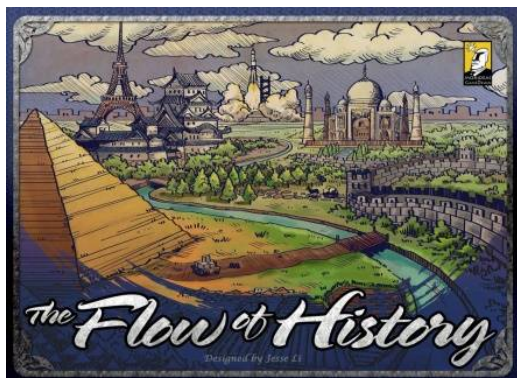# Spiel '16

Pevans reports from Essen

2016's Spiel games fair was bigger again – the organisers (Friedhelm Merz Verlag) had over a thousand new games listed before the event and had taken an extra hall at the Messe (exhibition centre) in Essen. The show is ever more international, too, with less than half the exhibitors coming from Germany this year.

There are, of course, far too many new games to be able to try them all. I used to try to make sure I at least saw everything, but this year I've realised I have to give up on this as well. The usual refrain after Spiel is "Did you see…?" To which the response is too often, "No, where the hell was that?!"

So, my report will concentrate on my personal highlights, particularly the games I did get to play during Spiel (though not necessarily at the show – there's a lot of games playing going on in hotels and

In the halls on Wednesday evening – there's lots of unpacking to do

restaurants all round the city). Note that when I refer to game being like another, I am not suggesting it's a copy. This is just a shorthand way of describing a game by reference to another.

Let me start with the game at the top of my list: *The Flow of History*, designed by Jesse Li and published by Moaideas Game Design in Taiwan. I've noticed Moaideas at Spiel in the past, but mainly to wonder how it's pronounced: Moa-Ideas, maybe? This time I got to sit down with them and try their latest game. *The Flow of History* is a neat, card-based civilisation development game. It has resonances with *Through the Ages* and *Innovation*. Right up my street!

The game's main component is the large format cards. The cards represent different aspects of civilisation – familiar things like military, leaders, knowledge and, of course, wonders. The last of these mainly provide victory points while the others help players develop their civilisation – though only the most recent one of each type has its full effect. The cards are divided into Ages, too, so there's also historical development through the ages.

Explaining *The Flow of History* with the initial cards available to players

Players have two ways of acquiring cards. They can bid on them one round and take them the next. Or they can pay a player what they bid on a card and take that one. There's a reward for the player who loses out on the card, of course, so there are tactical opportunities here. Players bid with the generic 'resources' they hold, so another important action is acquiring more these – having the right cards will help with.

Finally, some cards have actions on them, so players' last option each round is to use one of the actions they have. For example, the action on the "Bureaucracy" Government card allows the player to just take a Government card – though the new card goes on top of Bureaucracy, so they (probably) won't get to use the action again.

Much of what a player can do depends on the icons visible on all their cards. For example, gathering resources will be more effective the more "Harvest" icons they have. This is, of course, another thing to weigh up when deciding what cards to buy. There's a lot to like in this game. I got to play through two Ages at Spiel and thoroughly enjoyed it. So much so that, as Moaideas had sold out at the show, I ordered a copy of the game. It gets a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale and expect a full review once my copy's arrived. Moaideas can be found on Facebook (www.facebook.com/Moaideas).

Second on my list is *Oilfield*, designed by Paco Yanez, and published by Spanish firm abba Games. This was another game I actually got to play at the show. The setting is the Texas oilfields where the players are wannabe oil barons with some funds. First, they have to buy a lease for a plot in one of the oilfields. Once they have somewhere to put it, they can buy a drilling rig. Depending on the type of rig, it will produce oil and/or gas. Players can sell this

to the local market, where it brings in a set amount of money (or points), or to the national market for a variable amount.

The interesting bit is how players get to take their actions each turn. They have one ublic action and one private one. First, players place their meeple on a public action. This is done in turn order and there are limited spaces for each action – notably there's only one space for becoming first player. Then players secretly choose a second action from their cards – a slightly different set of actions. The public actions are then carried out in order, followed by private actions in player order – which may be different by now.

You can immediately see (some of) the tactical opportunities and decisions for players. Added to this, the leases are limited, there are different drilling rigs that have different properties – some of them send what they produce direct to market, which can be very useful. Plus, players can choose to 'invest' cash. This buys them victory points – and money isn't worth anything at the end of the game if you haven't done this. In a neat touch, players can get their money back during the game and may even make a profit on it, so it really is an investment.

I thoroughly enjoyed my introduction to *Oilfield*. The abba guys provided me with a review copy, which has already made it to the table at the Swiggers games club, so expect a full review in due course. For the time being, *Oilfield* gets a provisional 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. The (English language) abba Games website is abbagames.com/eng if you want to find out more.

Playing *Oilfield* with some derricks in operation and a round just starting

Our game of *Summit*: my (red) climber is about to be cruelly beaten to the peak. The karma track on the far side shows we've all been good … so far.

