

Spiel '12

Pevans reports from Essen

I was taken by surprise on my annual trip to Essen this year – it was warm! I expect to put on a pullover as well as a jacket when I go outside, not have to take my jacket off. By Sunday afternoon, the sun was blazing down, but it had been getting hotter and more humid in the halls since Wednesday afternoon. Mike Dommert and I drove over this year (it provides so much more luggage space than flying!) and arrived in time to take a turn round the halls while exhibitors were still setting up.

This is my favourite time at Spiel. Most of the stands are complete – some have even been shut up for the night – and it's possible to chat to exhibitors without customers intervening (often). However, you may have to dodge the odd pallet of games or reversing van. Mike made a beeline for the secondhand dealers to hunt down copies of *Ave Caesar* while I said hello to people and had my first look at some of the new releases.

That, of course, is the purpose of this article: to introduce you to the new board games that I saw at the show. To begin with, I'll cover the games I played at the show (less than a

dozen). I'll add more as I play them and will put up as complete a list as I can on my website (www.pevans.co.uk/Reviews is the place to look). A couple of caveats first, though. These are very much my first responses to what may not have been a complete – or accurate – play-through of the game. Secondly, when I say a new game is like an older one, I am not suggesting that it is a copy, this is just a bit of shorthand description.

If all this is new to you, let me explain what I'm talking about. The Spiel games fair is the biggest board games event in the world and is held at the Messe (exhibition centre) in Essen for four days towards the end of October each year. Spiel '12 took place on 18th-21st October and I was there for all four days. What makes Spiel special is that, although plenty of business gets done, it's a public fair and the emphasis is on playing the games. Most of the publishers' stands are spaces with tables and chairs for people to sit and play.

Mike and I joined up with Pete Card and the three of us grabbed a table at the Eggertspiele stand first. Eggert had three new games on display. *Qin* is a Reiner Knizia design with a Chinese theme. It's a territory-grabbing game that looked very abstract to



Setting up at Spiel '12 – at least the vital Snack-Point is open! (M)

me: brightly coloured square tiles to place on the board and bobbin-shaped wooden markers to show ownership. An English language edition is published by R&R Games. Reiner Knizia is also the designer of *Spectaculum*, a game of sponsoring travelling circus shows on their journeys around their kingdom. The winner is the player who makes the most money.

However, the game we played was *Yedo* (designed by Thomas Vande Ginste and Wolf Plancke), set in the Japanese capital during the Shogunate. The board is a colourful representation of the city, divided into districts. Players are clans currying favour with the new Shogun. They send their representatives ("Disciples" in the rules) into the city to carry out missions, which generally require specific items as well as a disciple in the right district(s). Completing a Mission may provide players with money and other assets, but its main purpose is to score some "Prestige" points. The winner is the player with the most prestige after 11 rounds.

Each round starts with an auction. Seven different assets are available for players to auction, but they can only buy one each round. The assets include new disciple pawns, mission cards (players start with some) and weapons. Losing an auction doesn't mean you can't get a particular asset, though. They can also be bought in one or other district on the board. However, it's usually cheaper to get them in the auction. A random event then affects the game before players start placing their disciples. Only a limited number can go into a district – some only have room for one disciple – so turn order can be important here.

In placing their disciples, players must look out for the City Watch, which can arrest them if they're in the wrong place at the wrong time. Then they get to take actions with their disciple pawns. Most districts provide several actions, depending on just where the disciple is placed. They can also be used to complete a Mission. After 11 rounds, players tot up the points from their Missions, add any bonuses and the player with the most points wins.



Yedo in play (P)



Palaces of Carrara on display (M)

I had great fun playing *Yedo*. On first play, it provides a terrific tactical and strategic challenge as well as a great atmosphere. The Missions are part of this atmosphere as well as the main way of scoring points and the focus of the players' strategy. Interestingly, most of the game's mechanisms are very familiar from *Princes of Florence*, but this is a very different game. It was a great start to the fair for me and I give *Yedo* a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

After a sausage in a bun (aka lunch), we eyed up the Hans im Glück stand and were able to grab a table for their new board game, *Die Paläste von Carrara* (*The Palaces of Carrara* is the English language edition from Z-Man Games). Designed by the first rate team of (Michael) Kiesling and (Wolfgang) Kramer, the game features a turntable – not unlike *Ora et Labora*. Like that game, the turntable is divided into sections. The different materials (coloured blocks) used in the game are drawn at random and placed on the turntable, which is then turned to change their prices.

