuji Koro*, others may want to seek a less component-heaving hero story to enjoy.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

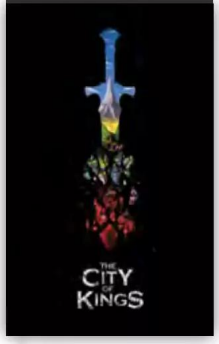
Fuji Koro's simple, yet engaging gameplay is very appealing, however it gets dragged down by elaborate components that while looking gorgeous on the gaming table, are fiddly and frustrating.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Imperial board
- 1 Game frame
- 6 Player boards
- 1 Central tile
- 1 Rope tile
- 3 Sacred temples
- 33 Volcano tiles
- 3 Bridge tiles
- 51 Lava tiles
- 1 Dragon health token
- 9 Status tokens
- 6 Life tokens
- 38 Resource tokens
- 20 Adventure tokens
- 12 Damage tokens
- 13 Dragon tiles
- 13 Dragons
- 6 Samurai
- 38 Monks
- 60 Wooden resource cubes
- 90 Metal resource cubes
- 25 Dragon tooth cubes
- 20 Magic cubes
- 24 Gear cards
- 24 Magical blueprint cards
- 16 Sacred scroll cards
- 18 Action cards
- 18 Magical blueprint tokens
- 42 Sacred scroll tokens
- 6 Dragon tooth dice
- 17 Dice
- 1 Countdown / Tokugawa marker

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CITY OF KINGS...

Fuji Koro is *City of Kings-lite*, offering a similar tile-laying dungeon-crawler experience but focused on a single play, rather than a campaign.





MECHANICA

Tidy, happy, robots

Designer: Mary Flanagan, Emma Hobday, Max Seidman | **Publisher:** Resonym

45-75m | 1-4 | 12+ | £40

The future is spotless, we are told by a subtly threatening cartoon Roomba on the cover of *Mechanica*. This is the threat throughout, as small cleaning robot in the rulebook offers us this helpful tip: "ankles are the most accessible part of the human body, but the jugular is the most vulnerable!"

But this isn't a game about killer robots, it's about efficiently producing an army of them in exchange for cash, and therefore points. *Mechanica* is a lovingly designed game that uses its box and inserts to make it near enough possible to set up the game by taking the lid off.

The game itself is an engine builder, each turn players buy upgrades from the marketplace and slot them into their playerboard jigsaw. These do things like upgrade the robots going through them, create extra lower quality robots, gift wrap for more points, and so on. Each robot moves along a track at the start of the turn until it reaches a hole. Players start with one fabricator (which creates basic robots) and one truck, these can also be upgraded and added as the game goes on. Forks can be used to create complex machines where a robot is upgraded to the highest level, duplicated, then broken down into multiple smaller mid-level robots which are then sent on various further upgrade paths.



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 4 Factory boards
- 15 Blueprint cards
- 4 Vaults
- 13 Truck tiles
- 10 For tiles
- 27 Improvement tiles
- 24 Basic tidybots
- 24 Plus tidybots
- 24 Deluxe tidybots

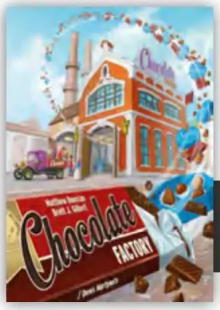
It's a really clever and, dare we say it, clean, mapping of how we model this kind of conveyor belt engine working in our heads. It's also got some of the better Eurogame thrills in the sense of trying to keep quiet when the item you want comes up in the market. As the market (a spinning wheel that sometimes bins components in a satisfying way) reduces the cost of components each turn, getting exactly what you need can be very pleasing. A kind of just-in-time fulfilment we can all get behind.

While there are frustrations of the 'I should have put that elsewhere' kind, *Mechanica* offers a very pleasing puzzle distraction. Sometimes, like all market games, the strategy you entered with can't be completed by what is available, but that's all part of its enjoyable friction. The only major gripe with the game is that sometimes there's a bit too much 'sorting out change' whether that for robots or the coins. You can feel a bit silly running the machine and then realising all those bits you just put back in have generated again by the next cycle. It's obviously a key part of the game, but it does feel a bit like tidying up. If you can live with (or are unreasonably excited by) this clean-freak level of 'everything in its right place', then *Mechanica* is your game. For the rest of us, it's a solid recommendation.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A really strong, if occasionally fiddly, engine builder that makes you feel like you're building a real machine as you go. A cleverly designed, tidy, box.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CHOCOLATE FACTORY...

Similarly non-combative, *Mechanica* also lest you build a pleasing conveyor belt of upgrades, even if they're not quite as sweet to the taste.

LABYRINTH: THE ADVENTURE GAME

No bowie, but plenty of magic

Designer: Ben Milton & Jack Cæsar | **Publisher:** River Horse

296 | 6+ | £35



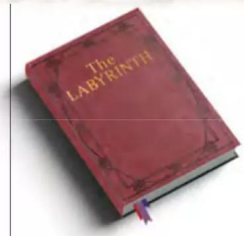
Art by Brian Froud

Caught somewhere between an RPG and a choose-your-own-adventure book, *Labyrinth: The Adventure Game* is a curious experience that lets you dip a toe into the ocean of roleplaying without worrying about rules or preparation. In places this can make it feel a little awkward, but much of that is neatly countered by the bucketful of charm that splashes out of every single page.

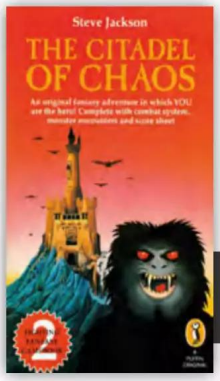
The game throws its players into the world of 1986's cult classic *Labyrinth*, setting them the task of retrieving some stolen treasure from the Goblin King – played by a tight-trousered David Bowie – within a 13-hour time limit. What the missing object is and who the players control is up to them, but the general shape of the quest is going to be the same each time.

Once things get going, this rescue mission plays out through the pages of the gamebook, with every spread spelling out the details of some location for the party to explore. Depending on how they overcome the obstacles and encounters thrown at them, which can range from simple patches of quicksand through to weird goblin birthday parties, the players may be sent to different locations or simply propelled further into the book.

What separates the game from an elaborate choose-your-own adventure book, however, is the way in which the players are given free rein to roleplay and dream up their own clever solutions to the puzzles placed before them. There are plenty of guidelines in the book about what might happen under certain circumstances, but for the most part the GM – or, rather, the Goblin King – is left to rule on possibilities and set tests.







This is, of course, exactly what you expect to happen in a more conventional RPG, but that doesn't make it any less exhilarating or terrifying when the players seize on some wacky idea and you're suddenly forced to play out the consequences. Indeed, the safe, guided nature of the rest of *Labyrinth: The Adventure Game* can make it even more intimidating when a table of friends or family members start throwing round ideas that will turn the game on its head.

Fortunately, while prospective Goblin Kings might worry about overenthusiastic knights challenging every other goblin to duels, there's very little reason to be anxious about managing the rules. Really, it says a lot that the rules for using the book's coloured place-markers are about as length as the game's core mechanics.

There are no hit points or magic spells to track, nor any fancy systems for handling stress or fatigue. Instead, every single challenge in the game is handled by having the players rolling one or two six-sided dice and trying to beat some target value get by the Goblin King.

It really is that simple, which is both a blessing and a curse.

On the one hand, you can explain the rules in mere seconds, and because there are very few worries that the you might mess up on some point of order. However, this also helps to keep the gameplay puddle-deep, and though the circumstances might regularly switch up it can all get a little samey once you get a few hours in.

This means that the entirety of your enjoyment is going to come from exploring, building stories and generally having fun in *Labyrinth*'s weird world. In turn, this kind of relies on you and your players being the kind of people who get on with the setting's style and sense of humour.

One early puzzle for example, might see the players dumped in a dungeon – or more accurately, an oubliette – and presented with a cape embroidered with the letter 'S.' The trick to getting out is realising that what they are holding is, in fact, an s-cape.

An escape.

If this truly awful pun does nothing for you, that may be a sign that *Labyrinth: The Adventure Game* would start grating on your nerves within the first few pages. If, however, it made you groan and grin at the nonsense of it all, you're probably going to be fine.

Indeed, one of the most appealing things about the game is the prospect of unleashing it on your children, younger cousins or even classroom. The rules are simple enough for kids to grasp with ease, and while the preteens of today might not know who David Bowie is or why you keep singing *Dance, Magic, Dance*, the twisted fairytale world of *Labyrinth* is still packed with charm.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

If you're after a wholesale *Labyrinth* RPG you're going to be disappointed, but this makes for a great first step into the hobby for fans of the film, or an easy game to play with slightly older children

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FIGHTING FANTASY BOOKS...

Both conjure up fantasy worlds through the pages of a book, and though the handle things differently the magic is still the same.



IRONSWORN

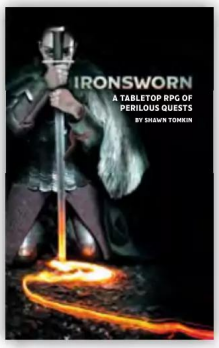
Ironclad solo adventure awaits

Designer: Shawn Tomkins | **Publisher:** Shawn Tomkins

270 | 1-5 | FREE

While *Ironsworn* can be played like a regular role-playing game complete with other players and a GM, its real defining feature is its solo mode. And boy what a solo mode that is. Initially the 200+ page rulebook can be intimidating, especially if you're just looking for something to while away the quarantine with but once you wrap your head around the novel mechanisms in play, *Ironsworn* reveals a simple and rather elegant core.

The concept is that you are an "ironsworn", an adventurer who has made an unbreakable vow and must travel throughout the Ironlands to see it done. Along the way you'll make Moves which is just a short hand way of saying, make a specific roll and see what happens. Want to have your character travel somewhere? You 'Undertake A Journey' and roll to see what happens. You either succeed well, succeed with some complications, or fail. If you've played *Powered by the Apocalypse* or *Forged in the Dark*, you're already familiar with this. This simple Moves system, where each action is encompassed under a wide umbrella, gives you just the right amount of freedom to tell the story you want while challenging you every step of the way. From introducing unexpected locales along the way when travelling to separating you from companions, getting you hopelessly lost, or luring you into a cairn which didn't have graverobbers like you initially thought but bonewalkers armed with magical weapons! All thanks to the Oracle, a selection of tables with things like names, locations, and complications as well as a handy decision making tool that lets you decide without feeling like you're just making it up.



As you progress through your vow, you'll pick up sidequests, make bonds with NPCs, and make new vows. All of which help you to gain experience which can be used to buy new assets like weapon powers, rituals, and companions. And while progression feels a little stingy, it does allow for long term investment. Though that is a bit Marmite-ish.



Experienced role-players may find that *Ironsworn* has a few design decisions that require some deprogramming. Combat, for example, has initiative but not in the way we all know it. At the start of a fight, you perform the 'Enter The Fray' Move which determines who has initiative. After that you either Strike (if you won) or Clash (if they won), with each Move having different results for if you win or lose. So, if you have initiative, you attack. If you win, you keep the initiative and can attack again. Or try something else entirely. Like searching for a weapon after the enemy breaks yours in half with their magical axe.

For the forever GM, *Ironsworn* is an amazing opportunity to experience life on the other side of the screen. Even if you've never ran an RPG in your life, *Ironsworn* has your back. Each ability, enemy, and locale has quest prompts with it to help guide you onwards and most of that intimidating page count is taken up with world building prompts, examples of play, and a campaign guide to help you structure your own.

But most importantly, it's refreshing to see a pseudo-Norse setting that explicitly states: "You can envision your character and those you interact with however you like, unbound by considerations of geography, lineage, sexual orientation, and gender." If you're looking for something to scratch the itch while we're in lockdown, then *Ironsworn* is a fantastic way to spend an afternoon or a week or every Friday from now on. Oh, and as its definitely worth mentioning, the digital version of *Ironsworn* is completely free through their website.

ANNA BLACKWELL

WE SAY

Ironsworn is a great introduction not only to solo RPGs, but becoming a DM of a world of your own.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MYTHIC...

Both provide non-intrusive settings that can be used with groups or alone. Mythic's GM Emulator is considered one of the best Solo RPG tools.

THE LIBERATION OF RIETBURG

The real liberation was the friends we made along the way

Designer: Gerhard Hecht | **Publisher:** Kosmos

40m | 2-4 | 10+ | £20

Smaller recreations of bigger tabletop experiences can often fall flat. They either don't have the spirit of the main game inside them, or they're so obviously a cash grab it's easy to dismiss them out of hand. That's not the case here however. The mechanics of the game have changed a great deal, and we only really have six locations to move between, rather than a huge map, but the spirit of the game is here. And the spirit of Andor games is 'get a move on there's a quest to complete'. All of the games have a central conceit of there being more enemies added each turn, and the speed at which turns are taken are tied to how quickly players exhaust themselves.

In *Liberation of Rietburg* we have the familiar 'bad guy management' of other games in the series. Players use their hero standees and tiny deck of cards to play an action each turn. There's three on each of the three starting cards, usually consisting of a single or combination of actions including: attack, turn an encounter card at a location, acquire a willpower or other consumable item, and move. Correctly choosing which to use and in which order is the trick, and ensuring you can beat the next monster in your path with what you have left makes for less wasted turns.

Visit a location, turn the cards, beat the monsters by playing a card with a higher attack value than the monster, and, eventually, reveal your quests. Complete four of these, and you've won the game. Simple as it sounds, there is a tax for refreshing your hand, which is flipping a narrative card. These play out more monsters in specific locations and make 'digging' for the quests at hand a little trickier. Certain monsters will give you the chance to draw from the friends deck, increasing the size of your had, giving you additional actions and delaying the refresh, which appears to be the real game here. These 'friends' are what, in most of our games, made the difference between a victory and a loss.

Quests are completed by discarding slain monsters for the most part, meaning there's a certain troll-corpse kleptomania added to the usual mix. It's pleasing to know that your actions are usually going to be working towards a quest once revealed, even if you don't quite know what that is yet.

When played on harder difficulties the game becomes quite a challenge as all co-op games should, and provides plenty of chances to make working out the particular puzzle before the time runs out a bit more thinky. A good challenge with a small footprint that offers you the rushing thrill of a bigger Andor game.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A very tidy implementation of the feeling of bigger games set in the Andor world, while also remaining accessible and fast. It also doesn't take a whole dining room table.



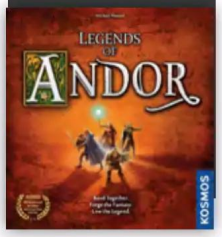
WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Game board
- 120 Cards
- 6 Hero standees
- 18 Willpower tokens
- 16 Quiver tokens
- 6 Books of spells tokens
- 1 Axe token
- 1 Water spirit token



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED LEGENDS OF ANDOR...

Like the heavier version of this game, *Liberation of Rietburg* gives you that feeling of sprinting through a world to complete your goals before becoming overwhelmed.



KAREKARE

Great song and dance if you can haka it

Designer: Muntsa Corbella & Gustavo Mariano | **Publisher:** Devir Games

45m | 2-4 | 10+ | £30

Karekare is a deceptive game. Set in Aotearoa (New Zealand) we play as tribes exploring and working the land to build our civilisation and grow sweet potatoes, the art consists of nice tiles and amusingly anthropomorphised local wildlife. It's got little boats and houses. And yet, when you get the game to the table, there's quite a vicious back and forth happening underneath.

The game is played out by making three randomly chosen stacks of tiles, returning the rest to the box. A small market is drawn that you can take from, and you always have a hand of two tiles. When the tiles are played down, you trigger the effects of your tile in its new context. Place a forest next to a forest and get some charming wood tokens, a field next to a forest will yield some equally charming sweet potatoes. You can use these to build houses and canoes later, providing your tribe with honour (victory points). The scoring happens at the end of each pile of tiles, with the most points scored for canoes, fewer for houses.

Placing canoes can be a bit tricky however, as while water tiles are very helpful in this regard, other players can place forest tiles next to your water tile and swap your canoe for theirs. As such there's a struggle of optimal tile placement and timing here. If the round is running out, placing your canoes can lead to big points, but it might also mean opening your potential lead being flipped into someone else's. Placing the relatively expensive houses has a similar issue that other players can get points for placing tiles adjacently, less than you would, but it reduces the number of bites of that particular hut-shaped cherry.

It's a case of what you want to risk opening up for your opponents every move. The game is one where there's always a good move for you on the board, it's just whether it's the best possible one. So rather than the *Carcassonne* problem of 'where does this fit to my benefit?' it's more about open strategic options and forming the kind of game you want to play. Equally, because the mix of tiles is different every game (especially at the two-player level) players can't necessarily solve the board in the way they want it to be.

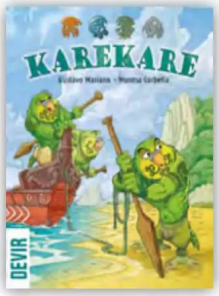
The only downside of the tile matching system is that because tiles go both ways, there can occasionally be some confusion as to which effect can be activated. It's not a huge hurdle or overcome, but we've rarely used player aids as much as we did in this game.

When it comes to family tile laying games there's plenty to choose from, but the charming flavour, cute art and the chance you might learn something about island culture and birds makes this a great island to be stranded on.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

An excellent tile layer that is only stumbles when it comes to remembering which way around and action's effects are implemented. Beyond this minor gripe, there's a beautiful and elegant game to discover on this island.



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 70 Hexagonal land tiles
- 30 Timber tokens
- 30 Sweet potato tokens
- 1 Honour score boards
- 24 timber and sweet potato x5 tokens
- 1 First player token
- 24 Canoes
- 24 Huts
- 16 Field markers
- 4 Rules cards



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CARCASSONNE...

Just like the classic tile laying gateway game, Karekare offers players the fun of creating an expanding map each turn and the ability to strategically steal points from one another.







KRAKEN ATTACK

Yo ho ho and a boatload of fun

Designer: Antoine Bauza & Esteban Bauza | **Publisher:** Loki

25m | 1-4 | 7+ | £30

Designing a great kids' game is a tricky proposition. Ideally, it should be simple enough for young players to understand, but with enough depth to keep grown-ups entertained. It needs to be fast-playing enough to cater to children's attention spans. And ideally it should come with a fun theme and some cool physical bits and pieces to play with.

Kraken Attack ticks every single one of these boxes. A co-op game of pirates fighting to repel a giant sea monster, it's a co-design from Antoine Bauza (*7 Wonders*, *Ghost Stories*, *Hanabi*) and his son Estaban. Perhaps including his own offspring in the creative process helped Bauza tap into a child-like sense of excitement, because from its fast-flowing gameplay to its toy-like plastic components, everything about this release seems to radiate a sense of family-friendly fun.

Its action takes place on a brightly illustrated board with a sailing ship in its centre, surrounded by a set of lanes. Each lane contains one of the kraken's deadly tentacles, and on each player's turn they'll roll dice to see which move towards their craft. If a tentacle ever reaches the ship, it rips a chunk from its hull. Allow it to happen one too many times, and you'll sink – something pirates generally prefer to avoid.

To ensure you stay afloat, you and your fellow players will have to sprint from one part of the ship to another, fighting off the advancing appendages using cannons, pistols and cutlasses while scrambling to repair damage. The tricky bit, though, is that the actions available on your turn are determined by a deck of shuffled cards, and you'll constantly need to confer with your teammates to work out how best to use the limited set of options at your disposal.

To make things a little less punishing, each pirate comes with their own special ability, letting them perform certain actions repeatedly, attack from apparently impossible angles or unleash devastating volleys of cannon fire. But as the game progresses the enemy becomes steadily angrier, launching quicker attacks and eventually poking its head above the water to finish off you and your crew. It means that, as in any good co-op game, the challenge and the tension ramp up with every round. But you'll also only be able to defeat the beast once it emerges from beneath the waves, and it does mean that the preliminary stages feel a bit less consequential, with no way to deal meaningful damage to your foe.

Still, though, this is a fantastic introduction to cooperative gaming, and with everyone on the same side, there's no potential for the kind of tears and tantrums that can arise in competitive kids' contests. Its cartoon artwork and gorgeous pieces give it incredible visual appeal, and its rapid-fire pace mean no one ever has to wait very long for their next turn to come around.

Good children's games are a vital part of any parent's collection. This is one of the best to come out in years.

OWEN DUFFY

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 1 Ship board
- 1 Kraken tracking board
- 1 Kraken figurine
- 4 Pirate pawns
- 8 Tentacle figurines
- 8 Ship's rails
- 6 Kraken dice
- 40 Action cards
- 4 Player aid cards
- 4 Hole tokens
- 3 Kraken Attack tokens
- 4 Whirlpool tokens
- 1 Rulebook

WE SAY

With its quick-fire rounds, ramping tension, buccaneering theme and beautiful physical production, *Kraken Attack* is a fantastic addition to a family game shelf.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FORBIDDEN ISLAND...

Where *Forbidden Island* served as an introduction to co-op games, *Kraken Attack* simplifies things even further.

CHRONO CORSAIRS

A Gilliam-esque pirate time romp!

Designer: John Brieger, Vincent Hirtzel | **Publisher:** Tasty Minstrel Games

60-75m | 2-5 | 14+ | £45

If I had to be trapped in a time vortex I could think of worse places to be than a tropical island. Fortunately that's where *Chrono Corsairs*' rival bands of pirates find themselves in this latest release from Tasty Minstrel Games. On the downside, the island of Ouroboros does have the slight problem of being cursed, forcing these shipwrecked souls to tackle its many dangers on repeat for the foreseeable future.

That is the exciting premise of *Chrono Corsairs*; a twisted mash up of *Time Bandits* and *Groundhog Day* spilled out across a colourful modular board. At its heart, *Chrono Corsairs* is an area control game. Players will spend turns attempting to amass groups of pirates within the island's several regions, with treasures being rewarded to whoever holds the majority. Treasure largely consists of doubloons and time gems – a mysterious resource that presumably holds the key to escape – with the latter being sought for end game scoring. Along the way, traps will be sprung, and game changing artefacts will be unearthed, giving players more options for traversing the island and ambushing their opponents.

Unsurprisingly, each day starts the same. An anomaly card will detail any particular rules changes for that day, with variations dependant on how far the game has progressed. From here players will refer to the action queue on their ship boards and perform each step in turn. Initially everyone's actions are identical and predictable, but each round players will be able to play plan cards on top of any action in their queue. These plans offer alternative movement or ambush options, permanently allowing pirates to cover more ground, split up, and access areas of the board much faster than the original action queue dictates. This programmable action queue mechanic offers a lot of options and is a joy to see unfold – at least when it goes to plan – but can often lead to moments of analysis paralysis as you agonise over the order and consequences of your actions. Thankfully, as the game progresses and your goals become clearer, gameplay speeds up comfortably and with an element of tension.

At the dawn of each round, the pirates will find themselves thrust back to the harbour and stripped of any of their remaining doubloons, leaving only their gained knowledge and precious time gems. Doubloons are spent between rounds on more crew, Plan cards, or altering the order of their action queues, giving players some flexibility and customisation when it comes to executing their strategies. Some players might rush to employ as many crew as possible to increase their chances of winning majorities, whilst others may opt for honing their action queue with Stable and Unstable Plan cards (which accelerate the game's time track).

Whilst higher player counts will likely entail more back and forth interaction, two player games are just as enjoyable. Having just one opponent to plan around makes the tactical thinking needed to succeed at the game that much more attainable. Furthermore, less players means less pirates crowding icons and other information on the arguably pretty small board and region tiles. Aside from this issue of space, the components are of a generally good quality, with nice pirate meeples and suitably thematic illustrations on the various cards. There are a couple of spelling mistakes on both the cards and rulebook but nothing that breaks the game or makes it difficult to learn or teach.

Overall *Chrono Corsairs* stands out as an interesting stab at Euro-tinged area control. Despite a few aesthetic bumps, the game's engaging and innovative mechanics succeed at sucking players into its intriguing theme, before spitting them out to do it all over again.

CHAD WILKINSON







WE SAY

Chrono Corsairs handles its furious time storm quite elegantly. Gradually uncovering the island's mysteries and exploiting your action queue to greedily revisit its treasures day after day feels rewarding, and curiously enough, not repetitive.

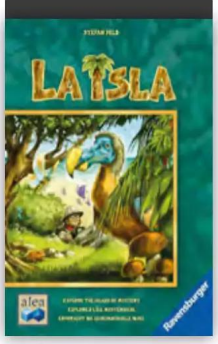


WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 game board
- 13 island tiles
- 5 Ship mats
- 10 Plan cubes
- 10 Officer meeples
- 55 Crew meeples
- 28 Event tokens
- 5 flag markers
- 1 Time marker
- 65 Doubloons
- 88 Time Gem tokens
- 1 Heart of the Vortex token
- 1 Storm Stability marker
- 9 Anomaly cards
- 19 Unstable Plan cards
- 30 Stable Plan cards
- 35 Artefact cards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED LA ISLA...

Stefan Feld's classic animal set collection game shares a similar action queue mechanism in a similar locale, but if you fancy something trickier and with more competitive bite, *Chrono Corsairs* is a great alternative.



KUNIUMI

Designer: Ignazio Panades | **Publisher:** XVgames

10-25m | 2 | 10+ | £12

In Japanese mythology, *KuniUmi* is a tale of creation by the two gods Izanami and Izanagi, who had the task of forming the first series of islands out of the sea that would become Japan. In *KuniUmi*, the board game, players take on the role of two gods, and using their tactical prowess, compete against each other to be the first one to get surrounded by the opponent's tokens, thus creating their own civilization.

During the game, players will be moving their god pawns on the grid, placing a token of their colour in their stead. The goal is to avoid enclosing an opponent's cluster of tokens with your own, which as the game progresses and the grid gets more occupied becomes harder. The less free spaces are on the board, the more brain-scratchy the gameplay becomes, with players spending longer to contemplate their turn and assess options available to their opponent, trying to catch them out. While the gameplay never reaches chess strategy levels, there is still skill to making a winning move.

Japanese culture is known for its understated elegant simplicity, and the *KuniUmi* tries to emulate that. The whole game comes in a velvet bag that also serves as the board of the game. Components inside are minimal: two types of pawns and two types of tokens. The green, Earth tokens, stand out in particular: they come in different sizes and have a rough texture that is reminiscent of the moss-covered boulders. Whatever the tokens were coated with, unfortunately, can leave white powdery dust, which slightly undermines the finesses of the overall component presentation.

One imagines creation process to be a spectacular, loud, bombastic event, quite the opposite to the serene, calming, and contemplative experience that *KuniUmi* offers. Yet it is a welcome perspective providing an interesting interpretation of Japanese mythology in a board game form.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA



BEAK, FEATHER & BONE

Designer: Tyler Crumrine | **Publisher:** Tyler Crumrine

33 | 12+ | $5



Kickstarter wrapped their second ZineQuest event in early March and spawned hundreds of weird and wonderful zine sized RPGs and while most are still in development, a few have already managed to get out into people's hands. Including *Beak Feather & Bone*. A map labelling RPG. Which is a fantastic litmus test in and of itself. Would you like to play a map labelling RPG? Anything other than a cautiously intrigued yes means this probably isn't for you.

Inspired by Avery Aldery's *The Quiet Year*, this 33 page zine puts you in the feathers of a community of crow people as you collaboratively label buildings on the map and determine their appearance, purpose, and reputation. To help guide you, the game has you draw from a deck of cards with the suit determining the purpose – social, financial, historic, etc – of the building you want to label. And as the game progresses, the town develops a personality and a history. A tent-like structure could, in one game, be a circus that the miners faction chipped in to fund while in another it could be a temporary HQ for the soldiers faction as they prepare for war. Which is really interesting as even though the map always stays the same, the meaning behind it changes for every group.

Sadly *Beak Feather & Bone* falters in the chronicling. It wants to make the map last and to serve as a tool for game masters to make an interesting village but the down time while someone answers the questions kills the pacing. As a solo tool, it works well at prompting you to think. But as a group, it's much preferable to discuss, bounce ideas around, and just keep a fluid conversation going throughout. Perfect, however, if you're looking for something light to play online.

ANNA BLACKWELL



KING OF TOKYO: DARK EDITION

Things that go smash in the night

Designer: Richard Garfield | **Publisher:** IELLO

30m | 2-6 | 8+ | £39

Special editions of games often draw funny looks. Whether that's because of the way Kickstarter has created a spectrum of game versions, or just the idea that a publisher is after more cash for its best loved titles, the player picking up the game is right to worry that their favourite is about to be put on a *Monopoly*-style production line.

But we don't have to worry about that here. *King of Tokyo: Dark Edition* is an extremely nice reworking of the original hit Richard Garfield game with brand new art and a few additional rules too.

Starting with the way it looks, *Dark Edition* is simply more handsome than the cartoony original, in this reviewer's opinion anyway. The art takes a darker and more electric direction, and while there's little fundamentally different with the character design, small touches make the whole thing feel a little more refined.

Other improvements include the attractive and slightly over-large 'frosted' dice, which are a pleasure to roll. Which is mostly what we're doing here anyway. At its core *King of Tokyo* is all about rolling dice, keeping the useful ones and rerolling the less useful ones. Rolling triples get you victory points and rolling 'smash' or 'energy' dishes out damage or provides you with the game currency. If you're in the city you can't heal and your attacks hurt everyone outside, and outside the city you're going to be doing damage to the monster currently on the throne. Grab a few powers from the marketplace to make things more difficult for your opponents and you're well away to becoming the giant monster monarch.

So far, much the same, but with *Dark Edition* a new set of powers is opened up. As you roll triple ones and twos you will accrue 'wickedness' points that move you up a track. As you progress past one of the three thresholds, dark powers will open up for you. These can be the simple, but useful 'gain an energy' or 'heal for one at the start of your turn' at the bottom end, through gaining extra dice, up to, at the top end, generating extra energy and healing for whatever your roll.

King of Tokyo has always been a very good for its 'take that' elements – and some of the additions here give you more of that to take. Some wickedness tokens knock whole swathes of points away from your opponents. It's not been made a nastier game by any means however, for those who remove the shrink ray cards from their games (good advice for those who don't like to see hope evaporate from their friend's faces) there's nothing as rough as that added.

As special editions go, it's one worth shining a light on as the tweaks make it just enough to elicit interest from fans, and is certainly the version you'll want to pick up if you've not already got a copy of the game.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 8 Monster boards
- 6 Cardboard figures
- 1 Tokyo board
- 8 Dice
- 66 Power cards
- 10 Wickedness tiles
- Energy charges
- 6 Wickedness counters
- 27 Tokens



WE SAY

If you don't own *King of Tokyo* already, and you can get hold of *Dark Edition*, this is one to get – but only the die-hard fans need to replace their copy. A great update to an already great game.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED KING OF TOKYO...

Because that's what it is, bar a few tweaks. It's very much more of the same, in a much nicer package.



RURIK: DAWN OF KIEV

No time to be chicken

Designer: Stanislav Koronskiy | **Publisher:** Piecekeeper Games

30-45m | 1-4 | 13+ | £80



Rurik: Dawn of Kiev is a game that tricks you into thinking it's a war game. In truth, it's a Eurogame where you track who is winning by moving soldiers around and killing one another. The game uses area and majority control to dictate what parts of the board you're in control of, and conflict involves spending attack actions and flipping a card for casualties. That's the trick – the reality is that the game is played out on a strategy board to the side, where players bid with their numbered advisors for a set of actions. If you're at the top of the column you'll get more of that kind of action (say, movement, or tax) – but that might mean using your fifth advisor, who has the most weight in these things, but also makes that action the last one you do in a turn.

See, you're not just bidding, you're programming your turn. This makes the game strategically interesting as it abstracts your planning away from the goals on the board. Yes, you need to pay attention to both, but there's none of that 'rush to the goal' blindness that can befall a lot of us less well marshalled war game players. It is, frankly, a joy. After all, there's something deeply satisfying about a good scheme.

Small features like the rebels which give you random resources once removed from play make games varied, as do the uses of hero powers, which allow bonuses to tax, movement, or war stuff. Building in a region solidifies your position there, and also means the board changes before you – once your opponent gets a stronghold in a region, you're less likely to want to try and take it. Similarly, resources are all loaded into a boat when collected to represent your trade, these give you extra currency which can be used to augment the position of your advisors on the strategy board, boosting them to a better position. Also, blissfully, there's not much in the way of token shuffling going on here – admin is kept to an absolute minimum.

That quickfire of the little things in the game that make it all run smoother is important as it just shows how much care has gone in to making the game as slick as it is. There's only four rounds to a game and it's probably going to be over in half an hour (maybe an hour and a bit with four of you on your first go). It's a world full of meaningful decisions which all push against your opponents in a satisfying way – and of course, you get to move some little men on a board and claim a new region, and who doesn't enjoy that?

Like the best games, it makes you want to play again immediately, with your strategy improved – and from our experience, this feeling doesn't really go away.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

Xxx

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 71 Plastic miniatures
- 4 Leader bases
- 36 Punchboard coin
- 143 Wooden pieces
- 64 Mini cards
- 30 Variant tokens
- 31 Tarot cards
- 8 Conversion tokens
- 4 Household mats
- 1 Game board
- 1 Strategy board
- 1 Claim board

WE SAY

A hyper-simplified and extremely fast game of conflict and conquest that make the most of its Euro mechanics without losing sight of its goals. It might be the most medieval war you can have in 30 minutes.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SCYTHE...

While *Rurik* doesn't have the crunchiness of *Scythe* in some respects, it does offer us similar – but faster – thrills.



SILVER & GOLD

Where X marks all the spots.

Designer: Phil Walker-Harding | **Publisher:** NSV

20m | 2-4 | 8+ | £15

Seven years ago, Phil Walker-Harding designed one of the modern tabletop era's most accessible, yet also deeply satisfying, quick-play single-deck games: *Sushi Go!* His latest card-based offering *Silver & Gold* is calibrated to fill the same spot in your game night: a nice little warm-up, perhaps, or a swift filler between meatier board-game servings. However, that's where the similarity between the two ends.

Where *Sushi Go!* has drafting at its heart, *Silver & Gold* takes its cue more from roll-and-write, although there is no rolling involved. The theme, such as it is, casts players as treasure hunters, exploring different tropical islands in search of hidden shiny things... And, um, palm trees. Coconuts are valuable too, we guess...

Anyway, instead of a shovel you get a dry-wipe pen. This is used to mark off squares in a variety of island-representing grids on Treasure cards, of which you have two, face up, at a time. Some squares contain coins, which yield points for each set of four, with the score decreasing every time a player completes a set (tracked on their individual score card). Some contain red crosses, which allow you to mark off another single square anywhere on either of your islands. And others contain palm trees, which provide a score depending on how many other palm trees are currently visible in the four islands shown in the display at the centre of the play area. Completed islands are worth points at the end of the game, and some offer bonus points for islands of another specific colour (of which there are four). You'll be able to either choose a fresh one either from the display, or from the top of the face-down stack, every time you've completely dug up an island.

But you can't just go digging up any old square. At the start of each turn, an Expedition card is flipped to reveal a tetromino arrangement of squares which dictates the configuration of the X-marks you'll have to make on your chosen island. Every player uses the same expedition pattern, marking their squares off simultaneously. You can rotate the shape it how you like, or mark it out in mirror-image form, but you have to use the complete pattern, otherwise you have no option other than to mark off a single, lonely square. When seven Expeditions have been played (leaving one unused), the round ends. After four rounds, the game ends and you tot up.

And that's pretty much it. As with all those roll-and-writes, there is something undeniably pleasing about scribbling on the cards (which wipe clean perfectly), meaning it's rare you'll put this away after a single game. But there isn't a huge amount of variety between plays and the number of decisions you can possibly make are inherently limited. It is fun, but it fundamentally lacks the long-term replayability – and also, let's be honest, the visual appeal – of Walker-Harding's sushi-making classic.

DAN JOLIN

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 47 Treasure cards
- 8 Expedition cards
- 4 Score cards
- 1 Round card
- 4 Dry-wipe pens

WE SAY

A neat little card game with a roll-free roll-and-write flavour, which is probably best appreciated in small doses.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ROAM...

With its exploratory theme and use of tetromino-based search patterns, *Silver & Gold* is reminiscent of Ryan Laukat's recent small-box game, though it's not nearly as challenging.

PATHFINDER 2ND EDITION: BESTIARY 2

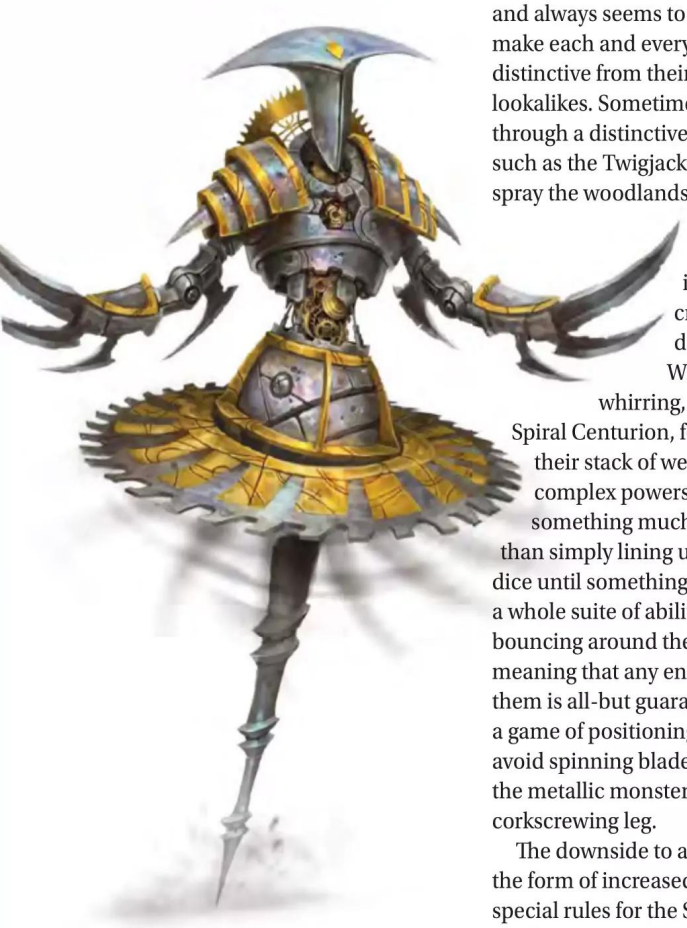
More monsters, more magic, more everything

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Paizo

319 | 11+ | £45

Varied and exciting monsters have always been the fuel that fires *Pathfinder*'s combat-heavy gameplay, and the release of the *Bestiary 2* certainly lines up an absolute mountain of stat blocks, background notes and slick illustrations to keep both your campaign and imagination burning through the night.

In terms of raw numbers, the thoroughly chunky book promises to bring more than 350 new creatures to your table, spread pretty evenly across the game's potential levels of play. That's about it in terms of actual content – don't expect new rules or character options here – but it's still rather an impressive feat when you consider the detail of many of its entries, which delve deeply into questions of lore and potential plot hooks.



And for some folks that simple statistic is probably enough to sell them on the book. Adventurers always need more monsters to slay, after all, and the clever designs of creatures like the half-plant, half-draconic Zomok should help to keep combat fresh and exciting. After all, who among us can say they don't relish the idea of taking on a flying monster that can swallow the party whole and then teleport away at will?

If you're still on the fence, however, it's worth taking a look at both the quality of the monsters on offer and how likely you are to actually use them in a game. This is especially important when you're comparing it to the first *Bestiary* book released for *Pathfinder*'s second edition just last year.

The sheer invention on display throughout the book is impressive, and always seems to find a way to make each and every monster feel distinctive from their many rivals and lookalikes. Sometimes this comes through a distinctive move or ability, such as the Twigjack's ability to spray the woodlands with a shower of splinters, and sometimes it's through the creature's entire design.

When you fight a whirring, gyrating Spiral Centurion, for example, their stack of weird rules and complex powers blend to create something much more interesting than simply lining up and rolling dice until something dies. They have a whole suite of abilities aimed at bouncing around the battlefield, meaning that any encounter with them is all-but guaranteed to become a game of positioning yourself to avoid spinning blades and knocking the metallic monsters off their single, corkscrewing leg.

The downside to all of this comes in the form of increased complexity – the special rules for the Spiral Centurion clock in at a wordcount about a third as long as this entire review – but that has always been the price you pay with *Pathfinder*. There are a few offenders that get genuinely unwieldy to run at the table, but for the most part GM's who are happy to run the game in the first place shouldn't struggle too much.

On top of the fair few original foes filling up the pages of *Bestiary 2*, a solid slice of the book is made up by entries that expand on creatures already found in the first volume. If you're looking to spice up an encounter with a clan of trolls, for example, there are now four pages of new variations to pick from. This allows you to make some more creative choices, such as dropping in a multi-headed mutant to beef up the clan's defences or maybe adding a gem-crusted cavern troll to play with the party's assumptions about their weaknesses.

Where the first *Bestiary* took a broad-ranging, surface level skim through many environments and iconic creature types, this time around it takes a much deeper dive past the obvious fantasy monsters and into a more obscure realm. This makes it absolutely ideal for GMs looking to really flesh out their encounters and add variety to certain areas of their campaign, but if all you really want from your game is a reliable list of classic foes you're likely to find that the latest book spends a lot of time on the shelf.

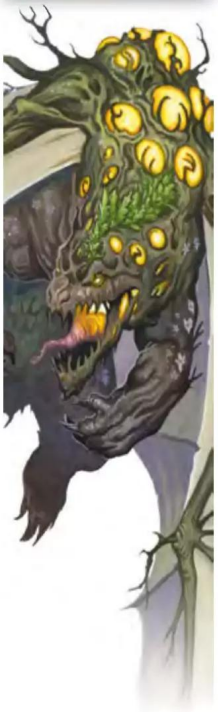
Ultimately, however, for many committed *Pathfinder* players, the only really important criteria for whether or not the book is a success is whether there's a decent variety of monsters and whether they're well-built. In both cases, the answer is a resounding yes.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

It's hard to turn down the prospect of adding more monsters to a game of *Pathfinder*. Just beware of some rather complex rules, if that isn't your thing.





TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PATHFINDER 2ND EDITION BESTIARY...

Do you like monsters? Do you want more monsters?





NESSOS

Beware of Greeks bearing gifts

Designer: Takaaki Sayama & Toshiki Arao | **Publisher:** IELLO

20m | 3-6 | 8+ | £14

Nessos is a game based on the Greek myth where the hero captures various classical monsters and imprisons them in clay jars to offer to the gods, but slips up and gets ferried to the Underworld as punishment. This myth, with others by the writer Spurios of Themes, was recently discovered by archaeologists on the island of Iello wrapped around an abstract bluffing card game.

If you come to *Nessos* hoping for classical derring-do and sandal-based escapades you're in for disappointment. This is old-school bluffing and lying, a game of tricksters and trust. If the designers had gone for a Norse theme instead then the subheading on the review would have been 'Are you feeling Loki, punk?' because that's the gist of it: how well can you lie to someone's face?

Each player gets a hand of cards, mostly numbered 1-10 with monsters from satyrs to medusae, and most likely a few green Charon cards too, with no number. When the first-player marker (a wooden amphora) is in front of you, you pass one of your cards face-down to the player on your left. If it's a monster, you must say its number. If it's Charon, you must lie, giving a false number.

The receiving player has three options. They may tell you that you're a transparent charlatan, forcing you to take the card back and place it face-up in front of yourself. Or they may accept it, placing it face-up in front of themselves, or – and this is where it gets interesting – without looking at the card they can add another one from their hand and pass it on to the next player, speaking a number which may be true or a lie depending on the card they've added. This third player can then refuse, accept or add, as before; and the fourth player can only accept or refuse.

Charon cards are the risky ones. Get three of them face-up in front of you and you're out – and it's possible to get three in a single hand, if you're at the end of the chain and can't tell you're being sold a three-headed pup. So there's a big element of calculating risk and pushing your luck, as well as spotting truth from myth.

It's a great deal of fun, but it has weak spots. Play is always to the left, so you're always going to be giving a card to the same player, which is a problem if you're sat to the right of someone who can read you like a book. The rules for fewer players require you to take out some cards, which feels like a fudge and spoils the game when someone offers you a 6, having forgotten they're all in the box. And there are unnecessarily fiddly details in the rules.

But it zips along with energy and pleasant tension, somewhere between Poker Dice and *Sheriff of Nottingham* writ smaller and faster. There isn't much in the box but it hits that sweet spot where novices will have fun and more experienced gamers will crunch the numbers and plot the tactics, and still most likely lose to someone who's spotted that funny sniff they do when they lie.

'Greek deduction and bluff' it says on the cover. They should have used the poet Virgil's one-line summary of the Trojan war, 'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts' because it sums up the game perfectly, but if someone gives you a copy then it's one gift you shouldn't turn down.

JAMES WALLIS



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 40 Creature cards
- 15 Amphora cards
- First player pawn



PLAY IT? PROBABLY

There are more intricate games of bluff and chance out there, but *Nessos* has a stripped-down simplicity and speed. A few fiddly details spoil what's otherwise an elegant and very enjoyable opener.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SKULL...

Nessos is not the same as the (supposed) biker game of bluff and luck, but they share a style, a dynamic, and really good-looking cards.



TEA FOR 2

Designer: Cédrick Chaboussit | **Publisher:** Space Cowboys

20-30m | 2 | 10+ | £18

Many things have happened during the Mad Hatter's tea party, and, who knows, maybe a quick two-player card game was one of them. In mixture of very light deckbuilding with top trumps mechanics, *Tea for 2* has a surprising level of depth packed in a small game with adorable artwork.

Starting with the same base decks, players simultaneously reveal their top cards. Whoever has the highest value wins the round and therefore can use the value difference between the cards to purchase a new card or perform a card-specific action. The aim of the game, as one would expect, is to get the most stars, victory points. Some can be generated through in game actions, for example rotating the hand of the pocket watch, and others are gained at the end by completing objectives that are randomly dealt during the setup.



With different card actions, pocket watch powers and various tokens abilities, *Tea for 2* gives a myriad of paths to victory, while at the same time not overbearing players with complex rulesets. With the random card draws, comes the spice of the luck, however throughout the game players can get rid of weaker cards to tip the odds their favour.

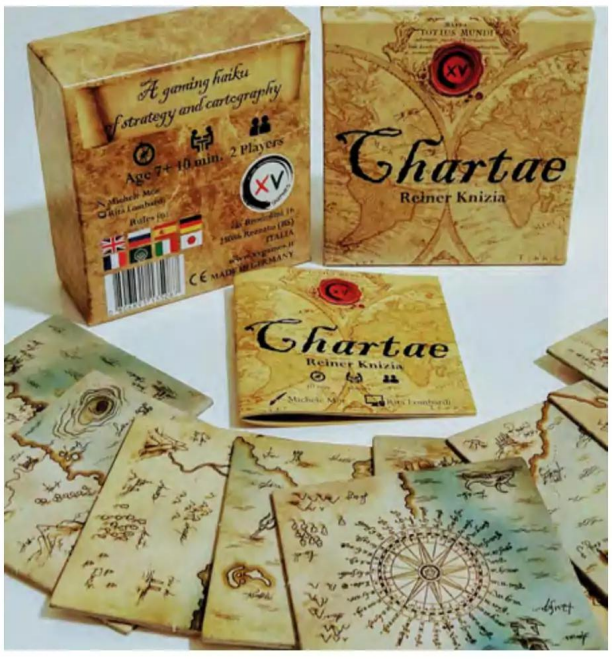
With relatively short playtime and delicious looking artwork, *Tea for 2* indeed feels like having a nibble on a crunchy biscuit with your tea, giving you something to chew on but also leaving you with a warm feeling.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

CHARTAE

Designer: Reiner Knizia | **Publisher:** Galactic XVgames

10m | 2 | 7+ | £12



Chartae may not have the picturesque game board of *Babylonia* or the mountain of liquorish-coloured camels of *Through the Desert*, but despite its almost minuscule size, it still contains that Reiner Knizia signature gameplay: simple in execution, but delightfully brain-tickly.