Making our first exploration of Spiel on Thursday morning, my roommate – Pete Card as usual – and I stopped at Inside Up to try their game, *Summit: the board game*. This is a successful Kickstarter project with delivery expected early next year. Designed by Conor McGoey, the game is a tricky challenge of mountaineering survival. It comes in two versions (well, technically, three: it can also be played solitaire). The co-operative game is played as a team, racing against time to climb the mountain and descend safely. Naturally, we played the competitive version with a couple of German gamers.

You start at base camp, outfitting your climber with rations, oxygen and equipment. Both very necessary, but they add to the weight you're carrying, which slows you down. To begin with, there's no way up the mountain. Players construct this by playing triangular tiles to add climbing pitches as they ascend. These can be easy, lengthy or icy.
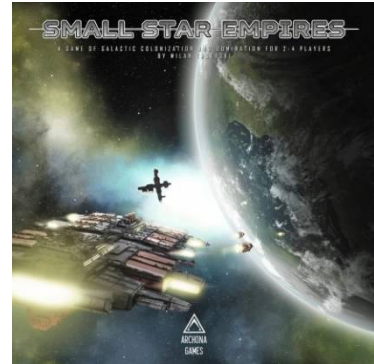
Players score points according to the order they reach waypoints up – and down – the mountain. Halfway also allows players to re-equip, something I neglected to do (I was going for a light, fast strategy). Thus there's an incentive to be first. However, there's also something to be said for following another player, allowing them to pioneer the ascent and looking for shortcuts to sneak ahead of them.

This is tough enough, but players also need to survive the events that crop up. Actually, these can be good or bad, but the bad ones seem to have more impact. Players also have cards they can play to help or hinder their opponents. The neat thing is that helping opponents improves your karma, giving you reserves that can be very useful. Hindering the opposition reduces your karma and can leave you in, like, a bad place, man.

It's not enough to get to the summit, you also have to get safely back to base camp – something I didn't take into account. I was pipped to the peak and then ran out of oxygen on my way down: epic fail! The descent is a bit easier, since routes are already there, making it more of a race. Unless your opponents mess around with the tiles.

There's a hefty random element in *Summit*, but it was great fun. The karma track is a clever mechanism for balancing the "take that!" elements of the game: stitching up other players is good fun, but may well rebound on you. I'd guess that the co-operative game is quite tense – time is not an element in the competitive game. I give *Summit* a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale and suggest you take a look at insideupgames.com to find out more.

Our next stop was at Archona Games, another new publisher with a successful Kickstarter project. In this case, the game is *Small Star Empires*, a quick playing area control game with a science fiction theme. Pete and I played the simplest version, starting with four spaceships on our home planet on a playing area made up of hexagonal spaces showing different star systems.

In turn, players move one ship in a straight line, crossing their own or empty spaces to end in an unoccupied space. They place a colony on the space the ship stops on, claiming the points (depending on the size of the star system) for themselves. Alternatively, they place a trade station, which will score according to the number of opponents' pieces next to it at the end of the game. Apart from the points, the key thing is that this restricts players' freedom of movement. Hence just where your ships are and the options for moving are crucial. If you want to make things more complicated, just add wormholes into the game.

Our game of *Small Star Empires* nears its end (I'm green, Pete's blue)

Relying on my Go experience, I set out to claim the outlines of a territory to fill in later. This didn't work too well as Pete got ships behind my line and finished a few points ahead. *Small Star Empires* is a bit abstract for my taste, but I enjoyed playing it rather more than I expected. It plays quickly and I will be interested to see how it works as a multi-player game. For the time being, it gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. You can find out more at www.archonagames.com

A high priority for me – and Pete – to visit this year was PSC Games. The first person we bumped into there was in fact Ian Brody, main man at Griggling Games. He was demonstrating his latest, *Quartermaster General 1914*, which is being jointly published by Griggling and PSC. As the name suggests, this applies the logistics-focused *Quartermaster General* system to the First World War. The game is for up to five players as two teams, representing the Entente powers (France, UK, Russia) on one side and the Central powers (Austria-Hungary, Germany) on the other.

The board shows Europe and the Near East, divided into areas. As with the other *Quartermaster General* games, gameplay is card driven with each player having a separate deck representing their nation (or, in this game, combination of nations: Austria-Hungary is also Turkey, for example – Ian was clear that Turkey did not have enough to do on its own). Cards allow players to place and attack with their armies and navies. Less obviously, they let players build up reserves to attack or defend or force their opponents to discard cards – running out of cards is an important element.

Quartermaster General 1914 being demoed. It looks like it's almost over for the Central Powers (Germany only has two armies on the board), just don't ask me what a French army (dark blue) is doing in Bulgaria.

The PSC element comes in with the playing pieces: armies and navies are represented by soldiers and battleships (not to the same scale!) in each nation's colour. The figures are nicely moulded, using a hard enough plastic that there is plenty of detail on the models, but also soft enough that they're not brittle and bits break off. There aren't very many of them, though, as the emphasis of the game is on supply, rather than battles.