The other major component of the game is a deck of tiles made up of several types of building each in the same range of values. Players can build these by using the right number of blocks. However, the colours used limit which cities these can be allocated to. The cities are worth either money or victory points in different multiples. Of course, it's harder and more expensive to build in the more valuable cities. Players can then score either their buildings in a particular city (each can only be done once in the game) or their buildings of a particular type.

To make things harder, you can only do one of these in a turn: buy some blocks (which has the effect of making those you didn't buy cheaper for other players), use blocks to construct a building (take a tile) or score a city or a building. Scoring also gives the player wooden markers in the shape associated with the building(s). These are worth additional points at the end of the game, as is any surplus cash. The game ends either



Ginkgopolis ready to start (P)

when all the buildings have gone or when someone reaches the specific game end conditions shown (worth a few extra points to the first to get there).

This is a typically clever game from Kramer and Kiesling and, indeed, *Hans im Glück*. It's rather too dry for me to give it top marks, but I enjoyed *The Palaces of Carrara*. I certainly expect it to be much played in coming months. I give it 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Mike and Pete had trouble finding me the following morning (one advantage of a press pass is getting into the halls early and bagging a table), so I had played *Ginkgopolis* with three Scandinavians. ("Newly-weds!" scoffed the eldest of the trio as the young couple opposite us bickered gently.) This is an interesting tile-laying game from Belgian publisher Pearl Games (Z-Man is doing the English language edition), designed by Xavier Georges.

The story of the game is that, in the near future, we will build our cities from Ginkgo Biloba trees. The players are competing urban planners doing just that. They start with some square tiles in the three colours that represent different city functions. Each tile is numbered and numbers 1-3 of each colour form the initial city grid on the table. Players can extend the city by laying new tiles adjacent to it ('urbanizing') or by placing tiles on top of those already in place. They put markers on top of the tile to show ownership: these will score points when someone builds over it or at the end of the game.

What players do in a turn depends on the card they play. There's a card for each tile, which is what is needed to build on top of it. Players keep the card and get the bonus shown on the bottom when they take resources. There's a neat mechanism for getting the cards for new tiles into the deck. Other cards are for urbanising and these are recycled into the deck. Players can also play cards to gain more of the resources – tiles and markers – they need to build the city. Playing the card for a tile 'operates' that part of the city to generate resources.

Several events can trigger the end of the game. Players then get bonuses for each 'district' of the city, according to who has the most markers there. The districts are contiguous groups of the same colour of tile. So, as well as considering the tactical options of placing a tile, you also need to have an eye on the strategic considerations of the districts.

It took a while to get the hang of just what you can do in a turn and then how best to build up the city. It looks like having your markers built over is a good move. Not only do you get immediate points for this, but you get the markers back to re-use. As the supply of these is limited, getting some back is very useful – and I certainly suffered from a shortage of markers. I really enjoyed *Ginkgopolis*, though. It's an ingenious and entertaining game and I give it a provisional 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Italian publisher dV Giochi had several new card games on show. Top of the list was *Samurai Sword*, Emiliano Sciarra's development of his Wild West gunfight game, *Bang!*. As the title suggests, this version has a Japanese setting. To begin with, players choose a role at random. One player will be the Shogun, supported by one or more Samurai, depending on the number of players. Other players are Ninja and there may be one Ronin, again, depending on the number of players.

In their turn, players can play as many cards as they are able to, including one attack. If successful, the attack removes 'Resilience' points from the defender. Lose all your points and you're out until your next turn. You must also give your attacker an 'Honour' point. On the bright side, you're now 'harmless' and can't be attacked until you've taken your next turn. (Players are also harmless if they run out of cards.)



Playing *Samurai Sword*: only 1 hit, but 5 honour and look at that Concentration! (P)

The game ends when one player has lost all their honour (all players lose an honour point when the deck runs out, so the game won't go on for ever). While one team will come out on top, one player on that team will also win, depending on how much honour they have left. *Samurai Sword* is a quick-fire game that is great fun. It addresses the problems I always had with *Bang!* – that it's a knock-out game that can leave players twiddling their thumbs while the others finish the game and that there's nothing for players to do if they have no cards in hand. Add to this the effective Samurai theme and I think this is an even better game than *Bang!*. I give it 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Grosso Modo is a new, French publisher who had an intriguing wargame on show. *Rome & Carthage* is for four players in two teams: Rome and Byzantium versus Carthage and Alexandria. Each player has the same set of army pieces: infantry, chariots, ships and an elephant. However, the strength of any unit in battle depends on the cards played by the player. Again, each player starts with the same set.