In *Chartae*, players are cartographers arguing on how to plot the most accurate map of the land and sea. One of them, wants the sea to dominate, while the other one wants the land to do so. The map is composed of a three by three tile grid, which, once completed, signals the end of the game. Then the player whose terrain occupies the most connected tiles wins the game.

During their turn players can either add tiles to the grid or rotate those already in play. It may sound like there is not a lot of space for strategical manoeuvring, but for a ten-minute game, there are quite a few tactical decisions to be made. For example, adding a new tile brings the game closer to the end and has a risk element – you draw from the deck blindly – but gives you a level of control of how the map grows. Rotating a tile is a powerful move, but can be countered by the opponent on the next turn.

Chartae is the essence of the traditional Reiner Knizia gameplay, in pocket-sized packaging. While it does not lay claim to any new boundaries with its tile-laying gameplay, it is a delightful game that will make any ten spare minutes worthwhile.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

OCEANS

Life can be better down where it's wetter...

Designers: Nick Bentley, Dominic Crapuchettes, Ben Goldman, Brian O'Neill | **Publisher:** Northstar Games Studio

60-90m | 2-4 | 12+ | £50

A first glance at the box and artwork for *Oceans* suggests a tranquil game. Warm swashes of watercolour (naturally) depict a gentle, whale-like giant gliding beneath a calmly rippling surface, while colourful fish graze amid a colour-burst coral reef. However, much like nature itself, there is viciousness beneath all that beauty. Similar to its land-based counterpart *Evolution*, this is at heart a game of fierce survival on the most epic, eon-spanning scale imaginable. A game of life in the truest sense.

The bones of *Oceans* will be familiar to *Evolution* fans, but this is a separate and distinct entity. Each player must create and evolve subaquatic species using a six-strong hand of trait cards. These are initially played down one per turn, either added to an existing species or used to spawn a new one. Essentially, these sets of cards form an organic engine, whereby species can leech, predate or bottom-feed off each other – or, with careful arrangement, off other players' species.

You don't *have* to play aggressively. If your cards allow, it is possible to get by hoovering up the appealingly colourful fish tokens from the trays at the centre of the table; primarily through foraging at the reef, but also



using certain card abilities to gain fish from one of three deeper ocean zones. However, the reef will quickly empty, and it requires the discarding of a potentially useful trait card to repopulate it by migrating fish from the ocean zones. Also, as each zone empties, the game escalates, triggering scenarios (for example, 'Large Predators' which makes any predators on the table even more deadly) and the Cambrian Explosion. This 541-million-year-old evolutionary watershed moment increases the number of cards played per turn to two, doubles your species' aging rate (which increases your game-end points but also the risk of a species going extinct), and allows you to play cards from the game's second deck of traits, the Deep deck.

You don't *have* to play with the Deep deck, either. *Oceans* is enjoyable enough with just the Surface cards, which contain all the core traits. But it is so much more fun and challenging once the Deep cards come into play, each unique card offering more advanced traits and raising the stakes considerably. Especially if someone plays 'The Kraken'...

Which brings us back to aggression. Nature thrives on violence, and *Oceans* really comes alive as all these lovably bizarre sea monsters start picking on each other. Just as species evolve in relation to each other – perhaps developing hard shells after generations of sharp-toothed predator attacks, for example – so *Oceans*' gameplay requires flexible strategies and carefully responsive play. If one player's huge filter-feeder is gaining tons of points per round, it would be rude not to evolve one of your species to an apex predator and get chomping on them. Or maybe turn parasite and lazily leech off them. Of course, they may, in return, evolve transparency and mess your plans up. Which means it's then up to you to figure out a response to *that*, before your species' population dries up and it suffers extinction.

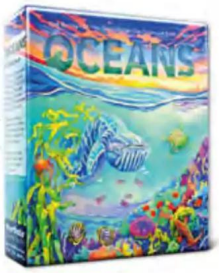
The interaction between the cards, both within and between tableaux, is simply ingenious. Once players grow familiar with the Surface traits (and, more gradually, the Deep ones) every game will become a thrillingly close-run contest, each of which requires a different approach to the last. The theme is not only compellingly immersive, it also seeps through every pore of *Ocean*'s mechanisms. Although 'mechanism' feels the wrong word here. Far too inorganic. Everything about this game feels so, well, *alive*...

DAN JOLIN



WE SAY

Easily one of the best games published so far this year, and you don't need to be familiar with the *Evolution* games to appreciate it, either. Go on, take the plunge.



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 120 Surface cards
- 89 Deep cards
- 200 Population tokens
- 24 Scenario cards
- 24 Species boards
- 1 Reef tray
- 1 Ocean tray
- 4 Player screens
- 4 Bonus tokens
- 1 Cambrian Explosion card

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED EVOLUTION...

Oceans is, after all, part of the same series, even if it doesn't have the word 'evolution' the titles. Lovers of the *Blue Planet* series should check it out, too.



SOLO REVIEW



TIME STORIES REVOLUTION: THE HADAL PROJECT

Taking the time to smell the flowers

1-3h | 1-4 | 12+ | £28

Designer: Kevin Delp, Melissa Delp, Manuel Rozoy | **Publisher:** Space Cowboys

Time travel is a tricky subject for gaming, especially if you leave any questions floating mechanically. In a medium where the 'take back' of a move is a questionable action and often a sin, there's always going to be friction against a concept that offers the main novelty of having another go.

The Hadal Project is part of the *Time Stories* universe, in a slightly different coloured world. Not requiring the base game like many of the *Time Stories* expansions means that this can be considered a complete and standalone project. And for those of us who fancy dipping our toe into the time machine, it's a great place to start.

Players do the normal *Time Stories* things like laying our panoramas, exploring parts of them and looking for ways to achieve their goals – these might not always be clear from the start, but working out exactly what you're looking for is part of the fun. Here we're tasked to find the cure to a mysterious virus which is spreading throughout the planet. And we begin our adventure in a huge undersea lab before something large and fishy happens. We can't tell you much more without spoiling things.

Each player takes a vessel to inhabit, who come with their own set of skills and personal story cards. These include interesting motives that can be completed for your own satisfaction and for a bonus of Azrak returned to your character. This Azrak is the currency of your actions, as players have to spend these little plastic crystals to turn over panorama cards and investigate the scene. Azrak can also be used to pass tests more effectively. Usually a test will be presented with score you need to meet, exceed, or in some cases fail, each sending you on a slightly different path on your chrononautical journey.

As a solo experience it's compelling. It's heavily story driven, and with the use of the personal motives, has a very pleasing human element. You're not just the godlike narrator of the action as you are in some solo experience, you can make intriguing story choices to explore. Not all of them to your advantage.

While a 'normal' game relies on communication most of the time – players usually having to pass on information rather than exposing the cards to one another – in solo mode it becomes a fairly tough puzzle of interpretations. 'Does this, what feels like a too obvious clue, actually lead us where we need to go?' the options for second guessing yourself are plentiful, and working out what your characters' strengths are is key.

Once you're in the swing of things the game opens up to this thinky experience that lets you make mistakes. The tests can feel a bit arbitrarily luck based, as much as you try and hedge your bets. On the plus side, there's little hand holding, so you never feel on rails. On our first solo playthrough there were whole areas left unvisited as I rushed towards what turned out to be quite a bad ending. Apologies to the entirety of humanity.

As an experience compared to the larger *Time Stories* games, it's simply more compact in scope – if not table space. A couple of scenes take up a great deal more table space than you'd imagine for a game mostly about laying down a row of cards. Still, those expansive movements are pleasing and cinematic. It's a solid entry in the series and pleasantly streamlined.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A very contained and accessible version of *TIME Stories* that takes any worries about 'investing' in the series, and gives you a new timeline to play with.



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Token punchboard
- 32 Azrak crystals
- 110 Story cards
- 60 Common cards
- 59 Personal cards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *UNLOCK!*...

Similarly to the much lighter *Unlock!* series from Space Cowboys, *TIME Stories Revolution: The Hadal Project* is a rewarding puzzler, and the ideal next step for those looking for something meatier.





MY CITY

Could be worse, could be Man City

Designer: Reiner Knizia | **Publisher:** Kosmos

30m | 2-4 | 10+ | £34

There's no shortage of family-friendly games about making cities, but a few things make *My City* stand out. It's by Reiner Knizia, the most prolific designer of all time. It's up for the Spiel des Jahres, which as my colleague James will remind you, is the most important games award in the world. And it's a legacy game – the modern innovation where the game is physically changed after each play, making each set unique

My City isn't the first family-friendly legacy title, but it's one of the most ambitious. A complete campaign will last 24 half-hour games which is, as my youngest child exclaimed with wide eyes, seventy-two hours of play. (It's not seventy-two hours, but it's still a commitment that a lot of families, distracted by homework and Roblox, will never get to the end of.

It's a tile-layer. Specifically it's a tile-layer with the sort of post-*Tetris* tiles that may remind you of *Patchwork* and other games by Uwe Rosenberg, which is ironic because Rosenberg is also on the shortlist for the Spiel des Jahres this year. Funny old world. But Knizia's take on the aesthetic is distinctively different.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 4 Player boards
- 96 Playing pieces
- 8 Sealed envelopes
- 4 Scoring tokens
- 24 Construction cards

Everyone has their own identical board and tile-set. Each turn someone flips a card showing one of the tiles, and everyone takes that tile and places it somewhere on their board, subject to some fairly simple rules: new tiles must touch an old tile, no crossing rivers, and so on. Of course, this being a legacy game those rules change and develop as things go on.

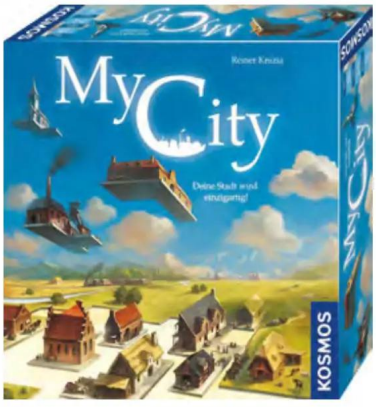
Once all the tiles are down you score: plus points for every tree you didn't cover, minus points for leaving rocks and grass uncovered, and negatives for tiles you couldn't place. Points let you colour in progress symbols on your board, but also affect who gets to put new stickers on their board. The learning curve is gentle but the game is never less than pleasantly challenging. It's a multiplayer solo, so nothing you do will affect the other players, but that doesn't detract from what's basically a social puzzle.

Each of the eight sealed envelopes in the box covers one chapter of three play-throughs, adding new rules and sometimes components. I'm deliberately not going to describe what's in the envelopes because the surprise is half the fun, but chapter titles like 'The Flood', 'The Gold Rush' and 'The Railroad' give some good clues. The variety keeps the game fresh, but without moving far from the original gameplay.

As an introduction to legacy games, *My City* is pitched just right. The core mechanic is simple but robust, the half-hour games pass quickly, and everything has the level of polish you'd expect from one of the world's great designers. But whether this is a game for you comes down to two core questions: will you enjoy this kind of abstract puzzle enough to play it, with variations, twenty-four times, rebuilding the same city from scratch over and over again; and does your family or group share your enthusiasm?

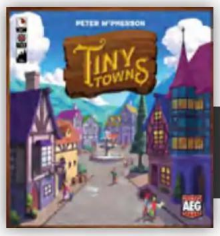
Clever game? Absolutely. Great game? Possibly. Great legacy game? That depends on you.

MARTIN ADAMS



WE SAY

It's great to play, but asking any family to play a game 24 times may be a tough ask. Perhaps if we have to go back into lockdown....



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TINY TOWNS...

It's a good year for family-friendly town-builders, and *Tiny Towns* is different enough in style to make the transition between the two games a pleasant one.

POETRY FOR NEANDERTHALS

Designer: Francesca Slade & David Matthews | **Publisher:** Exploding Kittens

40-70m | 1-75 | 12+ | £25

On first inspection, *Poetry for Neanderthals* seems a lot like the mass-market favourite *Taboo*. Each round sees one player take on the role of a cave-dwelling poet, drawing cards from a deck showing different words and short phrases and attempting to get their teammates to guess them. It's a familiar party game premise, but here it comes with a twist: to help your teammates, you'll only be able to use words of one syllable.



It's harder than it sounds. How would you describe a sand castle using only the shortest words in your vocabulary? Maybe: "Big stone place where knights live, but made of beach stuff." What about a winter break? "Leave home when it's cold and fly off to hot place for a while." The severe restrictions on how you can communicate mean you need to be creative, and with a sand timer relentlessly trickling down as you play, you also need to think on your feet.



It's about as straightforward a concept as you'll find anywhere in gaming, but it comes with one or two added elements to give it some depth and flavour. Each card in the game comes with easy and tough options to attempt, worth one or three points respectively. Then there's the inflatable wooden club included in the box which you can use to bash anyone who uses an extra syllable. It's an optional extra – one shamelessly lifted from the 2009 game *Ugg-Tect* – but if your group doesn't object, it adds something to the atmosphere.

OWEN DUFFY

HAGAKURE

Designer: Frank Crittin, Grégoire Largey | **Publisher:** Studio H

25m | 3-5 | 10+ | £15



Trick-taking games vary vastly in variety, playtime and levels of complexity. Some, like *Preferans*, played with a standard deck of cards, are not newcomer friendly, with its high levels of strategy and hefty playtime. Others, like *Indulgence*, aim to introduce trick-taking to more casual players by including custom cards with appealing artwork and non-card components that add extra gameplay elements.

Hagakure takes *Indulgence's* approach even further: a small card game, with swift five-card rounds, it makes trick-taking accessible and appealing. The core trick-taking staple remains: the highest card takes the trick. However, *Hagakure* also comes with its own little spin on the basic rules. For example, if a player lays down a samurai (a red card) at the start of the round, others must also play a samurai card, if they have one. This essentially weeds out the higher valued cards, making discarding low ones, that are unlikely to take a trick, harder and therefore raising the competitive bar of the game.

At the start of the round, players can also play a Nobori token, a one-off ability that can, for example, double your points from tricks. These tokens can help you get ahead if played in a combination with the right hand of cards. A player has to have a sensible assessment of a hand dealt to estimate if spending a token is worth it and if it is, which one would yield the best result.

The light Japanese theme fits perfectly with the artwork that is both humorous and elegant. However, the game's attempt to give all of its components Japanese names, like Nobori for tokens and Yomi for the non-player deck, feels slightly try-hard. The name of the game itself refers to the spiritual guide for Japanese warriors and the Book of the Samurai, however, it is unclear how that is related to the trick-taking or the game and once again feels like the theme is being pushed too hard.

Despite this relatively small shortcoming, *Hagakure* succeeds as an absolutely delightful gateway into trick-taking games.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA







UNDAUNTED: NORTH AFRICA

Designer: Trevor Benjamin & David Thompson | **Publisher:** Osprey Games

30-60m | 2 | 14+ | £30

There's two main ways to do war on the tabletop. Many like to attempt a simulation. Hundreds of tokens or miniatures, rules for every part of the conflict from reloading to morale, and a sense of a complete machine being turned by your hand. The other is abstraction, focusing on the broad strokes and, in truth, getting to the most meaningful parts of conflict.

Undaunted: North Africa, the sequel to *Undaunted: Normandy*, is on the latter end of this spectrum. Like the previous game, from which the rules are only tweaked and improved, players set out a scenario using tiles and then create starting decks to draw from each turn. The game is about bolstering and improving your deck by removing the fog of war added through exploration, and calling in more soldiers to improve your chances of drawing them. You're also trying to thin out your opponent's deck by shooting at their soldiers. A kill means they lose a card, and if it's the last in the deck, the token and all cards that go with it are removed from the game. For those who have played *Undaunted: Normandy*, you will notice a deviation here – previously soldiers could always be bolstered from the supply, now there is a real danger in having a soldier type wiped out. This is something of an improvement, stopping games running too long.

We're placed in North Africa, playing as either the Italians or the British Long Range Desert Group, and while much remains the same, we do have one important feature introduced: tanks. Tanks, and other vehicles like gun trucks have been added to the box, and offer a minor amount of additional management. When soldiers are placed inside tanks, they swap their action for the actions of their seat, allowing them to drive, fire anti-tank shots and so on. This makes for interesting manoeuvres and allocation of soldier tokens, as while someone is driving, they can't shoot, making the use of vehicles one of the key puzzles to unpick when pressing forward to your objective. They're an obvious advantage, but it's an elegant trade off. And objectives are the draw here. If you lose sight of what you're meant to be doing, then you're likely sunk. Staying focused is important for winning the battle.

What *Undaunted: North Africa* does best is asks you as a player to make the large and sweeping choices in the war – your actions count at every point, as do your opponents. As such it really does have the feeling of duel about it – the game itself falls away to be about way your strategy interlocks with your opponent's weaknesses.

Everything you loved about *Undaunted: Normandy* is here, with polish, and a sprinkle of novel new features. There are few war games that are accessible while remaining 'truly' a war game. This one is nearly perfect, and with enough community scenarios in the future, might be the only one you need.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

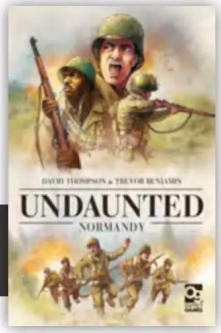
Much like its predecessor, *Undaunted: North Africa* presents us with the tight gameplay and meaningful strategic decisions that make conflict fun and accessible. If you're looking for a war game that lets you make real decisions in less than 40 minutes, then there's nowhere better to start.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 88 Cards
- 22 Map tiles
- 4 Dice
- 91 Tokens
- Scenario booklet

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED UNDAUNTED: NORMANDY...

If you wanted more *Undaunted*, this is a great sequel. For those who are about to dive in, there's no harm starting here.



MYTHIC ODYSSEYS OF THEROS

D&D in the lap of the gods

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

256 | 11+ | £38

Between the capricious gods, mighty heroes and terrible monsters, there's always been plenty of scope for a crossover between Greek myth and *Dungeons & Dragons*, and though it isn't the first attempt made at such a task the *Mythic Odyssey of Theros* does a great job of blending the two together.

With a handful of tweaks, some new character options and a couple changes to the rules, the book creates something that plays like traditional *D&D* but feels noticeably different. Rather than battling dragons and raiding tombs, it shoves players towards epic quests through the underworld and hunts for monsters that sensible folk would ignore entirely. This comes together to create something dramatic; a feeling that the divine challenges and unlikely coincidences that fuel your adventures aren't tired clichés but rather a baked-in aspect of the world.

The world in question is that of Theros, a realm already beloved by the *Magic the Gathering* players who've seen several sets based there. However, even if you've never so much as sleeved up a single spell you shouldn't assume this is a sourcebook to skip, as the setting's a pretty easy one to wrap your head around.

It is, essentially, a riff on mythical Greece, complete with a pantheon of meddling gods and stack of gargantuan monsters in need of slaying. The elves and dwarves of more conventional *D&D* are ditched in favour of satyrs, centaurs and minotaurs, and with them go a whole load of fantasy staples. The gods get a vibrant makeover, going from distant figures of abstract power to dangerous forces that regularly meddle with the world of mortals.

This isn't simply background storytelling either. The entirety of Theros is warped by divine might and this is reflected in new rules that provide the biggest twist on the fifth edition ruleset to date.

For a starter, every character has a chance to pick a special supernatural gift that marks them as champions of the gods. All of these add in flavour to the mix, but also powerful little bonuses that make even brand-new adventurers feel like the heroes they're destined to become.

The extra rules and power don't end with character creation, either, as there's an entire system set up to track a hero's piety to their chosen god. You unlock greater benefits as the game goes on, and what starts out as a free spell or two can quickly become a permanent stat increase as you take on more powerful foes.

If there's a problem with this, it's that it can sometimes feel rather restrictive. Mechanical benefits like these are something players love to carefully curate, and sometimes they may feel trapped into following their gods' wishes. Of course, in some ways this is appropriate – going against the god you've been championing should be a difficult decision, after all – but choosing between a story point and a +2 bonus just doesn't feel great no matter the circumstances.

This is especially true when you think that little bonus might be needed to take on one of *Mythic Odyssey of Theros*' greatest achievements: the enormous pile of monsters it brings to the table.

These beasts are among the best that *D&D* has to offer and offer a huge range of deadly encounters such as build-your-own chimeras and squads of well-trained hoplites. There's an impressive amount of creativity on display, and while GMs may struggle with the fact that many fantasy staples just don't match Theros' tone, the list of new monsters should more than make up for that.

Indeed, if you wanted to you could quite easily pick up the core rules alongside *Mythic Odyssey of Theros* and happily game away without ever sparing a thought for the wider world of *D&D* or even bothering with the base game's basic conceits. In some ways, it feels as though a subtle shift of rules and approaches has found the book a spot somewhere between a new setting and a new game entirely.

Is it the kind of game you'll play for the rest of your gaming life? Maybe not, but that doesn't stop it being a delightful breath of sea-salty air, and well worth investigating whether you're a *Magic* fan or not.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



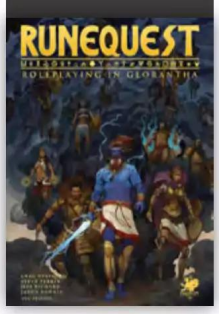


WE SAY

A solidly constructed way to step away from conventional fantasy tropes and explore a world of myth and legend. We just wish there was more adventure support for it.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RUNEQUEST

If you're after the mythical feel of *Runequest* but aren't so keen on the system itself, *Mythic Odyssey of Theros* offers a great path into spears and sandals





SOLO REVIEW

PLANET APOCALYPSE

Finally doomed

Designer: Sandy Petersen | **Publisher:** Petersen Games

60-90m | 1-5 | 14+ | £90

This might be an entirely unnecessary review – Sandy Petersen fans know what they're getting in this trove of demons already. But for the rest of us, I'll start you with two questions – 'do you enjoy rolling dice?' And, 'do you like monsters?' If the answer is yes, you can happily give your local friendly game store a ring and see if they can get this massive box in for you.

Hell is coming for us, and our rag-tag bunch of orthogonally ordained heroes are the only way to stop it. You will pick at least a couple of heroes (even for solo play) and begin pushing back against the tide of demons. And it does feel like a tide, or even just trying to walk upstream in a particularly nasty river. Each turn invasion markers will move down the track, and when your heroes meet this marker, you'll be asked to roll some dice. These custom dice tell you to put out a demon of a certain tier when you match a pair, plus a grub (the most swattable minions) per pair. You start the game massively under-equipped and it's only through collecting courage by bashing demons, laying ambushes with troops cards, and carefully planning your advancement that you've got any chance of finally meeting the boss monster – Baphomet, a kind of goatish body trapped in a hell-wall.

You'll need to level up by buying cards from the market and adding them to your character. These might be special skills, an upgrade to your dice, or a new way to spend courage. Bashing monsters works by rolling whatever dice you're currently equipped with, and helping each other out by upgrading the dice rolled – at the cost of courage. Eventually you'll meet Baphomet, who you'll fight in helltime, a separate combat instance.

At its best you'll be throwing huge handfuls of dice, and praying that you're going to wipe out the current horror facing you. At its worst… the rulebook is a bit fiddly and over complicated for what is a game about having some very silly and straightforward fun. That's not to say it doesn't have dramatic swings – going from the back foot to pushing back the menace is a real fists-in-the-air-moment – it's just you might want to go horns up with your hands while you're doing it.

Of course, that all sounds too simple. A circular despair track keeps ticking per the number of players each turn, and a dice is added each time it reaches the start again, making the threat worse every time you uncover an invasion token. This ticks another track on which advances the boss demon and make them spawn a nearly as awful fourth circle monster.

Literally every demon has too many faces and is horrific in its own way, the heroes are elegantly sculpted and modelled. The dice are just… very nice. Everything here is just about having huge handfuls of luck and going for it. Your biggest problem is that there's three expansions out too with even more fourth circle demons – and they're hard to not recommend as well.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WE SAY

Huge, nasty, and stupid in all the right ways. There's not much more you could ask for from a top-tier dice-chucking hell-beast-bothering game. If you're going to drop some cash on your first Petersen game, this isn't a bad place to start.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX? WATCH US MEET EVERY MONSTER



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 42 Dice
- 66 Gift cards
- 28 Trooper cards
- 4 Legion cards
- 1 Double-sided map
- 6 Heroes
- 10 Limbo minions
- 6 First circle demon miniatures
- 4 Second circle demon miniatures
- 2 Third circle demon miniatures
- 2 Fourth circle demon miniatures
- 1 Baphomet miniature
- 6 Hero mats
- 1 Hell time zone
- 60+ Tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BLOOD RAGE...

If you thought the *Blood Rage* monsters were a little tame, the conflict a little too elegant, and you'd prefer to be throwing dice around, *Planet Apocalypse* is your bag.





GEOMETRIC ART

It's a smart, arty party game

Designer: Romain Caterdjian, Hsu Wun Hao, Eros Lin | **Publisher:** EmperorS4

10-30m | 2-5 | 7+ | £25

If you're a gamer with an artistic streak, the tabletop hobby offers plenty of opportunities to express the creative side of your personality. From the hit drawing-and-guessing game *Telestrations* to the bluffing and subterfuge of *A Fake Artist Goes to New York*, there are more art-themed games than you can shake a paintbrush at.

It means that *Geometric Art*, from Taiwanese publisher EmperorS4, faces some pretty stiff competition. But this silly and sociable release does an admirable job of distinguishing itself from a crowded pack, combining familiar elements from much-loved drawing games that have come before it with a handful of twists that help it feel fresh, challenging and – perhaps surprisingly – genuinely artsy.

The game comes with two modes – co-op and competitive – both of which see players roll a handful of wooden dice showing a collection of lines, curves, shapes and squiggles. On each round you'll use this random assortment of elements to attempt to draw an object determined by a set of category cards. Then, you and your fellow players will take turns to guess what one another's masterpieces are supposed to depict.

The cards themselves only show broad, often open-ended categories: monster, city, fairy tale, clothes. It's up to you to decide exactly what to draw using the shapes at your disposal. You'll find yourself racking your brain for inventive ways to use the elements available on each round, asking yourself whether a particular combination of lines and squares could form a bridge, a car or a skyscraper. It takes some genuine artistic thought, and while you don't need to be any good at drawing to enjoy the game, you do need to be able to think visually in a way that feels quite creative.

Once you and your friends have finished drawing, you'll simultaneously reveal your work, and it's here that *Geometric Art* reveals the second part of its expressive one-two punch as you try to work out what the hell everyone's pieces are supposed to represent. You'll stroke your chin and 'hmmmm' approvingly as you discuss the inherent suggestion of the organic in the artist's use of bulbous forms and disjointed positioning of elements. And then you'll probably guess completely incorrectly, leaving yourself looking like a prize numpty.

But it's here that the game recognises something important about art. Any kind of artistic endeavour is a two-way process. There's the creator, then there's the audience. Expression and interpretation. How a work is interpreted can be just as important as the artist's intent in its making. It's probably the kind of thing they talk about in art school, I dunno, I couldn't tell a Reubens from a Renoir. But *Geometric Art* makes both sides of the equation equally fun, and it manages to make both its cooperative and competitive modes thoroughly enjoyable, feeling almost like two games for the price of one.

It's an impressive achievement, and a great option whether you're playing with kids or over wine and cheese with your *impossibly* sophisticated friends.

OWEN DUFFY

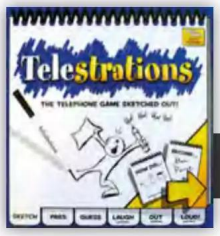


WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 7 Dice
- 5 Artists' boards
- 5 Coloured pens
- 35 Topic cards
- 10 Ability cards
- 1 Exhibit card

WE SAY

Beauty is in the eye of the beholder – but this is an objectively good addition to anyone's collection. A strong entry in the draw-it-and-guess-it genre.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TELESTRATIONS

Geometric Art is a deft, dice-chucking evolution of classic silly drawing games.

BACK TO THE FUTURE: DICE THROUGH TIME

That's the power of luck

Designers: Chris Leder, Ken Franklin, Kevin Rodgers | **Publisher:** Ravensburger

45-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £25



One of the most enjoyable (and noodle-baking) moments in the *Back to the Future* trilogy is the sequence in the second movie where Doc and Marty infiltrate the climactic events of the first instalment, which of course involve past versions of themselves. At one point, 1985 Doc even handily passes 1955 Doc a wrench. Talk about self-help.

That wrench makes an appearance in *Dice Through Time*, the latest of several tabletop adaptations of Robert Zemeckis' time-preztelling saga (coming very close to Prospero Hall's own similarly titled take, *Back in Time*.) What marks it out from the rest, however, is the way it invites players to cooperatively recreate their own version of that *Back to the Future Part II* sequence, each playing a Doc/Marty team from a different time period: 1885, 1955, 1985 and 2015. Troublesome bully Biff Tannen has been on a DeLorean stealing joyride and left stolen items scattered around the space-time continuum. So it's up to two-to-four Doc/Martys to find them all and return all these plot-relevant knick-knacks to their proper times before the universe implodes.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Game board
- 4 Player mats
- 4 DeLorean movers
- 4 Biff standees
- 16 Dice
- 72 Event cards
- 20 Item cards
- 20 Paradox tokens
- 20 Einstein tokens
- 1 OUTATIME marker
- 1 First Player marker

Like all good cooperative games, *Dice Through Time* presents a series of short-term puzzles that must be solved with careful attention to each other's resources and decisions, while the long-term challenge gradually escalates. Each round, a number of movie-moment event cards are placed on the board's luridly coloured grid, which represents Hill Valley in the four different time zones (rows are years, columns are locations). In order to pick up an item, these events must be resolved and removed by matching card symbols to those found on the game's custom dice, which all players roll simultaneously before taking their turns to use them. Each die result has its own action, too. A flux capacitor means you can move up or down the board to the same location in a different year, for example, while an arrow means you can move left or right to any other space in the *same* year.

When a round ends, unremoved events shunt the board's "OUTATIME" marker along its track; if it gets to 12, game over. Fortunately, item returns are rewarded with a backwards step along the track and an Einstein token which effectively gives players a bonus die result.

Things are complicated by Biff, who blocks locations, and the fact that sharing a location in the same year with another player moves you two spaces forward on the OUTATIME track. But there's a really pleasing, theme-driven mechanism which can make your time-hopping lives easier. You can "ripple" dice by leaving them on the board for other players. If they're in the same location in the same year or a future year (i.e. below the die in the same column), they can be used by that player on their turn. This both adds a layer of cooperative coordination and also neatly fits the concept of Doc and Marty leaving clues for their future selves.

Being a family-weighted, dice-based game, it does rely a little too much on luck. Despite ripple-based mitigation, or the "Mr Fusion" allowance of using two matching results to count as any other, a bad event-card draw or roll can prove irreversibly disastrous. However, fans of the trilogy will love the way it evokes the films' frantic-scrabble pace, while its lightweight complexity and quick set up time are sure to encourage same-session repeat plays, time and time, and time and time, again.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

It helps to know the films, but even if you don't, the way it requires diligent cooperation – especially through the dice-rippling mechanism – should be enough to hook you.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BACK TO THE FUTURE: AN ADVENTURE THROUGH TIME...

With its own take on rippling and its emphasis on resolving events in different times, IDW's *BTTF* competitive card game is a close, albeit inferior, cousin.

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MARGRAVES OF VALERIA

If only looks could thrill...

Designer: Isaias Vallejo | **Publisher:** Daily Magic Games

60-90m | 2-5 | 14+ | £55

Word of advice; never use the descriptor "Worker Placement" to entice non-board gamers. In terms of raw appeal it's only slighter above "Economic Management" and miles behind "Party." The epidemic has reduced my playtest group to my parents and younger brother, who I had to convince to play a 90-minute Hand Management Worker Placement game. Thankfully, *Margraves of Valeria* is not your run-of-the-mill Eurogame, but a board game ambassador that manages to make building a cardboard engine engaging.

First impressions matter a lot and this game looks gorgeous. From its army of wooden knights to the individual player sets of Margraves (think fancy warlords), ships, towers and dinky cardboard castles, the game wows with its high quality production value. The board is a cascade of colour and every card has wonderfully stylish artwork, making medieval fantasy look as tantalising as a sweet-shop.

Gameplay is just as inviting. Players start with a smattering of resources and identical hands of citizen cards. Each turn, a player can either use the top or bottom of a card to gather resources, buy more cards or slay monsters, all so they can build ward towers and curry influence with the four ruling guilds. Whilst the game ends when one player builds their four towers, the winner is decided by whoever has the strongest influence in the realm, encouraging players to support one or two guilds to maximise on points.

The hand management mechanics lets players approach the game differently, despite starting with the same options. When you want to build a tower or pick up your previously played cards, you must play a card facedown first, rewarding players who manage to not only focus on a particular strategy to succeed, but who sequence their card plays so they're free to take advantage of opportunities.

So, if it looks great and plays smoothly, it's a must-have, right? Unfortunately, no. For a worker placement game to shine, it has to make the act of placing workers matter. The game's generous resource distribution and card playing options means you're never forced to compromise. A resource might run out for a turn, but you've always got something else to do, so it never feels like an inconvenience. Some cards also benefit your opponents when played, but never punish, limiting your influence over other players to barely registered passive aggressions.

The lack of interaction overall makes playing an isolated experience. Veteran worker placers will immediately see the point potential in certain card combinations, leaving less experienced players to fumble across the board, thinking that they're doing well and only discovering how far behind they were when points are finally tabulated.

For this game to be great, players needed ways to meaningfully interact. If the monsters presented a danger to everyone's success instead of a passive point possibility, or if there were more ramifications to player actions that made gaining resources a challenge instead of a formality, then the puzzle of finding success would feel more rewarding and the game overall would be more exciting.

I really want to rate this game higher based solely on how good it looks, but these quality components come at a cost, one that's hard to justify when the core gameplay means you're only having fun on your turns. If your play group hates when someone spoils their plans and loves gathering and building without fear of being sabotaged, this is the game for you, but if you like your games with a little more bite I recommend looking elsewhere.

MATTHEW VERNALL



WE SAY

The production values and hand building mechanics really raise this game above most, but the lack of player interaction makes it more suited to people who enjoy building an engine.but hate having spanners thrown in the works.

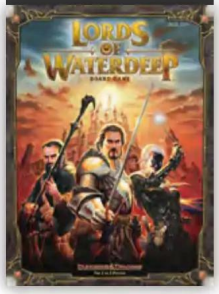


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 1 Track board
- 1 Score sheet pad
- 45 Cardboard gold tokens
- 1 Wooden starting player sword
- 60 Privilege tiles
- 10 Starting wealth tiles
- 104 Game cards
- 5 Self-assembly cardboard keeps
- 5 Player aid cards
- 5 Player boards
- 39 Wooden resources
- 6 Plastic gems
- 20 Wooden knights
- 5 Wooden margraves
- 5 Wooden ships
- 20 Wooden influence trackers
- 20 Wooden ward towers
- 5 Cardboard strength tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED LORDS OF WATERDEEP

One of the most accessible worker placement games around, both games make players feel rewarded for everything they do, but *Margraves* trades the Gotcha-style intrigue cards for higher quality components, for better or worse,





AGE OF SIGMAR: SOULBOUND

High fantasy, high drama

Designers: Various | **Publisher:** Cubicle 7

349 | 11+ | £45

We all know that you shouldn't judge a book by its cover, but if you're looking to get a handle on *Soulbound* you can probably make an exception this time. In many other games the kind of scene the front of the rulebook depicts – a tableau of heroic battle where golden-armoured warriors wield sparks of blue-tinged lightning as the fend off a legion of undead – would probably mark the desperate climax of a campaign. In Soulbound it's Tuesday night.

'Powerful' might be the best way to describe *Soulbound* as a whole. Drawn from the *Age of Sigmar* wargame, it drops its players into a world inspired by only the highest of high fantasy. The characters you play aren't common adventurers rounded up in the nearest tavern, but mighty heroes chosen by the gods.

While this may all sound like it's ripped from the big book of fantasy clichés – because, frankly, it is – the joy of *Soulbound* doesn't come from breaking new ground but rather by smashing together a whole pile of ideas ripped from the genre's century-old history. It gives you a chance to run up walls as a dagger-wielding elf assassin, channel unknowable power as a battlemage and take to the skies as an armoured angel – all from the very start of your campaign.



The core rules of the game are handled by a dice-pool system that will feel familiar to anybody who has played *Shadowrun* or the *Alien RPG*. Essentially, characters tackle obstacles by stacking up a pile of six-sided dice based on their stats and skills, and then trying to roll as many successes as possible.

So far this feels fairly similar to many other games out there, but *Soulbound*'s special quirk comes from the fact that the GM can also declare that the players need more than one successful roll if they're to pull off particularly complex tasks. If that door has multiple locks you need to crack or chains to tear through, you might need as many as three successful rolls to actually achieve your goal in time.

It's a rather slick system that allows for plenty of flexibility, though the GM does need an unusually solid head for stats if they want to keep their complex rolls feeling fair. If you aren't careful to keep track of players' dice pools it isn't hard to accidently call for checks that are either virtually impossible or laughably easy.

Fortunately, much of the need for judgement calls are removed in *Soulbound*'s frenetic combat system, which flows rather wonderfully and allows for a great blend of tactical decision making and cinematic storytelling. Positioning is all handled by divvying the battlefield up into zones, and while simply smacking your foes with basic attacks is a solid strategy, there's also plenty of scope for mixing things up with called shots to your enemy's helmet or knocking them prone with special talents.

Indeed, one of the game's biggest strengths is the fact that players can usually decide how much complexity they want to handle in their game, whether this is in combat or during character creation. It's easy to simply follow the book's recommendations and pick a couple of cool powers for flavour, but if you're interested in tinkering there are some rather fascinating blends of skills and gear waiting to be unlocked.

Really, this is the joy of *Soulbound* – the knowledge that you can do pretty much whatever you feel like and come out with something that looks, feels and plays cool at the end of it. It's not subtle or particularly nuanced, but it's easy to grasp and incredibly fun. That feels like a success, at the very least.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



WE SAY

It's as subtle as a gold-plated brick, but that doesn't stop *Soulbound* from being hellishly good fun.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

If you're into high fantasy but want something a bit more malleable, with faster combat and even more scope for shenanigans *Soulbound* is well worth checking out



COWBOY BEBOP: SPACE SERENADE

Cosmic cowboys catching criminals

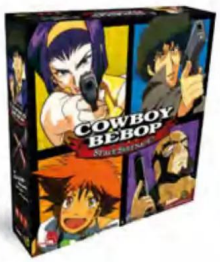
Designer: Johan Benvenuto, Florian Sirieix | **Publisher:** Japanime Games

30-60m | 1-4 | 14+ | £50

Stack up on fuel, get your crew ready and don't forget to take your genetically modified Welsh Pembroke corgi, because you are off on an adventure to collect bounties for known criminals from Earth to Mars and as far as Ganymede in the semi-cooperative deckbuilding game Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade.

Players take on the role of one of the main characters of the crew of spaceship Bebop – Spike, Jet, Faye and Ed (who comes with Ein, the aforementioned corgi, and also the undeniable MVP). While each character, as per standard deckbuilding rules, start with the same base deck, only differing the colour of their cards, throughout the game, they will be able to purchase more cards, whose abilities cater more to the nature of the characters they belong to.

The crew then travels to the three planets, collecting clues or fighting the local criminals to get renown, the points that determine the winner of *Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade*.



WHATS IN THE BOX

- 3 Planet boards
- 1 Bebop board
- 4 Character boards
- 1 Damage board
- 1 Common deck board
- 5 Plastic miniatures
- 5 Cardboard standees
- 7 Fuel cubes
- 40 Renown tokens
- 50 Capture tokens
- 1 Big shot stand
- 188 Cards



Towards the end of the game, Spike's nemesis Vicious will appear. He is stronger and more elusive, hopping from planet to planet, as the crew chases after him. It is the defeat or the escape of Vicious that will signal the end of the game.

Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade does not stray far away from the basics of deckbuilding established by *Dominion*. Players play five cards to purchase new ones, deal damage or get clues. The primary focus of the game is on defeating the criminals, which can be brought down when they lose either all of their health or clue tokens. Therefore, for the most efficiency, players will build their decks to be more clue or fighting orientated. The characters themselves will also be more predisposed to one of these approaches. For example, Ed's character ability allows her to get additional clues, so it only makes sense to buy cards that boost investigation as well. These two approaches come with their own downsides, however. Dealing damage has a potential of getting characters injured, i.e. filling their deck with useless cards. On the other hand, multiple clues are needed to get the criminals' token, so it is harder to achieve overall.

While players are competing to get the most victory points, there is a very light cooperative aspect to it as well. Characters can use some of the abilities of the other crew members as long as they are on the same planet, which can prove quite useful, particularly when trying to capture Vicious.

To do well in a game of *Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade*, players just need to follow the strategy that can apply to any deckbuilding game: carefully curate your deck, get rid of the low-value starter cards and make every action efficient. And, of course, don't forget to use cards from different characters' decks to create combos, synergies and get bonus actions.

This is not a game that will revolutionise the deckbuilding genre, nor will it add anything substantially new to it. Yet the gameplay principles *Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade* does take, it also utilises to create an engaging, challenging and entertaining experience. It also approaches license, beloved by many, respectfully, faithfully recreating it in components of great quality, from card thickness to perfectly fitting game box insert.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Just like the anime series it is based on, *Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade* is a fun jazzy ride. It sticks close to the golden rules of deckbuilding, adding a few mechanics that help enhance the theme, making players feel like true space cowboys.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DOMINION

Cowboy Bebop: Space Serenade sharp card play is reminiscent of *Dominion*, *although it has a bigger focus on the combat abilities and combos.*

PROJECT: ELITE

We're going to need bigger guns

Designer: Konstantinos Kokkinis, Marco Portugal, Sotirios Tsantilas | **Publisher:** CMON

1h | 1-6 | 14+ | £90

Originally released in 2016 to general acclaim, *Project: ELITE* has returned to the board gaming tables, boasting a new coat of paint, plus some updated components and mechanics.

If you are unfamiliar with the game, at first glance it's possible to confuse it with another instalment of the *Zombicide* series. It's a tough cooperative game, in which players are an elite group of soldiers battling hordes of monster-like creatures – in this case, aliens – on a gridded board. Two-thirds of the game box is occupied by the alien miniatures, and from the first round, they spew onto the board in endless waves that players will struggle to clear. However, as an elite squad, players are armed to the teeth and what equipment they don't have, they will be able to find by searching the map. During the game, they will need to clear the enemies through dice-based combat, fight bosses, complete objectives, and try to stay alive to win. Although the game comes with three modes of difficulties, none of them will be a walk in the park.

However, this is where the similarities with *Zombicide* end, because what sets *Project: ELITE* firmly apart is the real-time action phase. Between the start of the round, where events trigger bad things to happen, and the end of the round, where aliens cause more bad things to happen, players get two minutes to perform as many actions as they possibly can by rolling dice. The re-roll mechanic is pleasantly generous, which helps to keep the fast-pace of rolling that is needed to do well. There is only one 'bad' dice outcome, which triggers the zombies to move, and the rest can be distributed between weapons, items, actions or objectives as players see fit.

Yet, while luck is a dominant part of the gameplay, the game manages to utilise dice rolling in a way that introduces strategic thinking. Objectives, as well as some items or weapons, 'lock' assigned dice until the end of the round. This this limits the number of dice players can keep rolling, making it harder to complete specific outcomes. So, do players commit to an objective straight away and risk action inefficiency towards the end of the two minutes, or risk waiting until the last minute and thirty seconds to try to complete the objective?

Those last two minutes are also complete chaos, as everyone around the table is rolling dice as fast as they can, moving miniatures on the board and shouting out their progress or how much time is left (counted on the included electronic timer or through a free app). It is possible to make a mistake, for example, move an alien in a position that is worse off for the team overall, but that is also part of the fun, a 'price' to pay for the swift decision-making.

To win a game of *Project: ELITE* players must complete missions. These are quite simplistic in nature, primarily differing in the type of symbols required to roll to win and a bit of initial setup, and overall are lacking in variety. Also adding a bit of narrative to the bones of the overall story would really help improve the theming of the game beyond 'generic burly sci-fi soldiers kill scary aliens' premise.

It may be a game of several years old, but among newer, miniatures, dice-combat, grid movement games, *Project: ELITE* still feels like a breath of fresh air. The only let downs are the semi-feeling missions and somewhat a generic theme, and that despite the setting of space and inclusion of really fascinating alien designs, still feels like it has too much grey paint.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

With improved components and tighter mechanics, this re-release of *Project: ELITE* still carries the rat-a-tat of fun from its first edition.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 6 Hero miniatures
- 53 Alien miniatures
- 1 Electronic timer
- 1 Double-sided map boards
- 6 Hero dashboards
- 6 Counter bases
- 64 Equipment cards
- 3 Swarm stats cards
- 25 Event cards
- 30 Swarm spawn cards
- 20 Boss spawn cards
- 6 Player aids
- 42 Dice
- 6 Damage markers
- 88 Tokens
- 28 Double-sided objective tokens





TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ZOMBICIDE: INVADER

In addition to the cornucopia of detailed miniatures and dice-based combat akin to the *Zombicide* series, *Project: ELITE* also adds a challenge of the time constraint with its real-time action phase for a tense gameplay.



TOP CAKE

Designer: Ellie Dix | **Publisher:** The Dark Imp

30-45m | 2-4 | 8+ | £15



Top Cake is a deceptively simple auction game from The Dark Imp's growing line of attractive small tin offerings. Competing as aspiring hoteliers at a confectionery trade show, players will bid on layers of cake each round and add them to their display, aiming to astound the judges with the most impressive cakes at the end of the game.



Each bid is made up of two cards - one face up and one face down - from players' hands of ten. Values range from one to eight, plus a Snatch and a Reverse card which mix up the usual highest bid wins formula.

A decent amount of player interaction comes from the inevitable bluffing, as players cautiously ponder over which card to place face down and when best to use their Reverse and precious one-use-only Snatch cards. Furthermore, it pays to be cautiously aware on each player's turn, as any matching cards on a cake layer are removed from play. Comically, this encourages plenty of suspicious, mind-reading glares game after game.

The icing on the cake is how Dix taps into that satisfying feeling of 'building' something that is so often desired in the hobby. Thanks to its aesthetic design, *Top Cake* isn't merely asking players to collect abstract sets; it's tasking players with building a towering cake. The game packs in seven unique types of cake, each boasting distinct, minimalist design thanks to artist Anastasia Cartovenco. As auctions are won, players will stack their cakes with these cleverly overlapping cards, hoping to score extra points through matching layers and crowning them with ornate toppers. It's a satisfying process, undoubtably helped by its impressive table presence considering the game's diminutive size. *Top Cake* manages to push its novelty size aside, admirably presenting itself as a game capable of competing with designs twice its size and price.