Having enjoyed all the *Quartermaster General* games so far, I'm really looking forward to trying this one. Ian professed himself very pleased with the way the game system works for the First World War. He reckons it gives players tricky decisions to make if they want to avoid a constant stalemate – which is, at least, historically accurate. I give it a provisional 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. For more from Griggling, take a look at www.grigglinggames.com
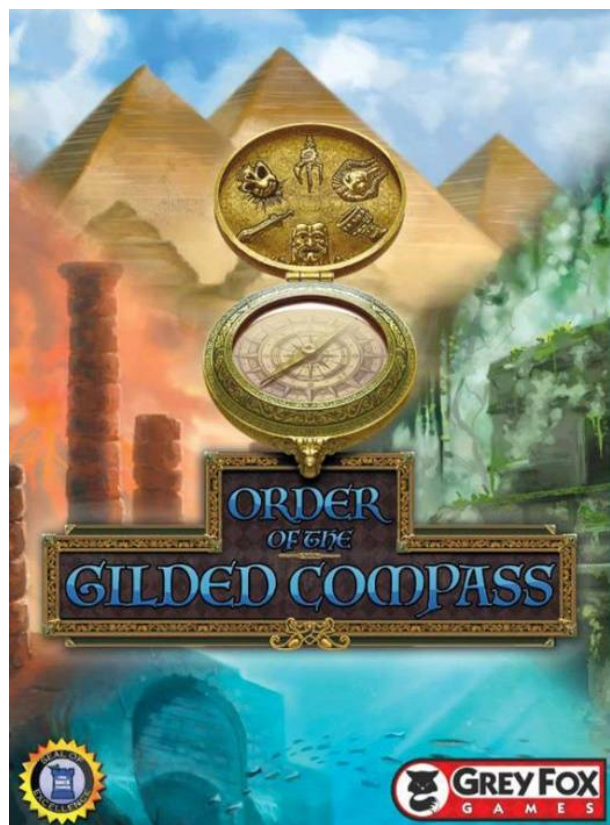
Also on PSC's stand – but getting less attention from me – was *Hold the Line: the American Revolution*, a joint production with Worthington Games. This merges some of Worthington's earlier wargames titles (notably *Hold the Line* and *Clash for a Continent*) and has more super models from PSC, this time in 1/72nd scale (familiar to me from the Airfix models of my childhood). I didn't look more closely at the game, though.

Piquing my interest rather more was the prototype of *Lincoln*, which PSC Games plans to publish next year. Two things got my attention: it's a one-hour game of the American Civil War – my period when it comes to wargames – and the designer is Martin Wallace. This will be a card-driven, two-player game that covers the whole war at a national scale. The aim of the Confederates is to either win before the North can fully mobilise or last long enough to get European support. The Union needs to block the South initially and then build up the military strength to take 'em out. Definitely a game I'm looking forward to. For more on all the PSC games, see their website at www.pscgames.co.uk

Come Thursday evening and I had an introduction to *Order of the Gilded Compass*, designed by Jeffrey Allers and Bernd Eisenstein and published by Grey Fox Games. This dice game is a development of their *alea jacta est* from 2009. Here the theme is archaeological. The game is played over a set of buildings (tiles) that provide rewards for players placing sets of dice, according to each building's requirements.

The buildings also provide different rewards: places, people and things. Archaeological sites, for example, are worth points themselves. Archaeologists both score points if assigned to an appropriate site and increase the value of the site. Artefacts score points according to players' individual goals. And so on.

As you can see, the trick is getting the best out of the scoring system. This will be different between players and change from

game to game. This should make for a challenging game that is different each time you play. However, it left me cold. In particular, there's significant down time between turns as players don't want to roll their dice until the previous player has taken their turn so that they can't react to this. I give it a provisional 5/10 on my highly subjective scale. Form your own impression at www.greyfoxgames.com