Rome and Carthage almost over – the Carthaginians just need Rome (P)

Battles happen when two units are in the same space and will end with one of them being taken off the board. Hence, the game becomes one of cat and mouse around the cards in players' hands. Everybody has one high value card that doesn't come back, but other cards re-cycle, bringing other values into players' hands. The question is: how much do you want to win this battle? How high will your opponent go? And can you afford to lose this piece?

The game is a bit odd: there's no real military strategy, nor any value in taking territory (one side wins by holding both their opponents' capitals). As only the ships can cross the Mediterranean, all the other units are channelled through the Middle East on one side of the board and Spain/North Africa on the other side. They galley's then fight it out for control of the Med. I was not surprised to discover that this is actually a re-print of a game from the 1950s.

However, as well as providing the original game, Grosso Modo have added rules to expand the options available to players – such as using ships to transport ground troops across the sea. Hopefully, these make the game more interesting, since I was not impressed by the base game. It's not without interest – the challenge of out-guessing your opponent being at the core of the game – but I was underwhelmed. *Rome & Carthage* gets a provisional 5/10 on my highly subjective scale.

The three of us hit the Rüttenscheider Hausbrauerei for our evening meal on Friday (day two of the show). This is the German equivalent of a brewpub, serving its own beers and a fine selection of food (mainly involving slabs of meat). Their dark wheat beer is a favourite of mine as it has the key characteristic of good, tasty beer: the more of it you drink, the more you want another one. While drinking our first half litre and waiting for the food, we tried another of dV's games, *Kalesia*. This was billed as the winner of the "best unpublished game" award from last year's Lucca games festival, so I thought it was worth a look.

It worked well with three players as there are three factions fighting for dominance of the forest – a 5x5 grid of cards laid out on the table. Players have a hand of cards dealt from a deck containing cards for all three factions. They also get a secret faction card that identifies who they want to win. The forest cards are resolved in numeric order – though they are laid out randomly. All the players secretly select some cards which are turned over when everybody's chosen. The faction with the highest total across all the cards played wins that section of the forest.

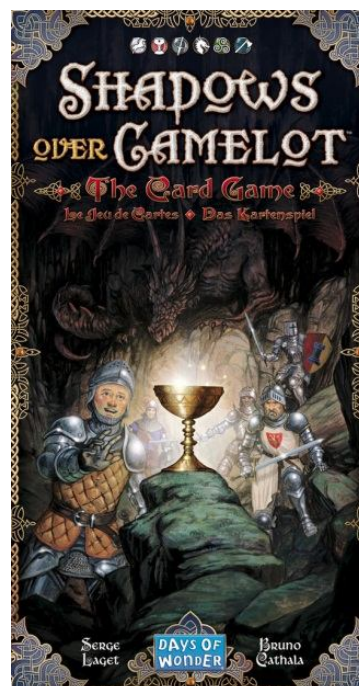
This continues until players have only three cards left. These cards are passed to the player on the left, everybody picks up the cards they've played so far and the game continues. This is a neat touch as it makes you think about which cards you want to pass on as well as which to play. The game ends when any faction gets three forest sections in a row. In a three-player game, the player who was backing that faction wins. With four players, teams of two support each of the main factions, but both teams can lose if the third faction wins.

I thought I was doing well in our game as everybody seemed to have cards for my faction. Pete out-played me, though, getting a win for his faction just as our food arrived. Clearly there's more to this game than is immediately apparent. *Kalesia* is a clever game that plays quickly and with some subtlety. It makes a decent filler for gamers (particularly if you start with an identical set of cards for each player) or a neat family game – though the bare-breasted mermaids may provoke some discussion (their opponents, the equally female centaurs, wear breastplates). I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Having returned to the hotel, we were roped in to a game of *Shadows over Camelot* – the card game. Designed by Bruno Cathala and Serge Laget, this is what the title says: a card game version of their highly successful co-operative board game. As in the original, the players are Knights of the Round Table (though one may be a traitor) and must complete quests to save Camelot from the several threats facing it. Victory or defeat is determined by the number of white and black swords achieved: seven white swords means a win for the Knights, seven black their defeat.

So far, so good and the theme lends itself to much banter around the table – mainly *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, it has to be said. My problem is that this is a memory game. Each turn, the next player takes a card off the top of the deck and places it on the top of the pile. This goes on until somebody thinks there's enough strength in the pile to succeed in a particular quest. The pile is sorted out by quest and the numbers totted up. If there's not enough strength, the players get a black sword. If there's too much, they get several black swords. Only if the numbers are just right do they get white swords. Additional swords may be added for the other, subsidiary quests.