CHAD WILKINSON

DON'T COUNT YOUR CHICKENS

Designer: Ellie Dix | **Publisher:** The Dark Imp

20m | 2-4 | 8+ | £15

Ellie Dix's charming small tin game of competitive fowl raising is a unique merging of genre and mechanics, tasking players with the tricky challenge of simultaneously gathering birds whilst picking apart the puzzle of each bird's value. Oftentimes, an original idea results in a steeper learning curve, but occasionally it just clicks. *Don't Count Your Chickens* snugly fits into the latter, pairing its central hidden information mechanic with worker placement in a way that just feels right.

Much of this is down to its relative simplicity. Like most games in the genre, turns consist of placing a worker on a particular action, gaining its benefits whilst blocking them for others. With a central area of only seven action spaces, *Don't Count Your Chickens* strays from the usual generous formula found in classic games like *Caverna*, and conversely uses a sense of restriction to evoke tension.

This restriction is amplified further through the clever mini bluffing game that kicks off each round. Players secretly choose one of the three coloured bird types to display. Any duplicates among players are instantly discarded with any remaining unique birds granting players a bonus bird of another colour. The downside is that this bird type can no longer be taken or traded in any of that player's actions throughout the round.

The meat (poultry?) of the game lies in the action spaces. Some simply gift players with more birds from the market or discard coop, whilst others offer up snippets of information on the value of each bird. Finding the balance between gathering information and snatching up as many birds as you can is an immensely satisfying puzzle. Acting too hastily can result in an abundance of animals known to be high value, being cancelled out by a flock of unknowingly negative scoring birds at the end of the game. Such a clever idea could easily have become a more ambitious project. But ambitious doesn't always mean better.

CHAD WILKINSON





KEYFORGE: MASS MUTATION STARTER SET

Do the evolution

Designer: Richard Garfield | **Publisher:** Fantasy Flight

45m | 2 | 14+ | £25

KeyForge has been known for its weirdly fun brokenness in the past with key cards that had to be errata'd because they could (effectively) end games in single turns, the introduction of chains to slow down competitive play, the way you're cycling your deck so quick there's almost always an explosive turn at hand, if you want it.

So, with a box showing mutated, toxically-lit monsters – some of which are two cards large and need to be played at the same time – you'd think things might be getting whackier. Strangely, *Mass Mutation* seems to be moving the intended 'meta' (as much as one can read from review games) towards control play. It's less a race than *KeyForge* has been before, as the creatures on the board are real threats to æmber generation and your eventual win.

It's worth noting that this is the first 'entirely in-house' release for *KeyForge* with Richard Garfield taking a step back to a more advisory role. If you were worried, don't be. It's great.

The main changes brought into the game are from the mutations. A number of cards in each deck can now generate æmber, steal it, do damage, and so on – unusually so for that card type. These little bonuses go some way to offering control options for the board and for keeping your opponent away from the required æmber for the all-important keys. Stealing the opposition's whole stack on to a larger monster also seems more common, as do cards to take them down (for example, a card that reads 'deal 23 damage to a creature' would have seemed quite silly in the past). Frankly you pay much more attention to the board when there's a creature on it holding a key and a half's worth of æmber. As such Fantasy Flight have answered one of the main criticisms of the game – that what happens on the board doesn't really matter when it comes to winning.

Fans will also notice the return of House Sanctum to the game, who now have unique ways to purge mutants – a fitting bit of thematic fun. Our games suggested the taunts found in this house make the whole 'steal everything' plays much more effective. It's feels a lot closer to other card games for presenting this 'battle' metaphor more directly, and that's no bad thing. Harnessing the wilder parts of KeyForge into a stricter form makes more a more strategic feeling game.

The starter set give you everything you need to get going, or, if you're like some *KeyForge* players we know, you would prefer to have some nicer tokens, this is a great top-up. Alternatively, if you want to get someone else into it, and leave them with enough kit to teach others afterwards, this takes some of the 'here's a pack' freefall.

Mass Mutation is a matured version of *KeyForge* that retains pretty much everything you already love about it but balances the more excessive parts. The flavour is monstrously huge, the combos have a chance to be completely destructive, but there's just a few more options to answer an opponent's dominating position. Still, all this balance and calm only exists until you rip open that perfect deck.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 2 Archon decks
- 6 Key tokens
- 22 Æmber tokens
- 22 Damage tokens
- 44 Status counters
- 2 Chain trackers
- 2 Poster playmats

WE SAY

A more controlled and refined kind of game, despite the mutations, which takes away a lot of the explosive and weirdly exploitative victories of previous outings. A great place to start for those who were unsure about *KeyForge*'s weirder elements.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *DUNGEON MAYHEM*...

If you're looking to step up from a boxed card game, without having to get into booster buying and deck construction, *Keyforge: Mass Mutation* is the place to begin.



GENESYS – SECRETS OF THE CRUCIBLE

It's a wild world out there

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Fantasy Flight

272 | 11+ | £42

One of the great strengths of *Genesys* lays in its ability to handle any concept you could want to throw at it, and this has never been more useful than in this stellar effort to sketch out a *KeyForge* RPG setting that blends Martian death-rays, enchanted battle axes and wandering sky pirates into a chunky genre-soup.

The pleasingly hefty book aims to let players and GMs alike roleplay their way across the Crucible, home to the *KeyForge* card game. It's stuffed to the (radioactive, glowing) gills with the new rules, character options and gear needed to get exploring the world as ordinary-ish inhabitants of the sprawling star-planet as they head out on weird and wacky adventures.

Like the two *Genesys* sourcebooks that have preceded it, *Realms of Terrinoth* and *Shadow of the Beanstalk Secrets of the Crucible* portrays itself as both a guide to playing in a specific world and a broader genre. However, while you could quite easily have converted the game's previous efforts into solid, generic material for fantasy and cyberpunk games, respectively, this one feels like it'd be difficult to use in any world other than the Crucible.

It's hard to think of many other settings that needs rules for playing as both a goblin and a ghost, for example, or as a giant and a sentient plant. Nor can there be a long list of games that feel a need to set out rules for mounts as diverse as flying saucers and chariots.



If you aren't familiar with the *Keyforge* card game, you'd be forgiven that this all sounds like an absolute mess. And, frankly, you wouldn't be entirely wrong.

The entire point of the Crucible, both in-fiction and out, is that it's a world formed of a mis-mash of cultures and tropes drawn from across the entire galaxy, summoned there by forces entirely beyond anybody's comprehension, for reasons nobody can quite comprehend. This flimsy justification is all that's needed to stick elven forests next to sci-fi megacities and demonic enclaves, each of which have access to both powerful technology and world-shattering magic.

All this madness comes together to create something a little hard to get a handle on at first, but the sheer diversity of the world also makes it incredibly fun to explore at the tabletop. It's particularly appealing to those of us who struggle to settle their attention on a single genre for long but don't want to restart their campaigns every three weeks, as you can scratch those barely-constrained creative urges by bouncing the game from fantasy dungeon crawl to sci-fi heist whenever you feel like it.

If there's a downside to all this, it's that the world feels a distinct lack of focus. It's a whole heap of cool ideas held loosely in place by a bit of string and a smattering of duct tape, lacking much of an obvious flag for what kind of stories you're supposed to tell there. In the card game, this driving motivation is provided by having groups of god-like Archons battle over stashes of Æmber – a quasi-magical wonder element – but this is difficult to translate to a game where you're playing as just another soldier in the ranks.

Perhaps the best way to deal with this existential lack of purpose is to embrace the chaos; to intentionally leap from genre to genre and embrace the ludicrous range of options jammed into *Secrets of the Crucible*'s pagecount. The characters you can make with this book can be some of the weirdest, wackiest and most downright enjoyable little bundles of rules and ideas you're going to encounter in a mainstream RPG.

Indeed, the entire book – perhaps the entire setting – drips charm and perhaps a little bit of self-knowing silliness from every page. This manifests in countless small ways, ranging from the entire Martian faction's obsession with ray-guns and flying saucers, through to new skills that allow a hero to flex their muscles in lieu of a conventional social check or spend story points to make a dramatic entrance into a scene.

Is *Secrets of the Crucible* a bit of a mess? Perhaps, but only because that's what makes the setting so much fun. If you can embrace that, it makes for a great world to play in.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

It might be a hard sell if you aren't already a fan of the card game, but *Secrets of the Crucible* offers a compelling – if weird – world to explore



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *KEYFORGE*

Like the cards? Try exploring the world. Just try not to blow itup, okay?



THE 7TH CONTINENT: CLASSIC EDITION

Classic indeed

1-30h | 1-4 | 14+ | £59

Designer: Ludovic Roudy & Bruno Sautter | **Publisher:** Serious Poulp

This is the new, smaller and somewhat trimmed version of *The 7th Continent* – designed to sate the desires of those who missed the initial Kickstarters for the game. It's been shaved back from the huge Kickstarter version to make what is possibly the most compact version of the game Serious Poulp could have made. It would be very ambitious to call it a travel version, but the box is a little bit smaller. If you're not acquainted with *The 7th Continent* – check out our Have You Played? on the game on page 14.

So what's different? There's less curses for a start – meaning that there's slightly less ways to die. There's less characters – including the loss of a couple of literary in-jokes with Victor Frankenstein missing the boat on this one. Oh and the minis, you'll have to settle for standees. You're also going to miss out on a couple of trays, a card holder and some player aids. Most importantly there's less cards – although all the cards are there to make the game work, with 113 cut cards you might think you're missing out on something…

People who own the Kickstarter version of the game will tell you that whatever has been cut from the game is the best bit. They might be right, but that's not the point of *The 7th Continent*. The *The 7th Continent* is about going on your own journey. You can ignore them until you've at least died a couple of times in the jungle. And if you really do feel like you need more ways to die in a far off land, there's always the (thankfully reasonably priced) expansions coming later this year.

The core loop is the same as the other editions – you'll explore the world and uncover events, make choices about what you're going to attempt, and then how many cards you're going to commit to overcoming whatever the obstacle is. Failure isn't the end, but much like actually failing to scramble up the side of a hill and falling on your backside, it's pretty frustrating. Eventually, the risks mount up for your characters, and it becomes very real as the risk of a curse striking you down once the action-and-lifeforce deck is flipped, your choices become more important than ever.

The 7th Continent is more or less a solo game, even if you're playing a team. The deck is shared, discussion is required to progress anywhere with any kind of efficiency. It's one of those games where having more people around the table doesn't help you win or make the game easier, but it does help you stop making stupid mistakes. A bit anyway, you're still going to wish you'd done a lot of things differently – like not dying – before lifting your first curse.

As stripped back versions of games go, this is one of the best we've seen. The heart of the game is there in a way that feels untampered with, and without looking you won't know you're missing anything. Other than the areas you've yet to explore of course.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 3 Curses
- 849 Cards
- 2 Storage trays
- 34 Dividers
- 9 Cardboard figures
- 1 Player aid

WE SAY

The 7th Continent is a classic, and if you missed out on the original, but want a taste of this wide world – then this is probably the best way to do it.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *GLOOMHAVEN*...

Or really, any big game of exploration. *The 7th Continent* isn't *Gloomhaven* in complexity or combat, but when it comes to opening up a wide world, there's few better ways to do it.

CARAVAN

Threading the needle

Designer: Joseph Huber | **Publisher:** Rio Grande Games

45m | 2-4 | 12+ | £48

If *Caravan* had been published in the early-to-mid 2000s, we might be talking about it alongside other classic gateway Euros. It has a robustness of a game which when it sets out its rules, for anyone, it does so with no pretext of you ever having played a game like it before. Like allthe best gateway games do. It also, as an aside, has an art and component style which these days seems antiquated. This is just another reason it won't look out of place next to *Carcassonne* or *Catan*. Quaint or tired, your mileage in this desert may vary.

The desert is full of treasures, and handily it's laid out in a grid. You want to move those goods to the city that wants them (luckily these places only want one thing). The best way to do that is to place camel meeples between the good and the place you want it to go. Players have four action points to spend a turn, placing a camel on an empty space, picking up goods, moving goods along a camel chain, and stealing goods all cost one. Moving a camel onto an occupied space costs two. The game has a chess-like feel to the blocking of the other player. Placing your camels in the way of where they want to go is going to slow them down. It's even better if the route helps you later in some way.

Moving your goods, and delivering them uses the camels like a conveyor belt – players can move a good to any camel orthogonally connected. As camels with goods can't move themselves, it's important to snake across the desert and do a little bit of 'to me, to you' to efficiently deliver goods where they're needed.

Stealing is a matter of being on the same space as the 'victim camel' and handing your theft marker to your opponent. Consider it like a fancy highway bandit leaving a calling card. The thief stores the item under their camel where it is safe until it is moved (at which point it goes back on top). It's a good way of regulating the thievery as when someone has been stolen from enough, they're able to call and end to desert piracy – unless they want to start it up again.

You restock the desert every now and again, and then there's a scramble for this or that resource – as some are worth more. Players are faced with the flipping of their whole caravan of camels over a couple of turns to get a high-scoring resource across the map, or the slightly less exciting hoovering up of lesser resources. These choices are agonising in the way you want from a good gateway Euro, and they zip along as fast as a cantering camel.

It feels extremely satisfying to create a good chain, or block your opponent, and yes, even stealing the little wooden cubes. It's elegant and hard not to recommend fully. If you were looking for 'the game' that you're going to come back to again and again, *Caravan* is no mirage.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A reminder of a simpler kind of gaming which is often overlooked simply because we're all a lot more used to playing complex systems than we once were. A real treasure in the desert that won't disappoint if you come to it with an open heart.



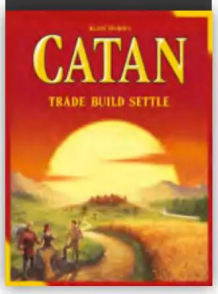


WHATS IN THE BOX

- 24 Camel meeples
- 4 Theft markers
- 48 Goods
- 1 Cloth bag
- 44 Demand markers
- 1 Game board
- 4 Player boards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *SETTLERS OF CATAN...*

Somewhere between *Settlers of Catan* and *Carcassonne* this game sits as a kind of long-lost brother – while it's slightly 'out of time' it is charmingly competitive and will remind you of the early days of the Eurogame explosion.



SHERLOCK HOLMES CONSULTING DETECTIVE: THE BAKER STREET IRREGULARS

25 years later, this game is still afoot



Designer: Dave Neale, Gary Grady, Suzanne Goldberg | **Publisher:** Space Cowboys

When the original *Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective* was released in 1981, the concept of interactive fiction was still relatively new. The iconic *Fighting Fantasy* series of adventure game books would only begin the following year, and the first *Choose Your Own Adventure* book had only been released in 1979. The idea of readers taking control of a story was an intriguing one, and *Sherlock* stood out not only for its novelty, but for its immersive air of mystery.

The game cast players as investigators working alongside the great detective, tasking them with solving a series of baffling cases by visiting crime scenes, interviewing witnesses and confronting suspects. It came with a set of booklets to work through, each containing a series of numbered, interlinked paragraphs, and each with a hearty helping of dark deeds, strange circumstances, red herrings and memorable characters. But what was perhaps most impressive were the lengths it went to to build its setting.

Consulting Detective came with a detailed map of Victorian London, as well as a collection of replica newspaper pages full of information on brazen thefts, society scandals and gristly murders. It made it easy for players to imagine themselves amid the swirling fog and gaslit streets of Holmes' city. And when the game was re-released in 2016, a new generation of players discovered its enduring appeal.

The Baker Street Irregulars offers a new set of cases for fans to crack. A standalone boxed set which you can tackle whether or not you've played the original game, it comes with a collection of stories focusing on the group of street children employed by Holmes to aid him in his investigations. Like the original game, players aim to unravel the truth behind a series of bizarre and shocking incidents – kidnappings, thefts and murders.

To uncover the truth, you'll follow a succession of leads, some of which point to valuable information and others to dead ends. When you're confident that you've solved the mystery, you'll aim to answer a series of questions about the perpetrators and the circumstances around their crimes. When you're done, you'll score points based on the number of leads you followed and the number of questions you can answer correctly.

It's absorbing and brain-teasing fun, rewarding players for picking up on small details and interpreting each new piece of evidence with Holmes-like logic. The individual cases are deftly crafted mysteries that feel true to Arthur Conan Doyle's original stories, although they do suffer from some occasional anachronistic language. And while some are self-contained single-session brain-teasers, others knit together to unveil a longer campaign to lose yourself in.

If you're the kind of person who relishes a good whodunit, there's nothing else in gaming quite like this series, and it's good to see it continue to spawn new mysteries so long after its initial release. While its box suggests playing with up to eight fellow sleuths, though, we wouldn't advise it. This is an ideal game to tackle solo or with a trusty Watson-like partner.

OWEN DUFFY



WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 10 Case Booklets
- 10 Newspapers
- 1 Informants List
- 1 London Directory
- 1 London Map
- Rulebook

WE SAY

A great addition to a well established, classic series. The choice as to whether you pick this up or not is... elementary...





TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *LEGACY OF DRAGONHOLT*

Sherlock Holmes Consulting Detective combines the narrative immersion of an adventure game book with a well-crafted set of Sherlockian mysteries.

DIG DEEPER

Designer: Rob Daviau | **Publisher:** Portal Games

2-3h | 1-5 | 16+ | £13

The *Detective Board Game* from Portal Games really sticks out as one that embodies its mantra – 'games that tell stories'. In it, you seek to resolve a series of cases using a mixture of decision making with the cards you're given, and research both on the board and in the cards, as well as on its dedicated website, that allows you to uncover and link your evidence in the age of technology. That begs the question then – how do you capture that in an expansion that's set it in 1970's Boston before the internet?



Dig Deeper is part of the new signature series, and so this adventure is penned by Rob Daviau. At its simplest, just another case. You receive another pack of cards to run your story, you use Antares online to investigate, and you use the same logic of working time and overtime stress to contribute to your final question answers. But as repeatability is an issue for the first game, it's great to have another case to get your teeth into, especially when it's so well written. Much like before, the story itself is very engaging, where you're investigating the untimely death of a local politician. Without spoilers, it's enough to have you questioning everything and everyone.

So how do you get around the new timeline restrictions, and utilise the key research part enjoyed in the original? Well, upon selecting *Dig Deeper* on the Antares site, it converts to a library computer. You'll type commands into the DOS-esque screen, to complete your interviews or check out your evidence. Plus, you can also call for librarian help. It takes three hours in game world time and makes you appreciate the modern world all the more, but it's a clever method change.

If you liked *Detective*, and want to play it again with a new tale, this is worth every penny. It's more of the same stuff you will have enjoyed, with a few twists to keep it interesting, a few surprises along the way, and a real chance to *Dig Deeper*.

CHARLIE PETTIT

FORBIDDEN LANDS – THE BITTER REACH

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Free League

314 | 15+ | £35



If *Forbidden Lands*' fog-shrouded aura of doom hasn't been quite bleak enough for your tastes so far, *The Bitter Reach* may well be just the thing to scratch that melancholy itch. Straddling the gulf between setting guide and full campaign, the beautifully built book paints a snow-dusted portrait of frozen wastes, evil kings, and rampaging demons in a land where the weather can kill as surely as any monster's claw.

In many other games this would probably come across as a rather niche product – a supplement designed for the hardcore survivalist who relishes the idea of losing characters to frostbitten toes. In *Forbidden Lands*, however, the howling wilderness simply feels like a different flavour of misery. Yes, it's very cold in *The Bitter Reach*, but at least the mist isn't trying to eat you.

In truth, despite the almost comical amount of gloom hanging about the book, it exudes a perversely inviting air of possibility that makes the prospect of a fresh campaign exciting rather than intimidating. Part of this is probably the simple result of having a fresh map of unspoilt hexes to explore, but there's no denying that the setting and story play their part too.

The entire campaign is based on a frozen continent and the book comes packed with plenty of new rules governing firewood, snowfall and numbed fingers that strike a fair balance between experience feeling unique and turning the game into one of logistics rather than adventure. It leans more towards an open-ended sandbox than a more traditional linear adventure, but it also makes sure there are always important events ticking along in the background.

This wonderful combination of open-world gameplay and bubbling plot can be tough to execute neatly, and certainly requires some thought on the part of the GM, but when it goes to plan it offers a truly delightful bit of gaming and an excellent expansion of *Forbidden Lands*' gloomy fantasy adventures.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



PLANETARIUM

A worldbuilding game. Literally.

Designer: Stéphane Vachon | **Publisher:** Game Salute

45m | 1-4 | 10+ | £32

Where a game like *Oceans* or *Evolution* takes us right back to the origin of life (on this planet, at least), Stéphane Vachon's Planetarium goes even further. The aim of this game is to create planets themselves – four planets in one solar system, to be precise. This is done by smashing matter together with perpetually spinning globula rasas (star blobs) to create evolutionary events which shunt each world towards completion, whether it ends up a toxic-atmosphered rock, or a life-supporting gas giant.

Each player starts with a hand of five Evolution cards: two 'Low Evolution', two 'High Evolution' and one 'Final Evolution', which can't be played until the final round of the game. These typically present a bunch of criteria required to lay down an orb-forming chapter in one of the four planet's stories. For example, if you gather water and gas on a terrestrial world, you'll give it an ozone layer, earning you six points and making it more habitable. You lay your card out on the relevant edge of the board, joining a tableau that actually has little function other than to track which player's applied each developmental leap, and also tell the story of the planet's formation come the game-end.

In order to collect all this space-stuff, each player starts their turn by moving one token one place on the busy orbital board, attractively and efficiently graphic-designed by Dann May. You can either move matter or one of the four planets, and tokens can only go clockwise. This sounds quite limiting, but there's always something useful you can do, while it gets more engagingly challenging later in the game as matter is swept up leaving, well, more space in space.

Your short-term aims – evolutions for points – are simple enough to achieve, to the degree that you won't really need to bother too much with the Low Evolution cards and will do better to focus on High Evolutions, which require no Low Evolution prerequisites; an arguable design flaw that actually has little negative impact on the game. But what you must keep your eye on are those Final Evolution cards, which can't be played until the board's Evolution Track is filled with used matter, triggering the final round.

By this point, you'll have had the option to draw Final Evolution cards at the end of each card-playing turn, up to a maximum of four in your hand. The more you've collected, the more options you have to bag the big, game-swinging points. But you'll have also limited your chances of scoring for earlier evolutions, and will need to meet more complex criteria for each Final card. For example, to achieve "Radiation-baked orb", you'll need to have collected three metal tokens on a hostile world that you've previously played a card on; for "Hot Jupiter", you'll need to have manoeuvred a gas-world into one of the three orbits closest to the sun.

It's quite a quick game, given the eon-spanning, system-spinning theme, and not exactly the thinkiest, while player interaction is minimal. But there is gentle satisfaction in its world-creating strategies, making it suitable for family groups, or those who don't mind a lightweight Euro.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

It's very straightforward and a little dry, but the epic, science-based theme is hugely appealing, and there's a lot of satisfaction in seeing how each game's four planets turn out.



WHATS IN THE BOX

- Game board
- 4 Planet tokens
- 4 Optional planet tokens, with stands
- 68 Matter tokens
- 4 Habitable/ Hostile tokens
- 4 Player mats
- 8 Scoring markers
- 32 Player markers
- 52 Evolution cards

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *PETRICHOR*...

It's about making planets rather than creating clouds, but there's some similarity in its lightly applied 'gather and create' system and nature-based theming.



AQUALIN

Designer: Marcello Bertocchi | **Publisher:** Kosmos

20m | 2 | 8+ | £18



It's hard not to love a satisfying clack of a tile bumping into its neighbour on the seabed. Or indeed, the clack of it bumping into another, newer, neighbour as a player shifts a blue crab away from its blue friend and next another crab.

Aqualin is a colour-or-pattern matching tile-laying game. One player takes the role of bunching together colours, the other creature type. Turns are a simple matter of firstly sliding a creature horizontally or vertically, next taking and placing a tile from the face-up market of six tiles, and replenishing the market.

And it's really good in that duelling, chessy kind of way that abstract games offer. Players take turns shifting their opponent's pieces around the board, ideally blocking them with the piece they're about to lay, adding to their growing collection of contiguous animal or colour shapes. The game really heats up when players realise the best moves in the deep are the ones where you give the opponent impossible choices on their turn. They could shift the turtle back to its turtle-enclosed spot, or instead, because of where you've moved it to they have the chance to block you by bumping it along a couple of squares. Of course, doing that might be what you're hoping – so the range of second guessing a player can set up (especially with a good eye on the market) is oceanic.

The whole thing is beautifully put together, nice to look at, and yes, pleasing to hear. It's got longevity beyond its simple abstract confines, and offers depths that while not exactly Mariana Trench deep, should at least be unsettlingly refreshing when you look down.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

BARKING KITTENS

Publisher: Exploding Kittens

15m | 2-5 | 7+ | £15



Barking Kittens is the third expansion to the popular *Exploding Kittens* game, where its predecessors include *Imploding Kittens* and a *NSFW version*. Once the record setting Kickstarter, you have to ask if the continued expansions are worth the time. Well, for *Barking Kittens*, yes, it is.



There are two new additions to the series, the first being an additional 20 cards. These include new play requirements to add to the original, such as 'Potluck' which sees everyone around the table put a card of their choice in the draw pile, or the titular 'Barking Kitten' which requires the person who holds the other matching card to take half of their hand, pick out the best ones, and return the same number of cards, as well as Alter the Future, Bury, Super Skip, and more. These are the sort of expectations we have of an expansion, but are fun in their own right.

Then the differentiator is the Tower of Power Crown. Made of laminated stiffened paper, if you gain the Tower of Power Card, you may wear the Tower of Power Crown, which contains six cards from the draw pile. This means that when other players attempt to steal your cards, they must take them from the crown atop your head instead.

Is it gimmicky? Probably, and it does serve to make the box larger than it would otherwise need to be for a simple 20 card addition. However, that doesn't stop it being fun. When you replay Exploding Kittens you begin to lose some of the delight in the silliness that original plays of it had in spades. When you replay with additional tactics offered in this expansion, whilst you or your players are forced to wear a cat hat/crown, alongside a selection of other random cards with their typical style and wit, it's easy to give in, and laugh your way through. Silly, a little childish, but engaging – pass me the crown.

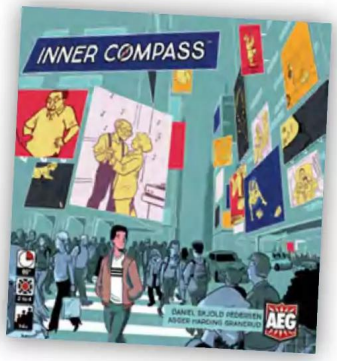
CHARLIE PETTIT

INNER COMPASS

Abstract excellence, but it lacks feeling

Designer: Asger Harding Granerud, Daniel Skjold Pedersen | **Publisher:** AEG

40-60m | 2-4 | 14+ | £40





Inner Compass is the latest release from the Danish design duo who last year produced the fantastic *Copenhagen*. Now they're back with a new offering which promises to delve deep into the human psyche, exploring deep and complex themes of emotion, memory and personality.

Unfortunately, once you start playing, it quickly becomes clear that *Inner Compass* does nothing of the sort; it's an almost entirely abstract experience. The good news, though, is that it still generates plenty of chin-strokingly thoughtful fun.

The game plays out over a modular board filled with coloured squares, with different colours supposedly representing happiness, sadness, fear, anger and love. On each of your turns you'll move from space to space, picking up cards based on your direction of travel. You'll be able to discard these cards in order to feel specific emotions, placing markers on the board to represent the feelings you experience.

It's a slick system that quickly feels intuitive, but the game's real strategic hook lies in its scoring system. Whenever you place one of your markers, you'll be rewarded with points. But the value of each emotion shifts constantly throughout the game, leading to some tricky dilemmas. Should you cash in your cards now while you have the opportunity? Or should you wait a few turns until you're in a position to reap a greater reward? It also introduces the delicious option of deliberately manipulating the scoring track, letting you suddenly crash the value of the happiness cards your opponent has worked to accumulate.

While scoring points during play is important, you'll also be able to unlock a collection of end-of-game bonuses which can often prove to be the difference between victory and defeat. Like the board itself, they're highly variable, with a different set dealt out at the start of every game. It means that each time you play you'll face a different puzzle, trying to work out the most efficient and powerful ways to rack up points with the tools available.

What's most impressive about *Inner Compass* is the depth of the decisions it creates using this small set of mechanical moving parts. Playing well takes some clever spatial strategising as you work out where you need to be on the main board, and the best ways to get there. You also need to be acutely aware of your rivals' plans, ruthlessly seizing any opportunity to deny them points. The sheer variety, from the board setup and bonus scoring opportunities to the constantly changing values of each emotion, leave you constantly trying to adjust to shifting circumstances – a kind of mental churn which is the closest the game ever comes to feeling thematic.

Higher player counts increase the unpredictability, making the game less analytical and more about reacting to your rivals. It feels much better as a two-player battle of wits. It's a pity that its gameplay doesn't complement its promising emotional premise, but this is a superb abstract game which offers a fresh and taxing challenge with every playthrough.

OWEN DUFFY

WHAT'S IN THE BOX

- 4 Life board sections
- 4 Player boards
- 4 Player pieces
- 6 Emotion tokens
- 60 Player cubes
- 8 Value tokens
- 69 Emotion cards
- 16 Quality tiles
- 1 Qualities board
- 1 Situation track
- 1 Compass token
- 80 Victory point tokens

WE SAY

While it misses out on cashing in on its theme, it's nevertheless, a great abstract experience.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *SANTORINI*

Like the brilliant game of Greek gods, *Inner Compass* is all about spatial strategy and planning a few moves ahead.

BUTTERFLY



Designer: Stephen Glenn | **Publisher:** Rio Grande Games

In Butterfly, players all assume the role of Hudson the hedgehog, taking turns guiding him across the meadow, gathering up bugs with his trusty net, and scoring various sets at the end of the game. Whoever racks up the most valuable entomological collection is the winner.

Games begin by populating the main board with insect tiles and each player receiving a handy player aid. The numerous and lovingly illustrated tiles actually represent a more diverse fauna than the title suggests, with butterflies being joined by many others. The process of gathering up these varied cutesy critters – all printed on thick, sturdy cardstock – feels rewarding and tactile, with younger players taking particular joy in stacking up their matching sets. Thankfully, there's enough strategic depth here to keep adults engaged too.





Almost Knizia-esque in its abstract elegance, *Butterfly* relies solely on sparse components and a refreshingly simple central mechanic. Each player's turn will play out in the same manner, beginning with choosing a direction for Hudson to face before sending him off along a straight line. Whichever tile Hudson has come to rest upon is taken by the player and added to their collection.

Each type of creepy crawly scores uniquely, with some awarding points to only the highest or lowest valued tiles in players 'collections, whilst the titular butterfly simply scores its printed value. While there's enough fun to be had blindly bagging butterflies, it's infinitely more satisfying taking the time to choose your catches more methodically. With a bit of sly planning, players can even meddle with their opponents by leaving Hudson in unfavourable spaces on the board.

There's nothing groundbreaking here in terms of gameplay, theme, or aesthetic, in fact *Butterfly* falls into the camp of games boasting designs that seem to have been around forever. But that's not necessarily to its detriment. This underlying sense of familiarity is comfortable. There's no cumbersome new mechanics here, just a gameplay loop that feels logical at an almost unconscious level, making *Butterfly* a joy to teach, even to younger children.

CHAD WILKINSON

FAIRY SEASON



Designer: Gavin Jenkins & Dan Fish | **Publisher:** Good Games Publishing

It's harvest time for the goblin kings – and what are we harvesting? Delicious fairies of course. *Fairy Season* is a trick-taking card game using the four seasons as the rising suits of each turn. Players take a hand of five cards and play a higher number onto the card already on the table. If it's a spring one card, players can play a spring two or more card on top, or play a summer card, moving the seasons forward.



Each season suit comes with its benefits, earlier seasons offer card draw, while later seasons only offer the stashing of cards (the way you get points at the end of the game). This leads to an interesting curve of play where you can choke out 'flunks' from your opponents by moving the current trick towards winter, quicker. These 'flunks' are cases where no one can make a move after you play a card, leading you to stash the hand for points.

On top of this there's a number of trap cards (one of the ways you can grab the trick) which can only be contested by one of the four fairy royalty cards, which trump pretty much everything. Other options include the goblin cards which allow for minor trickery (choosing everyone to pass two cards to their left or right for example) or stashing extra cards.

A quick and light game of trick taking, with some quite nice art – although notably the goblins are more interesting than the fairies. It doesn't ask anything more from players than to hoover up fairies, and for that, it's pretty good. Just remember not to clap.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT





POKÉMON TRADING CARD GAME: BATTLE ACADEMY

Want to be the very best, like no one ever was, but don't know where to start?

Publisher: Nintendo

30m | 2 | 6+ | £22

Everyone has a Pokémon memory, whether it's the mourning of getting rid of Pokémon cards, whether it's telling people about a cool card you once found, bragging about finding a specific Pokémon in the videogames, or you may be a player of Pokémon now in various formats. When you take a look at the trading card game however, it's become such a vast behemoth, that it's looked upon with a mixture of admiration and of intimidation. Where do you even start?

Nintendo are seemingly realising that the sheer size of its IP is inaccessible, and so we've seen it release *Pokémon Go* on mobiles, *Pokémon Let's Go!* On the Nintendo Switch, specifically designed as entry level versions. This is exactly where Pokémon Battlegrounds comes in, as an entry level game to the *Pokémon Trading Card* World.

Whilst it's pitched as a board game, it's basically a board version of the paper inserts found in some starter packs, explaining where to place your cards, alongside three trading card packs, with Pikachu, Charmander, and Mewtwo. There's also a shiny coin and some tokens, but it could easily have been completed in the same format as previous starters. However, there's something quite lovable about it regardless.

Gameplay is straightforward – it is, after all, one of the most popular trading card games available, and its gameplay isn't in question or dispute. Through *Battle Academy*, you'll play your opponent in



the prebuilt decks, with an independent instruction booklet for both Pikachu and Charmander decks. The decks include a well considered mixture of cards, making gameplay pretty evenly levelled.

The instructions are really where it shines though, as each player gets their own player book to match the starting deck they choose. These decks are stacked in a specific order, so it can refer directly to actions to take based on the hand you have. These take each person through a simple first game step by step and turn by turn, and so when you finish your turn, it picks up in the opposing book for the other player. You'll need to talk about what you're doing, as you do different things, from learning how to use energy to how to evolve your Pokémon. We're fans of walkthrough instructions regardless, but this really does build your confidence slowly and surely, meaning once the stabilisers are removed, you're free to joyfully continue unaided. In doing so you may enjoy or curse the entry of the GX cards, in the form of a Raichu and a Charizard, but you'll know from the previous games how to evolve and use them effectively.

Then, when you feel really confident, you can pick up the advanced rules and discover the Mewtwo deck literally underneath it. Whilst there's an argument to be had in a two player game as to who gets to play the new deck first, this adds a nice extra opportunity to change up gameplay and try some new techniques. Whilst it doesn't add anything particularly new – there's no status conditions or multi-Pokémon cards to learn, but it does reinforce what you've learnt, and adds a little extra variety.

Overall, it's a fantastic step by step introduction to the *Pokémon Trading Card Game*. You build confidence easily and can play over and over again. Whilst it does mean you're almost bound to be reaching for additional decks to play with, it's not a requirement, though doing so will just take you further into the trading card world. As an academy, you can't do much better than this.

CHARLIE PETTIT

WE SAY

You could pull everyone from kids to your grandma to this game, and have them battling and debating Pokémon in no time.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 3 60 Card Pokémon Trading Card Decks
- 2 Tutorials
- 1 Advanced guide
- 1 Game board
- 1 Large metallic coin
- 1 Set of damage counters
- 1 Online code

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: *YU-GI-OH! TRADING CARD GAME SPEED DUEL...*

It might be a simple comparison, but if you've played any fast-paced trading card game before, and want to introduce yourself – or someone else – to the game, this is a great way to start.

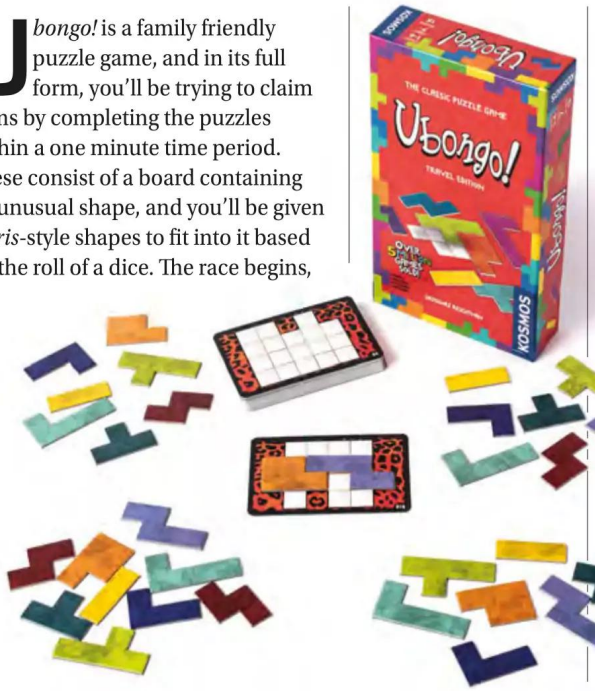


UBONGO! TRAVEL EDITION



Designer: Grzegorz Rejchtman | **Publisher:** Kosmos

Ubongo! is a family friendly puzzle game, and in its full form, you'll be trying to claim gems by completing the puzzles within a one minute time period. These consist of a board containing an unusual shape, and you'll be given *Tetris*-style shapes to fit into it based on the roll of a dice. The race begins, and upon making the correct shape, you shout "Ubongo!". It's generally a pleasant, harmless game, and a great one to play with children.



The travel edition builds on this successfully, except instead of having specific pieces dictated by the dice rolled, you use all of the pieces. Instead of racing against the same clock, you're racing to reach eight points, and your fellow player has 20 seconds to complete their shape after you shout your *Ubongo!* Instead of a board, you'll receive a stack of two sided task cards to cycle through. It becomes an effective card-and-token version of the original. However, where some will make their tokens more sturdy, or even waterproof, the *Ubongo!* tokens are the same cardboard tokens as the main game. That lack of durability is a concern, as there's a reasonable chance pieces will end up spilled into the footwell when travelling, and receiving an accidental stomp. They may be sturdy enough for sensible play, but outside the safety of the board game shelves, it wouldn't take much for a piece to break.

Having said that, the gameplay makes up for it a little. It's simple but effective, and clever enough to make you wonder if the full version of *Ubongo!* is really necessary, as the fun of the puzzle is well encapsulated in these even simpler rules. The cards are balanced, so adults and children can play fairly, and there's further recommendations on difficulties and solo modes. Ultimately, as a version to play quickly and repeatedly for travel, it does well.

CHARLIE PETTIT



DECKSCAPE: ESCAPE FROM ALCATRAZ



Designer: Martino Chiacchiera & Silvano Sorrentino | **Publisher:** dV Giochi

An escape room game that's actually about escaping a room is refreshingly straightforward. Here we're attempting to escape Alcatraz, the island prison in San Francisco bay. While each Deckscape game uses its own mechanics, this one is mercifully vanilla in its use of clues on the cards, and working things out from the prop in the box. This prop is one of our favourite things in games – the fake newspaper. While it's not exactly *Consulting Detective* it is full of suspicious little puzzles that you might not be able to draw the answers from immediately.

It's still a series of tests, and there's very little in the way of non-linearity. Yes, there may be optional pathways to explore for a few scenes, but they all have to be explored and everything collected to progress. Without 'failing forward' without knowing you're failing as an option, it's less of an adventure you're in control of than a hazard perception test. Failure sees you mark an alarm level and number of 'x' on your score sheet, and that's about it.





Some of the puzzles are interesting lateral thinking tasks, while others are a little obtuse – only a couple of times are we asked to make a choice about 'doing the right thing' which is often when these games excel. What's missing here is the sense of immersion that you get in similar games – even if not to a huge detriment.

It's a tempting little diversion, and worth it if you've got a group for a games evening that might like to have minor arguments and doesn't mind the one-shot nature of the game. As a solo game, we recommend ignoring the timer however, as one of the pleasures of solo gaming is doing things in your own time. Or in this case, avoiding doing time.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



POTEMKIN EMPIRE

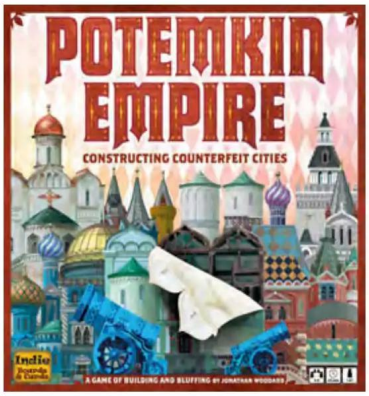
Fantastic fabrications

Designer: Jonathan Woodard | **Publisher:** Indie Boards and Cards

30-45m | 3-5 | 14+ | £29

If board gaming was a medieval kingdom, then Indie Board & Games would be the scheming vizier behind the throne. Publishers of *The Resistance* and *Coup*, their talent for creating games that reward your skills in duplicity is well documented, but can they capture that same thrill whilst leaving their cyberpunk dystopia settings for a more historical environment? In a word, да.

Potemkin Empire is set in Russia, 1787. As Catherine the Great begins her nationwide tour, players take the role of nobles trying to impress her with their wonderfully decorated towns, even if not every building is quite what it appears. Each of the four rounds start with players drafting interior cards that either show a "real" building or "fake". Once cards are drafted, players take it in turns to build any type of building and place one interior card behind it. Government and Culture buildings give you points and (along with Science buildings) let you wrest control of unique bonuses, Industry buildings let you produce resources for more points, a repeatable action you can use each turn until only one player in the round is still in the "construction phase," whilst the final option, Espionage, provides agents that can check if buildings are real or not, destroying fakes and anything hidden behind them whilst, of course, scoring you points.



The game loop is quick and appealing: you'll fly through drafting interior cards, getting some "genuine" building cards but mainly working with balsa wood facsimiles and hoping the agents don't come knocking. When constructing you've got to consider what your opponents are up to, as sometimes it's worth building a fake government building just to take the first player marker, or making sure that no-one runs away with having the most culture buildings and holding a shield that protects from agents. It's tempting to play safe, only building "real" things so they don't get knocked down, however the final scoring rewards you two bonus points *per fake building* you have, so no-one can afford to be too cautious.

There are great moments of tension as a player with an agent decides whether it's worth building to make sure they don't fall behind, or to try their luck and give someone's structure a good kick in case if falls over. This luck can be mitigated with actions on cards, some of which are "free" and let you take a turn immediately after, but every action played gives you one less interior card to build with, so finding the best way to use your cards and to deny your opponents is a tantalising challenge, which is constantly under pressure as players start to produce for points and get closer to ending the round (another action no player wants to miss out on, but someone will.)

The four rounds fly by and the final reveal as everyone shows what was and wasn't real is a great finish. Scoring takes a little while but is still engaging and I found games often finished with few points between victory and last place. It seems lazy to say "They've done it again," but this game really does delight as much as Indie's other deception titles. If you're not a fan of bluffing games there's nothing here that will change your mind, but if you like a rousing evening of "You've gotta be lying, wait are you lying?" then this will entertain for many a day and night.

MATTHEW VERNALL

WE SAY

A fascinating light bluffing game that plays quickly and provides players with plenty of ways to win. Pick it up if you like a little bit of lying in your games.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board
- 85 Interior cards
- 64 Facade cards
- 40 Resource cubes
- 15 Agent meeples
- 1 Capitol meeple
- 1 Scientist meeple
- 1 Shield meeple
- 5 Mode tokens
- 5 Player aids
- 4 Month tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *SHERIFF OF NOTTINGHAM*

Swap smuggling apples for swindling aristocrats for an equalling engaging thrill, both games come to life with table drama as you throw out accusations whilst hoping no-one calls you out.

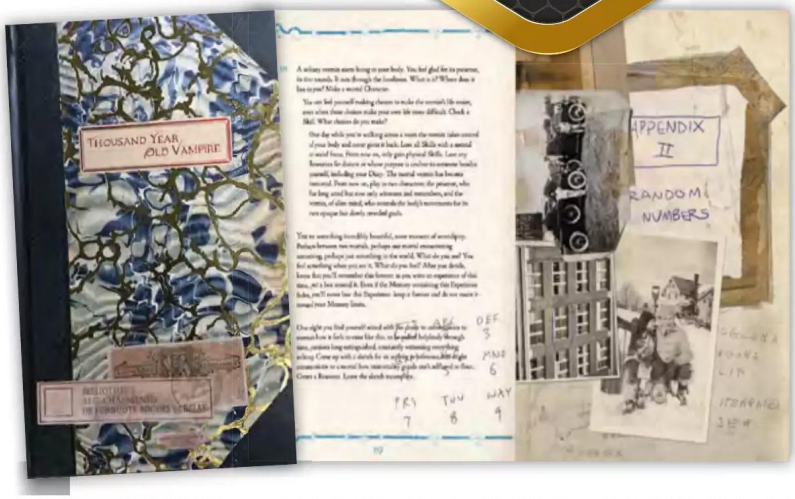


THOUSAND YEAR OLD VAMPIRE

188 | 14+ | £15

Publisher: Tim Hutchings | **Designer:** Tim Hutchings

There is a tendency among solo RPGs to delve into the dark parts of life. Whether this be abandonment or fear or moral decline, these games lend themselves to introspection and exploration. So of course it comes as little surprise that someone would make a solo RPG that captures the pain and heartbreak and unique experience of being a vampire. In many ways Tim Hutchings' *Thousand Year Old Vampire* is immediately comparable to the book and film *Interview With The Vampire* (which is a great way to get some inspiration). You choose some far-off time in history and develop a quick idea of your character's lot in life. What three skills were most important to them, what three mortals do they know and potentially love, what important memories define them, and what was the immortal that cursed them with this unlife. And you aren't straddled with the usual Hollywood vampire archetype here, no, you can be a rat infested creature of the night, a rune marked warrior, a mesoamerican shapeshifter, the possibilities are endless. The only caveat is that you have some of the usual vampire traits like blood drinking and not being able to go into sunlight.



The game itself is incredibly simple, just rolling and answering prompts but *Thousand Year Old Vampire* has hundreds of unique and interesting prompts that take you on unexpected and fascinating journeys. Especially as it encourages you to go on jaunts through Wikipedia to help make your vampire's journey feel more authentic. If an educational game could trick me into learning as much about Scottish folklore and Pictish etymology as *Thousand Year Old Vampire* did, then it'd be a huge success. Sadly there is little space to talk about how beautiful and fitting the scrapbook design is so suffice to say it is a masterpiece.

ANNA BLACKWELL

QUEST

155 | 11+ | £30

Designer: T.C. Sottek | **Publisher:** The Adventure Guild

If you walked past a group playing *Quest* you'd be forgiven for assuming it was one of those countless games whose descriptions always open with the phrase "Like *Dungeons & Dragons* but…". Linger just a few moments longer, however, and you'll find a game that carves out a niche of its own; one that ditches number-crunching and tactics in favour of streamlined storytelling laser-focused on getting you and your friends telling tales with the bare minimum of fuss.



The sheer extent of *Quest*'s devotion to smashing down the barriers between players and stories is mind-boggling. It feels like the designers combed countless sessions of more traditional RPGs for every time a rule, conceit or mechanic caused even a moment's hesitation or confusion, and then slashed them through with red ink. Levels? Gone. Spell slots? Gone. Handfuls of weirdly shaped dice? Gone.