I don't often manage to sit down at Queen Games, but Pete Card and I got the chance to try one of their new games this year. I could see two new games on show. The first one was *London Markets*, a design from Michael Schacht that is a development of his *Dschunke* (Junk – as in Chinese ship) from 2002. As I recall, this was an interesting trading game in a floating market with players moving from ship to ship by placing 'planks' between them. As the name suggests, *London Markets* moves the action to London, with five marketplaces scattered around the city.
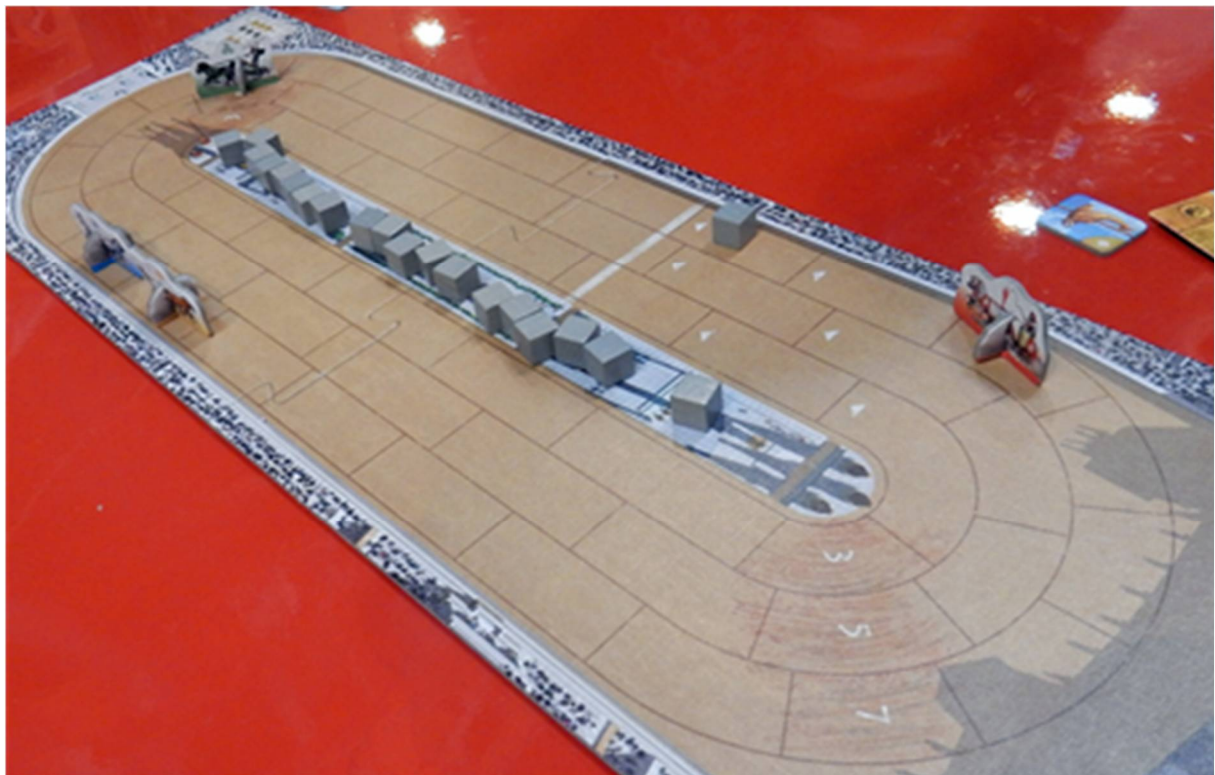
The second game, which Pete and I tried with a German couple, is *World Monuments*, designed by Piero Cioni. The game starts with a board showing the plan of a monument (such as St Peter's Basilica in Rome). A diagram then shows how the building will be built up of coloured bricks in specific layers.

Game play takes two parts each round: first players collect bricks, then they place them. A selection of bricks is placed randomly on concentric rings on a board. Players take it in turns to move a pawn up to three spaces around these, collecting bricks along the way. The bricks go behind players' screens. Once all the bricks have gone, the second phase starts. Players take it in turns to add one brick to the building under construction – according to specific restrictions. They score points for the level they place their brick on.

World Monuments is a neat little game with lots of tactical niceties. There are four different buildings in the box and, of course, plenty of scope for more buildings to expand

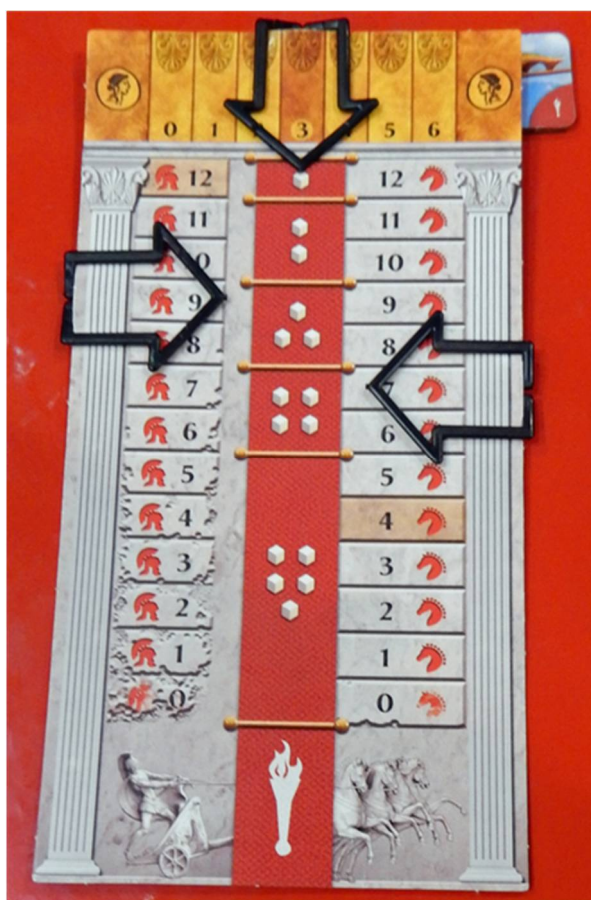Display of *World Monuments* components (courtesy of Queen Games)

Playing *Chariot Race*: red is about to complete the first lap well ahead – assuming it dodges that caltrop…

the game. I enjoyed playing it and would be happy to do so again – if someone brought it along. It gets 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. Queen Games' website will have more information: www.queen-games.de

Moving on to the rather red Pegasus stand, Pete and I were able to try *Chariot Race*, a dice game from Matt Leacock (published by Eagle-Gryphon in the US). We were joined by a German father and daughter (who was much amused by playing a German game in English). As the name suggests, this is chariot racing in ancient Rome, played on a small board representing the Circus Maximus. The first chariot to complete two laps wins.