To break the monotony, occasional Merlin and Morgan cards provide twists to the rules or the process or impose forfeit-like conditions on the players. However, the game essentially consists of turning over cards until someone's had enough. In order to win, players need to remember



what cards have been revealed. However, the game is only fun if they don't remember! Our great example was Pete calling a quest that just succeeded. He was actually a traitor and thought we would lose the quest!

Shadows over Camelot – the card game can clearly be fun in the right circumstances, but the combination of a memory game (groan) with forfeits (shudder) put me right off. It gets a provisional 4/10 on my highly subjective scale. Which is a shame as I really like the original *Shadows over Camelot* (as you can see from my review: www.pevans.co.uk/Reviews).

On the Saturday of Spiel I was playing in the EuropeMasters tournament rather than playing new games. So it was Sunday when Mike, Pete and I tried out *Iron Sky* at the Arctic Union stand. This is an umbrella for several small games publishers from Finland and *Iron Sky* comes from Revision Games. Designer Juha Salmijärvi was on hand to take us through the game. It pits two teams against each other. One is the invading Space Nazis from the dark side of the Moon, the other Earth's gallant defenders! Yes, it's the game of the film.

The board comes in sections showing different parts of the Earth. This allows players to fight over part or all of the planet. With six players, we used all three sections – I was defending Australasia against Mike's invading Nazis (reminding me of our wargaming past when my Russians fought Mike's Germans). The game starts with the defence forces spread out (one in each area) while the invaders mass in the 'sky' (stacked on the edge of the board). Then the fun begins.

Battles are resolved by playing cards. Players have a couple available, but can only see the backs of them. This indicates whether the card is offensive (more cross-hairs), defensive (more shields) or neutral. Once both have chosen, the cards are revealed and the attacking side of the attacker's card compared to the defending side of the



EuropeMasters 2012 under way – *Last Will* is the game being played (M)

defender's. Each cross hair that is not blocked by a cross-hair kills a unit – the advantage of stacking up several units is that you can lose a unit or two without losing the area. If only one side is left, they control the area.

This is a neat combat system, giving players some idea of how their attack is likely to go while providing some surprises. The scoring track is also ingenious. There is one on each section of the board and it has two markers. One shows the current state of the invasion (in terms of areas held), while the other shows the 'high water mark'. That is, the most areas held by the invaders at any point. At the end of the game, the defenders get points according to the current state, while the Nazis get points according to the high water mark. Both sides get points for the individual areas they hold and the side with the most points (across all sections) wins.



The battleground for me and Mike in *Iron Sky* (P)

Our game ended in a victory for the Nazis, despite their having been pushed back from their high water marks. One wrinkle is that the invaders have limited forces – defeated units are extra points for the defenders, while the defenders get their casualties back to, potentially, re-use. I was particularly miffed as I was doing a good job holding off Mike ... until Pete lent him a helping hand from his section of the board!

Iron Sky was good fun and has some clever elements. However, it didn't really grab me. It's a game I'd be quite happy to play again, but not one I'm going to rush out and buy. And I wonder how much replay value it has. I give it a provisional 6/10 on my highly subjective scale.

A new strategy game from Emanuele Ornella and Mind the Move is something of an event (I'm a fan of both *Hermagor* and *Oltre Mare*). The game is *La Loire*, set around the eponymous river in France in the fifteenth century as the first postal system begins. The board shows the river with the cities of Nantes and Orléans in opposite corners of the board, also connected by two roads, one on each river bank. The players start with two pawns, a merchant in Nantes and a messenger in Orléans. These travel the roads from one city to the other, visiting the villages in between to buy goods (the merchant) and deliver messages (the messenger).

On arriving at a city, a messenger can buy fresh messages. The merchant can sell goods and then invest in building. 'Palace' buildings in either city give the player bonuses in that city. Alternatively, they can set up a farm at a village or upgrade an existing farm to a castle or replace it with a monastery. All of these give a discount to any merchant who buys there, also scoring the owner a point. The monastery also allows the owning player to buy the very valuable beer or the most valuable messages.

In case this isn't enough, one of the villages will be host to the circus. The clever pricing mechanism for goods also serves to move the circus about. Catching up with the circus allows a player to hire one of the many characters available. Each of these provides some bonus: a premium on selling, perhaps, a discount on purchases or maybe the ability to carry more on the road. Each of these appears to have their place and just who you hire will depend on what you want to do – and what your opponents are up to.