The result retains the shape of classic fantasy adventure but carries very little of the weight. The core pillars of the genre – classes, monsters, treasure – are all still there, but the systems that fleshed them out have been hacked back and replaced with gossamer threads of suggestion and imagination.

This makes *Quest* a shockingly easy game to pick up and play. The rules can probably be explained in less than a minute and the character sheets are dominated by concepts that drive the story rather than the gameplay. You can use the game to spin some truly wonderful tales without ever worrying about whether you're playing optimally or using the right rules for grappling.

Of course, this does lose its sheen if you're the kind of players who enjoys fiddling with the rules and exploring the possibilities of tactical combat. Ultimately, *Quest* is something for those groups that like the idea of classical fantasy adventures but keep bouncing off the more complicated, more prescriptive rulesets. It's light, breezy and full of imagination, and there can be few better ways to get storytelling at the tabletop.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

THE MAGNIFICENT

The theme is all an act

Designer: Eilif Svensson, Kristian Amundsen Østby | **Publisher:** Aporta Games

60-90m | 1-4 | 14+ | £53

In *The Magnificent*, players are competing to bring the biggest circus show to town. As exciting as the theme of performances and circus acts sound, it disappointingly has very little to do with the game itself. While some artwork and game pieces attempt to carry the theme, *The Magnificent* is almost purely mechanical. The actions are an amalgamation of moving various pieces and tokens around the board and resource management that in themselves have very little to do with running a circus or the art of the performance. So, if you were looking forward to immersing yourself into the running and drama of a circus, this is not a game for you. However, if you fancy a robust midweight Eurogame that mixes dice drafting and with Tetris-style tile placement, then, please, come right in.

Putting its theme completely aside, *The Magnificent* is a collection of mechanisms that work together in a surprisingly satisfying and challenging way. The core of the gameplay is the dice drafting: a pool of dice are rolled at the beginning of the round and players select several dice to activate various actions. Value of dice corresponds to, for example, how many tetromino pieces you can take to build your camp or how many spaces to move along the game's several tracks. Typically, the bigger the dice value, the better the reward, which then translates into victory points.

However, in *The Magnificent*, rushing to get the six pipped dice is not necessarily the right strategy. At the end of the round, players pay for the highest value dice of the same colour, including any joker (white) dice they used. If you can't pay – you lose victory points.

The Magnificent also introduces an interesting mechanic where dice of the same colour power each other up. If the player used a purple dice for action, and on the next turn once again picks up a purple dice, their values combine together to become more powerful. It is possible, for example, to perform an action of a power 18, if you desire, just remember to pay for that at the end of the round. Together this creates an interesting interplay where low-value dice can still create powerful effects, if used in the right combination. Picking up a dice is not so much a matter of luck, instead it is a carefully considered and weighted decision.

In other parts of the board, you will be busy arranging tetromino tiles for bonus rewards and victory points or progressing along a travel track to gain gems that can enhance your dice rolls. Everything you do around the board in one way or another is linked, enhancing, and supplementing each other, and making every action feel worthwhile.

The downside of this, however, that it takes some time to wrap your head around all available actions and their outcomes. This is not helped by a board bustling with colours, tracks, shapes and symbols, attempting to emulate the circus feel, but instead making the board feel overwhelming.

While it is disappointing that one of the biggest appeals of *The Magnificent* – its theme – is also its biggest let down, this alone is not a reason to disregard this game. Mechanically, it is one of the more exciting, innovative dice-drafting games available, offering players plenty of freedom in how they want to approach the game and rewarding their thoughtful decisions.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

With its theme less magnificent than expected, this mid-weight dice drafting game successfully hits all of its gameplay notes.





WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 4 Player boards
- 56 Master cards
- 54 Poster cards
- 15 Circus tents tokens
- 40 Coins
- 19 Dice
- 48 Gems
- 3 Wagon tokens
- 4 Scoring tokens
- 8 Hat figures
- 32 Trainer markers
- 12 Trainer tiles
- 84 Camp tiles

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *COIMBRA*...

The Magnificent, like the medieval-themed *Coimbra*, packs a lot of gameplay and decisions in its box, while making dice-drafting the centrepiece of its gameplay.









SUCCULENT

No need for a cutting remark...

Designer: J. Alex Kevern | **Publisher:** Renegade Studios

45-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £45

This reviewer has a soft spot for gardening games. Any time you place us in a gardening plot full of attractive flowers and plants, we're already smiling. It works for us on the principle that whatever happens in the game, we're all going to be looking at an attractive board at the end of it.

Enter *Succulent*, which may be more muted than some gardening games, but has all the pleasures of a really nicely maintained courtyard. From the creator of *Gold West* and last year's *Artsee*, a set of gardeners is tasked with collecting together cuttings to complete gardening projects. The most prolific or successful gardener (i.e. point from the project cards) is the winner.

Cuttings are taken by placing Tetris-shaped tiles out into the garden plots, with the flower beneath shown in a holes cut in the board. The player takes the cuttings and places a (double-thickness carboard) flower of their colour into the tile to designate it as theirs.

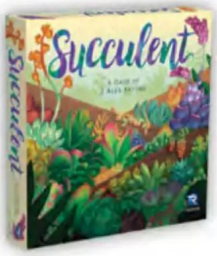
Players also take a greenhouse board, each different from one another. In this you play droplets, accrued from placing adjacently to already-owned flowerbeds, or from the flowers directly. Eventually you'll start buying project cards which range from big points to end-game scorers. The interesting part of the project market is they also offer you a way to get more garden tiles – place your player marker on the card and get the tiles shown. If that card is bought by anyone, you get a large, non-discardable droplet for use in the greenhouse.

The board expands from the initial right-side up board to others as the droplet markers on the board disappear. Once gone another of the six boards are flipped and the game continues – sort of like you're slowly conquering neighbouring allotments.

It's a game that's simply more complicated to explain than play. In fact, the project cards are extremely good at teaching you know the kind of things you'll find valuable later.

Do you want to attempt to create a number of small, independent gardens? Or maybe use the most three-tiled flowerbeds? In the end however, your scoring will be mercilessly tight. Of all of the test games we played, winning was achieved by a matter of one or two points, in one case, a half point kept it away from a draw. This tightness is what keeps the game moving throughout, as you're always nudging against one another's borders. There's little in the way of conflict, but there's always the chance that you're going to end up helping your fellow gardeners more than hinder them. As such, it's the kind of green-fingered grudge we all like to hold between the allotments.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 8 Garden plots
- 68 Flower beds
- 54 Droplets
- 50 Cuttings tokens
- 36 Project cards
- 4 Greenhouse boards
- 4 Gardener pawns
- 56 Flowers
- 1 Rulebook

WE SAY

As green-fingered games go, *Succulent* offers depths beyond the normal tile layer and a component quality well beyond what most modern games offer. An excellent excuse to get out in the garden.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *QUEENZ*...

While not quite a beautiful, *Succulent* goes at least as far down the garden path as *Queenz* and achieves just as much gameplay wise.

CONQUEST: THE LAST ARGUMENT OF KINGS

A returning conquest for Cavatore

Designer: Alessio Cavatore | **Publisher:** Para Bellum Wargames

2h | 2+ | 12+ | £65

Conquest, now with updated rules and many new minis, returns to the front line of fantasy mass battle wargames. Set in the fantasy realm of Eä, a world that is still struggling to rebuild following a great cataclysm followed by a long winter. Players will lead armies into battle from one of the four factions. The Hundred Kingdoms, the shattered remnants of an old empire perpetually locked in war with itself; the Nords, mighty northmen leading savage and relentless raids against their southern cousins; the Spires, remnants of an old civilisation that once spanned the stars; and the Dweghom, a race of hardy, industrious and peerless craftsmen originally created by dragons. *Conquest* allows players to play out battles from from small raids all the way up to grand battles.

The game itself plays in a very similar way to other fantasy wargames such as *Warhammer Fantasy* (pre-*Age of Sigmar*) or *Kings of War*, with players commanding armies made up of mighty heroes, regiments of warriors, and huge beasts. However, *Conquest* offers a unique turn sequence that makes for faster, and more interesting, battles.

A lot of the mechanics are as you would expect, such as movement and how your regiments go about attacking the enemy. The turns flow quite easily with streamlined attacking rules making combat quick, preventing you from getting bogged down in long drawn out slogfests between units.

But what really makes *Conquest* interesting is the turn sequence – instead of using a 'my-turn-your-turn' system it uses alternating activation. Whilst this is by no means a new mechanic in wargaming, what sets *Conquest* apart is the addition of activation cards. Each card represents one regiment or character from your army and must be placed into an order chosen by the player, with the top card being revealed for each activation. What this means is that you have to decide the order in which you will activate your regiments and characters at the beginning of the turn, before rolling to decide who will be activating first.

This tactical conundrum forces players to choose wisely, lest they be completely out manoeuvred by their opponent. It leads to a kind of game of bluffs. You will find yourself quickly changing the order of your cards multiple times as you try to outwit your opponent – and after that you'll be holding your breath as you roll off to see who activates first that turn. As always, your best laid plans being tactical genius or a series of complete blunders comes down to a dice roll, and how much you risked in your set up.

In addition to the turn sequence, *Conquest* also offers a selection of characters for each faction that add more to your army whether they be mighty warriors or powerful wizards. These characters offer some extra punch in combat or the ability to cast spells. What makes characters interesting in *Conquest* are their additional single use abilities or abilities triggered when they activate. These abilities offer various different tactical advantages that can really turn the tide of a game.

Overall *Conquest* offers some interesting mechanics and a new tactical challenge to players.

The focus is tactical, rather than strategic, and despite the games we played being on the bigger side, had the speed of a skirmish battle.

We should also mention that it offers some really nice 35mm scale miniatures to build your armies from the rank and file infantry all the way up to the towering monsters, such as the Mountain Jotnar – a personal favourite – standing just shy of six inches. The four factions all offering different aesthetics that all look good on the tabletop. The position options are perhaps somewhat limited but there are still plenty of ways to build up your army.

BEN JOY



WE SAY

If you're looking for a mass battle wargame that offers players streamlined play with a greater emphasis on tactics alongside an interesting activation system, then *Conquest* is definitely worth trying.



LINKS

Read the updated rules:
para-bellum.com/rules-and-faq/

Armies used in this review:
ttgami.ng/CLAKarmies

PLAY IF YOU LIKE... *KINGS OF WAR*

While there's not quite the range of fantasy staples in *Conquest*, those who are looking for their next taste of Alessio Cavatore's wargaming systems are sure to find something for them here.



BERMUDA PIRATES

Designer: Jeppe Norsker | **Publisher:** Foxmind

20m | 2-4 | 7+ | £25

It's hard not to be intrigued by magnets in a game – after all, they're a bit magic. In this case, they're for scuppering your treasure transporting plans. *Bermuda Pirates* uses a series of small magnetic discs, hidden beneath the main game board on modular underboards so that it's a bit random each time you set up the game.

Each player then takes turns moving from their dock on the edge, to the central treasure-laden island, popping a treasure that matches the colour of that side of the island into your boat, and trying to head back. You do this by pushing the back of the boat only. Simple right? Not when the front of your boat might at any time be snapped down by the wild, and magnetic, currents. Annoying when unburdened, awful when you see your hard-collected gem catapult across the board, to splash down nearby one of your competing pirates. You can make thing easier to remember by putting down buoys for future reference, but that only goes so far. You'll have to rely on your memory to guide you towards the bejewelled island.

It's really well put together, or should we say engineered? The gems rarely fly beyond the board and it's actually quite tricky to do exactly what you want. It's competitive in a way that games aimed at children are often best at (which is to say when adult play it can get a bit rough). The only downside is that there is downtime, so if your younger pirates struggle with that – and don't enjoy holding their breath in the hope their piratey opposition fails – that may be a setback, but otherwise it's a charming, novel and pleasing dexterity game.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT





HERD MENTALITY

Designer: Dan Penn & Rich Coombes | **Publisher:** Big Potato Games

30m | 4-20 | 10+ | £20



Continuing Big Potato's tradition of taking simple ideas and turning them into exceptional party games is *Herd Mentality*; a game all about fitting in. The base premise is that someone draws a card which asks 'what is the most boring sport to watch?' or 'name a famous redhead.' Each player then writes down their answer in secret, hoping to be in the majority with the rest of the golf haters. Those in the majority get a happy little cow token while any player who is alone in their answer gets lumped with the pink cow which means their points are worthless until they shift it to the next unlucky sod.

But what makes *Herd Mentality* so fun are the mind games and mistakes. Trying to guess what your friends would answer is already a puzzle but then you have to consider what they think you're going to answer and as players try to guess each other the mistakes come flooding in. 'What's the best type of sandwich?,' ham and cheese is such a normal answer that it would be a safe bet but two of us are pescatarian and they know I love tuna so of course the answer was Nutella. Foolish to choose otherwise really. And that's the beauty of a lot of Big Potato games, they're the kind of tried and tested parlor games that people have been playing for centuries with enough humor and style to keep them fresh. The rules are so simple that we got it to the table less than five minutes after the delivery driver dropped it off which is an impressive feat for any game. The only downside is that the answer sheets are paper where whiteboards would have been a much longer lasting option.

ANNA BLACKWELL



ESCAPE THE DARK SECTOR

Interstellar



Designer: Thomas Pike, Alex Crispin, James Shelton | **Publisher:** Themeborne

For once, we had firepower on our side. We were full armed with a rocket launcher and a variety of smaller arms. We thought we were going to make it back to our ship, and off the spacestation. We'd taken the chances we wanted to take already, we'd been disciplined with covering fire – our training had paid off. Yet, when we turned the corner and one of the crew was caught in a tractor beam, followed by a few unlucky malfunctions that left the crew with burnt eyebrows, it all fell apart.

That's the sort of experience players will end up having in *Escape The Dark Sector*, a follow-up to *Escape The Dark Castle*. While they're in the same family, they're not identical. In *...Sector* players will create a chapter deck of threats (this time broken into narrative chunks), a character (with a cybernetic upgrade and a weapon), and your adventure will begin when you turn that first card. Each card has a choose your own path option on it, usually with a challenge, a combat option, or a chance to run away. Some situations only effect the player turning the card, making it important to send the right player ahead into the darkness.

The chief difference however comes with combat. Players can engage in long-ranged combat as well as up close. While in close combat things resemble *Escape The Dark Castle* – match your icon with the icon on the threat's chapter dice to remove them – at a distance it's much more tactical. Instead you can take shots of different types, depending on your ammunition, to do extra damage. This damage can pick off any chapter dice. Using the right weapon is important, as is taking turns popping your head out of cover – as this will allow everyone to reload and continue the somewhat safer battle at a distance. Discussion between players is critical to your success, and working out what everyone is doing – including taking the new flanking manoeuvre or the one-use-in-combat healing drone – can be fretful decisions.

The cards being broken into three acts, which have a distinct flavour and power curve between them, really helps drive a sense of narrative. The items you get make you feel powerful, until they don't – which is more or less how space horror is meant to make you feel about protagonists. It feels good to make the best choice about engagement, and even better to have got away with using your sub-optimal equipment.

To us, it felt like a narrative *Space Hulk* – or at least, what we remember that game being from the car boot sale version we owned. It's a thrill of tactical combat, mixed with being inside a mostly claustrophobic space that, while there's no representation of it in front of you, feels three-dimensional. If you're looking for the closest thing to a tactical first person shooter, there's few games that actually evoke this feeling better – and if you're simply looking for your next dark place to escape from, it's time to turn the card...

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 35 Custom dice
- 48 Chapter cards
- 28 Item cards
- 6 Cybernetics cards
- 6 Character cards
- 5 Boss cards
- 3 Start cards
- 2 Tactical action cards
- 2 Epilogue cards
- 1 Medical record pad
- 4 Pencils

WE SAY

A natural 'next step' from *Escape The Dark Castle* without losing any of the approachability or appeal. A much deeper tactical and narrative game, and ideal for those who like a little more crunch when it comes to dying in an airlock.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ESCAPE THE DARK CASTLE...

It might be a too-easy comparison, but if you use *Escape The Dark Castle* as a way to introduce people to a world of hobby gaming, this is a great way to get them on to the next level.

VAESEN – NORDIC HORROR ROLEPLAYING

Monsters from the north

Designer: Nils Hintze | **Publisher:** Free League

229 | 15+ | £42

With all the Lovecraftian horrors and fantastical demons pawing their way through mainstream RPGs these days, we can sometimes forget just how weird, dark and disturbing real-world folklore can be. At least, it is until you get a couple of hours into a game of Vasesn and let out an involuntary yelp because the croaking of a crow outside is a little too close to that of a Night Raven.

Coming from the celebrated Swedish developers Free League, *Vaesen* is a deliciously dark take on the horror mystery genre, aiming to take its place somewhere between *Call of Cthulhu* and *Monster of the Week*. That might sound a little ambitious, but it's aided in this quest by a slick set of core rules and some truly horrifying folklore to use as inspiration.

You see, rather than relying on any old myths and legends to inspire its mysteries, *Vaesen* draws directly from the frozen depths of Nordic folklore. If that doesn't immediately sound impressive, just try to think of the kind of stories you're likely to develop through those long, cold winters, when the woods are filled with creeping shadows and falling snow. Then imagine investigating them armed with nothing but an old book of folklore and a revolver.

Indeed, perhaps the greatest strength of the game is just how deeply rooted it is in a particular time and place. Set amidst the growing industrialisation of the 19th century, it does an incredible job of capturing the clash between wild and civilised, between old traditions and modern learning. As you play through a session you can almost smell the pine trees on the chill breeze, hear the crunch of snow underfoot and feel the rough parchment of the old ritual book beneath your fingertips.

This kind of immersion does an incredible job of ramping up the tension and allowing players to forget that they're actually in their kitchen and instead imagine themselves somewhere in the Swedish hinterlands, being chased down by a murderous raven. When this works, it becomes easy to draw people in, and even easier to conjure up the frights that keep a horror game ticking along.

Of course, one of the keys to keeping this mood running throughout the entire evening is to make sure that the rules are as slick and unobtrusive as possible. After all, nothing breaks the tensions quite as cleanly as a ten-minute break to check the grapple rules, and this is somewhere that *Vaesen* certainly succeeds – mostly, anyway.

As with most games developed by Free League, *Vaesen* is powered by a relatively simple dice pool system. Most challenges are determined by having players add one of their statistics to their rating in the relevant skill, and then tossing that many six-sided dice across the table. If they roll at least one six, they succeed at whatever they were trying to do; if they don't, something bad happens.

This core system is wonderfully streamlined and is incredibly easy for most players to get a handle on. However, things get a little trickier as more and more sub-systems get bolted on.

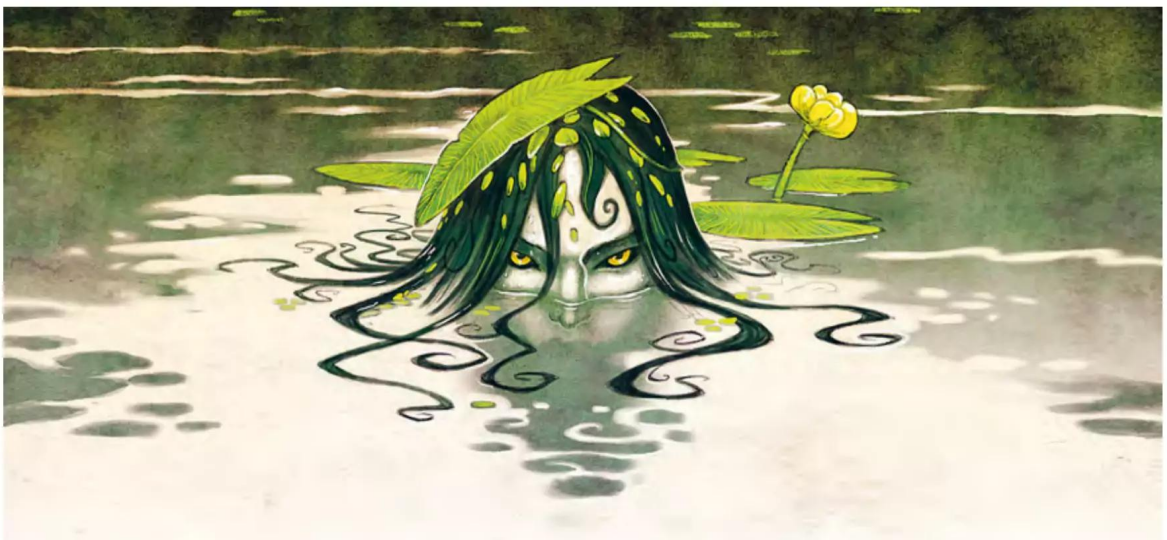
The rules around combat, for example, are surprisingly detailed for a game focussed on investigation and mystery rather than brute force. The abundance of details about wrestling, ambushes and explosion scattering feel like a legacy of the more fight-happy games scattered through Free League's back catalogue rather than core parts of *Vaesen* itself, and can get in the way of the mystery more than they help resolve a thrilling fight scene.

Fortunately, not every extra mechanism feels like a hindrance to the storytelling. One of the most enjoyable – and strangely satisfying – elements of the game is its surprisingly elaborate base-building system. It assumes that the players are operating out of a mysterious castle in the city of Upsala, and as the sessions fly by they can choose to spruce the place up with everything from botanical gardens to a dedicated psychiatrist, each of which offers their own tangible benefits as the characters prepare for their adventures.

It's a slightly weird system to wrap your head around at first, and seems at odds with the horror aesthetic, but having a dedicated safehouse to plot from and recover in actually adds a delightful contrast to the players' isolated, dangerous trips out into the wider world.

Plus, if horror stories have taught us anything, it's that inevitably something nasty is going to follow them home, and there's nothing more unsettling than having their fortress infested with something creepy, is there?

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



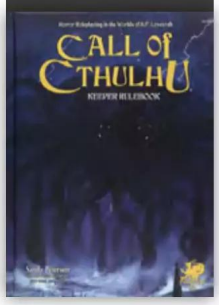


WE SAY

One of the prettiest RPGs to hit shelves in recent years, *Vaesen* is a horrifying delight that taps into some of Scandinavia's chilliest bits of folklore

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CALL OF CTHULHU...

The horror is a little less existential, but *Vaesen* taps into the same mystery-solving supernatural vein as the classic *CoC*





MEZO

War, what is it good for? Devotion, apparently.

Designer: John Clowdus | **Publisher:** Kolossal Games

60-120m | 2-4 | 14+ | £86

Would you like to be a God, even for a little while? To feel the pulsing power over tiny ant-sized humans down below, scurrying around to do your bidding; to see your decisions influence the tides of wars and lives. In *Mezo*, an area control game inspired by Myan mythology, you get to be that God for about two hours doing exactly that. But even while in possession of all your powers, don't expect this to be an easy job. Other Gods, as strong and as cunning as you are, are also vying for the same territories.

Mezo has all the main staples of an area-control game. The game board is divided into territories, which players will aim to control to gain victory points throughout the game's three ages. Each player selects a tribe and places their warriors, shamans, heroes, glyphs and pyramids in different territories to exact their influence. Despite some theme-appropriate terminology, so far this sounds like a very by-the-book area control game. What elevates *Mezo* beyond the expected and acts as pièce de résistance of the whole game are the Gods.

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 4 God figures
- 68 Human tribe figures
- 24 Tarot-sized god cards
- 1 Double-sided game board
- 4 Player boards
- 44 Pyramid pieces
- 9 Wrathful god tiles
- 6 Conflict tiles
- 24 Player glyphs
- 68 Additional tokens & markers

Gods do not only physically loom over the board, as huge, intricately designed miniatures, but they also influence the style of gameplay that players will adapt during the game. After everyone's soldiers have been assigned to different territories at the start of a round, players perform actions using their God's custom deck. The actions are attuned to the Gods' nature. Kukulcan, a War Serpent, favours the warriors, giving them extra abilities and mobility around the map. Whereas Ah Puch, God of Death, is particularly good at smiting units, sending them straight to Xibalba, the underworld, from where return is... complicated. The God's deck is not big – only five cards – however, there are three actions on each card offering some gameplay flexibility.

While the Gods' individuality is a big part of its appeal, what brings *Mezo* down is the lack of the feeling of progression. All three ages play relatively the same: you re-distribute the figures on the map, perform a Godly power, reveal and resolve an area using God's card actions, get rewards, rinse and repeat. The board gets cleared every age and only a couple of players' decisions make a permanent impact. The only real change from round to round is how far player's victory point markers moved around the board.

On its own, this point would feel like a very minor misstep, however, it is amplified by *Mezo's* larger problem: out of twelve Gods (so far) designed for the game, the base box offering comes with... four. Other gods are spread between various expansion packs, which – if you have seen the size and detail of those minis – you can expect to pay a precious penny. If the enjoyment of the game did not rely as much on the individuality of looks and gameplay of its Gods, this would be less of a sticking point. As it stands, once you have played with the four Gods in the base game, you have very little reason to return to the game. Overall, this makes the base game feel like an expensive teaser.

Mezo is a beautiful offering. From its theme to artwork to an impressive table presence with God minis towering above it all in their glorious detail, it is a feast for eyes. It is those Gods that entice you into the game, with their beautiful design and fun abilities, that feel powerful and tricky to master at the same time. It is only a shame that the biggest part of what makes *Mezo* unique and exciting is gatekept behind additional expansions.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Having found a great balance between feeling like an-all powerful God and maintaining the overall challenge, *Mezo* is let down by its semi-feeling gameplay and limited number of Gods available in the base game.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *BLOOD RAGE*...

Mezo shares a lot of similarities mechanically with *Blood Rage*, but has less in-game progression and customisation, although the Gods offer a lot more individuality in their gameplay.

MARVEL VILLAINOUS INFINITE POWER

Villains, assemble!

Publisher: Ravensburger

40-80m | 2-4 | 12+ | £35



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 5 Villain tokens
- 5 Villain decks
- 6 Fate decks
- 12 Speciality tiles
- 5 Villain guides
- 5 Domains
- 5 Reference cards
- 1 Vault
- 40 Power tokens
- 20 Strength tokens
- 15 Soul mark tokens

You probably know by now what you're getting when you pick up a *Villainous* game. These popular Ravensburger outputs are quickly becoming a staple board game for many, where you'll play as the villain from various Disney films, so that you might change the story and win for once. With the additional versions, you can play as a number of villains, from The Queen of Hearts to Dr Facillier, from Pete to Cruella and more. Plus now, apparently, Thanos.

Marvel Villainous is arguably a sequel rather than an expansion. Whilst yes, it's contentious to call the others expansions as they can be played alone regardless, they follow the same pattern of the game as those before it. If you learn how to play the first, you simply add the new characters and motivations and away you go. *Marvel Villainous* is the 'I've grown up and I'm moving out, but you can still do my washing' of the expansion/sequel world as now there's more rules, more challenges, and more time needed to play.

That means it's a benefit to have played *Villainous* before – you may find it much more straightforward if you can recite the original *Villainous* rules as a template. In some circumstances, it's tricky to determine what the game intends (and where house rules inevitably take over), where knowing how it worked or how you played similar quirks before does help. It's no requirement though, and you could pick up this game and play a full and fun version having never championed Ursula the Sea Witch before.

For *Marvel Villainous*, you can play as Thanos, Hela, Kilmonger, Ultron and Taskmaster. It's a really nicely made game, and you'll have your own game board, with the token representing the villain you have chosen. Whereas before, you would also have a unique fate deck, separate to your fellow players, that unique deck is now shuffled together with the other players. Your game will change based on the combination of who plays who, and adds interest when you play with different player numbers.

Then, you'll experience shared events. These might represent the Avengers seeking to stop you for example, and they may have conditions that limit you – but they'll limit all of your players, not just yourself. As a result, all players can contribute cards to defeat the event, should they wish to. They're therefore stronger, and more difficult to defeat.

These aren't the only changes, but they contribute to the feeling of getting something more from the game. It plays well, is themed beautifully, and the motivations don't feel forced. For example, Thanos of course is seeking the infinity stones. In the Marvel films, Thanos never has his own film, but rather dips into others stories, and so that's exactly what he does in the game. He has to attach the infinity stones to other players characters, and then transfer these back to his own timeline and hand in order to win. It's a new mechanic, but it makes sense, forcing you to think differently about how you'll win, or how you'll stop the others.

This version feels like *Villainous* grew up a bit, and it's not entirely unwelcome. Though the original format works, the evolution that has taken place fits in well with the Marvel villains, and their shared multiverse. The game is the usual and expected good fun, and if you can get your head around some of the quirks in the rules, you're in for a great time.

CHARLIE PETTIT

WE SAY

A good game grew up into a great game



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: VILLAINOUS

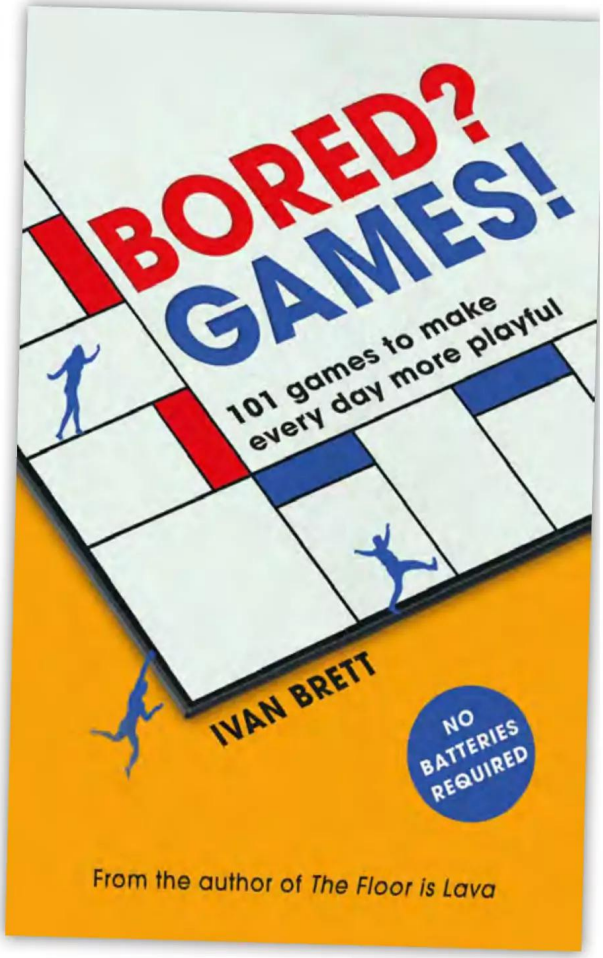
Because you can never have too much of a good thing.



BORED? GAMES!

256 £9

Author: Ivan Brett | **Publisher:** Headline Home



Folk games are something close to all our hearts. Whether we played them as children and formed strong bonds and memories of play with them, or if we think of them as some indestructible part of human culture – they're important foundations to a lot of what we think of as modern gaming today.

Ivan Brett has collected together 101 of them, just in time for the summer holidays. They're a mix of games to play with your hands, in your head, or on your feet – all broken up into the number of players you might have. The range is huge, from the journaling game using Pi and drawing games where one player attempts to make a happy ending while the other makes it more gory, to games about taking turns suggesting an evolution to animals to the self-descriptive *Short-Sighted Star-Spotting* in which players attempt to spot strangers around with even the vaguest passing resemblance to famous persons.

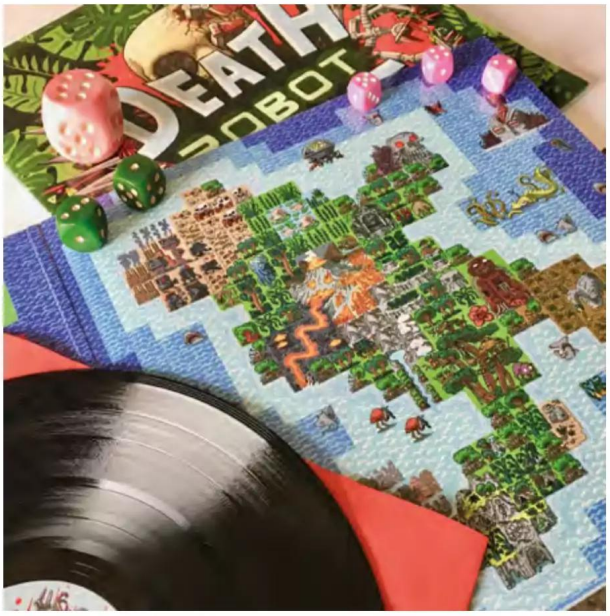
They're mostly good fun, and a lot of the joy of the writing itself is in the very inventive examples that Ivan offers throughout the book ("How much would I have to pay you to be stung by a wasp every day for a year?" from *Sweeten the Deal*). Your mileage with the games will vary with the kind of situations you find yourself in, but part of the utility of the book is that once you know a game – it's hard to forget it. This is a kind of games-culture pre-loading that will serve you well beyond immediately playing any of the games. A worth entry on any bookshelf, especially if creative entertainment options for younger gamers is a looming challenge.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

DEATH ROBOT JUNGLE

1h 1-75 12+ €30

Designer: Andre Novoa & Manuel Pinheiro | **Publisher:** Games Omnivorous



WATCH A VIDEO IN THE DIGITAL EDITION
pocketmags.com/tabletop-gaming-magazine

We don't often review vinyl at Tabletop Gaming Magazine. This might even be the first time. This is the weird 'RPG setting on a record' from recent weird RPG maker Games Omnivorous – it's designed to be a full album of music that you can use to plan your roleplaying session with, or even use as the soundtrack.

The album itself is a kind of crunchy synth-laden calypso of scenes and settings. A mix of funky bass lines, conga drums, buzz-saw guitar are all present. There's no instruction as to how we're meant to be interpreting it, but that's probably the point. So instead you're imagining the (probably poisonous) flora and (probably many-toothed) fauna of the island you're exploring with your group.

The sleeve also works as a GM screen – presenting a tropical island containing the titular death robot jungle. Using a grid pattern, the island offers all sort of weird treats from large statues, strange industrialising robots in the north and even a volcano. Naturally the idalnd is surrounded by sunken places and huge monsters. The screen also offers a few of the local inhabitants – like 'bushes with long tongues' and 'tiny transparent frogs'.

If you're into highly narrative OSR style gaming, this will already have you heading over to the Games Omnivorous store (where you can just get the digital version for €10 if you don't want the record, or postage). For the rest of us, it's a little like thumbing through a bestiary because you didn't get time to arrange a session this week. It's a nice diversion through the jungle but not something anyone would expect you to break out with regularity.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



VILLAGE GREEN

The grass might be greener

Designer: Peer Sylvester | **Publisher:** Osprey Games

30m | 1-5 | 14+ | £16

Ah, the village green. The source of pride for many a parish council member, local busybodies, and occasionally the bane of children when met with the 'no ball games' sign. When it comes to keeping up with the Joneses however, you want to make sure your village green is better than the one at the centre of the next village over. Settling these long held grudges, beyond suggesting that every neighbouring village somehow has webbed feet, is best done through passive aggressive garden arrangements.

And that's where Peer Sylvester (*The King Is Dead*, *Judge Dredd: The Cursed Earth*) comes in with *Village Green*. This is a handsome box of very nice looking and feeling cards, mostly depicting trees, ponds, grass and ornaments. We're here to make the best looking and most envy-inducing village green around out tables. To do this we're going to be creating grids of cards in front of us, taking from a market in the centre. The outer row and column are the way players can score points – these can be for having more than two types of tree in that row, or for a certain colour of card, or no ponds. Importantly, you build this scoring mechanism over time, and these cards can be overlaid whenever you wish.

In the centre of the village green players place their point-scoring cards, matching with the suit or the colour of the cards next to them. This can lead to tricky choices for would-be landscapers – you may only be able to lay a card in a certain position in the grid because of the restrictions, but this would ruin your point-scoring ability for that row. Corrections can be made as you go, by turfing over parts of your green with rare normal lawn cards.

Playing the game with three or more is especially pleasing, and leads to a kind of gentle humming around the table. The players main point of conflict is someone else taking the card they want from the main market row, which offers interesting, if frustrating shifts in game plan. But that's what the game is all about, changing your mind around what you'd planned to do and into a compromised position which you hope is just good enough to beat the other nearby villages in the running. This is equally important because those who lay out their green first will end the game, so speed is strangely of the essence for such a relaxed game.

The game feels like the ideal holiday game, a great game for passing the time when passing the time is all that needs to happen. It's a game worth slowing down for, and while there is plenty of thinky, brain-warming mechanics and gameplay on offer, you're not in total conflict. Our first game had everyone around the table in near silence apart from the odd sigh, hum or murmur which had the exact feeling of when everyone is really happy with their dinner. An excellent slice of gentle gaming that in the right circumstances can feel just perfect.

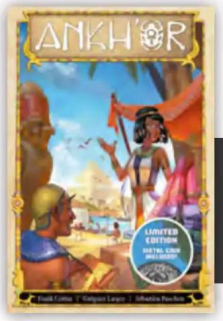
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 96 cards

WE SAY

Somehow the perfectly balanced mix of quiet contemplation and barely audible frustration, the ideal holiday game for sunny days where one another's company is all you need.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ANKH'OR...

For those who like quiet contemplation, there's little better than this modular set-up marketing game with a touch of pattern-matching about it. *Village Green* is the slightly less crunchy cousin – and you're not going to end up with sand in your sandwiches.

STRINGAMAJIG

Designer: Romain Caterdjian | **Publisher:** Fireside Games

20m | 4-10 | 13+ | £20



Sit down and relax for a moment, and cast your mind to the game *Pictionary*. Got it? Now, what would you do to change it up a bit? Draw different things? Change the medium? Merge it with another game? Well, if you make it so you have to draw suggestions made by the card you pick and the card below it, use a piece of string to draw with, and add a charades element into it, with– well, bam, you've created *Stringamajig*.

There are some interesting mechanisms in *Stringamajig*. Firstly, you use a looped piece of string similar to a shoe lace to complete your drawing. You might think that's pretty simple, but wait until you're trying to replicate a guitar with it, and I can promise that what looks clear and obvious in your mind with your finished creation, certainly doesn't to your fellow players. Then you have the fact that whilst the string may be lifted, at least part of it must stay on the table, giving you scope to engage with your inner AmDram and act your way to victory, though hindered by the invisible tether as gravity becomes your enemy.

Then there's the cards themselves, which give you a number of options for what you'll be drawing, but it's the numbers on the back of the next card in the deck that dictate which of those you're allowed to pick from. Some of those require another person to help, some require you to close your eyes, and so on.

There's very little wrong with this game, other than it seems perfectly pitched for a family game, but comes with a recommendation of 13+, seemingly to fit into the party game market. It certainly can do that, but with a little tinkering it could have even wider appeal. Whilst it has its funny moments, it's not one you'd necessarily reach for when the friends come around. However, if you like charades, and/or you like *Pictionary*, you'll love *Stringamajig*.

CHARLIE PETTIT

HALF-PINT HEROES

Designers: Johannes Goslar, Roland Goslar, Soren Schaffstein | **Publisher:** Corax Games

30m | 2-7 | 14+ | £17

Glorified on celluloid by the likes of James Bond and Steve McQueen, the game of poker is one of the most romanticised and popular card games around. But the designers of the bar-room brawl themed *Half-Pint Heroes* are bluffing. This isn't poker as you know it – it's a trick-taking game.



This merging of styles is the real kicker of *Half-Pint Heroes*, and thankfully it works. Each of the game's ten rounds will see players forming as many poker sets (tricks) as they can from both their hand and the Texas Hold'em style community cards. In the same vein as trick taking games such as Spades, players will first predict how many sets they are likely to win, scoring bonus points for correct guesses. Following that, bets can be made against the predictions of others – using *Half-Pint Heroes* satisfyingly chunky weighted betting chips. Taking turns playing at least one card, players' sets will be evaluated, with the highest-ranking poker hand scoring winning the trick.

Half-Pint Heroes' use of poker hands as tricks works surprisingly well and is kept interesting by each round's unique set up. The amount of community cards on offer, as well as the size of players' hands, is ever fluctuating, with the first dealt card determining the number of both. This brings a level of excitement and unpredictability to each round, as both large and small hands alter how cautiously players make their bets and predictions. The game can also be applauded for its unique card design, featuring playful illustrations of recognisable (albeit inebriated) stars of film, music, and even game design.

Admittedly, it's not consistently exciting, and games do tend to overstay their welcome by a few rounds, but *Half-Pint Heroes* accessible merging of genres is an enticing gamble that generally pays off.

CHAD WILKINSON



SONORA

Desert I land discs (for points)

Designer: Rob Newton | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games

30-45m | 1-4 | 10+ | £30

Let's imagine ourselves heading into the Sonora Desert, a vast, mostly unpopulated place that gives the perfect excuse for a rather nice box cover. Whilst gazing out across the horizon, we'll then convert what we see into a roll and write. Except, it's not a roll and write, but a flick and write. And really, it's not even that, because it's four flick and writes to be played simultaneously. And when we've done that, we'll call it *Sonora*.

So, let's clarify a few aspects here first. The game board itself is basically a plastic framed board. The corners are bigger, so that each player has a platform to flick tokens from, and the board itself is split into quadrants, which you'll spin 90 degrees each turn. The flick in the aforementioned flick and write gives the dexterity, seeing you place your numbered tokens onto your corner, and flick them into the area you want to gain the number of points on your token for.

It's all very simple, because each of those four sections is a mini roll and write in itself. One sees you using the numbers on the tokens to mark off as many areas as your tokens represent. Another, sees you use those numbers to gain shapes to fit into its oddly shaped areas, trying to highlight specific characters for additional points. Some numbers can be added together for some quadrants, and some can't. There're also bonuses on the board for each of them, plus some bonuses on your scoreboard for being the first to complete it. You'll play all four of the games and their rules concurrently, to make up one super Megatron of a game. Did I say simple?

That's easily the worst part of *Sonora*, as with many games, being the learning it. Going one by one with each quadrant, then learning the additional bonus actions, and then adding in that you need to retain the independent rules for each of them, and then retaining each of those to be able to play them simultaneously – it's a slog. Admittedly, it's well explained, but you'll need a clear head, or someone good with retaining instructions to get through the first game.

It's the same with the solo play. You'll be playing as your own competition. It works mechanically fine, but it doesn't invoke much fun, we substituted the second player for a high score table, and that was enough to enjoy it alone.

So surely, with all that this isn't a game to pick up? Well, certainly, your brain will hurt for the first little while, but once you break that barrier, I can happily say it's a delight.

Each of the four quadrants in isolation are a solid and varied roll and write game. Having them together is like levelling up your strategy. Adding to that, is a much keener sense of competition than you would expect. Your turn sees you flicking two tokens onto the board, and you may have them perfectly placed for the turn you want – only to have your opponent flick their token into yours, sending it to another quadrant and ruining your perfect turn. You may try to do the same to them on the next go, all the while considering how success or failure to do so will impact the scoring on your board. A little dexterous, a fair bit competitive, and a lot fun.

CHARLIE PETTIT



WE SAY

If you like the roll and write genre, this is absolutely the game for you (after an initial frustration period). If you don't like the genre... run in the opposite direction and don't look back.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board
- 20 Coloured discs
- 4 Wipe clean scoresheets
- 4 Dry-erase pens
- First player token

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TRAILS OF TUCANA

For something a little different in your Roll and Writes, this is perfect.





tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

WATERGATE

It would be a scandal to miss this

Designer: Matthias Cramer | **Publisher:** Capstone Games

30-60m | 2 | 12+ | £35

Themes in board games broadly can fall into two extremes. On one side, theme is a simple window dressing, on the other, the theme is inseparable from the gameplay. A game with a strong theme that is rooted in its gameplay that at the same time can be also viewed through a completely abstract lens seems an impossibility. Yet, here is *Watergate*, a game that does both things flawlessly.

A two-player game about the scandal of U.S. President Richard Nixon and his administration, sees players take opposing sides: the editor of The Washington Post, trying to connect the evidence and informants together, while the Nixon administration tries to survive until the end of the presidential term to win the game.

very timely parallel to recent events. Yet, *Watergate* can still be that much-needed escapism. No historical knowledge is required and no ideological lines are drawn in the sand. The two sides have different goals and playstyles, but that is to the benefit of the gameplay rather than some external agenda. Yet, if you are interested in the historical context, this board game becomes a great source. The rulebook dedicates its back pages to the story of the scandal, explaining in great detail the roles of key figures and main events. If you want to learn more, you can.

Watergate is an incredibly tight tug of war. Both players will be playing cards from their hand to move evidence, momentum and initiative tokens onto their side of the track. If at the end of the round, the evidence ends up on the editor's side, they can place it on the board trying to link informants to the Nixon photograph in the middle. Whereas, if Nixon gets the evidence, they can use it to block paths instead. Nixon needs momentum tokens to win the game, while the editor can use the same tokens to activate powerful abilities but also prolong the game time to gather the needed evidence. The initiative token gives its holder an extra action, a clear advantage for the round.

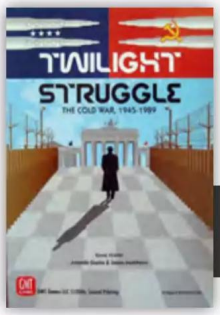
The cards can be used to move one of the tokens along the track or for their written actions, that are usually powerful one-off abilities so must be played carefully. After a couple of games, players will learn the abilities on each other's card and will start making decisions based on the powerful abilities they know their opponent can still play in the future and try to negate them.

In *Watergate*, every move, every component is important and nothing is wasted. It is tense gameplay, with both opponents going head-to-head the whole time. *Watergate* can be viewed as only an abstract asymmetrical strategy game if one wants it to be. The theme, however, adds so much visual flavour to its components and artwork, as well as knowledge of its historical background, if one is seeking it. Regardless of how you choose to engage with *Watergate*, it is one not to be missed.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WHATS IN THE BOX

- 1 Game board
- 9 Momentum tokens
- 1 Initiative token
- 1 Bag
- 1 Nixon administration momentum card
- 20 Nixon administration player cards
- 1 Initiative card
- 36 Evidence tokens
- 1 Editor momentum card
- 20 Editor player cards
- 7 Picture tiles
- 1 End of round overview card



WE SAY

A rare gem of a two-player game, *Watergate* is accessible and quick to play, with tug of war gameplay that brings gripping tension with every round.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TWILIGHT STRUGGLE

If you want gameplay similar in strategy to *Twilight Struggle*, but would like it in a game that does not take hours to playthrough, then *Watergate* is a perfect alternative.

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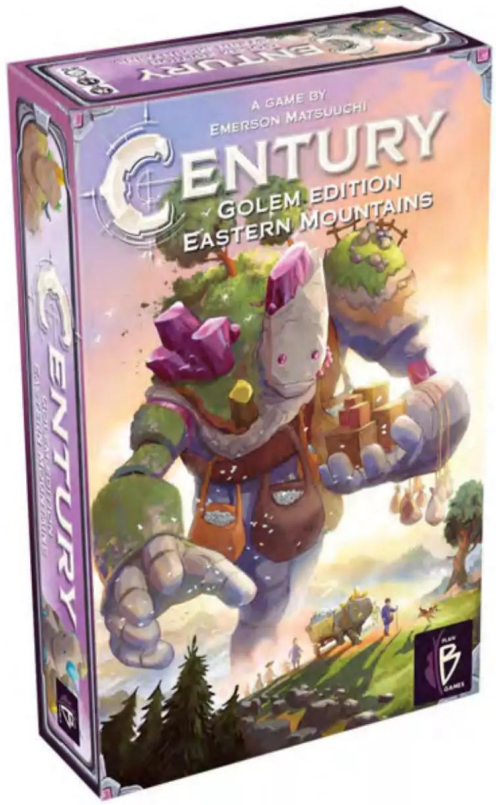
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CENTURY: GOLEM EDITION – EASTERN MOUNTAINS



Designer: Emerson Matsuuchi | **Publisher:** Plan B Games



Reskinning games has its ups and downs. For the publisher it's often a good way to get a little more out of a game rather than just going down the 'second edition' route. For designers it's often another chance to tweak a few bits. For the general public it's a good way to get hold of a game should the original gone out of print.