However, it's not just about the race: players can throw spears, drop caltrops or ram other chariots. What you can do in a turn depends on the results of your initial die roll. First, the slower you're going the more dice you roll and you have one opportunity to re-roll some/all of your dice. The dice faces allow you to increase speed, reduce speed, change lanes, attack another chariot or gain a 'Fate' point. These last can be used to repair your chariot or for extra dice re-rolls.

In race order, players roll their dice, make any adjustments and move their chariot. The track is three lanes wide with speed limits around the corners – exceeding these damages your chariot. Moving onto another chariot damages both. Note that you can only change lanes if you've rolled a change lane symbol, so you may have no choice about hitting another chariot. If your damage reaches zero, your chariot is wrecked and you're out (no being dragged behind your horses in this game!). No prizes for guessing who wrecked his chariot in the final straight in our game – and I'd been so careful until then!

Red's personal *Chariot Race* board, showing a speed of 7, 9 damage points left and three Fate points available

The game ends once someone completes their second lap, but all players complete their moves and the winner is the chariot that's furthest forward. *Chariot Race* was entertaining stuff and the dice rolling mechanism reminded me strongly of Matt's *Roll Through the Ages* games. It didn't grab me, though. In particular, I felt I was at the mercy of the dice (especially when it came to changing lanes) rather than using them to control my race. It gets a provisional 6/10 on my highly subjective scale and I will be trying it again. Pegasus Spiele can be found at www.pegasus.de/en (for the English language website).

Sit Down! is a French publisher that's been around for a few years, but I haven't seen much from them. They had two games on show this year. The first is *Goths Save the Queen*, a bonkers card game for two teams of Goth warriors (depicted in Astérix-style cartoons) trying to avoid the traps and find the hidden queen card. At first sight, the other game, *ekö*, looked like another game set on Mars – there were several Mars games as Spiel this year – because of the orange-red desert depicted on the board.

In fact, there's a whole fantasy back-story that sets up the players as the cursed souls of generals, eternally fighting to be top dog. The actual game, designed by Henri Kermarrec, looks very abstract with players' pieces being Draughts-style wooden discs – one of them the Emperor (distinguished with different artwork). Pete and I played a two-player game, which starts with all the players' pieces filling the clear spaces of the board's hexagonal grid.

The first thing a player does in their turn is to move a piece – or stack of pieces – as far as they want across unoccupied playing spaces. This can be a simple move, can combine stacks (to a maximum of four pieces) or can remove a smaller enemy stack. A stack of four pieces is not safe, however, as it can be eliminated by a single piece in a kamikaze attack that also gets rid of the attacker. Having made their move, players can then remove a stack to build, upgrade or take over a building in an adjacent (non-clear) space. Buildings are worth points and one way to win is to hit 12 points worth and hold the centre of the board.

The final thing players do each turn is to put up to three of their removed pieces back on the board. The crucial thing here is that these can only be added to one existing stack. Initially, this allows players to build bigger stacks, but it quickly becomes a limitation: you simply can't get all your pieces back onto the board. Thus, as the game proceeds, the board gets emptier, allowing stacks to move around freely and making it difficult to establish defensive positions. The second way to win is to remove your opponent's pieces.

ekö in progress: I've captured Pete's Emperor at this point

Playing *ekö* proved to be tricky as the game changed significantly as the board emptied. Our initial building strategies were abandoned as we began to run out of pieces. It ended with Pete having a single, four-piece stack against my singleton. I took him out, leaving the board empty. The rules don't cover this eventuality, so the Sit Down! guys put in a call to the designer to get a ruling. I thought Pete should win, having the higher value of buildings on the board, but the decision was that my kamikaze took the game.

It would be interesting to see how the dynamics of a four-player game would work. However, *ekö* is just not my kind of game and I don't think I'll be bothering to find out. It gets 5/10 on my highly subjective scale. To form your opinion, find out more at www.sitdown-games.com

Pete and I were intrigued by the rubber strips that are part of the second edition of *Stellar Conflict* on display at Artipia Games' stand. We stopped to investigate and were enticed into trying the game by the charming demonstrator. It's a quick-playing game of spaceship battles and Pete enjoyed it enough to buy a copy, allowing us to play a more considered game one evening.

Each player has set of spaceship cards and selects a total points value of these, depending on the size of battle chosen. Players then have a limited time – controlled by a sand timer – to place their ships on the playing area, lining up their weaponry on enemy ships. This is actually quite tricky. If you wait to get good tactical positions, you may run out of time – and space – to get all your ships down (that'll be me). However, place them quickly and you're just putting down targets for the other players (oh, me again).

Then it's time to resolve the battle. Ships have an initiative number and fire in this order. This is where the rubber strips come in: they're used to extend the straight lines from the ship cards to see what they hit. Depending on the strength of the weapon,

Part of our *Stellar Conflict* game. The black cubes are cargo
'liberated' from enemy ships and worth a point each.

damage is inflicted on the first card hit – unless the ship is protected by a shield. Chips are placed on the ship to show the damage so far. It's destroyed when the damage exceeds its protection and the player who inflicted the most damage gets the card as points. It is entirely possible to destroy your own ships, in which case the card scores penalty points.