This is a reimplementation of the modern classic, *Century: Eastern Wonders* with the 'Golem' treatment. That treatment is to add a cute mythical layer to the game and change some of the language – so rather than harvest, we mine – and the rest remains mostly identical.

The core game consists of moving around a hexagonally tiled map created for your playthrough. Each turn you can create an outpost in a tile, causing other to pay if they also want to place an outpost there. The point of the outposts is the be able to activate the trade mechanic, which allows your caravan to swap one or two of the resource gems for a different configuration of gems – usually for valuable. Eventually, when you have the right gems in hand you'll travel to a town to buy some victory points. It's got a good flow, as the original did, and aside from a forgivable typo in the rules, it's beautifully produced. The game's robust nature allows for nearly anyone to get involved, it's a pleasure to teach to new players and a solid step up from the straightforward gateway games that we get started on.

If you don't own the *Century* series, this is a great place to start – and certainly has a brighter appeal to non-gamers who might be put off by the slightly serious looking box art of the original. For those who already have a copy of the series, this is probably the one you'll want to buy for someone else.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

TOP OF THE POPS: THE GAME



Publisher: Big Potato Games | **Designer:** Big Potato Games

After the release of *Blockbuster*, it's actually a bit of a no-brainer that Big Potato would put out another take on the format. Moving from film to music, we've got *Top of the Pops Party Game* and while it does follow much the same format as its predecessor, it has one important addition: Kazoos.



The goal is simple, be the first team to collect a card from each of the eight different categories and bask in that warm trivia feel. However, if you're clueless about any categories, there are rules for changing things up so you only need ten cards regardless of category. Especially useful for luddites like myself who know next to nothing about the 60s, 70s, 80s, 90s, Pop Stars of the Future, or even most Chart Toppers. About the only ones I can reliably get are the One Hit Wonders which is sort of poetic in a sense.

Like *Blockbuster*, players can cash in three cards of the same category to steal a card from the other team which means that there is hope for musical hermits as long as they have the luck of the draw. The head-to-head round can be a little... competitive though as the buzzer/timer keeps the pressure high and one wrong answer can see you lumped with the harder cards in the next segment of the game.

But most importantly, there are kazoos and they play an integral part. Each round you have three artist cards which your team has to guess based off of; one word, a lyric, or your rendition of their songs on kazoo. As expected it can get chaotic as a player from each team desperately tries to remember any Atomic Kitten song while another blasts The BeeGees on kazoo.

ANNA BLACKWELL



LEWIS AND CLARK: THE EXPEDITION SECOND EDITION

Revisiting a true American adventure

Designer: Cedrick Chaboussit | **Publisher:** Ludonaute

30-150m | 1-5 | 14+ | £35

On its initial 2013 release, *Lewis and Clark* stood out as a thoroughly unique race game detailing the famed explorers' 1804 expedition across the North American frontier to the Pacific. Merging hand and resource management, worker placement, and even hints of deck and engine building, Cedrick Chaboussit crafted an incredibly deep game of strategy that was as rewarding as it was unforgiving. Little has changed since then, as *Lewis and Clark* still feels as fresh and tantalisingly clever as it ever was.

At the forefront of *Lewis and Clark*'s design is the unique card play. Players' cards represent the explorers and their ever-expanding troupe of companions, each with their own actions and strength. To perform a card's action, it must first be powered by another card, the strength of which determining how many times the action can be done. Furthermore, each played card remains relevant to all players instead of sitting idly in a discard pile, as resource gathering actions take into account every visible resource icon in front of not only the active player but also their neighbours.

Right from the first turn, this approach to action selection forces players to make meaningful decisions, as making a particular choice means throwing away another. Alternatively, cards can be powered by Indian figures, leading us to divisive area of *Lewis and Clark*'s theme.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 5 Player boards
- 10 Boat tiles
- 50 Tokens
- 5 Scout figures
- 18 Indian figures
- 100 Resource hexagons
- 84 Character cards

Essentially, Indians form one of the seven resources in the game. Whilst undoubtably more valued than fur, the labelling of Native Americans as resource is nonetheless problematic. Despite the ascribed value of the Indian figures by the game, and an inferred thematic mirroring of their immense importance to the expedition, grasping a handful of these little red meeples never sat quite right with me. That said, the rulebook addresses the relations between the explorers and Native Americans, and the general history of the period in a sensitive manner. Furthermore, each of Vincent Dutrait's stunning character card illustrations is supplemented with a brief description in the rulebook's index.

One change which is apparent in this latest edition is the inclusion of time tokens over the original game's camp tokens. Instead of having to manoeuvre the scout figure back down the river track to reach camp, this minor revision sees players accruing time tokens – representing the various burdens to the expedition's progress. Progressing onwards thus entails spending movement points to remove time tokens before travelling on up the river.

This management and balancing of both time and resources forms the central puzzle of *Lewis and Clark*. Where many games excite players with the prospect of gathering hoards of resources, *Lewis and Clark* conversely generates its excitement by not being a game of excess. Particular actions will lure players in with the temptation of mounds of food or furs, but greed will be their downfall. Storage on the expedition's boats is tight, with even small loads threatening to add dreaded time to the journey. Not many games have imbued resource management with this much tension and theme; an admirable feat given the game's age.

Lewis and Clark may not be as instantly accessible as other modern Euros, but wrapping your head around its intricacies soon pays off. It can be a tough game to master, and mistakes can be disastrous, but the gratification of a good play is utterly addictive.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

In an industry abound with deluxe new editions of beloved classics, this simple reprint confidently stands out as a simple and modest testament to enduring design.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TZOLK'IN: THE MAYAN CALENDAR

Their gameplay may differ but both proved that complex and innovative mechanics could still be intuitive and thematic.



HIGH RISE

In-spired

Designer: Gil Hova | **Publisher:** Formal Ferret Games

90-180m | 1-4 | 14+ | £70

The big city is full of corruption, and sometimes, it's the only way to get ahead. That, or just skip over everyone in front of you. *High Rise* is a city building game that has a certain *Monopoly* feel about it, without all the negative randomness. Players move their mogul around a board, performing the action on the location they land on. They have to gather materials, either by picking or choosing from a bag of resources. These resources are then used to build skyscrapers by matching the required elements with those on the blueprints for the decade you're in. You can then place your new skyscraper on the board in the area you're taking the build action from, or anywhere else, by taking corruption. Once you own a slot on the board, others can land there, and you'll get to take the action of the slot again as the landlord.

To build the biggest skyscrapers, players need to gain bonuses through extra cards, or matching ultraplastics (a wildcard material) on the blueprint. Every floor counts when building up your high rise city – as there's bonuses for having the biggest tower in each neighbourhood, as well as naturally scoring more points through these.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 1 Scoreboard
- 75 Standard floor tiles
- 15 Ultraplastic tiles
- 54 Building tiles
- 4 Base construction yards
- 45 Tenant tiles
- 32 Cardboard skyscrapers
- 60 Building bases
- 85 Power cards
- 20 Spires
- 42 Bonus tiles
- 1 Bag

The worker placement element is most interesting. Borrowing a mechanic from Knizia classic *Tutankhamen*, players can move as far around the board as they like on their turn, and the player at the back of the pack gets to go next. This means nearly everything is opened up to players immediately, and planning becomes tricky. You might think you can hop along to the next 'free build' site, but you can guarantee that it'll be vacant on your go – instead you'll settle for taking some corruption. Also, because you're always going first form the back, there's no opportunity to 'wait out' other players – you've just got to make the next best choice. You're often skipping opportunities that seem so tantalising to get to the action you simply *need*.

High Rise is simply beautiful. With art by Kwanchai Moriya and graphic design by Heiko Güther the board comes together and simply sings of a real metropolis that creates beauty despite it being driven by greed. The components in the game are lush productions, and even the spaces to place your buildings in their standees is slightly indented, reducing a certain amount of accidental godzilla-elbowing around the table.

High Rise is a marvel of interesting choices and indirect but very effective player interaction. Taking the slots on the board others were hoping to is satisfying, and there's few negative actions to take – only sub-optimal. It's also, despite its long set up time, a pretty quick game to teach. A great deal of this is down to the very amusing and tongue in cheek approach that the rulebook brings to proceedings. If you're ready to be a property mogul, and you don't mind who you lead over to get there, *High Rise* is the building game for you.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

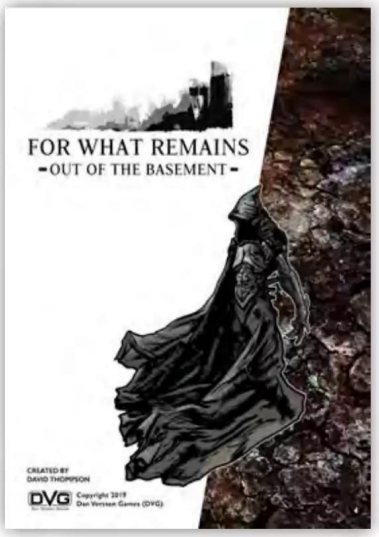
High Rise is the 'gamers *Monopoly*' you've been looking for. With an elegant blend of worker placement and satisfyingly large buildings, it's got everything you wanted from *Monopoly*, without going to jail. Well, not until the end of the game anyway...



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED QUADROPOLIS...

If you're looking for a step up from the frustratingly fun city-scuffles of *Quadropolis*, then *High Rise* is a good centrepiece for your next mogul meet-up.





FOR WHAT REMAINS

A bag of post-apocalyptic fun

Designer: David Thompson | **Publisher:** DVG

30-45m | 1-2 | 10+ | £60

It's the end of the world, again. Welcome to another bag-building wargame from David Thompson, best known for *War Chest* and *Undaunted* with Trevor Benjamin. This time we're taking tokened soldiers to task against our opponent, or AI, for survival in this weird world.

For What Remains comes in three flavours, *Blood on the Rails*, *Streets of Ruin*, *Out of the Basement*, each with their own campaign and setting. It's a pre-boxed trilogy of paired factions which makes it ideal for those who want to get moving to killing the enemy quickly. Each faction has their own powers and abilities that makes adjusting to their play style a big part of achieving any kind of victory. There are detailed campaigns which we won't spoil, but suffice to say there's plenty to get your teeth into. For quick skirmish games however, there's a fast point-buy system that allows you to draft units of different experience levels. These experience levels are expressed by stacking up the unit tokens, a little like *War Chest* but with the bonus of flipping the top token to injured as they go. The more experienced the unit, the more powers and special abilities they will have access to – for example the Death Vine's 'Hydro Merge' (a defensive move that gives them bonuses in water) only becomes available at the Veteran or Elite level. This also means as you chip away at the enemy, they'll have less powers available on their turn.

Turns themselves can be wildly swingy because of the shared action bag. Each turn you'll pick which units you'd like to commit to taking actions, they'll all be added to the same bag, and then these are drawn by a single player. Whichever unit is drawn takes an action – not only does this mean you're not always going to plan your perfect flank-and-fire move, but also that you might go the other way and your most exposed unit will be shredded by enemies before they've had a chance to do anything at all. This leads to cautious play, and sometimes it can feel a bit unfortunate. Combat itself is a matter of dice rolling – so luck is always going to play a part. This is a wargame after all, so a matter of choosing careful targets that you can actually damage is a big part of the game.

The modular terrain boards are a particularly nice way of providing longevity to the game without getting a ruler out – something that we feel is a barrier to those who want to wargame, but don't want to commit to all the tiny trees and terrain. On these modular boards, cover, elevated terrain and water all come into play in a big way.

Despite all of the asymmetry, most of the factions feel balanced, and they're all fun. Our personal favourites were the weird alien and earthen creatures of *Out of the Basement* – the basement being the underground nuclear dimensional rip – as they present such wildly different play styles.

For What Remains won't be for everyone – and may have had a larger appeal as a £160 box of minis on Kickstarter – but as a token skirmish game goes, there's enough story to keep you in the world without the big lumps of plastic.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Campaign Guide
- Faction guides
- Ai Reference Shets
- Character reference sheets
- AI activation cards
- 66 Character counters
- 60 Action tokens
- 14 Ability Tokens
- 12 Battleground tiles
- Cloth bag
- 5 Dice

WE SAY

While token based wargaming isn't for everyone, the speedy skirmish play of *For What Remains* is something to be admired. If you're looking for a modularly-mapped scuffle with some interesting factions to take control of, you've come to the right apocalypse.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SPACE HULK...

While not as claustrophobic as *Space Hulk*, *For What Remains* contains a little bit of that modular magic (without the minis).



FORT

The kids are all right

Designer: Grant Rodiek | **Publisher:** Leder Games

20-40m | 2-4 | 10+ | £30

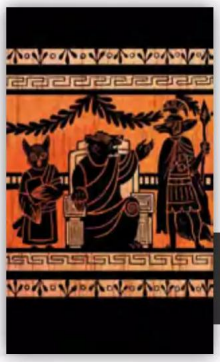
Once upon a time, children played outdoors. Which sounds crazy, we know, but they really did. Before the era of YouTube, Fortnite and Covid, they skinned their knees climbing trees, did mad stunts on their bikes (usually either a Chopper or a Grifter), and generally ran around like pint-sized loons, dodging all the white dog poo on the pavement. *Fort* is a game which celebrates all this, and is sure to deliver a sherbet rush of nostalgia to anyone old enough to get any of the references in the last sentence. (And even if you're not, don't worry, you'll still love it.)

Grant Rodiek's sweet little deckbuilder was once incarnated as *SPQF*, with a rather less striking Ancient Roman anthropomorphic animal theme. But, having been robustly reimagined by the big brains at Leder Games (home to the similarly single-syllabled *Vast*, *Root* and *Oath*), it now comes loaded with a personality far bigger than the appropriately diminutive size of its box.

The scrappy kid theme is most immediately borne out by the art of Leder's in-house scribbler Kyle Ferrin, whose bright, ink-rendered characters bring to mind the vivid-imaginary adventures of Calvin and Hobbes, or the antics of Charles Schultz's *Peanuts* gang. But, remarkably for a game which could be dismissed as a re-skin, it goes right down to the bones of the mechanisms too, most significantly one which also offers a truly neat twist on the deckbuilding genre.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 68 Kid cards
- 22 Other cards
- 4 Player boards
- 1 Victory track
- 1 Rule book
- 30 Wooden pizza tokens
- 30 Wooden toys tokens
- 4 Wooden score markers
- 4 Wooden fort markers
- 4 Reference sheets



The aim, primarily, is to be the first gang to build a cardboard-box fort, which is achieved over five stages of levelling-up progress by hoarding and spending resources (pizzas and toys). To do this, you'll need to recruit some handy friends (represented by cards in six suits: books, glue, skateboards, etc.) and think very carefully about which kids you play with on your turn. Strictly speaking, you can only play with one of them to trigger one or two actions: a public action, which can be copied by any other players who are able to match the played card's suit, and/or a private action, which only you can use. But some actions can be valuably boosted by playing down other suit-matching cards from your five-strong hand – a move which also offers another benefit.



With most deckbuilders, any unused cards go into your discard at the end of your turn, but not so with *Fort*. Here you put them out in your Yard, where they can be recruited by any of the other players during their turns, as if the cards were part of the central market (aka the Park). That's right: if you don't play with the kids in your gang, they go off looking for someone else to play with. Which makes perfect sense, right? The only exceptions are your two best friends who you start the game with, and will never leave your deck (unless you post them in your Lookout, which offers a way to keep cards safe while retaining use of their suit symbols).

Between the Yard and the use of public actions, *Fort* is a game which keeps all its players engaged throughout each round, eliminating downtime. You're also constantly thinking about how best to utilise your small hand, not only to maximise your cards' impact, but also to reduce the chance that you'll lose a bunch of them to your opponents. It is interactive, but never turns nasty, its little take-thats proving relatively gentle and unfrustrating. Which, again, chimes perfectly with the kids-at-play theme (they almost always make up in the end). And *Fort* makes sure that, like those kids, you'll just want to keep playing and playing.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

It looks great, it plays great, and (assuming you've not played *SPQF*) it does something new and ingenious with a very-well-known-by-now genre.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SPQF...

Its theme and mechanisms match so well it's hard to believe *Fort* started out as another game. This version is definitely an improvement.

MYTHOS

Bringing a tentacle to a street fight

Designer: Warcradle Studios | **Publisher:** Warcradle Studios

45m | 2+ | 13+ | £90

Mythos, a narrative skirmish game from Warcradle Studios, allows players to pit warbands from different factions against each other in one off games, or a series of games as part of a campaign. With great minis across the seven factions, *Mythos* brings an exciting and pulpy Lovecraftian experience to the tabletop.

This fast-paced action is delivered through alternating activation, competing rolls and a smooth ruleset that is straightforward and easy to learn. The rules themselves will feel familiar to anyone that has played a skirmish game with alternating activation and an action point system before. But *Mythos* still provides a unique experience with the addition of some rules such as madness and arcane abilities to fit the aesthetic. The rules for *Mythos* provide players with a system that has a structured core coupled with a robust simplicity that doesn't bog players down in rule checking.

There are a number of unique characters for each faction with their own selection of attacks and special rules giving them slightly different roles on the battlefield – with some being better in combat, whilst others holding back using arcane powers. In addition to this each character has 'ready' and 'altered' side of their character card, with the altered side being used either once the character has reached their madness threshold, or by the use of certain special abilities. Each side of a character's card has some key differences that are either signs that the character is weakening as they descend into madness, or for some characters changing in other ways to represent them going into a frenzy or changing in some other way. This helps to serve the narrative aspect of *Mythos* as the different sides impact on how the character plays. This gives each character an individual feel that ties in well with the narrative aspect of the game.

The combat in *Mythos* uses competing rolls where the winner damages the loser –potentially adding a condition such as blind or burn by rolling a critical hit or spending a mythos from their mythos pool. This style of combat makes for an exciting game with plenty of tension, as the defender is able to hurt or even kill the attacker with some unlucky rolls – or lucky, depending on how you look at it. The mythos pool is a limited number of mythos available to the player each turn depending on the characters on the board. This can be used to apply conditions when attacking as mentioned previously, but they also allow for the use of other character abilities or multiple arcane attacks in a single turn. Meaning that players must choose how they spend this mythos wisely to maximise the effectiveness of their characters.



When playing *Mythos* there are five different scenarios to choose from in the rule book, with each providing different objectives and special rules that affect the game and give more variety. Whilst it would be nice to have a few more scenarios in the rule book, there will no doubt be more on the way and the format makes it easy for you to create numerous scenarios of your own! This definitely feels like a game that suits a scenario that has objectives beyond just killing your opponent. Whilst that is still fun, the scenarios with additional objectives help to create a stronger narrative and a lot more enjoyment as players battle to destroy relics, or race to wake up characters that are being absorbed into 'The Dreamlands.'

Overall *Mythos* provides players with fluid rules that allow for really exciting and tactical gameplay as well as beautiful 35mm minis that will definitely help immerse you in the narrative on a suitably spooky board – perfect to pick up for a quick stand-alone game or to create epic campaigns. *Mythos* will let you tell whatever story you want to tell however long it may be, and will definitely provide many memorable tabletop moments such as a man with a flamethrower facing off against a giant crab named Click Clack.

BEN JOY

WE SAY

If you love all things Lovecraft and enjoy skirmish games, then this will definitely be for you! With smooth and simplistic rules that still allow for tactical play, *Mythos* is a speedy game that offers a fun narrative experience on the tabletop.

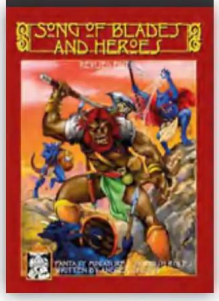


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Rulebook
- Torrent template
- 4 Dice
- 8 Objective tokens
- 12 Condition tokens
- 26 Wound tokens
- 26 Madness tokens
- Warbands sold individually (price quoted is RRP for Rules & Gubbins box, plus two faction starter sets)

PLAY IF YOU LIKE... SONG OF BLADES AND HEROES: REVISED EDITION...

Both games offer players fast paced skirmish combat, so if you like any of these games then *Mythos* will definitely offer you a similar yet equally uniquely Lovecraftian experience.

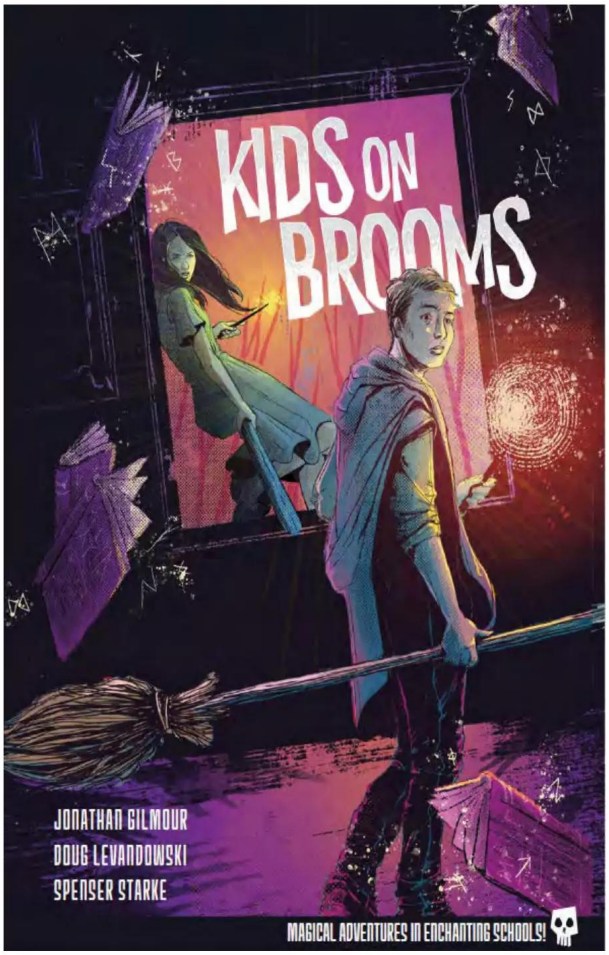


KIDS ON BROOMS

Harold Pottish and the lightweight rpg

Designer: Jon Gilmour, Doug Levandowski, Spenser Starke | **Publisher:** Renegade Game Studios

94 | 11+ | £21



There must be an entire generation of us who grew up daydreaming the adventures we would have when our invitation to magic school inevitably turned up, and while it may not quite be a replacement for that enchanted bit of paper *Kids on Brooms* is a great little framework for helping us play out those half-remembered dreams at the tabletop.

If that first paragraph – or, indeed, the game's name – didn't make it quite clear enough, though the book takes great pains to avoid stepping on any copyright or trademark toes, *Kids on Brooms* is essentially the closest thing we're going to get to a full *Harry Potter* RPG anytime soon. There are no Death Eaters, no Dumbledores and no Voldemorts, but the entire game is built around the idea of telling adventure stories set in and around a magical school.

This isn't a simple case of taking some generic rules and folding them around the Potter-ish tropes, either. Though the core of the game is founded on the same mechanical foundations as Renegade Studios' earlier releases, *Kids on Bikes* and *Kids in Space*, a huge chunk of *Kids on Brooms* is completely underpinned by a whole heap of ideas that rely on and feed into the premise.

As well as character sheets, for example, the players are issued with class timetables to sketch out. Rather than level up or buy new skills, the characters instead focus their attentions on their classes, slowly gaining bonuses as they study certain types of magic. These new systems do add a bit of extra bookkeeping onto the players' workload, but the nature of the setting means that having to plan around classes and consider which ones best fit your characters' strengths shouldn't ever feel like a chore.

Of course, simply going to school has never been main appeal of the magical school cliché, and *Kids on Brooms* also manages to bodge together a magic system that allows you to indulge all the arcane shenanigans you can imagine. Mostly, anyway.

It does this by ditching the idea of long spell lists or carefully curated effects in favour of an incredibly open-ended system that allows players to create any kind of spell or magical effect they could possibly want. In theory the characters can use magic to do quite literally anything they want, but in practise this is kept in control by a series of tables that bump up the difficulty of casting a spell the more dramatic it gets.

Want to do something that affects something about the size of a person? Add a +3 to the difficulty of the spell. Want to have it impact an entire room or more? Stick a +7 on there.

There are four different tables that feed into determining a spell's difficulty, and going through the process of estimating a score for each new spell your players dream up can be a rather laborious process. However, while it can be a bit of a pain to sit there and determine whether creating fire is merely 'unnatural' or if it crosses over into 'reality-bending', the mere fact that players can wander into a game of *Kids on Brooms* and start tossing weird magic around in minutes is hellishly impressive.

Indeed, as with the *Kids* games that came before it, the core rules are incredibly simple; the better you are at something the bigger die you roll, always try to roll high, that's about it. Okay, that's a bit of an exaggeration, but you can still get a handle on pretty much every aspect of the game within a five-minute rundown.

Somehow, though, despite the simplicity of the rules there are still just enough choices baked into character creation that you can still take joy in building mages that feel mechanically distinctive from one another. It certainly isn't going to fulfil any desires you have for tactical combat or complex system mastery, but there's just enough detail there to keep the more dice-happy players content.

The result is a game that feels like it did everything it set out to do, which is to create a streamlined little system for living out those magical school fantasies with your buddies. It might not quite have rights to all the names and it might use weird American term like "dorm" and "upperclassman" but it manages to do a wonderful job of giving you a magical new world to explore. And, if you roll badly enough, maybe blow up.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Lightweight, breezy and easy to pick up, *Kids on Brooms* is a great little game to indulge a bit of magical hijinks



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MONSTER OF THE WEEK...

Okay, so *Kids on Brooms* isn't quite as fixated on TV horror, but both are slick ways to recreate genre stories at the tabletop

MEOW: THE CULT OF THE CAT



Designer: Peter C. Hayward | **Publisher:** Jellybean Games



Meow: The Cult of The Cat is loosely based on the game *Mao*. Within it, you're trying to enter into the Cult of the Cat, and this game marks the final test to gain access. This premise doesn't come up a whole lot, but it's nice to have a story at least, if a little flawed in the number of other animals that make an appearance on the cards.

Regardless, each player will receive two cards with rules on. On your turn, you'll look to follow those rules, and then any of those held by the other players. You'll know the players rules from either watching the actions they take on their turn, or from receiving and remembering their hand, as at the end of the turn, cards are passed on. If you can complete a full and correct ruleset, you'll automatically win the game.

At its simplest, it's a memory test with silly actions. However, it's been done particularly nicely. The art is bright and friendly, and matches the feeling of the game, and there's several different characters offering you several different options. The cards are of a high quality that suggests they'll last the test of time, and as you only use a few cards in each hand, your games will play differently each time.

In addition, there are two decks included, of different difficulties. If you're playing with younger family, stick to the blue for a more straightforward game, or the red (or a merger of red and blue) for a more difficult play through. Whilst the game shines for the family audience, and is perhaps aimed at the younger players, it's still a solid game for all ages.

CHARLIE PETTIT

HOGS OF WAR



Designer: Paul D Allen and James Faulkner | **Publisher:** Stone Sword Games

Back in the weird and wonderful days of the Playstation game designers were a little... strange. Humans were too difficult to depict with any reasonable quality and humour was more slapstick and crude. But as a child of the 1990s, these games will always hold a special place. Especially the World War II themed Hogs of War which has recently been revived as a card game and upcoming miniatures game.



The name tells you essentially everything you need to know; there are pigs, they represent the different nations in World War II with the more questionable depictions left in the past where they belong, and it's stuffed with puns and Dad's Army style humour.

To get started players take one of the teams such as Tommy's Trotters (Britain), Sow-A-Krauts (Germany), Piggystroika (Russia), or Uncle Ham's Hogs (U.S.A) and randomly place their five pigs out on the field.

From here, the game is all about killing the other hogs using a wide variety of melee, guns, explosives, skills, and deployables which can be used in a surprisingly tactical way. Like mind controlling an enemy hog to cattle-prod them out of their safe little trench just to be shot by your sniper on the next turn. In a way it captures the feeling of a turn-based strategy game perfectly, the only thing missing is the anxiety inducing timer and janky PS1 controls.

Perhaps the highest endorsement of the quality and intuitiveness of the game design is that even after misplacing the reference cards and finding no explanation in the rulebook, we were able to interpret each of the icons with nary an argument. Which is no small feat in a competitive game where ten points of splash damage is the difference between victory and crushing defeat.

ANNA BLACKWELL

SLYVILLE

What happens in Slyville, stays in Slyville



Designer: Dominika Gerasimiak, Justyna Leszczyńska, Marek Daniluk, Mateusz Romach | **Publisher:** Hexy



If you are not a player who enjoys a bit of skulduggery, deceit or backstabbing, then may I recommend your ride straight past the medieval city of Slyville and visit neighbouring Niceville instead. However, if you are ready to make shady deals and can hold your own in a game of deceit, then you are more than welcome to join one of the trading guilds of Slyville.

If you join, however, don't be surprised if your best friend turns on you, making a secret deal for rum bottles right under your nose. *Slyville* is not a place where you play nice or share. Sabotaging plans of others is what gets you the best deals, earning you influence that is required to win the game.

The city of Slyville is divided into six segments. The central board with five districts arranged around it. All goods, cards, tokens and player standees will be placed on these boards throughout the game generating an impressive table presence. During the game, players will visit districts by playing cards face down in an assigned space. At the end of a round, districts are resolved one by one as all of its cards are revealed and their powers trigger in initiative order.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Main board
- 5 District boards
- 78 Goods and influence tokens
- 30 Deal tiles
- 5 Guild sheets
- 5 Decks of action cards (7 cards each)
- 5 Henchman tokens
- 1 Prince's favourite marker
- 5 Secret good tokens
- 1 First district marker
- 5 Intrigue cards



Each player has the same seven cards in hand and they are purposefully simple: cancel an opponent's action, make a deal, bid three coins for the district resources and so on. Each round, players will study the layout of the board and other player's inventories attempting to predict which cards they will play to each district. Having a limited pool of abilities makes the process of deducing the opponents' moves a combination of observation and elimination rather than pure guesswork, which makes the overall gameplay feel tighter and more exciting. Even when placing a card, yourself, you can't help but wonder: was that move too obvious? Is it worth playing another card as a back-up?

Every move in the game is a tell, and so every ruling matters. The first player can make bolder, riskier plays because that player also resolves all ties for the round. The order in which districts get resolved also matters because you might earn goods that you can spend later in the round on a deal. Or maybe not, because another player made an educated guess about your move and blocked you.

The game is full of these micro confrontations but none of them feel too personal. There are enough places to go and actions to do, that it is impossible for one person to be ganged up on. Even if you were blocked from getting a relic in a purple district, you also stopped someone else from making a weapon deal in the red district. These interactions are fast-paced and not dwelled on, as the gameplay moves swiftly to another district or a new turn.

Yet if you are a player that likes to build up and plan your turns, and then see them resolved in a precise manner you set up throughout the game, *Slyville* is not for you. Here your plans are constantly squandered by your opponents, which for a certain type of player can feel really frustrating. On the other hand, that one move that you successfully slipped under everyone's nose feels triumphant. Whereas blocking is satisfying not because you stopped someone from doing an action, but rather because you correctly deduced their plan by observing their gameplay and the current status of the board. There is a surprising amount of depth and tactical play in a game that is so easy to pick up and play, even for new players. So, if you are feeling a little mischievous, *Slyville* should be the perfect destination.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Slyville is not game for careful planners. It rewards mischief and deceit, observation and deduction, and has place for risk-takers and those with a back-up plan. You might think you know what the city of Slyville is about, but it will almost always surprise you.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED A WAR OF WHISPERS...

Slyville takes a less serious tone than imperial wars of *A War of Whispers*, but it is equally good at mixing tactical card gameplay with a dash of bluffing.

TOKYO GAME SHOW

Designer: Jordan Draper | **Publisher:** Jordan Draper

20-30m | 2-6 | 12+ | £40



What's better than one game? 62 games of course. As with Draper's other games we have a handful of guest designers (Hiroshi Kawamura, Yu Maruno) – but rather than a few games in the box, there's a massive range. Which is good, we're looking to get five seconds of fun on repeat here.

The box contains a handful of devices for the games master, or host, to dish out to make the game work – from dice, glow in the dark discs, cards and points tokens. The host is encouraged to ham up the host guise to dish out a series of word games, moving games, dexterity games, team games, quiet games, timing games, and possibly most interestingly – glow in the dark games – all over a series of five rounds.

The games themselves are what you'd expect from such a large selection, quick, fun, and a little like being at a children's party. The glow in the dark discs are great for games like Ghosts, where the host awards a disc every time someone names a visiting spirit well, whereas simple hide and seek games with items or points tokens are surprisingly well received. Equally, simple word games like Aliens! asks players to make up a phrase that starts with "aliens…" – like "aliens, with floppy femurs" – around the circle until someone laughs and is eliminated. As with all these games, there's ways to integrate it into other Draper games, which here just means adding more props for similarly silly fun.

With the right group, you can drop the charade of there being anything here but a full evening's worth of challenges, punctuated by whatever keeps your party motivated.

It's not as cerebral as some of the other games but as a box of little party games goes, it punches well above its weight.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S MISSING?... FROM MY DRAWING

Designer: Florian Siriex | **Publisher:** Ludonaute

20m | 3-6 | 7+ | £24



If you've ever played Jackbox, you'll be surprised to hear that this game emulates all of the good stuff about their quirky little party games, but instead in an analogue format, saving you from even turning on the TV.

The premise of the game is simple. You're given an object by your card deck. You conceal the card from your players, pop the card under the transparent page, and draw a scene around it, omitting the object itself, but in such a way that hopefully your fellow players will be able to figure out what is missing. For example, if you were to pull the umbrella card, you'd maybe draw the rain, leaving out a missing part for where the umbrella would be, and with a person stood dry and avoiding the rain underneath.

Everyone draws at the same time, and then attempts to guess the other drawings. If they succeed, they get the card (which equates to a point). If no one can guess the missing part, you lose the cards you gained and the card is discarded. It's an easy way to stop those drawing poorly intentionally, and an amusing occurrence when you explain that – of course – the missing object was a zombie. Why else would there be a half-eaten brain? No, it wasn't jelly.

As everyone plays at the same time, there's no dreaded downtime, and it comes with three different difficulty levels in the cards, which means the family can play at a level engaging to them. There's real variety in these – you could pick from an alarm clock to a panpipe, a swimming pool to a three headed dog, so the challenge really is on. Plus, the boards are dry wipe, which means you can just shuffle the cards and play again and again.

It's surprising how fun a simple premise can be, and has quickly become the most requested at our family game nights.

CHARLIE PETTIT

FORGOTTEN WATERS

A pirate game to truly get on board with

Designers: Mr. Bistro, J. Arthur Ellis, Isaac Vega | **Publisher:** Plaid Hat Games

2-4h | 3-7 | 14+ | £49



Many games have tackled the pirate theme in recent years, some better than others. But can a tabletop game truly make you *feel* like a pirate, thrusting you deep enough into the role so as to develop a hokey dialect and a thirst for oceanic adventure? Plaid Hat Games certainly think so and are looking to their proprietary 'Crossroads' formula to prove it.

First seen in *Dead of Winter*, the 'Crossroads' system brought a sense of immersive decision making and semi-cooperative mischief to board gaming. With *Forgotten Waters*, they have opted for an almost fully cooperative adventure, giving players personal objectives and choices which highlight collaborative storytelling over sneaky sabotage.

Gameplay largely takes place within a gorgeously illustrated spiral bound book. Whether it's scenes of vibrant coves subtly beckoning players to ponder its mysteries, or looming sea monsters inviting moments of playful panic, these evocative illustrations manage to lure you in to their colourful sense of wonder, creating an irresistible air of anticipation for each coming round.

This level of awe and immersion thankfully never becomes bogged down by mechanics either, as turns are as slick and simple as placing a standee on one of the pages' available actions. The app's forty second timer encourages players to act quick, relying mostly on the game's iconography or their own gut instincts when making choices. This real time aspect keeps the story rolling at a good pace and, importantly, never feels restrictive or particularly stress inducing.

But these mechanics are merely props for the game to support its true strength: spinning a mighty good yarn. *Forgotten Waters*' involves players in this process through its elegant approach to character development, driven by a basic skill tree found on the front of each players' unique character sheet. As players level up, small nuggets of backstory can be orated to the rest of the table, with every subsequent reading drawing players ever closer to one of three endings for their character. As simple as this sounds, in practice it is staggeringly effective. Outside of dedicated roleplaying games you are unlikely to find a game so adept at making players care about and embody their characters. A 'fill in the blank' section on each of the character sheets (guided by some intriguing prompts) is a further stroke of genius, making even the most reserved of players form an attachment to their pirate's story.

Yet, as captivating and engaging as these backstories are, they are arguably not the main attraction. At the heart of each scenario is an epic app-driven adventure, featuring some of the best and genuinely funny writing I have encountered in the hobby, alongside a stellar voice cast. Each story plays out with all the bombast of a blockbuster film; full of wit, tension, and quirky postmodern flourishes of parody and homage. Better still is players' active involvement with these narratives, with gameplay often opening up bite-sized subplots allowing players to expand their characters' story or merely interact with the smaller details of this magical world.

Ultimately, all of *Forgotten Waters*' many parts are designed to summon that roleplaying feel in the most accessible manner, even when applied to the game's much appreciated web-based remote play alternative. Partially formed character sheets come to life in the hands of players, whilst stories bloom from simple actions and decisions. Skill checks are quick but meaningful, and never succumb to number-crunching or tedium. But, most importantly, everyone rounds off their character's story knowing they played a part in everyone else's, and the adventure as a whole. It's also worth noting that two player and solo mode rules are available online.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

A triumphant splash in the world of both storytelling and light roleplaying board games - plunging both genres to exciting new depths in a way that is both accessible and exciting.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Location Book
- 1 Map Board
- 6 Player Role Boards
- 1 Pad of Ship Scribe Sheets
- Pad of Player Sheets
- 7 12-Sided Dice
- 7 Pirate Standees
- Ship Standee
- 89 Treasure Cards
- 96 Story Cards
- 10 Objective Cards
- 127 Tokens

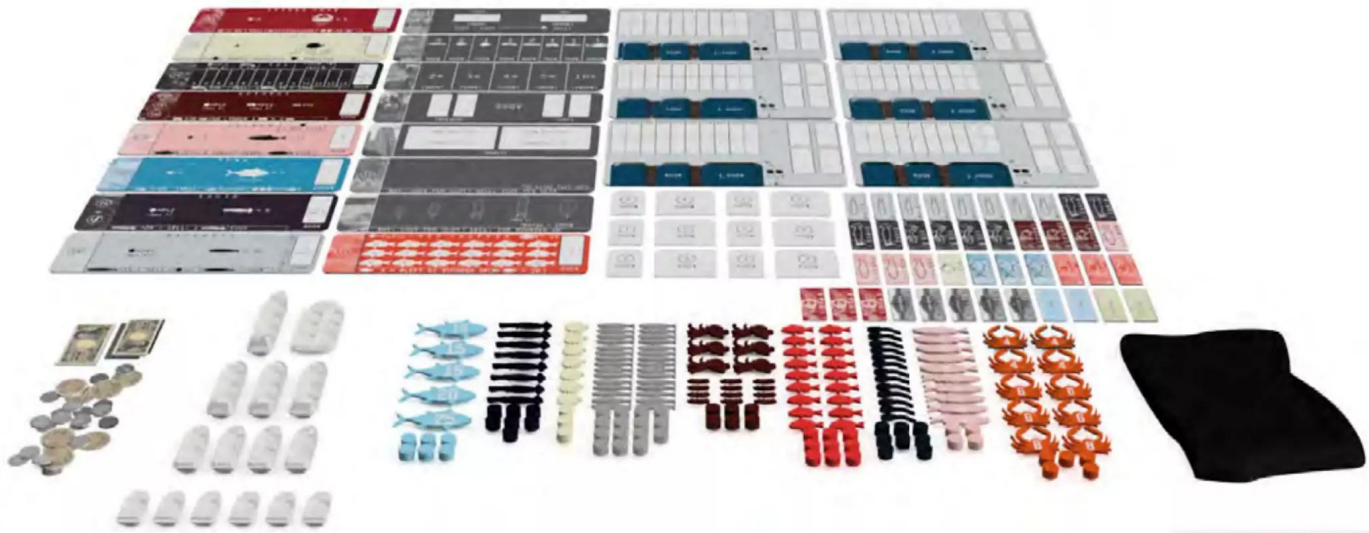
TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TALES OF THE ARABIAN NIGHTS

Forgotten Waters and its surprisingly cohesive storytelling is a perfect companion to this less sleek 1985 classic.





tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY



TOKYO TSUKIJI MARKET

More fun than a bag of eels

Designer: Jordan Draper | **Publisher:** Jordan Draper

90m | 2-6 | 14+ | £50

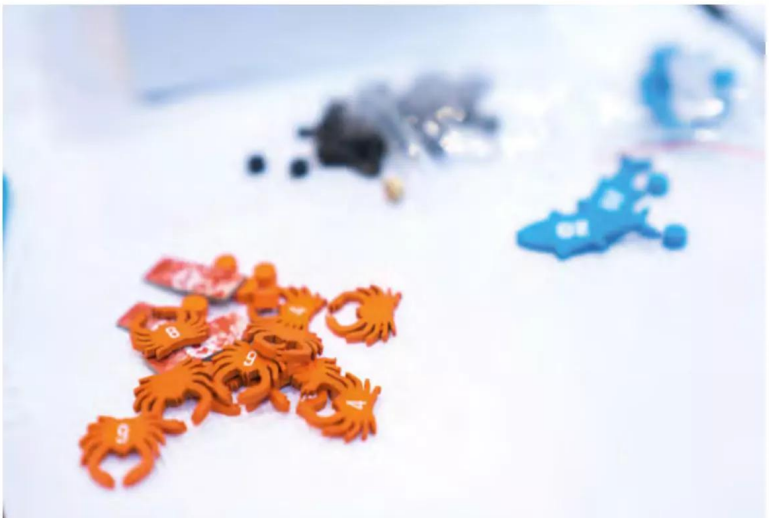
We all love good components. Any time there's a very nice object in a game, we're more likely to engage with it. Here, at the fish market, we're overloaded with nice things. From elegantly cut crabs, slightly shiny mackerel, to red snapper and eel, there's just a lot of nice wooden tokens in this box. Equally, the hand-poured (and therefor slightly wonky) resin boats are a delight to touch and move about too. But once you've laid out all the pieces, picked the markets you want to use and piled everything else back in the box – what kind of game are you left with?

Tokyo Tsukiji Market is a bit of a slippery fish to get straight in your head the first time you play. It's a market game when you have two actions to take each turn. These actions can be taking your boats out for fishing, or taking actions on the markets in the centre of the table. You need licenses to fish for certain kinds of fish, so there's a sense of investment in a plan from the start. When you catch a fish they exist in a barrel in your market space in front of you at the price you set them at. These will degrade over two turns, so you best not price them too high. The only way to get actual fish tokens is to buy them from another player. This is the tricky bit, that once you have it in your head, you'll wonder why you struggled at the start.

Everything in the game relies on player interaction. Players should be reading the markets – deciding whether to buy red snapper (and therefore reduce the price for everyone) or invest elsewhere. Maybe in eels, a market that increasing in value every time an eel is caught, and reduces when an eel is sold to it. Or maybe the crab market, which uses blind bidding and randomly grabbing an individually valued crab from a bag. At the start, it's easy to think you want your prices to be punitive to other players, getting the most out of them. But as you're playing two roles here – as a market seller and the fisherman themselves – you have to think of it as an entire loop of an economy. Sure, they can buy your fish cheap and flip them into bigger points and cash elsewhere in the central markets, but that's the fuel that lets you buy what they've got, and doing the same, but maybe smarter and better.

Soon competitive pricing takes over, taking just enough to make it worth it to the other players, and ensuring that you can nudge them out in the end. It's a powerful magic once everyone starts attempting to manipulate the markets over several turns. Sometimes it feels like poker and sometimes it feels like a brain-burning Eurogame. And frankly, it is both at once. It's a game full of deep pleasures, grand strategies and sometimes, simply going with your gut. If you've been trawling for an economic game with interaction by the fish barrel, *Tokyo Tsukiji Market* might be the big catch you've been waiting for.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WE SAY

One for fans of strong economic sims that like over the table interactions. The tactile nature of the game brings direct joy – almost as much as artfully crashing the eel market for your friends before they cash out.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 6 Double-layered harbour boards
- 12 Port coverings
- 15 Custom resin Japanese fishing boats
- 18 Market boards
- 42 Licenses and extras tokens
- 64 Fishing barrels
- 119 Custom-shaped fish resources
- 60 Yen tokens
- 1 Auction bag

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED POWER GRID...

While a bit heavier than *Power Grid*, and way more modular, there's a similar taste of just about beating your friends in bidding wars and pushing the prices up.



TOKYO COIN LAUNDRY



Designer: Jordan Draper | **Publisher:** Jordan Draper



This might be one of the weirdest boxes we've opened at Tabletop Gaming Magazine. Inside you'll find an assortment of mini cards, four pink washing machines, two white dryers and then some tiny clothes inside them, as well as currency and a couple of bottles of washing liquid. We asked ourselves, what kind of game is this?



This is a box of several games made in collaboration with other designers. The largest and most complex is RPG created with Luke Crane (*Burning Wheel*). In this, players are trying to resolve their mood in the liminal space of a coin laundry over three days, oh, and also get their laundry done. It feels like a social experiment, and the wackier day three events offer plenty of fun twists that no one could see coming. It's an attempt to represent such a small moment in life that when you're trying to perform it, becomes strangely revelatory.

If an RPG about not getting your washing done doesn't do it for you, how about a washing machine wargame? Yes, there's one in here too that lets you do very silly things like flick a washing liquid bottles at your opponent's machines to score a 'detergent snipe'. There's also a solo game, strangely contemplative, which asks you to load washers and push your luck. Rarely does the busywork of components in a solo experience lead to direct fun, and yet it does here. You can get caught up in it in a way that you don't with abstracted components and scores. There's also a stacked washer dexterity game which is a decent implementation of a washing machine Jenga tower with added challenge. In short, they're all perfectly combined with their component in a way that will elicit a smile at the very least.

We think it's nearly ideal as a conceptual game that's about 'play' itself. For those that 'get' the game, they will love it, for the rest... it's good to be curious.

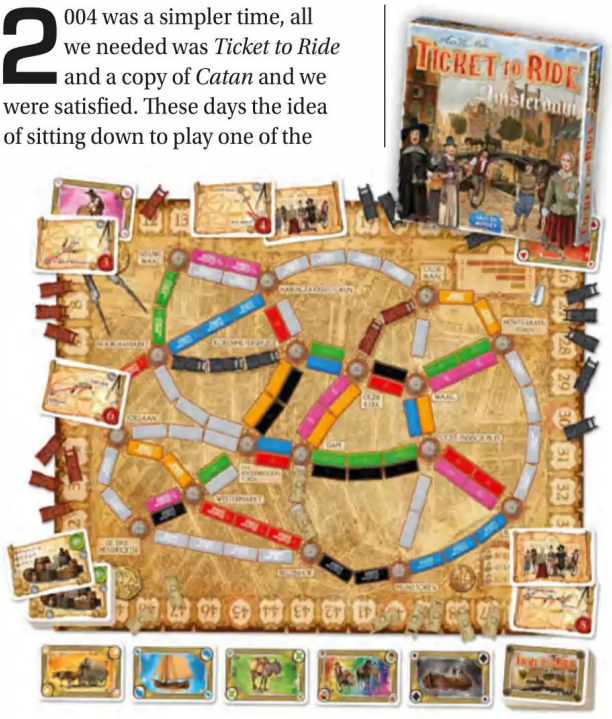
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

TICKET TO RIDE: AMSTERDAM



Designer: Alan R Moon | **Publisher:** Days of Wonder

2004 was a simpler time, all we needed was *Ticket to Ride* and a copy of *Catan* and we were satisfied. These days the idea of sitting down to play one of the larger versions of *Ticket to Ride* can feel a bit daunting – an hour, or sometimes longer with a larger group of new players can feel like a long time. Thus, the entry of the smaller and more compact versions of the game into the market was a godsend – *New York* and *London* being excellent versions.



Ticket to Ride Amsterdam is possibly the apex of this small-box version of the game. Here we have carts, instead of trains, which we're trying to run between markets. They're lovingly sculpted, but once you get going they might as well just be any abstract block. Equally, the inclusion of a 'wooden' coloured player token is a great touch, as are the slots that they snugly fit into.

The game loop is the same – pick routes that you need to fulfil for points, then get the right number of carts to match what's on the board to make a connection through the various stations. Complete your route for the points, and any cards in your hand left at the end are taken off your final score.

Ticket to Ride Amsterdam is *Ticket to Ride* in 15 minutes, sometimes less. It's got everything the bigger games have, but with a speed that makes it possible to play four games in an hour. It's frankly a joy to have all the pressure taken out of the game, and losing to feel more like 'I'll get you next time' – which is right away. It also makes the game work well as a duel. If you need to free up some time in your life, and don't mind having a stab at Dutch place names, swap your bigger box *Ticket to Ride* for this.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

7 WONDERS SECOND EDITION

Wonderful

Designer: Antoine Bauza | **Publisher:** Repos Production

30m | 3-7 | 11+ | £44

tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

Nobody builds Wonders anymore. The closest we get to anything as awe inspiring as the Pyramids or the Colosseum are pointy skyscrapers built by rich jerks having a tower measuring contest. There's something about those legendary structures, build by civilizations who were just getting the hang of wheels and scaffolding, that continues to marvel countless generations.

It's no wonder (pun intended) that so many board games are inspired by these historical landmarks, with endless strategy titles that see players spending hours to recreate the rise and fall of these great kingdoms. But what makes *7 Wonders* brilliant is how well it captures centuries of history in a half hour, using one of the most succinct drafting mechanics in any board game.

In *7 Wonders*, three to seven people play as one of seven different cultures, drafting from a hand of seven cards over three rounds. Whilst players begin with a single resource and blueprints for a multi-tiered Ancient Wonder, each turn they'll select one card and pass the rest to their neighbour, until everyone has played six cards in each age. After three rounds of drafting, points and achievements are totalled to decide the winner.

From the first hand of cards, you immediately see the various possibilities available to you. For guaranteed points you'll want to build blue society cards, but equally as inviting are red military cards that gain you ever more valuable glory tokens whilst dropping a smattering of negative loss markers to your opponents, or green science cards that increase in value quadratically (i.e. two symbols are with four points in total, but three symbols are worth nine) encouraging you to commit hard to gain a bucket load of points.

However, In order to get any of these cards (or to build stages of your wonder) you'll need resource cards. While not worth points by themselves, these cards are the fuel for your civilization engine. If a card or wonder section has symbols on the top left, you must have access to exactly these types and quantities of resources to build it, either through owning matching resource cards or by paying money to any neighbour who does.

This balance between getting the resources you need for the buildings you want is where the game shines. Very rarely will you start a round and know exactly which of the seven cards are best for you, leaving you to consider what you need to grab now and what might come back your way. Seeing which cards your neighbours prioritise is also key, as if one of them seems to be grabbing a lot of resources, it might be worth getting one of the yellow economic cards to gain discounted rates on their goods, or to gather the coins necessary to fund your development.

As more and more cards are chosen in a round, the game speeds up proportionally, as with fewer options in hand turns go quicker, whilst players congratulate or commiserate their forward thinking skills. The satisfaction of gathering just the right number of resources to power your empire, having just enough strength to conquer your opponents or denying someone a card they desperately need to develop your wonder, is such the quintessential feeling of accomplishment that makes board games great.

This second edition release is a beatific joy to behold. The design overhaul and use of minimalist symbols (first seen in *7 Wonders Duel*) grants more room for the phenomenal illustrations, the quality of the components is just the right touch of luxury without being overindulgent and the game now has a colour-blind symbol system to make it more accessible. Add to that a few balance tweaks that gently cool off some of the more hostile cards and you have a re-envisioned masterpiece.

After a decade since its original release, this cherished gaming icon still proves to be one of the best drafting games ever made.

MATTHEW VERNALL



WE SAY

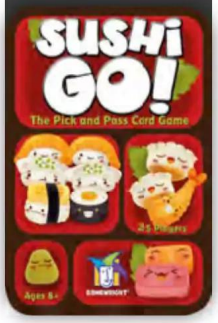
The gorgeous redesign and ease of life changes adds another layer of polish to this fantastic Classical Era themed classic. If you don't already own it, rectify this now.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

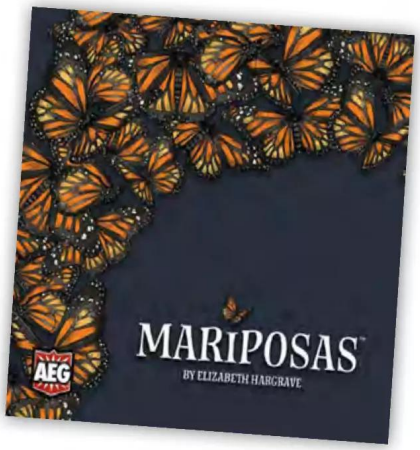
- 7 Wonder boards
- 148 Age cards
- 78 Cardboard coins
- 48 Military conflict tokens
- Score pad
- 4 Player aids

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SUSHI GO!...

Grabbing Japanese snacks makes for a fun, breezy experience that's a great introduction to drafting, but if you have the money and want a less random experience there's never been a better time to buy *7 Wonders*.







MARIPOSAS

Anyone fancy a flutter?

Designer: Elizabeth Hargrave | **Publisher:** AEG

45-75m | 2-5 | 14+ | £50

If you were a fan of last year's avian hit *Wingspan*, then you must be craving *Mariposas* like, well, a butterfly craves nectar. After an intriguing small-deck diversion with the 'I split, you choose' mini-game *Tussie-Mussie, Wingspan* designer Elizabeth Hargrave follows up her bird-collecting debut with a board game that takes to the sky on a different kind of wing (chitinous rather than feathered) and alights on a different genre (grid movement rather than tableau building), but shares the same appealingly micro-detailed attention to its natural-world themes.

Of course, any expectations that may have mounted after dozens of delightful *Wingspan* plays should be managed before cracking open *Mariposas*. While *Wingspan* justifiably attracted many new players to the modern tabletop, it still involved a reasonably complex layering and interplay of mechanisms, giving it a depth that surely but gently drew you in, with the help of its vast decks of beautifully painted, unique cards and tasty-looking components. *Mariposas*, in contrast, is a much simpler, more traditional feeling affair, featuring a colourful central board, around which players move their butterfly markers to collect flower tokens and life-cycle card sets, while trying to score the most points. It is a much quicker, much lighter game than *Wingspan*. But don't let that put you off.

Hargrave is a master of gameifying nature, and here turns a remarkable phenomenon into a compelling tabletop treat. Every Spring, multitudes of monarch butterflies flutter northwards across the United States and into Canada. But, with such fleeting lifespans, not a single butterfly makes it back by Autumn, the round trip being completed by their descendants. So each player starts off with a single butterfly that they know will not survive the first of the game's three seasonal rounds (Spring, Summer, Fall). This butterfly must hatch offspring (by landing on a space next to some milkweed), which in turn must hatch more offspring across four possible generations through the gathering of flower-token sets, and spread across the continent, achieving as many seasonal goals as possible.

The best way to bag a big end-game score is to hustle all your generation-four butterflies (the last possible generation) back down to the starting point of Michoacàn – though this proves surprisingly challenging. Movement is dictated by action cards from a hand of only two, and these must be employed thoughtfully on each turn, with only four, five or six turns per season (depending on the season). You can boost them with bonus cards from widely spread waystations, but it's still very easy to find yourself hatching fourth-generation flappers too late, and too far away, leading to many failed sprints to the southern-border finishing line.

Mariposas, then, is a game filled with more tough and interesting decisions than you'd expect from its easy-to-digest rules. In that sense, it is even better tailored as a gateway game than *Wingspan* – even if, honestly, the birds do beat the butterflies overall – and it lures you back to the table for further plays, like a monarch butterfly drawn to Mexico.

DAN JOLIN

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Map board
- 1 Waystation board
- 50 Wooden butterfly markers
- 5 score markers
- 1 Flower die
- 120 Flower tokens
- 16 Waystation tokens
- 6 Life cycle ability tokens
- 20 Season goal cards
- 36 Action cards
- 60 Life cycle waystation cards
- 15 Bonus move waystation cards

WE SAY

Hargrave proves that *Wingspan* was no one-off with a light game whose challenge belies its gossamer touch.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WINGSPAN...

As we say: different kind of wings, and very different mechanisms, but it will certainly appeal to the same, natural-theme-loving players.





GLASGOW

The world's greatest city (in this reviewer's unbiased opinion) finally gets a game

Designer: Mandela Fernandez-Grandon | **Publisher:** Lookout Games

30m | 2 | 10+ | £22

Glasgow was once known as the second city of the British Empire. A thriving hub of trade and industry, its shipyards sent vessels to the furthest corners of the globe. Its importers grew rich on a flood of textiles and tobacco. And migrant labourers crowded its tenement houses, lured by the prospect of work.

This two-player game casts you and an opponent as some of the merchants and magnates who left such a profound mark on the city, and it's a tight little contest with rapid-fire turns and shifting tactics.

Before you play, you'll randomly arrange its set of action tiles in a circle in the centre of the table. On your turn you'll move your wooden marker clockwise around it, stopping at one of the available tiles and taking the action marked on it – usually gaining resources like bricks, steel and gold.

Some tiles, though, let you claim buildings and add them to an expanding square grid in the centre of the table. Each building costs different resources to construct, and it means you'll constantly look for the most efficient ways to grab materials. But in a touch that will be familiar to anyone who's played Uwe Rosenberg's *Patchwork*, you'll keep taking turns until your pawn advances beyond your opponent's. The result is that taking a big, bold move to grab the resources you want could gift your opponent two or chances turns to respond.

Once you've grabbed a building, you'll need to think carefully about how to place it. Structures score points in different ways, some by being on corners of the city grid, others by being adjacent to matching buildings. Parks reward you for collecting them in sets, and factories come with special abilities which trigger whenever someone builds in their row or column.

It feels a bit like a distilled and shrunk-down version of the brilliant *Quadropolis*, and it generates some surprisingly varied gameplay considering its simple setup. But what will bring a smile to the face of anyone familiar with the city are the little nods to its history and culture. There's the square-grid setup, reflecting Glasgow's grid iron street pattern. There are the buildings depicted on its tiles, including the Gallery of Modern Art with its iconic statue of the Duke of Wellington with a traffic cone permanently affixed to his head. The player pawns even come in green – the colour of the city's famous Celtic Football Club, and blue – the colour of the city's famous Blue Lagoon chain of fish and chip shops.

It also boasts diverse artwork, with a pleasing mix of genders and ethnicities. But it fails to address one crucial historical fact. Much of Glasgow's wealth was built on the trade in tobacco and sugar, industries reliant entirely on slave labour. There's an ongoing debate in the city today as to whether the streets named after its influential 'tobacco lairds' should be renamed. So enjoy *Glasgow* the game, but perhaps also take a moment to explore the real history behind Glasgow the place.

OWEN DUFFY

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 14 contract tiles
- 36 building tiles
- 4 depot tiles
- 2 player tokens
- 2 player boards
- 10 brick tokens
- 8 steel tokens
- 6 gold tokens
- 1 whisky barrel
- Score sheet
- Rule book

WE SAY

A strong builder game that has a good swing at doing Glasgow justice.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED QUADROPOLIS...

Glasgow plays with some similar ideas around claiming and placing buildings, but it does it in a slick and streamlined two-player form.

PRISMA ARENA

The kindest skirmish game you'll ever play

Designers: John Fiore & Rory O'Connor | **Publisher:** Hub Games

30-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £35



Rory O'Connor describes himself as a designer of "games with heart", which makes sense if you've played 2018's emotional heavy-hitter *Holding On: The Troubled Life of Billy Kerr*, or even his hugely popular debut *Rory's Story Cubes* (see page nine). So it may come as a surprise to learn that his latest title is... An arena battle game?

In *Prisma Arena*, two-to-four players each control a character who must triumph in a swift, slick sci-fi battle royale, involving grappling, energy blasting and powered monster sidekicks. Yet even the swiftest scan of the game's art and style will tip you off to the fact that it's not gonna be awash in blood, gore and testosterone. The characters are big-eyed, anime-ish youths (none of whom, incidentally, are either white or specifically gendered), while their monstrous companions are cute and colourful, looking more like Pokémon or the cast of a trippy, '80s Saturday-morning kids' cartoon, with barely a tooth or claw between them. Meanwhile, the arena in which they scrap resembles a cosmic disco, complete with obstacles that appear to be gigantic glow-sticks.

Despite its combative core, *Prisma Arena* brims with positivity. The setting is the world of Beacon, where young Guardians train to become 'protectors of Hope in the Time of Despair'. The eponymous battleground is a training camp, where you spar with pals to master the art of Prismakata, by which Guardians learn to channel their inner light. And the monsters? They're actually manifestations of different emotional states, such as the affectionate Grawva who has a 'hug' ability, or the confident Dawna, who can buff your hero through encouragement. The message here is that any emotion, even a negative one (such as jealousy or anger), can be embraced and moulded into a beneficial effect.

As such, *Prisma Arena* feels ideally pitched as a family game, or one to introduce younger players to tabletop combat in a supremely safe environment. Accordingly, its rules are simple and straightforwardly presented as 'Lessons' which gradually ease you into the game. It also sidesteps the potential frustrations of dice rolling by focusing on a slick, card-based combat system, which allows you to chain pleasing combos using cards drawn from a small personal deck. And in the interests of fairness, any of your played cards are passed to the next player to join *their* deck, meaning it's impossible to dominate by hoarding the most powerful moves. Oh, and no-one dies; they just bounce back during their next turn, with the winner decided by points.

In a really lovely touch, the character standees can be customised using reusable stickers, while levelling up your hero rewards you with new outfits to dress them in (these can be kept in a personal character 'locker', while resealable pouches are included to store all your character's bits and pieces). So in this welcome import from the videogame world there is an element of creativity and personalisation, too.

Given its family focus, some older players may find the game lacking in the kind of gritty, tactical depth they usually expect, and it does feel like it's begging for further scenarios and expansions – as if it's just the pilot episode in a possible animated saga. These would be welcome, though. While *Prisma Arena*'s beaming, teenie-toony upbeatness won't be to everyone's taste, it does feel like a refreshing change to the genre that deserves to be embraced.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

A light, bright kid-friendly combat game which feels like a blend of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Pokémon* and Pixar's *Inside Out*.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board (two-sided)
- Central game board (two-sided)
- 8 Action dials
- Advantage token
- 12 Standee bases
- 12 Obstacles
- 4 Hero standees
- 8 Mo'kon standees
- 36 Combo cards
- 50 Prisma power cards
- 4 Hero cards
- 4 Guest hero cards
- 8 Mo'kon cards
- 4 Hero sticker sheets
- 4 Hero lockers
- 4 Hero storage bags
- 4 Player aids
- 4 Score trackers
- 64 Hit tokens



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED WILDLANDS...

Similar to Martin Wallace's brilliant skirmish game, *Prisma Arena* uses player decks and combo plays to slick and pleasing effect.



GODSPEED

Less spacewalk, more cakewalk

Designer: Adam Hill & Clayton Hargrave | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games

60-90m | 2-5 | 10+ | £60



As opening hooks go, 'The Space Race was a lie' is certainly effective. The era of superpower one-upmanship makes for a rich land of board game possibilities. I look forward to playing a game that explores them, as despite the evocative tagline, *Godspeed* delivers a very different experience.

Godspeed takes two to five players through ten rounds of discussion, auction and actions. Everyone starts with five different worker tokens, some resources and a beginning objective, with the goal to create game winning developments by drawing cards and expending resources to play them.

At the start of each round a high council card is drawn, offering a reward if all players are willing to lose a specific worker, or penalizing players who don't contribute. Next, a selection of supply cards (and the first player token) is put up for a closed fist auction. Every worker has a different value and you can bid as many of them as you want, though anything bid cannot be used again until next round. The winning bid gets first and last pick of the supplies, with cards ranging from extra resources to special one use powers. Once everyone has picked their supplies, we finish off with a traditional worker placement series of actions. Two actions each, workers can only go on their matching spaces and only if there's room. These actions are the meat of the game, as the development cards created using actions help push your faction up prestige tracks or gain chunky milestone gems – the two main ways to win.

And it's... fine. Every stage of the round gives players something to consider, looking for the best way to build up their point producing engine that will send them to the top of a prestige ladder. The game starts generously, helping players to get the ball rolling, then maintains that momentum throughout. It's hard to completely screw things up, but also hard to intentionally take the lead. The game's proportionally-costed developments ensure you always get a fair amount of points for the resources expended and milestones are often claimed through determined slogging at one or two development themes. Two-thirds of the way through players gain an alien relic power, which provide a unique ability that seems overpowered, but again have been fine tuned to such a degree that it's rare for a player to aggressively abuse it to win.

The polish on the game's mechanics has smoothed over any risks, teaching concepts quickly and playing well. In doing so, however, it ensures that every experience with the game is roughly the same motions, despite the variety in factions, alien powers and game objectives. Many turns feel the same and players rarely interact outside of general table talk and jostling for actions, typical of worker placements. None of the high council 'decisions' are deeper than 'Do I care if I can't use this worker this round?' The same goes for auctions; despite the wide variety of interesting powers up for grabs, the option taken first most frequently is 'first player,' because losing an action you need too many times is the only way to lose.

The biggest deal breaker for me is the theme. While the production and art design are brilliant (although making development cards stylistically different would help colour-blind players read the game better) I never feel like I'm playing a space conspiracy. This could have been a renaissance town or medieval castle building game and the mechanics would be identical, which given how strongly the advertising pushes its theme is disappointing.

You'll have an okay time with *Godspeed* and if you really love the sci-fi look it'll prove to be entertaining for a few games. It's just not the space conspiracy game I was promised.

MATTHEW VERNALL

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game board
- 5 Player boards
- 200 Cardboard resources
- 274 Game cards
- 7 Plastic milestone gem statues
- 25 Cardboard production building tiles
- 8 Cardboard alien power tiles
- Tie breaker marker
- First player marker

WE SAY

It looks lovely and plays smoothly, but won't take long before its tenuous theme and arbitrary scoring system keeps it on the shelf. Ideal for game collectors who enjoy novelty.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED KEYFLOWER...

Both games have inventive auction systems and lovely production values, *Godspeed* is more accessible but *Keyflower* rewards repeated plays.

UNLOCK!: STAR WARS ESCAPE GAME



Designer: Cyril Demaegd & Jason Little | **Publisher:** Space Cowboys

The *Unlock* series is a group of escape room inspired games, and now, and with much excitement, Space Cowboys have offered a Star Wars version, so you can match the cold weather outside with the icy planet of Hoth – though thankfully no Tauntaun sleeping bags are necessary.





The game comes in three adventures, with an introductory one to give you an idea. You'll need to download the associated app in order to play, and then you're given a stack of numbered cards. The introductory adventure is a brilliant start to the game, and we barely needed to glimpse at the instructions before we were away, discovering codes, firing our blasters, and swearing at needing to use the hint button.

Though a great deal of the adventure is sifting through cards, the games do get really tense, with ongoing timer, potential penalties – a minute lost for doing the wrong thing – and that moment of staring at the cards before realising the outcome. Sure, sometimes the puzzles are a little convoluted, and tricky for the sake of being tricky – plus you have to learn, for example, to not just use the blaster at every opportunity – but the hint button is succinct enough to get you moving once again.

That's typical of *Unlock* games though, and it's the Star Wars theming that sets this game apart. As a fan of the franchise, it was great to adventure through Hoth, Jeddha and the Outer Rim. There is a little poetic license here as you might expect, but not in a way that detracts from the game play. The downside, as ever with this style of game, is that there's really no re-playability to them, making it a three-and-a-bit-hour game in total, before it becomes a fancy book end. A book end though, it was fun while it lasted.

CHARLIE PETTIT

DELVE: A SOLO MAP-DRAWING GAME

SEE DAN'S DUNGEON
ttgami.ng/DJDungeon



Designer: Anna Blackwell | **Publisher:** Anna Blackwell



Anna Blackwell's fantasy-themed zine *Delve* is as much a creative exercise as it is a game, meaning that you not only play it, but also end up with something that, whatever level your drawing skills, can be a pleasing memento of the experience – perhaps even something that can be repurposed for RPG scenarios or one-shots.

It casts its solo player as the boss of a dwarven clan, who must explore a dungeon in search of the fabled Void Crystal. If you find it, you win; if the monsters you disturb rampage to your entrance, you lose. The dungeon gradually materialises on your blank sheet of paper – either inch-gridded, or plain if you prefer to freehand – through the strokes of your pencil (and the rubs of your eraser), as you explore, recruit specialists, and gather and manage resources, spending them to create rooms or devices of your choosing.

Your discoveries are dictated by the flip of a standard playing card. A heart gives you resources (equal to the number of the card, plus the level of dungeon you've reached); a diamond trade goods; a club a natural formation (check a chart to see which kind); and a spade a remnant (ditto). It is inherently randomised, which often means you'll unearth something it's impossible to deal with early during your ventures, while in our games we never once found that damn Void Crystal.

But it's not really about winning or losing, it's about crafting your own map, and your own mini-narrative, and in that sense *Delve* is a slow-burn, ultimately satisfying experience that often rewards your patience.

DAN JOLIN

RIDE THE RAILS

First class

Designer: Harry Wu | **Publisher:** Capstone Games

1h | 3-5 | 12+ | £40

tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

Whenever a board game has a small rulebook, I'm intrigued. The level of confidence needed to ensure every rule query can be contained within a double-sided sheet of A4 speaks to either a very simple or very engaging experience. Sometimes, it can be both.

Ride the Rails has three to five players become railway tycoons as the 'age of steam' makes its way to America. You'll start on the east coast and slowly develop a nationwide multicolour train network, with the sole objective being to earn the most money after six rounds of play.

The game loop is sublime. Each round starts with players taking a coloured train piece as a pseudo-stock certificate. Next, players lay out trains across the map, connecting cities to a shared rail network and only able to place trains that they have a stock share for. Finally, each player chooses one of the 51 passengers (one for each city) and takes them on a city hopping journey, with the rule that they can never visit the same place twice. The player moving the passenger earns $1 for every city visited, then all players earn money based on what train lines are used. For example, a journey with five cities using three red lines and one blue, earns the moving player $5, then *every* player with a red or blue stock gets $3 or $1 *per stock* respectively. As the next round begins, a new railway becomes available with new placement conditions and play order is rearranged so the lowest scoring player goes first.

The game's simplicity makes sure that players are never lost in rules and are instead focused on finding opportunities. Space is limited and so are available trains, so if one colour is favoured by many you'll quickly find that supply exhausted, forcing players to react. Teams form and slowly splinter as the network diversifies, but those early alliances will always be a remembered as they continue to score much needed dollars right until the end. Money exists only to mark who's winning and isn't an expendable resource, so there's never any hesitation of whether you can afford to create a new line or not, instead it's nonstop 'build, build, build!'

The only restriction to creating new lines are mountains marked on the board; if any of your lines in a round go into any mountain space, you lose one train maximum. The seems like a small penalty, but the decision space is immense, especially when not having one more train to complete a route can be the difference maker in that round of scoring. There are financial bonuses to players who first connect certain cities or who manage to connect the first trans-continental route, which may not win the game outright, but will certainly help keep you one step ahead of your opponents.

The game strives for minimalistic elegance, from its charmingly retro look and the tactile enjoyment of placing wooden locomotives to span across all of USA. It could have had cards to represent stocks, or had players spend money up to a limit for how many trains you could place per turn, but instead it avoids these cluttered traps and keeps the focus on where it should be; deciding what train colours to have and where to place them.

Every game I've played of this has gone differently and every player count variation refreshes the puzzle brilliantly. Just when you think you have a winning strategy or optimised placement sequence, something will happen that completely changes things as the game finds new ways to surprise you.

It's a game that some players might bemoan for being too simple, especially those used to rule-heavy extravagances like the *18XX* series, but there is something magical about how *Ride the Rails* captures that same tension and power fantasy but concentrates it to a much shorter and much more accessible experience.

For players looking for a wargame without war or an economic game without economics, this is an incredible game that will continue to delight and impress time after time. Phenomenal.

MATTHEW VERNALL



WE SAY

A refined moneymaking master class in effective minimalist design. Easy to teach with countless play possibilities, few games make being a railway tycoon this engaging.

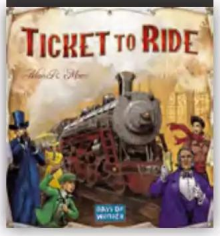


WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game Board
- 162 Wooden locomotives
- 52 Wooden passengers
- Round marker
- Tracker hexagon
- 6 Tracker disks
- 15 Player disks

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TICKET TO RIDE...

Comparisons are inevitable when making a train game, but *Ride the Rails* swaps out card management for stock manipulation for an equally satisfying experience.





TEKHENU

All in the balance

Designer: Daniele Tascini & Dávid Turczi | **Publisher:** Board & Dice

1-2h | 1-4 | 14+ | £53

Like a crossover album we didn't know we were waiting for, *Tekhenu* appears as a bold challenge to gamers everywhere – and that challenge is 'do you like it heavy?'. Daniele Tascini (*Tzolk'in: The Mayan Calendar*) and Dávid Turczi (*Anachrony*) are both the kind of designers who like to hang out in the top couple of hundred spots on the BGG rankings. So when you bring them together, is it destined to be a chart topper?

Mostly, yes. *Tekhenu* is an extremely polished and complex Eurogame. At its heart it uses dice placement or activation to trigger a number of abilities around the board. These dice are rolled and place around the huge obelisk in each god action area to dictate whether the dice is pure, tainted or forbidden. This dice status is based on whether they're in the shadow or shade of the obelisk, or in the light.

Players pick a dice from around the obelisk to take that god action. These actions are things like building in the temple (points for matching colours and rows), or in the quarry (gaining resources and resource limits), building statues to gods (gain resources when others take god actions) or even just making your population a bit happier. If you don't want to take a god action, you can simply take resources that match the dice you've picked.

Every two rounds the obelisk rotates one slot, changing the status of the dice around it. Every two turns of the obelisk, there's a Maat phase – where you are judged. Players store their tainted and pure dice on the scales on their player board, and those with the most balanced souls will be the first player next turn. If your soul is very unbalanced there's a chance you'll be docked a few points. Points come in the form of on the board markers for actions, cards picked up from the market that offer end game point scoring, or one-off bonuses.

There's a lot of rules to frontload here, but once you have all of the actions down, the flow of the game is very pleasing. Most actions are expensive, and keeping the balance between your resources just right can be the difference between a win and a loss. Also, don't forget about the bread tax – hungry workers can ruin your lead. Ultimately though, as you're only going to be taking 16 actions the entire game, every move ends up counting for a great deal. Like the best Eurogames in the 'heavy' category, *Tekhenu* becomes simple on repeated playthroughs, allowing players to build up game plans and strategies which can be executed exactly as intended. You'll be rewarded for getting over the initial hump of learning the game – and we hope the designers will be rewarded with a top 100 position for it too.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Large obelisk
- 1 Game board
- 4 Player boards
- 4 Player aid sheets
- 26 Dice
- 88 Cards
- 40 Buildings
- 32 Pillars
- 24 Statues
- 16 Cubes
- 8 Discs
- 8 Meeples
- 200+ Cardboard tokens



WE SAY

Tekhenu is the kind of big, crunchy Eurogame that we love. It's a game that once you're in the flow of its various and interlocking systems, something magic starts happening in your brain.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TERRAMARA...

Different systems, but a similar weight. If you're looking for another satisfying bite of the heavy Eurogame cherry, then *Tekhenu* will deliver.

THE HOBBIT: AN UNEXPECTED PARTY

In the middle of the earth, in the land of the Shire, there's a brave little hobbit whom we all admire

Designer: Jarratt Gray & Ian Luxmoore | Publisher: Weta Workshop

30-60m | 2-4 | 10+ | £32

All adventures start somewhere, and in the case of The Hobbit, and indeed, The Lord Of The Rings, that place is Bag End – the home of Bilbo Baggins. This isn't the first game from Weta Workshop though, with *GKR: Heavy Hitters* in the bag and *District 9* on the way they've had practice at high production miniatures games. But this game doesn't have a miniature in sight, instead we have possibly one of the highest production gateway-family-ish games out there. Attractive standees of caricatured versions of the film adaptations fill the box, and the double-sided plate-points, with their plain side looking like the back of a plate, show a level of detail not usually considered. This is obviously what happens when the man behind much of the design in the films, Daniel Falconer, is the artist for the game.

Aesthetics aside though it's a game that takes 30 minutes to replicate around one and half minutes of the first Hobbit film. Players move their current dwarf around Bag End, collecting up items that go into the 'things that Bilbo Baggins hates' song, and then ending up in the right room combination with the right items to take the victory points spread around the board. There's a catch however, each turn there's an event deck that's will move Bilbo and sometimes give you 'curious tokens' – tokens that if you reach the maximum slots for, start flipping to 'furious' tokens, blocking your inventory space, and eventually losing you points.

Losing points can be brutal, as you stack your point-plates (face down so others can't see) in a single pile on your player board, and losing points simply means discarding the top one. This means that if you've just got a two point token, but you're getting close to a fully furious Bilbo, you're at risk of losing more than if you'd only scored a one pointer.

The main flaw in the game is simply one of wording. Understanding the difference between the action of taking something from the item bag, or 'picking up' something from the floor (something Gandalf has to help you with) is a little confusing. It stalled our group a couple of times as players expected, naturally, to be able to pick things up in the rooms they were in. It's not the end of the world (that's later in the story), but surprisingly disruptive to what should be a speedy and friendly game.

This aside, and with the addition of having a rotating cast to manage that bring set collection in to the game, it's fairly robust with some basic market strategy options open to players. Making sure you don't ruin the party entirely is key to victory, and getting away with it is the name of the game. For fans of Hobbity fun, this is a decent and beautiful addition to your collection, and for everyone else, they've got away with it.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

The incredibly high production quality is initially let down by a few bits of strange wording – but otherwise it's a decent gateway game and a great homage to Bag End.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Bag End game board
- 15 Character standees with stands
- 21 Curious/ Furious tokens
- 1 Supply bag
- 26 Item tokens
- 13 Dwarf cards
- 30 Party cards
- 11 Bag End cards
- 60 One point plate tokens
- 15 Two point plate tokens
- 4 Player boards



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED HORRIFIED...

Not as smoothly implemented as this family friendly horror pick-up and deliver game, but *An Unexpected Party* shares a little of the simple grab-and-go gameplay.





DETECTIVE: A MODERN CRIME BOARD GAME – SEASON ONE

A great time whether you're a winner or a Luther

Designer: Ignacy Trzewiczek, Merry Trzewiczek, Weronika Spyra | **Publisher:** Portal Games

90-120m | 1-5 | 12+ | £26

Detective: Season One is the newest entry into the *Detective* series – and sets the franchise up for a potentially endless life. The series has always been one of the best for playing pretend *CSI* or *Law and Order* – and *Season One* is one of the best implementations of the system yet.

Players take a character (which they might as well leave in the box for all the difference it makes) and collectively work through a case deck. Each deck is a mere 24 cards of clues and leads. You take the first card as per the lead you want to follow from the introduction in the rulebook, read it, and discuss. You'll want to be taking notes too, as there's a lot of information – although much of it will look red herring shaped by the end of the game.

Mechanically speaking each action and lead you follow takes time to complete, tracked on the board, and changing location to take those actions will cost you another precious hour. There's also a set of portraits which will be dished out through the game. The most important part however is the handful of 'dig deeper' tokens that allow further investigations into a scene. You've only got a few, but they allow you to flip a card and discover more information. Spending these wisely feels like it might make or break the case, but mostly it's a mechanic designed to solidify an already good idea, or evaporate a bad one.

Sometimes you'll be asked to use the Antares database to see files, call logs, and finger print matches. This going back and forth between screens isn't as jarring as you would expect, and fits into the flow nicely. If multiple people are on the database at once you have a real sense of working on the evidence around the table. Watching someone scrub a video back and forth to find a detail that may or may not be important can feel like a huge moment – a break in the case – until someone else deflates it with corroborated call logs and fingerprints...

At its core *Detective: Season One* is a roleplaying game, where the role is you playing yourself as a detective. This sounds silly, but it's exactly what happens. The speed at which players can launch into theories, drown themselves in biases, lead one another down a completely wrong way of thinking or just work off a 'hunch' is impressive for a game which is more or less 'someone died: discuss.'

And that's where the joy in the game comes in – between players around the table bouncing ideas off one another. The way that very obvious prejudices build and appear is astounding – you can be led down a rabbit hole very easily, and nearly all of your efforts go to waste. But getting there feels the same as if you'd got to the right answer. Whether you solve the crime or not, you will have had a really good go at it, and you're still feel like a detective, even if you're not a very good one.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 3 24 Card case decks
- 7 Skill tokens
- 1 Time marker
- 1 Investigator marker
- 5 Character tiles
- 24 Portraits
- 4 Special numbered tokens



WE SAY

You really do feel like a detective playing this game, which as a recommendation for a game about solving crimes can't get much higher. A smooth playing, but extremely tricky game of deduction that makes the most of who you're with, rather than what's in the box.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED UNLOCK!...

If *Unlock!* was your way into solving things on cards with a bit of lateral thinking and dot-connecting, then *Detective: Season One* is your next stake out.

CTRL

Ctrl+F for fun

Designer: Julio E. Nazario | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games

20m | 2-4 | 8+ | £25

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Black base cube
- 20 Blue cubes
- 20 Yellow cubes
- 20 Pink cubes
- 20 Green cubes
- 4 Flags



Area control, but in three dimensions, and a bit like LEGO. That may well have been the pitch in the Pandasaurus offices for their latest party-flavoured sort-of dexterity game, *Ctrl*. But what areas are we ctrl-ing?

The game starts with a simple black base cube that players attach one of their own coloured cubes to, and stick their flag into. Then, in sequence, players take turns place three of their cubs in a straight line from their starting cube. Once complete, players can then put their flag into their coloured cubes in any direction except outwards – which would be pointless anyway. Pointless, because, the flag pole acts as a blocker to other players placing their cubes on the base cube – you simply can't mess with someone else's flag. When your move takes you into contact with someone else's cubes, you go over, if it's one above. The same applies if you're going around the corners of the actual cube.

The end goal here is domination on each side of this 3D object. If, when scoring comes around, you have the most cubes on each side, or own the most sides, you'll be the winner. And as it's everything 'on view' from each of the four sides (we don't mess with the base side) going having 'gone over the top' on one side can actually make you quite visible on the others, until you get blocked somehow of course.

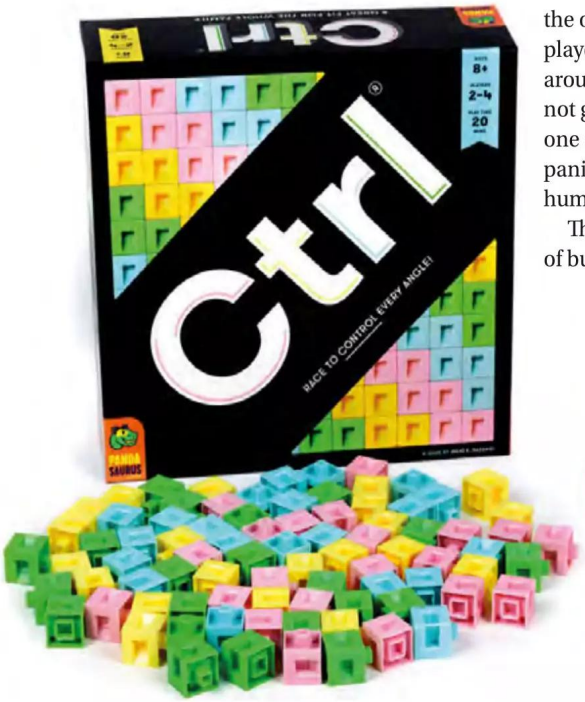
It's intuitive and pretty ruthless. Watching other players make their move that in some way will block off a side you're working on winning can be borderline heartbreaking. And there's a sense that everything's always up for grabs – at the end of your turn you feel triumphant and by your next turn you feel like you're on the back foot. In our games the occasions that one player would turn the cube around and see they've not got a single colour on one of the sides, and then panic, was numerous and humorous.

There is a small issue of build quality however. The connector between the cubes, and the force that you have to insert the flag can sometimes mean that if you're not particularly careful, you'll knock out a bunch of cubes, causing not only a mess, but an argument. The connectors can also feel a bit loose on the outside, and most around the table were concerned that they wouldn't stand up to a hard rotation in a kid's collection. But that's also to say that we played five or six games of it in a row without getting bored, and feeling like we could still be playing it after. *Ctrl* is more tactical than it's colours suggest, and well worth a look – even if it might not last forever.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A really strong multiplayer puzzle game that is both smart and extremely competitive. A little let down by the components, but only with the fact you'll want to play it so much in mind.





TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MENTAL BLOCKS...

If a 3D puzzle, like that in *Mental Blocks*, is to your taste then *Ctrl* is the little brother to this spatial party game. Less collaborative, but in that lies the fun.



TINY EPIC DINOSAURS

Prehistoric ranching in the palm of your hand

Designer: Scott Almes | **Publisher:** Gamelyn Games

30-60m | 1-4 | 14+ | £25



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 75 Wooden dinomeeples
- 20 Wooden ranchers
- 26 Wooden barriers
- 18 Tracker tokens
- 1 Wrangler die
- 4 Player mats
- 4 Ranch mats
- 4 Action mats
- 3 Gameplay mats
- 30 Research cards
- 36 Contract cards
- 8 Solo rancher cards

It's odd to think that with Scott Almes' latest foray into the tiny and the epic, we can effortlessly grasp the equivalent of several thousand reptilian ton and 175 million years of prehistoric evolution into a single hand. Thanks to their scope and compactness there's always been this godlike essence to playing the *Tiny Epic* games – but reducing a fifty six ton brachiosaurus to an effective toothpick is a whole new level. But don't let that go to your head – *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs* isn't asking us to rule over these gargantuan lizards – instead players will be assuming the roles of rival ranchers tasked with raising dinosaurs and fulfilling theme park contracts through slick worker-placement mechanics.

Like the rest of the *Tiny Epic* series, there's a lot of game crammed into its little box – both physically and mechanically. Large decks of contract and research cards keep things fresh from game to game, as do the varied ranch mats, but most impressive is the shear amount of dinosaurs on offer. Seventy five meeples – representing 19 different species of dinosaur - rapidly spill out across players' ranches throughout the game, and whilst they're certainly tiny, they are nonetheless surprisingly detailed. Players also get a team of four ranchers and one oversized lead rancher (who counts as two in majority situations), and three cute resource markers.

In terms of mechanics, *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs*' core worker placement framework never feels like a diluted take on the genre, offering plenty of options, tense decisions and a sense of growth despite its diminutive size. Indeed, the sense of escalation following each of the game's six rounds packs the same cerebral punch as games five times its size. The spatial puzzle that comes with actually arranging ranches is a particular highlight, as players must not only keep species apart, but also plan for breeding whilst keeping the precious resource generating spaces free.

Whilst the scale may be small, players' ranches manage to be more than abstract grids thanks to the nicely thematic needs of the dinosaurs. These creatures need space and specific diets, and failing to provide these causes problems. Escaping dinosaurs can damage enclosures (a relatively costly resource) and even kill off other dinosaurs, thus making caring for your animals a tricky but necessary puzzle. Thankfully, all of this feels quite flexible, and rearranging ranches as new dinosaurs rapidly come and go is a pleasure to master.

Points are largely scored by fulfilling contract cards. A number of these are displayed publicly and can be obtained by taking the appropriate action and discarding the required dinosaurs. Each player will also start with a private contract and gain another one in the fourth round. These score considerably more points but frustratingly must be fulfilled at the same time as a public contract – a considerable feat but not impossible.

Aside from a few garish illustrations, *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs* mostly looks the part and makes the most of its limited footprint. Components are of good quality – especially the meeples – and setup is surprisingly simple considering its fiddly size. In terms of gameplay, *Tiny Epic Dinosaurs* sits up there with the best of the series, and wouldn't feel amiss in the collection of any die-hard work placement fan. Two iguanodon thumbs up.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

Even if cute dinosaur meeples aren't your thing, there's still an engaging, challenging, and nicely thematic worker placement game here. A well thought out and nicely replay-able solo mode is an added bonus.



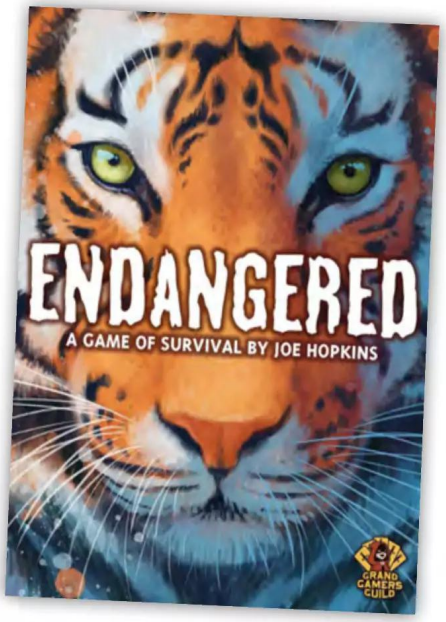
TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DINOSAUR ISLAND...

Tiny Epic Dinosaurs might not have the grandeur of the gorgeous *Dinosaur Island*, but its clear focus on the creatures themselves makes it arguably the more dino-centric game.









ENDANGERED

You're spoiling us, Mr Ambassador!

Designer: Joe Hopkins | **Publisher:** Grand Gamers Guild

60-90m | 1-5 | 10+ | £50

At the time of writing much of California is on fire. The pictures look like a futuristic hellscape of pinkened ash-filled skies. Earlier in the month a Japanese owned oil tanker crashed in the waters of Mauritius, making the usually idyllic blue waters a slick black. Habitats of many creatures in both these regions will be destroyed, and millions of creatures – from the cute and cuddly to the frankly fascinatingly ugly – will die.

That's not the most cheerful start to a review, but it's the premise that *Endangered* is trying to tackle. But rather than approaching the systems which contribute to these disasters, we're going down the route of activism and awareness. It's a game where, if you can convince enough ambassadors to stop pollution, then the pollution will stop. If this turns you off immediately, then the theme might not mesh well with your worldview (we personally bounced off it quite hard). But underneath there's a really strong game that does express the stakes powerfully.

Each player takes a gender-flippable 'role' board and deck, a bunch of dice, and sets up the board to present which habitat is under threat. Each turn you roll your dice and then activate the actions on the side of the board. These can be things like gaining money, moving animals around the habitat, cleaning up pollution or destruction, and placing new action cards from your hand. These cards placed can then be used later for more powerful, or cheaper, actions. The catch is that you can only place a dice on an action that already has a dice on it if your dice is higher than those present, meaning spending a five dice on an action might block out other players on their turns. Working together properly is critical, if you don't, and you expect someone else to 'do it for you' then everyone might be in trouble. Which as a metaphor for what the game is trying to get across is strong.

All of this happens while deforestation (for the tigers) or pollution (for the otters), creeps over the board. By rolling more dice you add destruction tiles to the board, which if they touch an area where the animals are, will wipe them out. On your turn you'll also roll for breeding, if there's a pair of animals sharing a square on the board. Without careful management of the furry friends at hand it won't just be them hoping to get lucky.

The feeling of the game, even in solo mode, is one of a looming and unstoppable threat – and whatever you do is only going to stem the tide until you can get someone with some real power to act. Which is what you're hoping to do. Convince enough ambassadors by either having a situation that's bad enough, being rich enough or adding enough influence to their card, and you might win by the time the game is up.

While pretending that a zoologist and a TV presenter are the same left us feeling a little strange, there's more than enough here to explore the enormity of ecological threats facing the fauna of this planet. A game that gives us a little glimmer of hope, even if it's hard to believe.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Double sided gameboard
- 5 Role boards
- 15 Wood tiger tokens
- 15 Wood otter tokens
- 36 Impact cards
- 70 Player cards
- 15 Custom action dice
- 1 Offspring dice
- 1 Destruction dice
- 10 Speciality cards
- 24 Destruction tile
- 2 Scenario sheets
- 12 Ambassador cards
- 25 Influence cubes
- 25 Money tokens
- 1 Year marker
- 5 Turn markers
- 5 Player aid cards

WE SAY

Aside from the slightly strange feeling approach to 'solving' the problem, *Endangered* is a great entry in the 'eco-game' category. It's also really good – and maybe better – as a solo experience. Handy if your gaming group feels endangered themselves.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED GARDEN DICE...

Endangered might have a heavier theme than this dice-grid gardening game, but if the mechanic works for you, it's a great addition.

EUROPE DIVIDED

European disunion

Designer: Chari Marling & David Thompson | **Publisher:** PHALANX

60-75m | 2 | 12+ | £45

Europe of the last 30 years has been a fairly confusing place. This isn't new of course, but when it comes to playing out Europe on a map in a board game, we're more likely to pick a headliner event like WWII or the Crusades… So having a game of geopolitical conflict – on the ground and in the political arena – presented in front of you from a time in recent memory can feel a little startling.

Europe Divided is a game of arena control and influence between the asymmetrical powers of Russia and what can loosely be defined as The West. Players pick their side and begin attempting to take important contested regions of Europe (i.e. the middle bit) by playing influence dice into them, sometimes protected by boots on the ground. It's a kind of deck building area control game. As you take control of contested regions, you add their cards to your deck, giving you their bonuses as you rotate through. Actions on the cards, of which you get to play two from your hand each turn, are things like move an army, create an army, add influence to a region or increase influence that's already there. Influence is tracked on various dice in a region (highest number is the owner) and bumping armies against dice lowers them and removes the army in question. The headlines, of which only two are active at any one time, are the way to score prestige (victory points) and eventually win the game. There's midgame scoring and end game scoring based on dominance and completed goals. It's pretty straightforward.