I found *Stellar Conflict* a really entertaining game. Placing your ships is frantic fun and is the heart of the game. Working out the results of the battle is more leisurely and it's quite impossible to predict who's won. I think it's a great little filler and give it 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. Find out more from Artipia Games (artipiagames.com) or the US publisher, Stronghold Games (www.strongholdgames.com).

Friday evening at the hotel saw us trying *Flamme Rouge*, designed by Asger Harding Granerud and published by Lautapelit in Finland. This is a tactical cycling race game. Each player has two cyclists, represented by slightly different models. The 'sprinteur' is standing on the pedals, while the 'rouleur' is crouched over the handlebars. Some people did have trouble distinguishing them. This is a problem because players have separate decks of cards for each cyclist and it all goes horribly wrong if you play a card for one of them only to find it's the other one moving.

The race track is made up of straight and curved tiles, assembled according to the 'stage' card drawn (presumably, you could make up your own, too). The bike pieces line up at the start and move according to the cards played, from front to back. Here players need to estimate what the cyclists in front of them are going to do – ending on an occupied space bumps you back. Then any cyclist or group of cyclists with exactly one empty space in front of them, slipstreams forward.

Conversely, cyclists with more than one empty space in front of them add an 'exhaustion' card to their deck. These have a standard value of '2', so they will allow your cyclists to move, just rather slowly. Picking up the odd exhaustion card is okay, but having a lot really clogs up your deck. Hence, just as in real bike races, it doesn't pay to be at the

Display of *Flamme Rouge* components (courtesy of Lautapelit)

front. Except at the finish, of course. Add in special rules for climbing and descending mountains and you have a clever little game that's a decent simulation of a bike race. We just need some *pavé* now to cover the whole Tour de France.

My only problem is that the game does go on a bit longer than I'd like – after half an hour, I'd had enough. Mind you, this may have been because I drew high cards initially and my cyclists broke away at the start, which is not the way to win. It took a while to let the pack catch up, by which time I'd lost out on a lot of slipstreaming. I give *Flamme Rouge* a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale and look forward to playing it again. Lautapelit is at www.lautapelit.fi/HOME (in English).

Ostia Spiele had a table on the Abacus stand where main man Stefan Risthaus was demonstrating his (and Ostia's) new card game, *Tallinn*. Each player has their own copy of the same set of double-ended cards. These are played so that only one end counts, the other being hidden under the previous card. Each shows icons for the members of three guilds and some trigger scoring for one guild.

The aim is to have the most members of a guild when scoring is triggered. You score for this and may also turn over the card to reveal a tower. There is bonus scoring for the towers at the end of the hand, along with further points for the

Display of *Tallinn* components (courtesy of Ostia Spiele)

largest holding in each guild. Thus there are incentives both to get towers and not to. *Tallinn* looks a clever tactical game and plays in just 20 minutes or so. I have picked up a copy since Spiel and look forward to giving it a go. Ostia Spiele is to be found at www.ostia-spiele.de

It's been a few years since I've spoken to Hans van Tol, the genial main man at Dutch publisher The Game Master. He's been busy leading teams on missions in *Countdown: Special Ops* – and looks quite intimidating dressed up as a Special Forces operative! However, this year he was in plain clothes and The Game Master has a new board game I was keen to take a look at.

Rhodes is subtitled "a light strategic board game" and that's a reasonable way of summing it up. It's nominally set on the island of Rhodes in ancient times, as the cover art makes clear (look, there's the Colossus!). Players are farmers and traders on the island where business centres on the port in Rhodes town. Each round they get two actions, taken one at a time, and must then decide where they want to be in turn order next round. This is a clever little mechanism on its own: if they really want to be first, players have to pay. However, if they're short of resources, they can gain a few by settling for last place.

Players start with a farm tile and a few ships. They can expand this with additional farmland and building tiles. Land tiles produce goods – production itself is a neat mechanism that provides tactical options – and have limited storage. Buildings provide bonuses (extra production, say) and other options (swapping types of goods, for example). Players can load their goods onto ships which – along with Egyptian (ie neutral) ships – line up through the 'harbour'.

Rhodes display on The Game Master's stand. There's a lot going on…

Goods on ships can be bought by players to go into their warehouses in the city. Or, if a ship reaches the end of the harbour (with its contents getting cheaper all the way), the goods go into the player's warehouse for free. There is thus a dual incentive for shipping goods into the harbour: for the cash if someone else buys them or for the goods if they're not bought.

Ominoes in play

Goods in warehouses can be used to complete contracts (called 'assignments' in the rules) to bring in cash and, of course, victory points. While there are other ways of getting points, the contracts seem to be the major source. They also control the length of the game: it finishes at the end of the round when the contracts have run out. Players' remaining goods and cash are worth a few more points and the most points wins.