The mismatched factions are where things get spicy. While the European side is dripping wealth and arms, it also has split influence to manage – there's the EU and there's NATO – both of which have their own requirements in any region. The EU doesn't have any military force, but is easier to build up controlling influence with, and the NATO side is your main tool for removing influence in other regions. The Russians on the other hand have a more straightforward game to play, but not necessarily the funds to achieve what they want each turn.

As a two player only game, it's got the tug-of-war-joy of both parties feeling like it's a struggle to get their shots off on one another – whatever forms they may take. As the European side, you feel like you've brought an oil tanker to a dogfight and as the Russians there's a sense of just never quite having enough gas in the tank to get the job done. But we had to ask ourselves after the first game, what job did we think we were doing? Ultimately we'd gone in expecting to achieve domination somehow, but in reality – given the tools at hand – it was always going to be a compromised position which left the continent divided. The clue was in the name of course. It always felt like we were losing, whatever side we were on, which is the nature of a geopolitical struggle like this. It's in parts desperate and exciting, and with such recent history on your side everything feels a little more real. In short, there's few better ways to spend some time slicing up a continent.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

With its deep and flavourful asymmetry and startlingly up to date events, *Europe Divided* feels less abstract to play that other geopolitical scrums. In parts cerebral and part visceral, it's a game that demands real choices from players, and it's a thrill to make them.



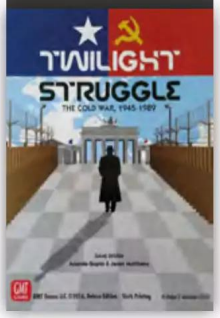
WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 22 1992-2008 Headline cards
- 18 2009-2019 Headline cards
- 32 Europe cards
- 26 Russian cards
- Turn track marker
- 50 Money tokens
- 2 Prestige markers
- 12 Yellow EU influence dice
- 12 Blue NATO influence dice
- 12 Red Russia influence dice
- 15 NATO army marker tokens
- 15 Russian army tokens
- 4 Double-sided sea control markers

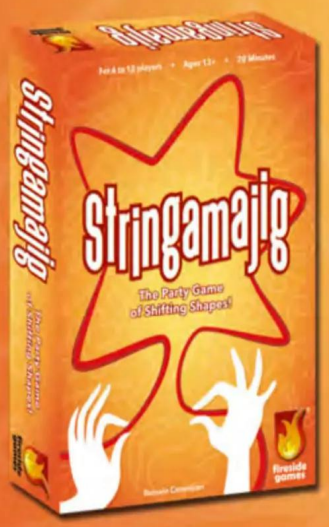


TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TWILIGHT STRUGGLE...

Like this cold war classic, *Europe Divided* puts you in the place of a bubbling conflict that is difficult to fully articulate – but satisfying to play out.



Stringamajig



CASUAL GAME RECOMMENDED

SEAL OF APPROVAL the DICE TOWER

Part drawing game, part charades. Pick your word, and then draw, move, and animate the string to get the other players to guess as many words as possible in 60 seconds!

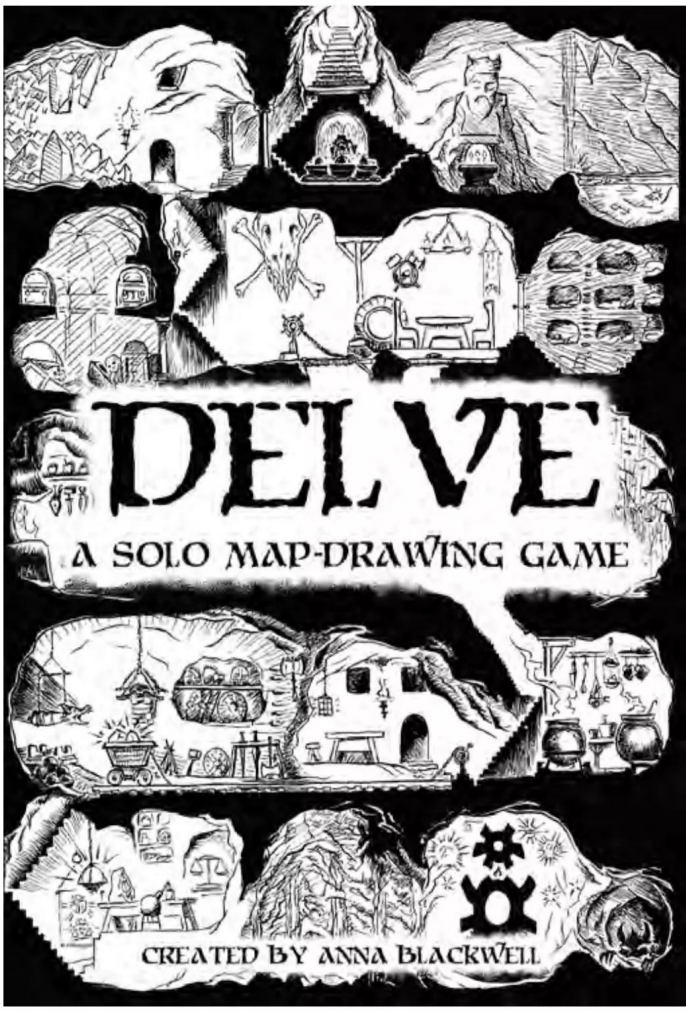




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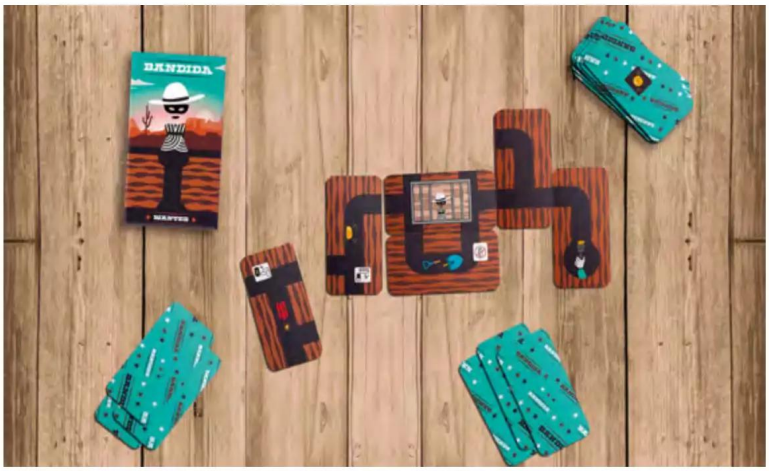
BANDIDA

Designer: Martin Nedergaard Andersen | **Publisher:** Helvetiq

15m | 1-4 | 6+ | £10

Returning to Martin Nedergaard Andersen's classic, *Bandido*, with a slight reworking should feel workmanlike. Or workwomanlike perhaps. The central conceit of playing down cards to extend and eventually blocking off the exits for the escaping criminal is the same, but a couple of extra game modes have been added in. Now, as well as catching the Bandida, we've got the option to help her escape with the introduction of the ladder card. If you play the ladder card from the deck before it runs out, and close all the exits, then you've won. Another mode is about connecting the 'Bandido super card' (the start card), if you have the other game, with Bandida's super card in a 'Romeo and Juliet of the tunnels' situation.

On top of this, additional icons have been added to the game including alarms cards (discard cards from your hand), map cards (remove cards from the board), broken tools (play all the cards from your hand and redraw), as well as others. These add a little more flavour to the game, but the draw remains the same – that central mechanic of everyone working together to build a kind of dominoes tile underground tunnel system. The group's frustration as they're forced to add more exits rather than remove them is palpable, as is getting exactly the right card. As a collaborative game goes, it couldn't get to the heart of the enjoyment of working together much quicker.



Do you 'need' this if you already own *Bandido*? No, not really. But if you don't own either, it simply makes sense to pick up the slightly extended version of the game. A gentle family classic, and it's out just in time for stocking filler season.

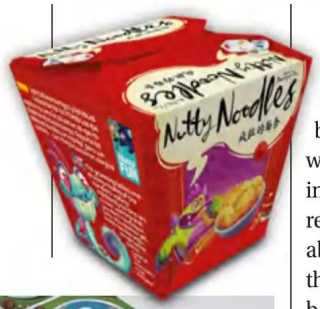
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

NUTTY NOODLES

Designer: Javier Jésus Domínguez Cruz | **Publisher:** Ludonova

15m | 2-4 | 6+ | £16

You would be forgiven for confusing *Nutty Noodles* for a real box of takeaway noodles at first glance. Inside though, instead of your favourite tasty chow mein, is a game of dice rolling and pattern recognition that may look like a quick easy meal but will surprise you with its flavours.





You work in a noodle restaurant feeding very hungry and impatient monsters. All available ingredients are laid out in front of you in a four by four tableau and a roll of the dice will determine which of them will go into the next bowl to be served. As a respectable noodle maker who cares about customer health and wellbeing, there is one more thing you need to be aware of: the monsters' individual allergies. However, if you feed a certain number (which varies depending on the player count) of customers to their full satisfaction first, you win the game.

This may sound like a very simple game to play, but there is a reason it has 'nutty' in the title. In this competition induced panic, it is very easy to confuse similar-looking symbols, like crayfish and chilli, or get one of the ingredients right but not the other. The next pit-fall is assigning the correct noodle bowl to the customer that won't get an upset tummy from eating it. The excitement of getting the ingredient right can easily lead to putting whichever customer token was in your hand, without checking if they can be served this food. This constant fight against these gut-reaction actions makes *Nutty Noodles* a really fun, yet still challenging, party game.

In overall appeal, *Nutty Noodles* only slightly loses out to similar games, like *Dobble*, due to its size: you will need table space to set up your ingredient tableau, making it less transport-friendly. But if you want a game that tests your memory, dexterity, patients and focus, *Nutty Noodles* will deliver that in full.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

SMALL WORLD OF WARCRAFT

It's a small war after all

Designer: Philippe Keyaerts | **Publisher:** Days of Wonder

40-80m | 2-5 | 10+ | £57

Small World is something of a modern classic. In the world of Euro-ish area control games, this is the thinkier, more mechanical version of *Risk*. *Small World of Warcraft* is, sadly, not just a micro-sized version of the game a la *Ticket to Ride London*, if anything it is a game that's increased in scope. Instead we're in Azeroth, the home of the variously generic fantasy people of World of Warcraft – the digital game that became the successor to EverQuest as the definition of what an MMORPG is.

Here it's a chance for Days of Wonder to reskin this fight for supremacy and upgrade some of the components. Whereas the original *Small World* had a variety of oblong and square boards to represent the world you're taking over, here we've got a world broken up into lumpy modular island. Players grab a couple based on their player count and place them wherever on the table – offering a looser board space that feels a little more organic. It looks great, especially as you'll be planting boxes of races, tokens and coins around the board anyway. Additionally, instead of the fantasy races from *Small World* we have those from Blizzard's universe. You might ask about whether it's worth swapping a Dwarf for a Dwarf, but the addition of races like the Forsaken – with their huge supply of tokens – is a nice thematic link that feels like a worthwhile change in the way the game is played.

The game loop is unchanged. You draft a race from the market – randomly built from the race banner plus a special power – take their tokens (the sum of the banner and power) and then begin spreading out across the world like an Elf/Tauren/Kobold tide. Conquering an area means placing a majority in it, with modifiers for mountains, Murlocs and indeed, your enemies. Any defeated enemies are returned with a number discarded back to the box. Then the other players do the same. When you're at a point where your current race is overextended, you'll put them in 'decline' and select a new one to then repeat the process with. There's a little bit of luck, as you can use the dice to add points to your final tile, but for the most part it's about not extending too much and choosing when to flip on your current race. It's a good back and forth at two players and enjoyably conflictful at higher player counts.

The only real complaint is that if you're not immediately familiar with the World of Warcraft cast, you can sometimes find the picking the right tokens out is a bit of consultation and peering at the difference between trolls, orcs and goblins. Anything that is as mass market as World of Warcraft is always going to have its aesthetic edges sanded off and that sometimes hurts it on the smaller tokens.

In addition to the normal rules, there's a bonus set of team rules. This leans on the Horde, Alliance, and neutral flavours of cards, and changes the drafting mechanic to a kind of grid. It's a smart addition that reinjects some of the World of Warcraft flavour back into the game.

Small World of Warcraft is a perfectly good place to be starting out for fans of the MMO, whose reference points will imbue it with meaning. If that's you, then it's time to choose your allegiance.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

If you're into the World of Warcraft theme, and haven't given *Small World* a spin, then you're in for a treat. The rest of us will have to weigh up the improved components against our World of Warcraft knowledge.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 6 Double sided game boards
- 16 World of Warcraft race token sets
- 16 World of Warcraft race banners
- 7 Legendary place tokens
- 10 Mountain tokens
- 9 Whisp wall tokens
- 12 Bomb tokens
- 1 Champion token
- 6 Watchtower tokens
- 5 Beast tokens
- 20 Special power badge tokens
- 110 Victory coins
- 5 Player aids
- 1 Dice

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RISK...

If taking over the world is what you're into, then this is a good a place to get involved on the more 'euro' end of the spectrum.



MYSTERIUM PARK

There's something strange, in the Carnival

Designer: Oleksandr Nevskiy, Oleg Sidorenko | **Publisher:** Libellud

30-45m | 2-6 | 10+ | £24

Come one! Come all! To the mystical magical delights of *Mysterium Park*, the carnival that came to town with a spooky spectre attached. Thankfully, they pitched up in the right place, because you're able to travel to *Mysterium Park* as a psychic to find out what really happened to the disgruntled deceased, in this standalone *Mysterium* game.

It's almost impossible not to immediately compare *Mysterium Park* to *Mysterium*. Whilst the ominous clock tower that spells your failure after thirteen hours (though, gratefully there's no pumpkins from carriages at the twelfth) has gone, as has the longer game board and huge box, the game is essentially a reiteration of mechanics that work really well. It adds in some refinement that – though wasn't needed to enjoy the game – is surprisingly welcome.



One player will assume the role of the ghost, offering hints through cloudy 'visions'. These visions are in fact abstract artwork that they hand other players to consider. Ideally these will point the other players directly to the location they need through clever deduction (though of course, in reality, what you notice in this artwork will frequently differ from the intention of the ghost player), and so psychics will cooperatively determine which of the options is correct, for mutual glory (or failure), and some enjoyable hilarity at the potential far-fetched deductions.



This of course, is interchangeable with the description of *Mysterium*, so what really has changed in this new box?

Firstly, instead of progressing through a track-like home as you would in the Mysterium Manor over thirteen rounds, now, you'll be trying to guess the position on a board over six rounds. You'll play only to find the character and location. The cards containing the guesses are now laid out on a three by three grid on the game board, and the ghost picks a card that mimics the grid with the players' colours prefilled, which remains hidden from the investigators. This tells the ghost what each of the players will be searching for, rather than requiring individual cards for each one. It's neater and works really well. There are little extra additions, like the use of a witness card, and the final round uses one row of the collected cards based on with roman numerals all of which fit fine.

The vision cards are also replaced now, this time with a little added modernity, as it is now the 1950's instead of the 1920's. The artwork was always a really praiseworthy part of *Mysterium*, and it continues to excel here. How do you make a black cat in a night time scene in front of a house in the middle of a field, seen through a cat head shaped window tell your players to pick a 'study' on a 'boat'? Answer: you either correctly anticipate your fellow players thought process, or hope that with a one in nine chance of guessing correctly, they somehow find their own logic and get it right regardless.

Overall, the changes aren't huge, so if you liked *Mysterium* before, you'll pick up *Mysterium Park* quickly, and it feels like you're getting more of a good thing. However, those changes make it feel like a pleasantly condensed version of *Mysterium*. A smaller box doesn't mean less gameplay, but a tidier one. As *Mysterium* sits in a sweet spot – a tiny bit heavier than a gateway game, but not heavy enough to pull itself out of the party genre – and as does its new arrival, *Mysterium Park* is a really solid recommendation for both new and veteran players.

CHARLIE PETTIT

WE SAY

Forget Ghostbusters, you've got this one covered. Tidier mechanics make for an all-round great rework of a classic.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 84 Vision cards
- 60 Plot cards
- 1 Card holder
- 3 Ticket tokens
- 1 Board
- 20 Character cards
- 20 Location cards
- 1 Game Turn marker
- 5 Intuition tokens
- 1 Witness token

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: CODENAMES...

These sort of guessing games sit within their own category, but this mixture of *Codenames*, *Cluedo*, *Dixit*, and the original *Mysterium* means you'll love *Mysterium Park*





EMPYREAL: SPELLS & STEAM

The next train game you should choo-choose

Designer: Trey Chambers | **Publisher:** Level 99 Games

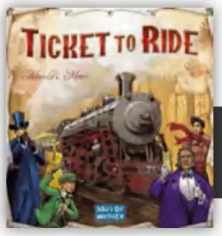
1-2h | 2-6 | 10+ | £73

How does another train game follow the tracks of the beloved card-drafting *Ticket to Ride*, or a classic worker-placement *Russian Railroads*, or delectably brain-scratchy resource management of *Whistle Stop*? Well, they could do it like *Empyreal: Spells & Steam*: with style. This is one impressive looking game – its *Gloomhaven*-sized box is layered with custom trays and compartments, designed to hold the smorgasbord of *Empyreal's* components. The trays are a perfect mixture of function and aesthetics, having a dedicated space for every little piece in storage, but also beautifully displayed on the gaming table, making the set-up process last mere minutes.

The main game takes place on the modular map, where every hexagon space represents a certain magical resource. Players will be placing their trains on the board, forming networks and routes, by which the resources can travel to various cities scattered around the board. Delivering resources to the cities and fulfilling specific demand tiles, earns players victory points. At the start of the game, every colourful hexagon is filled with a specific resource token, but by the end, while the number of resources has diminished, various train minis form snaking and crossing paths that span across the gaming landscape.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 6 Company folios
- 6 Terrain boards
- 210 Train car minis
- 8 Captain placards
- 67 Spellcar tiles
- 51 Specialist tiles
- 20 Wasteland tiles
- 210 Goods tokens
- 30 Demand tiles
- 10 Award tiles
- 12 City stands
- 6 Conductor pawns
- 60 Mana crystals
- 1 Start player token



Despite the visual busyness of the main board, the majority of the game happens on the individual player boards. Here the player's conductor pawn travels through the magical train cars activating one or more (if they can pay with mana) abilities. What abilities players get during the course of the game, how they arrange them on their train car spaces, how often they activate them or deliver goods to the city, forms the main engine of the game.

Having seen the number of components and the size of the board, it may come as a surprise that *Empyreal* is not a big or complicated game. In fact, if it had not so efficiently organised itself with storage and packing, the set-up of components could have equalled the gameplay length. Once the game gets going, players effortlessly steam ahead, placing trains on boards, picking up more train cars and delivering resources.

What can, however, impede the smooth journey is having to look up the reference for various abilities of the train cars or specialists. The game comes with a lot of variety: every train car does something different and every character that can be recruited for your train company also has a unique ability. Yet their iconology is not immediately clear and the sheer volume of the abilities available makes it impossible to remember what each of them do. The majority of the rulebook is dedicated to referencing each card within the game, making it very accessible and easy to find. Unfortunately, it does not make the 20th dive into the rulebook to look up a card explanation any less frustrating. Although this would typically be a minor gripe, in a game so fast-paced and easy to play, even small stops and starts are very noticeable.

Variety is, however, spice of life, and *Empyreal* is nothing if not a little extravagant and exuberant for the size of its gameplay. Yet it carries it so effortlessly, it is easy to be whisked away in a train car zooming through an ice tundra located next to molten magma lands, watching precious materials teleport before your eyes and simply enjoying your magical journey.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Entering the train game scene, full steam ahead, *Empyreal: Spells & Steam* is an incredibly appealing visual offering and it keeps up a swift pace with its gameplay.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED TICKET TO RIDE...

While *Empyreal is* less focused on the precise route building then *Ticket to Ride*, it is equally accessible for players and has a very appealing table-presence.

STAR TREK ADVENTURES: THE KLINGON EMPIRE

Today is a Good Day to D20

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Modiphius

378 | 11+ | £40

Ever since they menaced their way onto the screen some 50 years ago, the Klingons have occupied a strange and wonderful hold over geek culture. There are groups devoted to speaking their language and trying to make sense of their wildly impractical weaponry, and now they have a chance to embrace a well-crafted, wonderfully sprawling RPG that sits somewhere between game manual and cultural primer.

And boy, what a culture it is. Over the course of almost 400 pages *The Klingon Empire* delves deep into almost every aspect of what makes the space-faring species so appealing. It highlights the passion that makes them explosive elements in every TV series and side-story in *Star Trek* canon, and lays out all the reason why you might want to ditch the fuddy-duddy Federation and instead turn your campaign to the greater glory of the Empire.

If you're already a fan of *Star Trek* Adventures you might have noticed that the hefty page count doesn't just make this latest book a handy improvised weapon, but also something on the scale of the core rulebook. The reason for this is a simple one. *The Klingon Empire* isn't really intended to act as a mere sourcebook for the main game, but as an entirely stand-alone entry. While the rules are mostly the same – indeed, the moment-to-moment adventuring is damn-near identical – there are just enough new systems and ideas introduced that having everything in one place is well worth including a handful of repeated material.

Character creation, for example, is naturally much more limited in terms of species, but greatly expanded when it comes to home planets, backgrounds and house affiliations. On top of this, there is an entirely new system for tracking honour and shame, as well as rules for reputation rolls and advancement in the Empire's hierarchy.

This little sub-set of post-mission rolls and currencies add a fair bit of complexity to the game, but they also drill home the unique nature of the Klingon culture and push the players into thoroughly Kilngon-ey actions. It helps to get your party announcing their names and titles before charging an entrenched enemy position, to favour head-on confrontation and to embrace the concept of victory above all else.

Sure, this may not encourage the most subtle roleplaying out there, but one of the fun things about Klingon culture is embracing the dramatic and forthright. More than this, it can work to hammer home the message that while you may be rolling the same dice and using the same skills, a game of *The Klingon Empire* is not a game of *Star Trek Adventures*.

If there's a downside to this aspect of the game, it's that you and your friends might need to do a fair bit of background reading, as well as TV-show binging, to get yourselves settled in the culture. While you can probably handle a couple of folks who just want to roll up stoic, silent Worf clones, getting the most from the book and, indeed, the game, relies on both players and a GM that are truly invested in the world and have a sizable chunk of knowledge about what makes the Klingon Empire interesting, rather than just the generic baddies from the original series.

Ideally, the group could also do with a dedicated linguist, as the book makes prodigious and impressive use of the Klingon language. Though, even then, it'll take a dedicated table to stick to "yaS wa'Dich" instead of falling back on "first officer".

In many ways, *The Klingon Empire* can almost be thought of as the *Star Trek Adventures: Advanced Edition*. It offers a whole new series of options and roleplaying opportunities, but it also asks that the players be more familiar with both the source material and the new rules systems. It probably shouldn't be your go-to book for simply playing games in the *Star Trek* universe, but if you're sitting at a table of established fans and want to add a twist to your experience it offers that in spades.

Or, possibly, Bat'leths.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



WE SAY

If you're a big fan of the base game and are hankering for a bit of Imperial glory, this is a solid stand-alone product made with obvious love for the source material.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED STAR TREK ADVENTURES...

Okay, this is a bit of a cop-out, but what else do you want us to say? It's like *Star Trek Adventures*, but grumpier and with cooler weapons.





ICEWIND DALE – RIME OF THE FROSTMAIDEN

Chill out with D&D's coolest campaign to date

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

319 | 11+ | £40

Buried in a land of eternal winter and prowling death, *Rime of the Frostmaiden* is a deadly little shard of ice that skirts the line between snowbound survivalism and high-fantasy heroics. Beneath the gloom and doom of its setting, however, the latest campaign for *Dungeons & Dragons Fifth Edition* lays out some truly wonderful opportunities for sandbox adventuring and solid roleplaying.

The adventure drops its heroes into the classic *D&D* frontier of Icewind Dale, which is even colder than usual thanks to the presence of a grumpy minor goddess who's been keeping the entire region trapped in an endless winter. It's not the most complex premise in the multiverse, but it does a sterling job of setting up both the campaign's end goal (defeat the goddess, warm things up a bit) and what makes the entire thing feel special (everything is bloody freezing).

More than this, it also helps to keep the players' attention focussed on one of the book's greatest accomplishments – the world it paints through both words and beautiful splashes of art. It's become a cliché to say that the land itself feels like a character in the story, but as your party wanders across the crackling ice and creep through snow-heavy pine trees it's hard not to feel like it might be right this time. It's important that they keep the snowbound world in mind as they explore, too, as there's a much greater focus on travel and survival than you find in most of the campaigns so-far released for *Fifth Edition*. There are special systems introduced for handling avalanches and ice-cold waters, and any party who wants to live past their first few sessions will quickly sort out their plans for making fire in the wilderness.



The rules around this kind of frontier survivalism aren't particularly brutal by the standards of more true-to-life RPGs; they are more about grounding you in the setting than making things realistically miserable. However, things in Icewind Dale are certainly a little darker, and lot more dangerous than you might find in a more traditionally heroic D&D adventure.

Indeed, this applies to much of the campaign's tone too. Though things never quite make the lurch into full-blown horror, *Rime of the Frostmaiden* certainly flirts with dread and creeping chills in several places. This is especially prominent in the earlier parts of the adventure, where the players regularly trip over the bodies of poor souls who weren't killed by anything as fantastical as a dragon or a wizard's fireball, but by brutal cold and stark poverty. At every possible step, the game seems to be reminding the players that this Icewind Dale is a hard place, made harder by the endless winter, and if nothing else it can be a great way to encourage them to push on and search for a solution.

An awful lot of the campaign is actually deeply free-form, with the party being nudged towards their final foals rather than pushed or pulled. The lengthy opening phase of the campaign drops the heroes in a frozen sandbox and entices them to explore with a long list of minor, introductory quests that do a great job of foreshadowing later heroics.

These bite-size quests are a highlight of the entire book, and though some may find it frustrating to spend what could amount to a couple months' worth of sessions setting the scene before the main plot kicks in, this entire section does a great job of blending the freedom that makes RPGs so enthralling with enough guidance to help newer GMs.

Perhaps the one area where the book falls short is in managing the campaign's difficulty through these early stages. The wandering-adventurers conceit means that the party can easily stroll into a quest packed with monsters that far outstrip their current strength. While this isn't always a problem – some of the greatest D&D memories are spawned when the heroes need to think their way out of a problem rather than charge in blindly – the book isn't great at flagging up when this is likely to occur, or helping less experienced GMs manage their panicked party when their strongest fighter gets smeared across the ice with a single hit from a Verbeeg.

As upsetting as this might be, however, it is perhaps a reminder about what makes *Rime of the Frostmaiden* feel special among the pile of *D&D* adventures sitting out there – its blend of heroism and horror, of brutal death and mighty rewards. This may not be a twist that appeals to everyone, but if you want your game a little darker and deadly than usual, this might be just the campaign you're looking for.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A solid entry into the lengthy list of *D&D Fifth Edition* campaigns, filled with beautiful frozen landscapes and murderously challenging encounters



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FORBIDDEN LANDS: THE BITTER REACH...

Enjoy the chilly dangers of *The Bitter Reach* but want to keep things a little more heroic? Take a look at *Rime of the Frostmaiden*

KITTIN



Designer: Simon Milburn & Caezar Al-Jassar | **Publisher:** Alleycat Games







It's not often that a game appears that will fit in your pocket. In some cases, that's because of the wholly inefficient size of some pockets (should we be graced with them), but in most it's because the size of board game boxes are beginning to challenge the iceberg that sunk the titanic. In complete contrast to that then, enter *Kittin*, a small tin game to fit in your pocket that packs a dexterous punch from a tiny paw.

Opening the tin will see you greeted by some bright instructions, some cards, and 24 cat shaped meeples. When you've finished admiring the cat meeples (for they are both impressive and somehow endearing), you'll play against others in a race to build the tower of meeples in the pattern specified on one of the cards. Easy, you may think, but it feels like the spirit of the cat remains within the game, swatting an invisible paw at your tower to knock it down at the last minute, allowing another player to swoop in and claim the card for themselves.

There are also team rules, and a recommendation to kids to make adults play one handed if they seem too fast, which embraces the fact that this is a perfect little family game, or a great warm up to a regular games night. Though admittedly, it borders on the simple side of things and it's not a new idea in any way, it would survive with flying colours a Marie Kondo inspired clear out, because it really does spark joy. The meeples are cute and well made, they're brightly coloured, the tiny size of the game means it's easy to keep squirrelled in bags for a prompt game pretty much anywhere, and it's a great way particularly to keep the interest of younger gamers.

CHARLIE PETTIT

TINY EPIC KINGDOMS



Designer: Scott Almes | **Publisher:** Gamelyn Games

Games in the 4X genre (explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate) have always been known to be big, huge even. Think of video games like *Civilisation* or *Stellaris*, or their tabletop siblings *Twilight Imperium* and *Sid Meier's Civilization: The Board Game*. They take ages to play, have a lot of moving parts and components, and are unlikely to be new player-friendly.

Looking at these giants it is hard to imagine a small game, that fits into a tiny box, uses minimal components and takes half an hour to play, while still maintaining the core feel and strategies that make 4X games so compelling. Yet, *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* has it all while also giving players an option to play with 13 different factions, each with their unique abilities.





Every player starts on their territory, but inevitably – as everyone is competing for the same goals – expand into enemy lands, battling for resources and control. Even if outright conflict can be avoided, players are always in competition with each other – whether rushing to activate the action they want or be the first one to build the tallest tower. Although the gameplay is not complex, it still has enough strategic elements to ensure that every move matters and the order in which actions are performed is important.

The only area that *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* could have been improved on is the artwork. While there is a certain charm in the way the characters on the faction cards are drawn, the terrain tiles, especially with their dark grey borders, look gloomy and a little dated laid out on the table.

Although not the best looking of games, *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* rules with its surprisingly simple, yet very engaging gameplay.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA



ZOMBIE TEENZ EVOLUTION

When there's no more room in hell, the dead will go trampolining

Designer: Annick Lobet | **Publisher:** Le Scorpion Masqué

20m | 2-4 | 8+ | £25

2018's *Zombie Kidz Evolution* was one of the first legacy games aimed squarely at young players. A curiously cheerful game about a group of plucky kids caught in an undead uprising, it saw players battle to secure their school against a horde of reanimated corpses. But its bright, stylish cartoon art ensured it never got too scary for its target audience.

Now its creator has returned with follow-up *Zombie Teenz Evolution*, and while there's plenty here to appeal to fans of its predecessor, it also comes with a collection of new twists and challenges. Where *Kidz*' action unfolded in the confines of a besieged school, *Teenz* widens its scope with a board showing a grid of city streets. You and your friends will need to work together to venture into the zombie-plagued environment, retrieving supplies from buildings before the dead manage to force their way inside.

Like other legacy games, *Zombie Teenz* plays out over the course of an ongoing campaign, with players unlocking new rules, features and components as they play. On each playthrough you'll attempt to form human chains to pass crates of supplies from the buildings on the corners of the board to your stronghold in the centre. While you're doing it, though, you'll also have to contend with the rising threat of the ravenous dead. Zombies crawl from sewers, shuffling towards buildings and attempting to force their way inside. If they overrun the entire city, you'll lose the game.

It means that, in classic co-op fashion, you'll need to split your attention between pursuing your goals and dealing with problems as they arise. And while the first mission feels a little flat and repetitive – bash a zombie, grab a crate, bash a zombie, grab a crate – you soon start to reveal interesting new elements hidden in sealed envelopes which you can unlock by achieving an array of in-game objectives. While going into detail about any of them would spoil some of the fun, there are new character-specific powers to unlock, companions to meet and ways to hold back the tide of the dead.

At the same time, the game ramps up its threat level, making the zombie antagonists more dangerous and difficult to deal with. The result is a carefully balanced progression where every time you get a new tool to help you in your struggle, you also find yourself with a new undead challenge to deal with.

It's also worth pointing out just how smoothly the action flows. Individual turns tend to be lightning-fast, and it's rare to find yourself waiting very long for an opportunity to do something. And each playthrough runs from 15 to 20 minutes, making it very tempting to play two or three sessions back-to-back.

It may lack the depth and storytelling of games like *Pandemic Legacy* or *Charterstone*, but *Zombie Teenz Evolution* is playing for a very different audience, and its vibrant colours and zany elements (Undead clowns! Zombies on trampolines!) mean it's perfectly pitched for family game nights.

OWEN DUFFY

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 4 Teen pawns
- 4 Zombie horde tokens
- 4 Overrun building tokens
- 4 Crates
- 2 Dice
- 1 Event deck
- 1 Sticker sheet
- Various Secret Components

WE SAY

Zombie Teenz combines bingeable legacy game appeal with fast-playing simplicity.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PANDEMIC LEGACY: SEASON 1

Like the disease-fighting smash hit, it blends cooperation, planning, unpredictable events and rising tension.

SUPERFLY



Designer: Thomas Brückner & Anja Dreier-Brückner | **Publisher:** Iello

Superfly is like the 'hold my Panda-Pop' of family friendly card games. *Superfly* starts off as a simple card collection game, veering towards games like *Uno*, with a 'fly' theme (sadly not the 1986 Jeff Goldblum vehicle) in the form of adorable artistry on the cards demonstrating a range of 'baby' to 'grown-up' flies. That cuteness is overshadowed by some un-'bee'-lievable components, because actually, what other game offers you a flyswatter in the box?



Unlike the garden variety flyswatters, each of the flyswatters in *Superfly* house a different coloured six sided dice underneath a *Frustration*-esque dome. As cards are laid out in front of you (one for each player minus one, so you're drawn into competition for the cards you want), you'll use the flyswatter on the count of three to swat the card you'd like to add to your hand. If you swat the same as a fellow player, the highest dice roll number wins. Got the same number? You lose the card, and you'll need to exchange your hands.

Not only is this fun to see, but it serves the purpose of breaking up any tie disputes, which, when playing with younger family members, is wholly appreciated. Is it gimmicky? Of course. But it adds a tactile element to keep things interesting. That, and the instructions are brief, meaning it shouldn't 'fly' over anyone's heads.



In fact, the only part that might 'bug' you is that this is really a family only game, and it won't hold up at an adult game night for long. However, there're only so many games that successfully bridges the gap for a much younger audience, and this does that really well. For a pleasingly tactile game, that sits in the inexpensive range, it's safe to say the family are buzzing about this one.

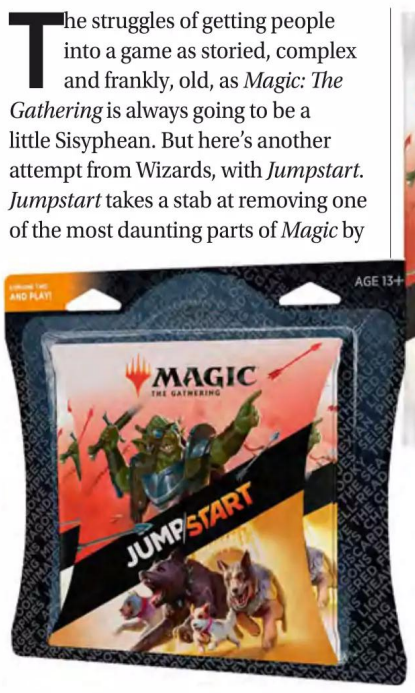
CHARLIE PETTIT

MAGIC: THE GATHERING JUMP START



Designer: Richard Garfield | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

The struggles of getting people into a game as storied, complex and frankly, old, as *Magic: The Gathering* is always going to be a little Sisyphean. But here's another attempt from Wizards, with *Jumpstart*. *Jumpstart* takes a stab at removing one of the most daunting parts of *Magic* by slicing away the deck building element. Instead, players can smash together two booster packs and get a totally playable, and dare we say, good, deck. Get four booster packs and you and a friend are away. Pleasing names occur when these decks are put together, for example, 'Smashing' and 'Rainbow' gives you a multicoloured deck that aims to wallop the opposition. The smart part is that you don't lose any of the fun in choosing the character of your deck, even if you're not choosing the individual cards.





The downside is that you're still going to have to watch a video or read the rules online, even if you remember half of it as we did. The cards have been chosen for simplicity, with only basic keywords included, so the amount of looking up is limited. It may have also helped to have useful 'token' cards as are sometimes included in standard boosters (cards with a number of +1/+1 tokens in them, or token minions) that fit the theme. While we were happy enough to rip up some scrap paper to make tokens, it might have been confusing for some.

So, while it doesn't teach you *Magic* it does get you into actually playing the game quicker than nearly any other attempt while maintaining a little bit of authorship for the player. If you're coming back to the game, this is a great way to start converting others in your group. If you're brand new it's the best place to dip your toe in the water.

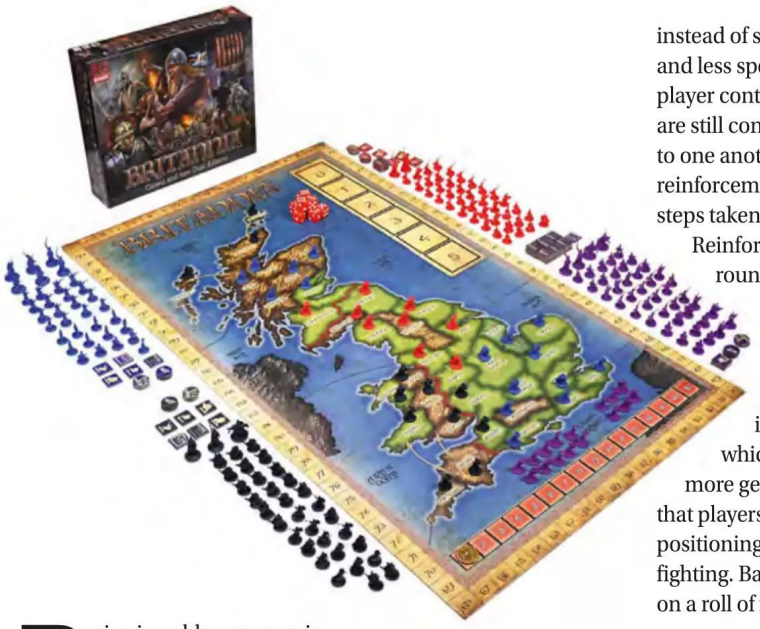
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

BRITANNIA: CLASSIC AND DUEL EDITION

Roll Britannia

Designer: James Pulsiphere | **Publisher:** PSC Games

1 or 4h | 2-4 | 14+ | £65



Reviewing old wargames is pretty thankless. *Britannia* first released in 1986, with minor cosmetic and balancing tweaks over the years. This edition is definitely the best it's ever looked, with hundreds of distinctive miniatures, useful player aids and an easy to read board. However, little of the core game have changed and it's the same slightly antiquated yet still solid wargame. Love wargames and British history? Definitely an easy recommend. Hate wargames with a passion? Nothing here will change your mind. Where this edition shines is the unknown. What if you *don't* know what your emotions are towards wargames? Enter *Duel Britannia*.

Designed for two players or two teams, this version (included in the same box as Classic) effectively condenses the original's four hour minimum epic to a spry sixty minutes. Each of the four original factions are split between the two players, putting Anglo-Saxons against 'Brython-Vikings' (i.e. everyone else) offering each player an opportunity to attack and defend.

The game takes the originals core mechanics and streamlines all of them. It now plays over seven rounds instead of sixteen, with less factions and less special timeline events. Each player controls multiple factions that are still considered independent to one another, each with its own reinforcement, combat and scoring steps taken in turn.

Reinforcement is calculated each round instead of points that retain between rounds, leading to less units on the board. To compensate, each unit can take two hits instead of one in combat, which when combined with more generous retreat rules means that players are rewarded for clever positioning as much as outright fighting. Battles still see players killing on a roll of five or higher and all attacks are rolled simultaneously, keeping them tense and hard to know exactly when to run away.



Photography by More Games Please

Scoring has been dramatically simplified; instead of a unique list for each faction to score in various ways in each round, now factions score for holding marked areas of the board and the territories surrounding it, as well as rewards for burning or holding forts and killing leaders. This makes it crystal clear when a faction is doing well or not, thereby teaching players if they're playing correctly immediately.

And teaching is the key word here. *Duel Britannia* feels like the perfect tutorial game, being a sharp, tantalising contest that teaches players the fundamental aspects of *Britannia*, that is still rewarding to play in its own right. The Attack/Defend switch at the halfway point ensures players get a varied and entertaining experience, with the changes made allowing them to make mistakes without being aggressively punished. The two on two team mode is also great for players unfamiliar to wargaming to tag-team with someone more experienced to see if this style of game is right for them.

It's this variety that gives *Britannia* the edge over other large scale wargames. If you own something like *Twilight Imperium* or *Diplomacy*, you know the heartbreak of having the game sit on your shelf for months (if not years) at a time between plays. *Britannia's* flexibility in playtime and player count lets you play more frequently and even introduce people to the genre. Not everyone is ready to jump straight into a four plus hour gaming session, but seven hundred years of war in sixty minutes? Now you're talking.

It's important to stress that if you don't think you could ever see yourself playing an all-day wargame, give this a pass. But if you love the idea and want to encourage others, *Duel Britannia* might be one of the most accessible and polished wargames currently available, providing a strong base camp to explore this genre.

MATTHEW VERNALL

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Double-sided Game Board
- 210 Plastic miniatures in four colours
- 10 Six-sided dice
- 6 Player aids
- 94 Cardboard tokens

WE SAY

Few wargames offer such versatility in player count and experience. Great for fans of the genre or players looking to see if wargaming is their cup of tea.

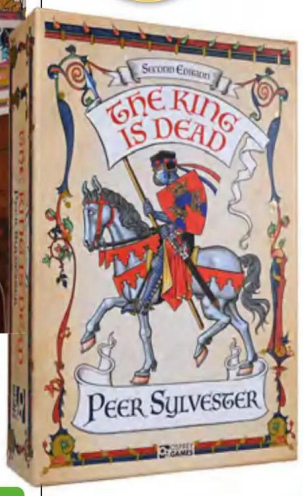


TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RISK

If you're a veteran wargamer you already known if *Britannia* is for you. But if Risk is your only point of reference for tabletop warfare, then *Britannia* is the next best step.



tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY



THE KING IS DEAD SECOND EDITION

Long live the king!

Designer: Peer Sylvester | **Publisher:** Osprey Games

20-45m | 2-4 | 14+ | £30

He's dead, and what awful timing. There is a power vacuum in Medieval Britain, and you'll want to be one the right side of the scuffle when the mud settles. And that's what we're going to be doing in *The King Is Dead* – now presented in a beautiful and occasionally gold foiled second edition.

The King Is Dead sees players set out a lovely looking board (thanks to Benoit Billion) of randomly chosen cubes into the various areas of Britain. Each cube represents one of the factions – the Welsh, the Scottish and the English – and having the most of these in an area at the point of conflict will award that area to majority faction. And of course, we're going to be trying to influence which faction owns the most areas of Britain to come out on top when the coronation comes around. Would be power-holders have a hand of eight cards, which they take turns to play – or not – as both players passing their turn is what triggers the next power struggle. The order of these conflicts is dictated by the order they are randomly placed around the board (in positions one through eight), so you always know what the next contested region will be. But whether it's worth expending a vital card to swing your way is the tricky part.

And what is your way anyway? Each time an action is taken, by playing a card, players take a single influence cube from the board to add to their court. At the end of the game, the faction you have the most of (or more of than you opponent) is 'yours' when it comes to totting up who made the best of their influence. Taking influence from the board has a strange counter-intuitive waltz about it, you've removed influence from an upcoming struggle, making it more likely a faction will lose, but at the end you're more likely to be backing that faction.

Choices like this make up the character of the game. Because power struggles are only resolved when both players pass, the game can feel very asymmetric. You can pass, your opponent can play a card that changes the state of the board, and now you have to think about whether it's worth committing another action to the game at this point. You can end up playing reactively, caught off-guard by an unexpected move or bluff from your opponent, or be left playing out everything early, and letting your opponent play their hand for the final few moves of the game.

When stability is in question, the French get involved. If there's an equal balance of influence in any region when a conflict happens there, the usual influence disc of the winning colour is replaced with a black 'instability' disk, taken from France. When three of these end up on the board, the French invade – causing a completely different set of win conditions (having the most complete sets). There are some interesting strategies here where triggering an invasion might be to your best interests, even though a coronation is often the much more likely outcome.

The King Is Dead makes you feel like a kingmaker having to bluff their way through court, with each action you take containing real consequences for both you and the opposition. Ruthless, strategic and really quick. We can't think of the last time we had such fun scuffling in the middle ages.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A nearly perfect game, now presented at its most beautiful.The struggles of Medieval power feel palpable – and entirely within your control.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Map of Britain board
- 40 Cards
- 63 Wooden pieces
- 32 Counters
- 1 Cloth bag

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RISK...

Abstracted and made of a narrative of your own devising, *The King Is Dead Second Edition* contains all of the joy of conflict that Risk offers – even if there aren't little plastic canons to shuffle around.





ATHENEUM: MYSTIC LIBRARY

Prints Charming

Designer: L'Atelier | **Publisher:** Renegade Game Studio

30-45m | 2-5 | 10+ | £45

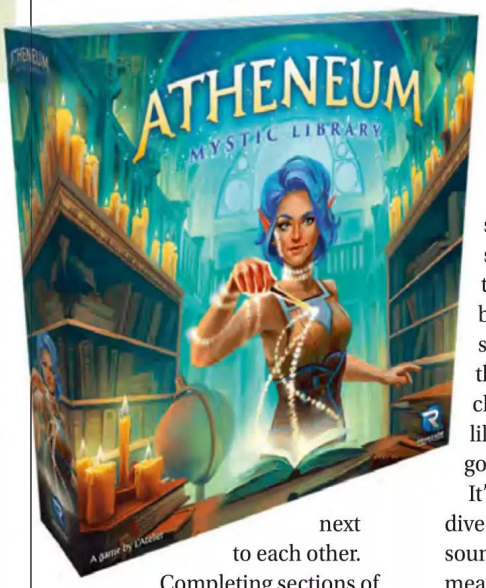


Ornate bookcases, a handful of spiders, dripping candles, an assortment of wands and hundreds of peculiar books… this is the very embodiment of a magical library. In *Atheneum: Mystic Library*, players are students at a magical school, who've been tasked with sorting out the otherworldly tomes. Each player has their own bookcase in which to stack volumes taken from a couple of wonderful three-dimensional library carts.

The game is played over two 'pick and pass' card-drafting phases. Simultaneously, players reveal their chosen Study Cards and execute the actions shown. Each card you play, gives you benefits, enabling you to stack new books, move existing books, acquire a new wand or have a dip in the candle bag. But, in a brilliant twist, each card, which is split into sections, also rewards the players on either side of you – with different actions. So each time you select a card, you're thinking not only about your own bookcase, but those of your neighbours too.

After actions have been taken, players may score objectives, by placing a wand on a current objective card. These cards show books of different colours placed in certain configurations. If you've assembled books as shown on the card, you may claim the objective. During clean-up, all four objective cards move right one place… the furthest right card becomes inactive and a new card is added at the far left. This rolling row means objectives are time-limited, creating a sense of urgency and dictating the cards you choose to draft, creating a bewitching tension. But beware, it's quite possible to complete an objective but find yourself wandless and unable to score it before the card disappears.

Bonus points are awarded when you place books of your own colour next to each other.



Completing sections of your bookcase and adorning your shelves with candles will also score you extra points at the end of the game.