Rhodes is an entertaining lightweight game that offers players some interesting decisions and tactical options. Having played it once, I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale and expect to be playing it again. You can find The Game Master at www.thegamemaster.nl

British publisher YAY Games is best known for the rather gruesome *Frankenstein's Bodies*. However, this year they had an abstract game to show us. *Ominoes* uses dice with Egyptian hieroglyphs on the faces. Four of these are the players' symbols, with the aim being to score points by getting a line of four or more of your symbol on the board. First to a specific number of points wins.

It's the way the game works that makes it interesting. In their turn, players pick up a die and roll it. Before they place it on the board, however, they first move a matching die. This gives them plenty of scope for wrecking their opponents' plans as well as trying to score. Add in the special actions provided by the other two sides of the dice (one moves and the other re-rolls any die) and you've got something quite challenging and surprisingly interactive.

Ominoes is still quite light, though, and not really my kind of game. I give it a provisional 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. It's another one I'll play if someone else brings it along. For more on YAY Games, see www.yaygames.uk

I don't have to go far to see what StrataMax are up to, as the guys stay in the same hotel as me. What took me by surprise was that they had produced a slew of little card games this year. The first of these was a proper, boxed version of *Airborne Commander*. Designed by Aaron Lauster, this is a solitaire card game of D-Day paratroops. I have a copy of the (limited) initial release and really struggle with it: I just can't win! If you want a tough challenge, take it on. I give it 6/10 on my highly subjective scale.

The most surprising StrataMax game was *Princesses and Unicorns*, designed by Aaron and main man Max Michael. This is a quick-playing bidding game with players trying to win crowns, gowns and frogs – things no self-respecting princess should be without! *Sheepdogs* is also designed by Aaron and Max. It's a trick-taking game with four 'suits' of different sheep – amusingly illustrated – with sheepdogs as trump cards and wolves as hazards, changing who wins the trick.

I'm running out of beer to spill: time to cut and run? Or roll the dice one more time?
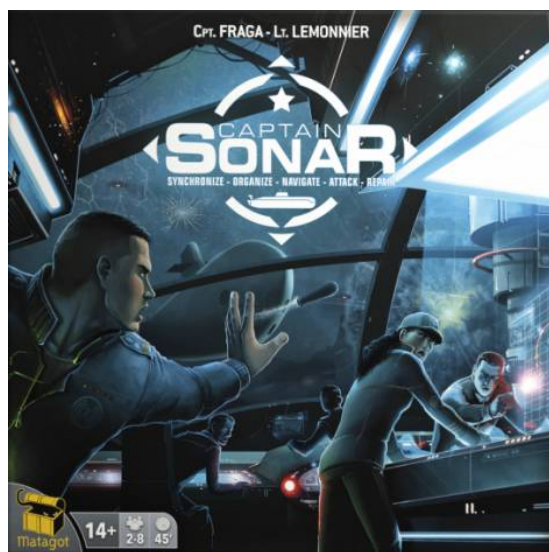
The game I played, however, is *Bavarian Holiday*, taking on Max in a two-player game. This is a push-your-luck game of dice rolling around the theme of drinking German beer. What's not to like? Players start with a sheet on which they will cross off what they've rolled/drunk: pils, altbier and weizen. Each of these beers is represented by different coloured dice and players have a free choice as to which dice to roll.

The tricky part is rolling numbers you haven't already crossed off, otherwise you commit the cardinal crime of spilling your beer. Spill too many beers and you're out. Or you can quit while you're ahead – the first player to call it a day and head home gets a bonus (buying flowers for their spouse!). The way out when things get tricky is to eat a pretzel, though there's a limited number of these, too.

I found *Bavarian Holiday* good fun – even though Max drank me under the table. Nearing the limit of spilled drinks, I went home with the bunch of flowers, but Max carried on drinking and somehow crossed off everything on his sheet! It is enhanced by the little wooden pieces used to illustrate aspects of the game – yes, there's a little bunch of flowers piece. I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. You can find StrataMax online at www.stratamaxgames.com

I had spotted the screens set up at the Matagot stand for their large-scale demo game of *Captain Sonar* and was pleased when Richard Dewsbery produced a copy to play back at the hotel on Saturday evening. This game is a submarine battle for two teams. Up to four players are in each submarine's crew and have specific roles, each with their own board to mark their progress on. Screens down the middle of table block sight of what the other team is up to.

The Captain is in charge, of course. They plot the submarine's course and give orders to the others. The Signals operator listens to what the opposition is doing and tries to work out their position for the Captain. The Mate (First officer, surely?) prepares equipment, including torpedoes, sonar and silent running. However, each of these takes several turns to get ready. The cost of doing things is that the Engineer must cross off a system on his schematic of the sub every turn, depending on what the Captain orders. If a

specific set of systems is crossed off, they will self-repair. However, if anything is offline, that equipment can't be used.

The immediate appeal of the game is obvious: "Launch torpedoes!" "Dive, dive dive!" Not to mention klaxon noises. Having got that out of my system, there is a serious, challenging game here. The players really do need to work as a team. Otherwise, as my group demonstrated, you can be sunk by failing systems on your own boat! (We lost one system, were hit by a torpedo and then finished ourselves off, having got the enemy's position completely wrong.)