Atheneum: Mystic Library presents a great puzzle. Each turn leaves you wondering whether it's better to take new books or rearrange some. This is a tile-placement game where the challenge is not in the tessellation or orientation of the pieces (as each book is the same dimensions), but in the order that the books are placed and the configurations you are creating.

There is something utterly delightful about the activity of filling the bookshelves with "Astral Travel for Armadillos", "Oil Painting with Dorian Gray" and "You Are More Than Undead". This game exudes a warm and fuzzy feeling which is echoed in the mechanics. There is no competition for Objective Cards as each one can be claimed by every player and each Study Card provides only benefits, no penalties, meaning you're always pleasantly surprised by the gifts from left and right.

Sometimes you get a dip in the bag. Each bonus tile found within can be used in two ways –for its special ability or as a candle, which gives end-game points. Special abilities may provide a paired set of books to shelve, a 'wild' book of your choice, a side bookcase (increasing your shelf space), a magic wand or the ability to re-shelve some books. Upon completing each section of your bookcase, you evict the resident spider, giving you a choice of benefits. Again, it feels like you're being showered with goodies.

It's a wonderful theme, so why not dive into it? Put on the Harry Potter soundtrack, dim the lights, pour the mead, light the candles and make sure you announce the name of each book you shelve in a ghostly voice. "Making Hand Soap From Hands" anyone?

ELLIE DIX

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Library board
- 30 Magic wands
- 5 Student pawns
- 1 Cloth bag
- 2 Library carts
- 5 Main shelves
- 10 Side shelves
- 160 Book tokens
- 60 Study cards
- 35 Objective cards
- 40 Bonus tokens
- 35 Spider tokens

WE SAY

Athenium: Mystic Library is a solid gateway game – easy to learn and quick to teach. With simultaneous play and a total lack of conflict, it also works really well for families. It's competitive, but always with an obvious overtone of generosity and abundance.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: 7 WONDERS

Atheneum is not an engine builder, but the 'draft and play' action and the interaction with immediate neighbours smacks of the popular classic.

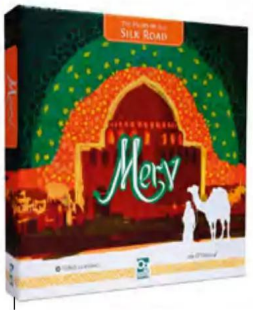


MERV

Too spicy for some

Designer: Fabio Lopiano | **Publisher:** Osprey Games

90-120m | 1-4 | 14+ | £50



This genre really needs a name. 'European style, non-conflict, modular board with a variety of point systems' games is too much of a mouthful. Personally, I've started calling games like *Five Tribes*, *Istanbul* and now *Merv*, 'Chocolate-Box Euros' as they offer lots of little options for you to consider and are usually quite sweet (if not to everyone's taste.)

Merv certainly succeeds in looking like a chocolate box, with its gorgeous pastel-coloured geometric patterns influenced by traditional Islamic art and its very generous array of tokens, giving the game a luxurious look. There's also a lot to look at; *Merv* sees 1-4 players attempting to build the medieval metropolis of Merv, with points scored for every mosque, library, market, caravansary, city wall and palace interacted with.

If that list seems daunting, you'd be correct. *Merv* is one of the longest board game explanations I've ever done, as each area features different ways to score points, many of which rely on one another and all of them need to be taught before a single worker is placed. Patient players are a must, otherwise you'll be left alone trying to explain how contracts have an appreciating score value.

Once players have some understanding of what each area does, playing the game is straightforward. Each of the three game years is split into four rounds. In a round, players take turns selecting a column or row from the 25-tile grid in the centre of the board, then selecting an action tile and placing one of their buildings if the tile is empty. That player then gains resources for each tile in the same column or row that has a matching coloured building, before performing the action on the selected tile.

This placement mechanic lets the game organically grow in complexity. Early on you'll play a couple of cubes to make small steps forward, then by the last year you'll have a small fabrication empire that races through progress trees or collect swathes of cards and counters. The game also lets players 'borrow' one another's buildings in exchange for the lender gaining more resources, ensuring that no-one is left trailing behind.

To keep players in check, at the end of year two and three the city is invaded by Mongols, who will ransom unprotected buildings, destroying them if unpaid. This incentivises players to hire soldiers or build walls to defend the city, with extra rewards if they help protect their opponents. These invasions help ground players, as the ones with the best point engines will also be the ones needing to protect their investments. The game also sees players bid for turn order each round, with players going last often getting camel tokens that they can use to either go first later or capitalize on certain scoring systems.

When players know what they want the game speeds along nicely, but the sheer quantity of options combined with a randomized tile set up (ensuring that an optimal strategy in one playthrough may be unusable in another) leads to long pauses as players deliberate their options. The denseness of the puzzle led to my playgroup stumbling upon game breaking combinations rather than intentionally building them, with others unwilling to intervene as it meant halting their own progress.

If your playgroup hates fighting one another and loves puzzling over a varying challenge game after game, *Merv* certainly has replay potential. But first impressions matter a lot and this game demands a lot of player attention and patience before it starts rewarding them. One for experienced Eurogamers who like a lot of mileage out of their purchase.

MATTHEW VERNALL

WE SAY

Games that look this beautiful can be somewhat forgiven for overdesigned gameplay, which while excessive and demanding can lead to inventive engine building. A lovely 'little' Chocolate Box Euro.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Game Board
- 25 game tiles
- 48 cards
- 205 coloured wooden pieces
- 110 cardboard tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ISTANBUL

This Kennerspiel winning game takes the modular tile layout to its extreme. If you enjoyed the path-finding puzzle in *Istanbul* you'll find a lot to like in the randomized streets of *Merv*.





GODS LOVE DINOSAURS

The real food chain magnate

Designer: Kasper Lappa | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games

30-45m | 2-5 | 10+ | £30

Being a nine ton prehistoric lizard is hungry work. After all, you'll need more than two hundred thousand calories a day, or 140 kilograms of meat, to keep you going, and Nando's hasn't been invented yet. Luckily there are two to five players gathering around a table to help feed these titanic beasts, with a series of smaller beasts.

The game follows a pattern of taking a double hex (like they've been stuck together) from the animal board and placing it in their own personal ecosystem. If you empty of the columns of the board, it triggers that animal's movement.

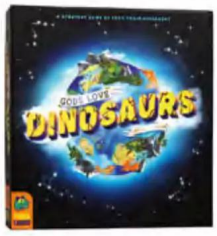
Players begin with a starting tile of seven hexes, with the three main biomes presented around the edges, and a dinosaur nest in the centre, on a mountain. Each of these has an appropriate creature in it – a rat in the jungle, a rabbit in the plains, a frog in the water and of course, a dinosaur on a mountain. Players place their double hex, and, with that, any associated animals marked on it. This might be more frogs, but it could also be a predator.

When the prey animals are activated by emptying a column they breed, adding an additional meeple of the same kind to adjacent hexes. When predators are activated however, they move (as per their pattern), eating everything in front of them, leaving offspring behind. If the dinosaur is in the column activated, then he goes for a wander for a snack too. Of course, the dino is only going to be satisfied (and therefore produce more dino eggs, which can be converted to points or more dinosaurs) if it eats something large enough – a predator for example. Don't feel too bad about the eagle eating all those frogs then, as it too will be someone's dinner.

One of the things players will have to consider for the dino or carnivore rampage isn't only if they could, but whether they should, eat everything. If a carnivore is activated, but can't manage to eat anything on its hunting path, it starves. The game emerges as a series of planned paths through the buffet of small and large creatures – a buffet you're having a lay on during previous turns. Equally, because you're a little in control of which animals trigger each turn, setting off a carnivore turn before your opponents have set up their prey can be a satisfying strike. It's not massively conflict heavy, but there is a little bit of eyeing up everyone else's ecosystem to make these moves.

The pleasure comes from a well executed plan, whether that's on the offensive, pushing for early activations, or just smart tile placement that promises a good snack pathway. Balancing your dinosaurs at the top of the foodchain – and not turning all your eggs into dinos straight away – has a great feeling to it. Arrange the arrival of everyone's dinner just in time, and you have a perfect storm of points that is as satisfying as a really good lunch.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Animal board
- 5 Starting tiles
- 84 Ecosystem tiles
- 5 Nest tiles
- 1 Volcano standee
- 20 Dinosaur meeples
- 35 Rat meeples
- 25 Frog meeples
- 30 Rabbit meeples
- 25 Tiger meeples
- 25 Eagle meeples
- 30 Regular eggs
- 15 Golden eggs



WE SAY

If bringing out your inner carnivore and carefully managing the meal plan of prehistoric monsters suits you, then there's few better, and simpler, games to get your teeth into.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED KAREKARE

If you're a fan of hexagonal tile laying and building up an ecosystem of your own, *Gods Love Dinosaurs* is a good place to move on from when you're done with the Polynesian expansion that is the underrated *Karekare*.

BEYOND THE SUN

Through the space ages

Designer: Dennis K. Chan | **Publisher:** Rio Grande

60-120m | 2-4 | 14+ | £75



Beyond the Sun tells you nearly everything you need to know about it from the start. Like tech trees from videogames? Like unlocking resources as a form of progress? Like a bit of space wandering? Then you're all set to strap in for this Euro-in-space.

Having destroyed our own planet and each other, while trashing the solar system on the way out one assumes, humanity has escaped into the great maw of space and must find its path toward some kind of civilisation. Whether that's in the form of automation or space war is entirely up to you. Well, nearly. At the start of each game you'll be randomly dealing out cards into various upgrade slots on the board. These will be face down until discovered and unlocked by your dice shaped spacefaring peoples. Once unlocked they'll be flipped, and new and exciting 'worker placement' opportunities will be available to you. You've only got one of these actions per turn, so every time you do unlock a new tech, it feels like Christmas – and most of the time you won't be pretending to like what you've got.

The mechanism for ripping open these intergalactic presents is also extremely pleasing. The six sided cubes are converted into population and then applied to the technology, opening it up for everyone to then plant their own flag. The later cards are more powerful, and researching them feels like a reward in itself. However, it's a bit of a trap, as playing catch up can be a better use of your resources, especially if you dodge an action that doesn't necessarily help you when unlocked. No one wants to open a present that suits someone else better.

These cubes can also be converted into ships to explore deep space – which takes place on an entirely different board and includes the rarest of things in a Euro, a bit of conflict and combat. Depending on how the tech tree resolves itself, you might find players complaining that the smaller exploration board should have been their focus since the start. It's hard to know how much conquering of space should be carried out in this way from the start of the game, but reading your chances as you get more familiar with the game becomes easier, and becoming comfortable a tactical switch is vital if you're going to stay in the running.

All of this comes together in a pleasingly brain burning experience with a punchy feeling of FOMO. What action will you choose, especially when one of your actions is to get more actions for later turns? The split-brain feeling of the second board also adds drama to the situation, and while nothing is truly lost in defeat on deep space, it can still feel like it.

Beyond the Sun is a dazzlingly good game that demands repeat plays through its complex and compelling systems. For those on the hunt for their next big bite of a Eurogame that they can keep coming back to, *Beyond the Sun* has boldly gone where we've been before, but rarely this well.

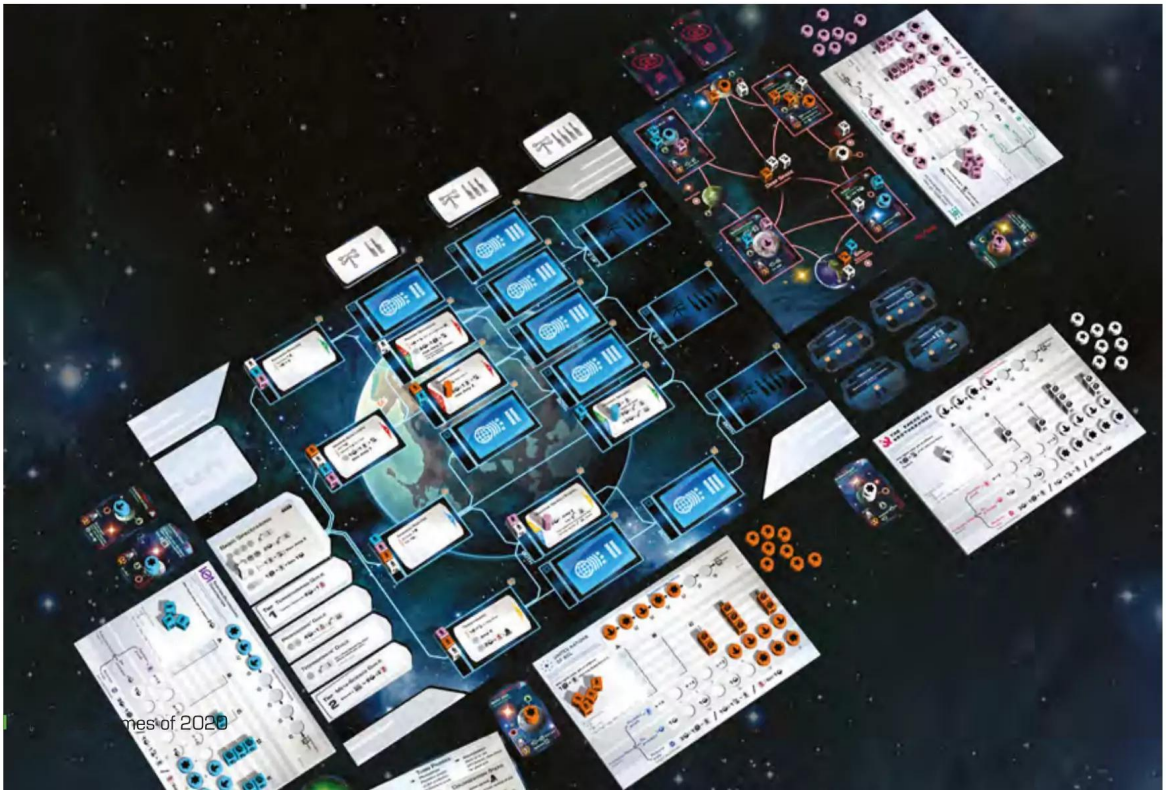
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

WE SAY

A nearly pure synthesis of many of the best Eurogame ideas of the last couple of decades, *Beyond the Sun* is one of the smoothest launches into the stratosphere for a first time designer we've ever seen. One giant leap indeed.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Technology board
- 1 Double-sided exploration board
- 46 Technology cards
- 24 System cards
- 20 Event cards
- 10 Achievement cards
- 60 Ore resources
- 4 Faction mat player boards
- 80 Six sided resource cubes
- 96 Wooden resource discs
- 4 Action pawns
- 2 Player aids



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THROUGH THE AGES...

One of the games that inspired *Beyond the Sun* seems like a fitting place to start your civilization's journey to the cosmos.





OUT OF THIS WORLD

Smells like teen sci-fi

Designer: Koen Hendrix | **Publisher:** Devir

60m | 3-5 | 10+ | £20

Out of This World is a cooperative game of ordinary teens facing the extraordinary. Everyday objects have sprung to life and the town's inhabitants are no longer what they seem. Even worse, the adults haven't even noticed.

Taking thematic and aesthetic inspiration from the *Paper Girls* and *Lumberjanes* series of comics, designer Koen Hendrix has concocted a simple but inventive set collection game of misunderstood nineties youth and suburban sci-fi. Through teamwork and youthful enthusiasm, these quirky characters will battle through one of five scenarios, trading and equipping items, whilst fighting off waves of oddly mundane inter-dimensional monstrosities. Whether it's a demonic bin, bench, or bush, each undefeated foe will eat away precious time, pushing the heroes ever closer to failure.

All of this drama is handled by a deck of cards comprised of era specific items alongside a variety of enemies. Be it a beat up DiscMan or a Nirvana T-shirt, players will be adding these cards to their hand from one of five face up stacks, before choosing to share or equip them. Alternatively, cards can be spent on defeating foes. This process of equipping cards forms the meat of the game and also its central puzzle, with a certain total value of them being required to complete scenarios. Equipping requires playing a set of three matching suits or numbers, resulting in the lowest value card becoming equipped. The same goes for passing cards to other players – albeit with a smaller set of two. This renders high value cards difficult to equip, often resulting in characters throwing away powerful items just to equip a measly pencil. Thanks to the accumulating foes, there's simply not enough time to hang around for those perfect cards, ultimately pushing players toward some disheartening but fantastically tense decisions.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 110 Cards
- 5 Character Cards
- 1 Time Tracker Card
- 8 Time Tokens
- 1 First Player Token
- 1 Rulebook

This tension persists through other mechanics too, mostly in the form of the walkie-talkie token. This cute little component indicates the active character but also serves as a reminder that *only* that player may talk. Thematically, this represents characters splitting up, in a rush to cover as much ground possible in their search for items, but it also adds unexpected layers of difficulty to how and what players communicate. As an added bonus, the walkie-talkie silences the 'alpha-gamer,' cooperative games' much maligned repeat offender.

Games usually take around thirty minutes, but the sense of accomplishment felt after beating a scenario can easily lead to immediately setting up the next. It also doesn't hurt that despite the campaign's short length, every chapter has a sense of progression in terms of the story and the gameplay. Instead of simply adding more foes, each chapter ups the difficulty by forcing players to focus their strategies. Teamwork really is the key to success and later games will rely on how efficiently the various actions, abilities, and items are used to ensure each character is as prepared as possible. Ultimately, it's nice to see a light, campaign-based filler game not resorting to basic rinse and repeat style gameplay, instead asking players to, basically, try harder.

There's a lot to like here, and while it might feel a tad light for some, we can't really fault a filler game that charms players into ploughing through its entire campaign in one sitting.

CHAD WILKINSON

WE SAY

Out of This World is far greater than the sum of its parts, drawing oodles of nostalgic theme, strategy, and addictive replay-ability from the most basic of rules and components.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ARKHAM HORROR: THE CARD GAME

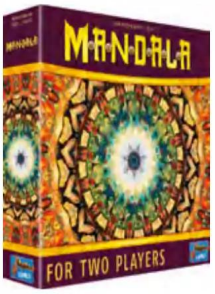
Where *Arkham Horror* thrusts its unwitting players into misery and madness, *Out of This World* turns down the horror, scale, and complexity for a more family-friendly slice of fiendish fun.

MANDALA

Designer: Trevor Banjamin & Brett J. Gilbert | **Publisher:** Lookout Games

15-20m | 2 | 10+ | £21





It's not often players have to iron the board before playing. *Mandala* is one of the few games where we'd advise that you do. The tea towel board (this is written affectionately) is laid before two players and the big deck of cards presenting some lovely looking mandalas is shuffled. Take a hand of cards and then either play them into your side of the one of the two 'mountains', on to the mountain itself, or discard and draw.

Players win a mountain by completing a set of six coloured mandala cards on a mountain, at which point it is destroyed and the player with the majority of any colour used gets the first pick of those colours on the mountain itself. These go into a scoring track where you'll get points for each of that type at the end of the game, the first will land you a single point, whereas the sixth will gain you six points, and end the game in completing your personal set.

As such this is a game of tactical denial of your opponent's set building ability. Because only one of each colour may be played into each mountain, blocking your opponent from completing their set, or gaining multiple high scoring cards is the way to victory. Equally, drawing cards requires placing mandalas into the mountain, which makes them up for grabs at the end and also don't count toward your 'claim' on them. You have to give up something then to keep your hand full enough to have options in the future. It's a smart back and forth, and having two mountains to complete at once can make for interesting 'shifts' in focus throughout a game. One worth getting the ironing board out for.

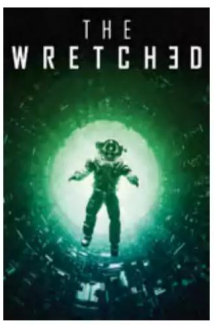
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

THE WRETCHED

Designer: Chris Bissette | **Publisher:** Loot The Room

18 | 1 | 12+ | £12





You remember that scene at the end of *Alien* where Ripley blasts the xenomorph out into space? *The Wretched* is what comes after that and it's atmospheric, frightening, and downright brilliant.

Using a tumbling block tower, a deck of cards, and a six sided dice, you are tasked with repairing the failing ship and hopefully survive long enough to be rescued. The chances of that happening are miniscule. Like a lot of solo RPG creators, designer Chris Bissette wants you to suffer – in a good way. Letting yourself inhabit the character, really picturing the actions they have to perform as you pull blocks from your ever less steady tower and feeling their fear, regret, and sadness is crucial to the experience. Which *The Wretched* captures in a clever little way. After each day, you log what happened via video recording or audio recording. You start each log with "Day X, salvage ship The Wretched, Flight Engineer [your name] reporting." and talk about what you've done that day. It's a great way to bring you into the character and as it's a solo game, you don't have to worry about your performance. It's cool to have this little artefact of your game but the purpose definitely seems more to immerse you in the character and the situation.

The Wretched, like most 'zine games, is light on rules and quick to the point. Of the 16 pages, four are tables (representing the various aspects of the ship, crew, and creature) and the rest are mostly setting the scene. This is a perfect example of the kind of incredible design that can come from limitations and thinking small.

ANNA BLACKWELL



THE SHINING

All work and no game-play makes Jack a dull boy…

Designer: Prospero Hall | **Publisher:** Mixlore

45-60m | 3-4 | 17+ | £20

Ah, the Overlook Hotel. Nestled among the majestic Rocky Mountains, this palatial retreat is so welcoming, you'll never want to leave. And you'll never be able to, if you succumb to its dark, mind-warping spirits and join their ghostly ranks as another of its permanent residents.

Adapting the 1980 Stanley Kubrick adaptation of Stephen King's classic horror novel, this latest Prospero Hall offering sets aside the troubled Torrance family, including psychic sprog Danny, and simply casts its cooperating players as a crew of caretakers, presumably on some kind of sweet work-sharing deal; after all, ol' Jack Torrance was able to do it all by himself. Well, up until the point he went ghost-crazy and attacked his wife and child with an axe.

And therein lies the challenge: can you all get through four months (five, if you feel like making it tougher), without losing your minds and, more pertinently, your lives?

As with all Prospero Hall games (see also: *Jaws*, *Horrified* and *Top Gun*), the rulebook is slim, the gameplay is snappy and the complexity is as light as a lettuce sandwich. In fact, given *The Shining*'s theme and imagery (beautifully executed by artist Claire Donaldson) render it inappropriate for younger gamers, it feels a little *too* light.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 1 Game board
- 5 Movers
- 52 Shining cards
- 16 Event cards
- 5 Role cards
- 68 Willpower tokens
- 15 Health tokens
- 2 Dice
- 1 Turn-tracking cube
- 1 Room 237 first player key ring
- 1 Rulebook



The board boils the Overlook down to just seven locations, around which players must move to take room-specific actions, mostly involving the collection of willpower tokens. Each player starts the month with a pair of face-down Shining cards, whose hidden total value represents a kind of psychic threat level that must be matched or exceeded by the value of these tokens. The back of each Shining card gives a threat range as a clue, which is handy as willpower is a precious, limited resource that will deplete quicker than you'd like, so you don't want to spend more than you think you'll need.

If, come the month's end, your Shining cards reveal a value higher than your total tokens, you lose it and attack another player. Rather neatly, many of the tokens feature weapon icons, which increase the chance of you landing a hit. If have any axe tokens and you roll an axe, that's one point of health lost to your caretaking pal… And players start with only three health each. Yikes.

It's very slick and tidy, but you quickly feel the narrowness of your spectrum of choices and the challenge becomes rather one-note after a few plays. Still, there is an advanced 'corrupted' variant to spice things up, which introduces a hidden-traitor element. That's right: one of the group has already gone full-on Mad Jack McMad and is secretly trying to get you all killed. It is a welcome extra layer which, honestly, feels like it should have been baked into the base game, given both its thematic relevance and the extra drama it generates. Our advice is to not, heh, overlook it, and dive straight in with the corrupted.

DAN JOLIN

WE SAY

A good-looking and casual-player-friendly take on a horror-movie classic. It's just a shame it lacks the depth and complexity of its source material.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED HORRIFIED…

Prospero Hall's previous film-based co-op survival horror game – albeit one you'd feel far more comfortable playing with kids.

TROYES DICE



Designer: Sébastien Dujardin, Xavier Georges, Alain Orban | **Publisher:** Pearl Games







Roll and writes have never hit home with me, it's just been too much like doing vlookups in Excel by hand. Until now that is. *Troyes Dice* is the best roll and write I've ever played, and I've tried to love so many of them. The game uses a circular board of plazas split into day and night, each turn consists of rolling three transparent dice and one black dice – transparent ones correspond to the colour they land on white (wisdom), yellow (money) or red (influence), while the black flips the plaza it's on.

Players simply look up in the grid of colours and numbers as to what choices they can make. For example a red three offers the choice of gaining some population, gaining three influence, or using the castle action to protect column three from future attacks. And these attacks are what makes the game exciting. In later rounds this black dice will begin destroying the plaza on your player sheet, meaning you've lost your chance to gain any points that way for the remaining rounds. The groans around the table as someone's key means to victory points is destroyed and they grumpily cross it out is frankly one of the highlights of the game – as is the smugness when you've wisely already protected that part of your player sheet.

This isn't a translation of 2010's *Troyes*, it's its own beast, and one which takes away some that that decade's fiddliness and replaces it with our current decade's scribbliness to great effect. It's a game that begs to be played repeatedly and has, components wise, been beautifully and thoughtfully put together. A wonderful little Eurogame dressed up in roll and write clothes.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

TRUST ME, I'M A DOCTOR



Designer: Dr Jack Ford Morgan & Dr Nick Wiggins | **Publisher:** Half Monster Games

Leeches, lobotomies, trepanning, and... fecal transplant. These are just some of the wonderful historical cures waiting for you in this lightweight card game. And it is hilarious.

Each round a player takes on the role of 'The Patient' and presents an ailment of their choice which could be as serious as lesions, cholera, or loss of vision. You know, the sort of things that you might actually see a doctor about. But, seeing as this ye olde times and doctors utilise much more than medicine, the ailments range into the absurd with paganism, tomfoolery, and blood ghosts among the complaints you will face.

Once the ailment has been revealed, each 'Doctor' presents two cures and waffles on about how their solution is the best. Suffering from severe wind? Well fret no more your humiliating affliction. With just a goblet of corpse brew and some liberally applied torture we can right your awful flatulence. But it's not all random which cures you apply. Each ailment has two or three symbols on it which relate to the well known medical traditions of: alchemical salves; mysticism, philosophy and psychiatry; and anatomical barber surgery. Your cures, which have one, two, or three symbols then have to match up to the cure's symbols to properly aid your poor patient. And this mechanic really helps keep the ailments and cures linked in an understandable way, making the explanations that much better. But what makes *Trust Me, I'm a Doctor* so fun is the arguing. After each doctor has had a chance to present their cure it's time to shout "chicanery" and "quackery" and discredit not only their medical credentials but their sexual prowess, mental faculties, and generally act like an academic. Fantastic fun if you enjoy improvisation and history.



ANNA BLACKWELL



AGON

Designer: John Harper & Sean Nitter | **Publisher:** Evil Hat

155 | 11+ | £19



Over the years countless tabletop RPGs have used the epic heroes and monstrous foes of Greek myth to add flavour to their worlds, but few – if any – have managed to make something that feels either as Greek or as mythical as *Agon*.

This feeling comes from the way in which, rather than aiming to simulate the feel of a fantasy novel or even a TV series, *Agon* instead aims to capture the feel of ancient stories and legends. It nudges players towards seeking glory and valour instead of simply aiming to win the current battle, prefers to paint the world in broad brush strokes rather than precise detail and always gives its players the chance to do something heroic – rules of physics and common sense be damned.

The core premise sets up the campaign as an *Odyssey*-esque voyage through a fantastical take on the Mediterranean, with the players taking the role of divinely favoured heroes island-hopping their way back home. However, in true mythical style, getting back to their loved ones doesn't depend on the heroes' navigational abilities or thrifty use of supplies. No, instead it's a simple matter of becoming legendary heroes and earn the capricious favour of the gods.

This isn't just a matter of window-dressing or GM attitude, either. The rules spell out the ways to gain divine brownie points, and note exactly how many of them you need to drum up before getting back to your loving family. There's no way around it, no matter how clever the players might think they are.

The result is a game that can feel a little disconcerting to those of us raised on traditional RPGs, where 'go anywhere, do anything' was always held up as a core part of the medium. *Agon* casually ditches this idea in favour of a much tighter, much more structured experience. While you are completely free to approach challenges in whatever way you might wish and roleplay in any style you could desire, every island you visit follows a familiar format of initial clashes, growing threats and looming finales.

This push towards a heavily codified structure even bleeds through into the core rules themselves. In most RPGs, carrying out a night raid on an enemy camp would require dozens of separate rolls, as each of the heroes try to sneak their way in, saw through prisoners' bonds and battle the commander in their tent. Not so with *Agon*.

Instead, the entire conflict – from the moment the players enter the camp through to the coming of the blood-tinted dawn – is handled by a single roll of the dice. Don't be mistaken, though, this doesn't mean it's a simple process of counting pips and working out who won. Indeed, one of the most enjoyable things about the game is revelling in the complexities, and above all else the drama, of its battles.

The defining moment of every roll comes right at the start, when each of the heroes has to declare their names and titles to all and sundry. From there, the party weigh up which dice they get to roll and whether they want to invoke the favour of the gods, while the GM, or, rather, the 'Strife Player', sets the challenge level and paints the opening scene.

The fact this this is only the first few moments of the action is important, as all the action happens after the results are already known. The players themselves get to narrate what they do in a scene, already knowing how well they did in it.

Some of the rules around the deeply stylised core mechanic can be a little daunting at first glance – the core rulebook comes with an incredibly handy flowchart detailing each phase, and you're likely to need it for your first few sessions – but it all feeds into creating an experience that feels truly unique.

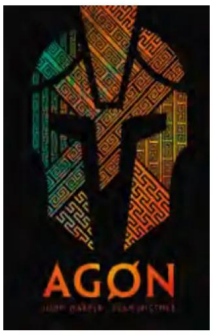
Many RPGs can provoke a table to laughter or shock, but getting a room full of people loudly declaring their heroes' epithets to the world at large is something that only *Agon* has managed so far.

The result is a game that may not be particularly flexible or especially simple, but that absolutely nails its aim of getting players to create epic myths and weave legends that will live on through the ages. Amidst a wine-dark sea of Grecian-inspired games that are, essentially, *D&D* in sandals, *Agon* truly stands out as a breath of refreshing, salty air.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

While it may not tick a lot of traditional RPG boxes, *Agon* creates an incredibly refreshing experience that neatly skewers the feel of Greek myth, rather than merely Grecian-themed adventures.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED *BAND OF BLADES*

If you enjoyed the short-term campaigning and tightly focussed structure of Evil Hat's stellar effort from last year, you'll probably fall in love with *Agon*



DUNGEON DROP

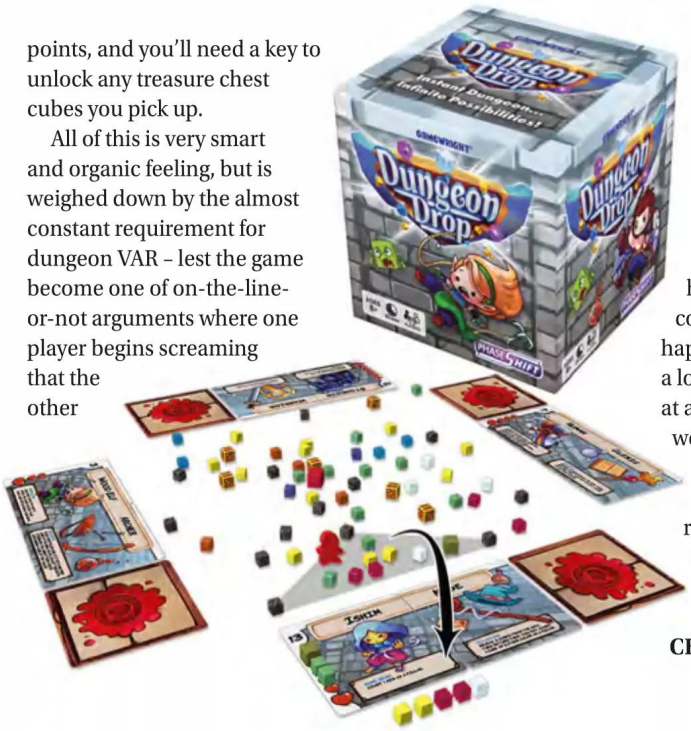
Designers: Scott R. Smith | **Publisher:** Gamewright

20m | 1-4 | 8+ | £25

What does the idea of dropping a big handful of resource cubes on your dining table fill you with? Dreadful anxiety for the fear of losing said small pieces, or even having them consumed by child, dog or hoover? Or the freeing joy of the chaos it's going to create on the table? Either way, that's what we're going to be doing for *Dungeon Drop*.

Players chuck a load of cubes on the table. These represent various treasures and items you'll be attempting to collect – as well as goblins and even a dragon that you'll want to avoid collecting. Additionally you'll be dropping grey cubes to represent the pillars of the dungeon. Make a triangle of these which doesn't contain another pillar, and you can have whatever is contained within on your turn. Monsters take away hit points, and you'll need a key to unlock any treasure chest cubes you pick up.

All of this is very smart and organic feeling, but is weighed down by the almost constant requirement for dungeon VAR – lest the game become one of on-the-line-or-not arguments where one player begins screaming that the other cannot, in fact, be serious.



Deciding whether a cube is in or out of the triangle of dungeon you're claiming ends up being a bigger part of the game than the dropping of the dungeon itself.

Sadly the game isn't as chaotically joyful as we had hoped, but instead turns into a contemplative puzzler that you happen to be setting up by dropping a load of cubes. This isn't a bad thing at all, and had we gone in knowing we'd be doing some chin stroking and careful pillar plotting we'd be very happy indeed. In this respect the solo mode is very fine indeed. A good little (dare we say stocking filler sized?) puzzle if you're not scared of the set up.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

MOB SITTERS

Designer: Paul Brook | **Publisher:** East Street Games

15-30m | 3-6 | 14+ | £20

Babysitting isn't the most dangerous or lucrative of occupations – unless you're a borderline kleptomaniac with a mob boss as an employer. Coincidentally, that's the set up of *Mob Sitters*, a take-that card game from publisher East Street Games.

In this quick-playing party game, three to six players will compete to rake in the most dough whilst avoiding both the wrath of their boss and the hand of the law. Sure, money can be made from an honest night's work, but doing odd jobs for the boss – or perhaps even robbing them – is the surest way to make a buck, right?

Whether it's snatching that shiny Mobster of the Year trophy or sneaking the occasional horse head (hobby horse of course – this is a family game) into a rival's bed, players better hold their cards close to their chests. Fellow co-workers won't hesitate ratting out competitors, and the cards in *Mob Sitters* give them just the tools to do so.

Roughly half of each player's small deck is made up of accusation and reaction cards. Accusation cards can be directed at anyone, forcing them to place their illegitimate earnings in a negative scoring discard area unless they respond with a reaction card. These cards literally point a finger either back at the accuser or to an adjacent player depending on the card's illustration. Very quickly, accusations can start bouncing around the table culminating in a healthy dose of riotous and unpredictable player interaction.





Getting the game up and running is a breeze, helped in part by a clear and concise rulebook and minimal components. It's a simple enough ruleset – which could've easily been compressed over a couple of pages instead of twelve – but the added real-estate certainly helps readability.

It's no lie that *Mob Sitters* is an unapologetically mean game, but with the right group its a solid fifteen minutes of cacophonous fun.

CHAD WILKINSON



MAGIC MAZE ON MARS

Frustrating chaos has never been so fun

Designer: Kasper Lapp | **Publisher:** Sit Down!

15m | 1-6 | 7+ | £24

Magic Maze had a problem – its theme, already confusing by mixing a modern mall setting with fantasy adventurers, did not quite work with an almost entirely abstract real-time movement puzzle as gameplay. The follow-up, *Magic Maze on Mars* has not made the same mistake. The setting, premise and gameplay intersect perfectly. Players are robots that are preparing the surface of Mars to be habitable for incoming colonists. This task incorporates collecting and moving resources along colourful paths, building domes, navigating trash and avoiding space slugs. Rather than being in charge of the movement of a particular token, players are assigned specific colours and can do any action as long as it corresponds to it.

A player in charge of green and blue can generate the resources of the same colour and move it along the blue or green paths. However, if they come to an orange path, they will need to stop and wait for the player in charge of that colour to move the resource further. Sounds easy? Well, it would be, if not for one more tiny rule: players can't talk to each other. Suddenly, a simple task of getting a token from point A across the map to point B is riddled with player miscommunication and confusion, which as you would expect, slows the whole process down significantly. Finally, add a sand timer into this mix and watch as mayhem ensues.



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 27 Mars tiles
- 6 Bridge tokens
- 3 Wild tokens
- 4 Sand timer tokens
- 1 Warehouse board
- 6 Action tiles
- 2 Space slug paws
- 5 Colonist pawns
- 10 Trash pawns
- 5 Dome tokens
- 12 Resource pawns
- 1 'Do something!' pawn
- 1 Sand timer
- 1 Communication board



What otherwise would have been a zen game of moving tokens across paths and completing tasks, transforms into a tense, time-clutching race against the clock where players give each other stern stares, wave hands around to get someone's attention and make panicked noises as the last grain of sand drops. There are a few allowed methods of communication within the game, like smacking a big red pawn next to a player on an icon that corresponds most closely to what you are trying to convey. It looks silly and most of the time is entirely unhelpful, but then so is waving hands in front of someone else's nose.

Although the game comes with only five different levels, the randomised tile map layout and natural chaotic player interaction makes *Magic Maze on Mars* feel different each time. As you beat one level, you move onto the next, adding another element that raises the difficulty and makes the new coordination puzzle challenging to solve. The more players you have around the table, the more you are reliant on someone else to complete a task, which, of course, can only go wrong. It is messy, and even though no one is supposed to talk, loud, with banging of the pawn and rogue exclamations of frustration or alarm. Whether you complete or fail a level, at the end, when talking is finally allowed, everyone laughs, because how could you not?

Some players might not enjoy the uncontrollable chaos of movement on the table in front of them, and then this game is not for them. And there will be plays that are just frustrating and nothing is working well – that is only a natural occurrence in games that rely on the player's mood and eagerness to work. Yet, when it all gels with everyone it is just the right mixture of hilarious and stressful, ridiculous and strategic to keep you wanting to play more.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

WE SAY

Magic Maze on Mars proves the importance of good communication, especially when you can't talk, delivering a game that is both ridiculously silly and deceptively hard.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MAGIC MAZE

If you like *Magic Maze*, then you will find that this Martian-themed instalment matches or improves on all of its aspects.

SOLO REVIEW

CHRONICLES OF CRIME: 1400

60-90m | 1-4 | 14+ | £28

Designer: David Cicurel & Wojciech Grajkowski | **Publisher:** Lucky Duck Games





It's 1400 Paris, and you're going to play a knight blessed with prophetic dreams, enabling him to solve mysteries and gaining a reputation for doing so. With some prophecy hint cards, you're well on your way to becoming the medieval version of Mystery Incorporated, dog included.

Detective games follow a similar format – see a clue with a number, use that number to search for another card, which should then prompt another numbered card and another, and so on until you solve the case. The difference with *Chronicles of Crime: 1400* is that this is blended with the use of a smart device, using an app to scan QR codes on the cards, enabling it to draw you through the story.

It is initially a little jarring, not least because you're trying to envisage 1400 France with a smartphone in your hand. The less confident you are in where it will take you next, the more you scan within the app to try to work out what to do, meaning almost all of your experience is app based. Plus, depending on the device, depends on how easy it is to share the story and findings that you're experiencing with fellow players.

Playing it solo however, I could zip about from location to location, sending off my trusty dog to sniff out additional clue, talking to new people, and having a twisty story unfold. Once in a rhythm, I was utterly hooked, pulled into the scandals and gossip as the story developed. The whole experience is immersive and enjoyable, and discovery is genuinely intriguing. When I reached a conclusion, I'd put my resolutions into the app, get a score for my work based on accuracy and time, and be on to the next adventure.

The main failing of this game is exactly the same as others like it – if you're successful, you can only really play it once. Having said that, as a solo game this excelled, and if I could play it all over again without knowing how it all ends, I would.

CHARLIE PETTIT

THE LOST WORDS

15-30m | 2-4 | 8+ | £14

Designer: Robert Hyde | **Publisher:** Kosmos

Rare is it that you'll be selling a game to people on how slow it is. Yet that's what we're doing here, with *The Lost Words*, a contemplative set collecting game based around famous word nerd Rob MacFarlane's book of the same title. The book of acrostic poems – in the form of spells – is lovingly recreated on to the cards of the game, and is one of the chief causes of the enjoyable slowness. Players are likely to spend time examining their hand not because of the complexity of moves they're able to make, but because many of the spells on the cards are fully reprinted and worth a read. The art on the cards is equally as lovely and magical by way of the excellent Jackie Morris.

The game lends itself to this slow, stalled play. Players set out their four cards, which need to be matched to win the game. On your turn you can play out a spell card from your hand to cover one of your own cards or you can play an action card which might give you the upper hand – like clearing the top card from an opponent's set or stealing their completed card combinations. It's quite a lot of 'take that' for a game which otherwise feels so gentle, but does keep the game from being beyond paper light.

As an experience then, with the right people, with a couple of nice readings of the cards – *The Lost Words* is an entertaining distraction. As a game of itself it's less satisfying than it could have been – although it solid enough. Make sure you're with the right crowd and you'll fall under its spell.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT











1565, ST ELMO'S PAY

Thankfully nothing to do with any '80s Brat Pack movies

Designer: Tristan Hall | **Publisher:** Hall or Nothing

40-60m | 1-2 | 14+ | £35

When he's not inflicting Gloom on the fantasy world of Kilforth, indie designer Tristan Hall likes to engage in a bit of historical re-enactment. Two years after he turned the Battle of Hastings into a neat, sweet two-player card game with *1066, Tears to Many Mothers*, he's doing the same for the 1565 Siege of Malta, in which the Ottoman Empire hurled its 30,000-strong armada against the 500 Knights of St. John and the irrepressible Maltese populace. In reality, the siege lasted three months and three weeks, ending with the supposedly invincible invaders being disastrously repelled. Here, however, either side can win in a sharply focused and immersive asymmetric duel that re-uses 1066's 'Historic Epic Battle System'.

Mechanically, there are no differences between the two games, so players familiar with Hall's Saxon-vs-Norman original can dive straight in here, and even mash the two games up, should they fancy an anachronistic clash between, say, William the Bastard and Mustafa Pasha.

As before, there are three frontiers (formerly called wedges), along which both players must array their cards (characters, units and leaders) in rows. You pay the cost to play them in resource points and discarded cards, carefully managing your hand to gradually create an ever-shifting, combat-oriented tableau. The first player to defeat two of the three frontiers wins the game, unless you manage to take out your opponent's leader first, or the other player burns through their deck, in which case you'll achieve a swifter victory.

But while cards can enter the fray from the start, those frontiers can't be properly contested until a series of objectives – historic-event milestones specific to your faction – have been achieved, one by one, making the game as much a race as it is a battle.

There is a strong narrative element, which delivers its chronological and character-based beats with punchy, immersive flavour text. This, you soon realise, is fundamental to the experience. After all, Hall's research is impressively thorough, with every card relating to someone who really lived and fought at the battle, or something that really happened, its text complemented by some wonderfully vivid artwork.

It's here that *1565* distinguishes itself from its 11th Century-set progenitor, especially through the way its story bears out the asymmetric elements of the gameplay. In this sense it's marginally superior to 1066, perhaps because it's based on a conflict where the two sides were more extremely contrasted. The Ottomans are all about superior numbers and artillery, constantly bombarding their foes in wave after wave of attack. The Knights, meanwhile, are more about resilience, bearing up under extreme pressure and trying to prevail with fewer, stronger troops.

As with all of Hall's games, a solo play mode is included (with the added bonus of a resource dial for the AI player, replacing 1066's fiddly paper chart), but *1565* is far better enjoyed as a straight-up head-to-head, where the clash of momentous, history-changing forces is more truly felt.

DAN JOLIN

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- 166 Cards
- 40 Red wooden teardrop tokens
- 40 Green wooden teardrop tokens
- 22 Cardboard attribute modifier tokens
- 1 First player token
- 1 Solo play resource dial



WE SAY

16th Century conflict comes to life in a superbly engaging two-player card battle that encapsulates one of history's greatest sieges.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED 1066, TEARS TO MANY MOTHERS...

It's a no-brainer, really. If 1066 Conquered your Williams, then 1565 is guaranteed to, er, Valette your Jean Parisot.

A GAME OF CAT AND MOUTH

A practically purr-fect party game

Designer: Exploding Kittens | **Publisher:** Exploding Kittens

15m | 2 | 7+ | £26





WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- Folding gameboard/box
- 2 Magnetic cat paw flickers
- 24 Plastic balls
- Cat face

tabletop GAMING MUST-PLAY

Sometimes, it doesn't feel like dexterity games get their due. It's easy to take a look at a bumper board game box, and think that these are the great games. The ones you get your teeth into. The ones your shelves groan at the weight from. If you compare that to a physically light, dexterity game where you haven't got to plan your move ten spaces in advance or read a rulebook longer than some novels, it rarely wins.

That's a shame, because you have games like *A Game of Cat and Mouth*, that are just an utter delight. The game is handed to you almost like a psychedelic coloured briefcase, complete with handle, which is held perfectly closed by magnets. Upon opening, it falls into two sides, and you'll need to insert a large plastic cat head (of course) that slots into the middle, acting as the divider, card pieces to insert to act as the bumpers, and a magnetic cat paw that sits on either side to become the flicker.

That of course, is the purpose of the game. Half pinball, half arcade basketball, and a dollop of air hockey. The cat paw is held in place by a strong magnet, but which you can use to teeter the paw into a perfect flicker. You'll then flick the four yellow balls provided to hit the hard to reach nose out, send all of your balls to the other side, or try to knock out the teeth (white balls) of the cat in the centre. Knock all three to your opponent's side, and you'll win the turn, but they can try to flick them back through to your side, so you'll need to be fast and accurate – easier said than done.

There's a balance of skill and ultimately luck – though, with the frequency I lose, this may be the determination of a sore loser. This allows for a surprisingly balanced game however, and one in which achieving a winning streak is beyond satisfying. And whilst the game is limited to two players, they've thought of this – there's a tournament builder available online. There's even a Spotify playlist you can use, featuring hits such as Pinball Wizard and We Are the Champions. You'll be grinning like a Cheshire cat.

For such a lightweight game, it packs a real punch, because it's wholly addictive. Each time you take up the mantle of the cat paw, you're obsessed with finding a new and better tactic to win. Do you spend time going for the nose? Do you steadily aim for the teeth? Or just try your best to aim every ball between the tiny gap and into the other players side for victory? The sheer enjoyment of such a simple game cannot be overstated. When you're done, you just pull a few components out, and fold the game perfectly back up into its neat little case. There's something pleasing about the contrast between epic battle to neat case within a minute.

The problem is, that as soon as it is packed away, it calls to you, presumably in tiny meows. Meows, translating into "I bet if you played again, you'd win this time", and then a second Meow translating into "I'm so easy to set up", and a third Meow of "just play the game!"

It's a simple concept, executed fantastically, for maximum fun.

CHARLIE PETTIT

WE SAY

A must play game should be one to recommend again and again and again, and the simple entertainment this gives warrants the recommendation.

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Wolfgang Warsch
The Quacks of Quedlinburg
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