We played *Captain Sonar* as a learning game, with each team taking turns. Once players know what they're doing, the game is played in real time, which adds another layer of difficulty. I suspect it will need an umpire if people are playing seriously. It was also great fund and I hope to have another go at Mid*Con*. For the time being it gets a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. www.matagot.com is the Matagot website.

The charming Björn Müller-Mätzig introduced me to his game, *Da Yunhe: Der Grosse Kaiserkanal*, published by his own imprint, Müller-Mätzig Spiele. The title refers to China's Grand Canal, which runs from Beijing to Hanzhou. (According to Wikipedia, the oldest parts of the canal date back to the 5th century BC, although the various sections were only combined a thousand years later.) The story of the game is that the canal has been sabotaged by rioters and the players are competing for the Emperor's favour by restoring (or building new) sections.

I had to wait a while after Spiel to get the English translation of the rules and be able to play the game. Players' actions each round depend on which action card they take. The start player gets to choose from all 10, passing the remaining 9 to the next player and so on. This gives players plenty of choice. Each card has three actions on it, in the form of icons, so there's a bit of a learning curve getting to grips with these (as a player aid, I printed off extra copies of the rulebook's last page which explains all the icons).
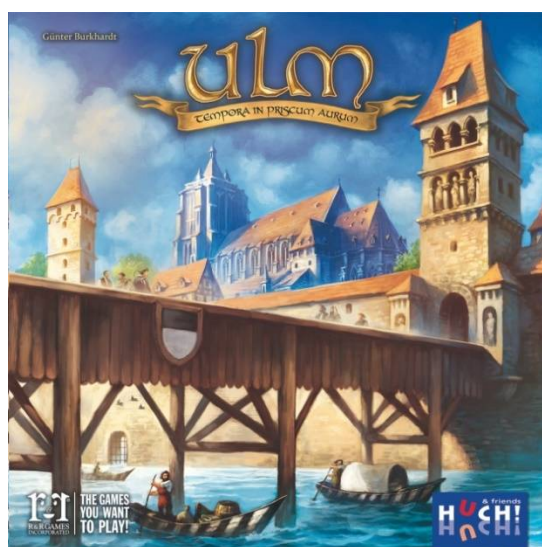
One action is adding hexagonal canal tiles from the player's stacks to their available stock. From there, they can be placed on the board with the build action to score the points value of

Da Yunhe being demonstrated

the tile. Each player's set of tiles includes 'Unrest' tiles, which can be used to attack other players. Some of these start on the board. If built over, they go to a smaller, side board and the owning player can lose points for them – other actions can affect this. At the end of the round, the 'Inspector' travels along the canal, rewarding players for their completed sections and penalising them for any Unrest. The game ends when the inspector has completed four journeys – at least eight rounds, by my reckoning.

The mechanisms of the game are quite intricate, so there's a lot to think about. The consequent issue is the amount of downtime between turns. Despite having selected their card at the start of the round, players can't really plan their turn as other players' actions will change the situation on the board. It's an interesting game that I will certainly be playing again. For the time being *Da Yunhe* gets 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. The publisher's website is www.mueller-maetzig-spiele.de

I acquired a copy of *Ulm* courtesy of Frank diLorenzo, proprietor of R&R Games. Designed by Günter Burkhardt, this is the English language edition of the game (with Huch! & friends producing the game in German and dV Giochi in Italian). The game is, of course, about the German city of Ulm (which I previously only knew of because it's on the *Thurn & Taxis* board) and the construction of its cathedral.

The board shows the 'quarters' (there are eight of them!) of the city with the river Danube running between them. Each player has a 'barge' (a wooden piece) on the river and will move this forward. The quarters a player's barge is alongside define where they can place their 'seals' (wooden discs). Seals give players some sort of bonus, generally extra resources, depending on the specific quarter. Players also score points according to how far their barge has moved at the end of the game.

How players get their actions is a clever little sub-game of its own. The game starts with a 3 x 3 matrix of square tiles. Each turn, the current player draws a tile from the bag (and may be able to change this in some way, depending on what resources and/or special abilities they have). They slide their tile into the matrix, pushing along one row or column – but only if hasn't already been moved. They then get to do the three actions now in the row/column they moved. These can be to move their barge, place a seal (which costs money), take money, take tiles that have been pushed out of the matrix or buy a card (which costs tiles). Cards provide immediate bonuses or victory points at the end of the game.

There are all sorts of tactical considerations bound up in this, on top of choosing which actions the player wants to take. *Ulm* is a clever, involved game with lots of decisions to be made. Having played it a few times, with three and four players, it seems that letting your barge fall behind the other players' pieces is a bad move. So is allowing one player to get several seals in the same quarter – especially if they earning the bonus from having the coat of arms for that quarter (something provided by placing seals in early quarters). Phew! I give *Ulm* 7/10 on my highly subjective scale and expect that it will be

Playing *Ulm* at the Swiggers games club

appearing on the table again soon. For more on R&R, see their website at www.rnrgames.com

That covers the games I got to play at Spiel this year. I'll add to this report as I play more of the new games. My thanks to Friedhelm Merz Verlag for another terrific Spiel: next year's event is 26th-29th October at the usual venue. For more (in English), see www.merz-verlag-en.com