This all sounds absolutely fascinating. However, when we played it, the game took quite a while to get going. It was several turns before anybody was in a position to build anything and hiring a character took even longer. This may be due to a misunderstanding of the rules (oops!) and I am determined to give *La Loire* another go. For the moment, it gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

I spent much of Sunday trotting round to the parts of the halls I hadn't managed to visit earlier, trying to make sure I didn't miss anything (invariably, there are things I don't spot during the show). Mike and I loaded the last boxes into the car – damn, we could have fitted a few more in! – and hit the road back. Eurotunnel decided we could wait an hour for a train, but otherwise the trip was uneventful. Now I just need to play all these new games.



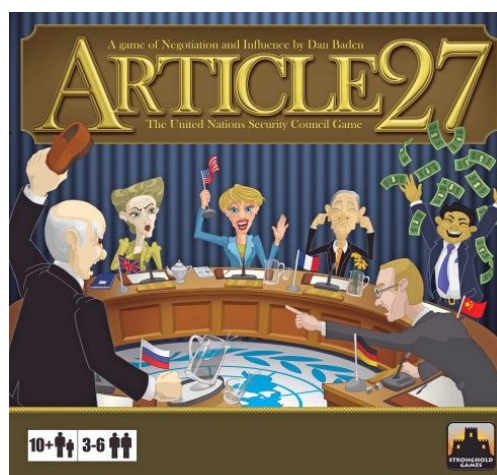
La Loire in play (P)

Post-Spiel

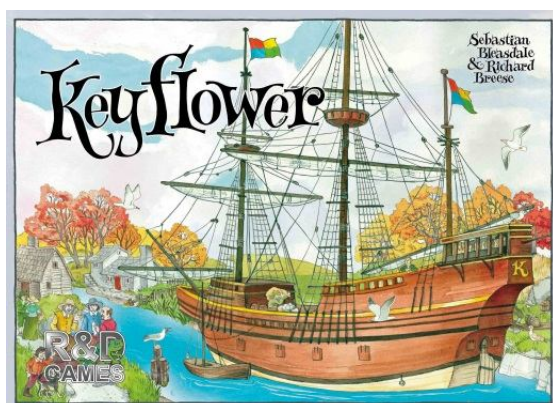
Since returning from Spiel I've been playing more of the new games that were launched there and I thought I should add to my initial report with my notes on these. Here they are, in alphabetical order of title.

Stronghold Games have made quite an impact in the two years they've been going. They caught my attention by producing a new edition of *Survive/Escape from Atlantis* in their first crop of titles. While they've continued to renew old favourites, Stronghold quickly started publishing new games as well. They had examples of both to show us at Spiel '12. The new editions of *Crude* (aka *McMulti*) and *Outpost* looked terrific. Both classics, of course. For those of you not as long in the tooth as me, *Crude* (originally published in 1974) is a terrific oil industry game – drill, refine and sell petroleum – with some great components. *Outpost* (rather younger as it dates from 1991) is a game of production and development in a science fiction setting. The game's system has since been used in *Scepter of Zavandor* and (in a condensed version) *Phoenicia*.

Stronghold's brand new games included the well-received *CO2* and *Article 27*. The latter is the one I've played, having first encountered it in pre-production form at the Gathering last year. Designed by Dan Baden, it is set at the United Nations with the players representing a country on the Security Council. In turn, each chairs a session, trying to get a resolution passed by the council. Players gain or lose points according to how closely their own policies (coloured chips held by the players) match the resolution on the table. However, they can also be ~~bribed~~ incentivised to vote for the resolution.



Article 27 is a fast moving game of wheeling and dealing reminiscent of *I'm the Boss* – it's helped by a timer that gives a maximum of five minutes negotiation time. It's been good fun both times I've played with some outrageous bargaining and surprising about-turns by players when offered enough money! Each player also has a secret agenda that generates extra points at the end of the game. *Article 27* is for 3-6 players (the more the merrier, I reckon), aged 10+ and takes 30 minutes to play (controlled by the timer). I give it 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.



In my first report from Spiel, I mentioned that my favourite of the games I played there was *Yedo*. Since then I've played *Keyflower*. Wow! There's a good pedigree here as the co-designers are Richard Breese (originator of the Key... series of games) and Sebastian Bleasdale (designer of *On the Underground* and regular at Swiggers games club). The *Keyflower* is one of the ships bringing workers to the players' villages at the end of each season (round) – others include the Sea Breese and the Sea Bastion (groan!).

The game is played over four seasons with the last, winter, being all about scoring points. While players can generate some points in the other three, the emphasis here is producing stuff. The two main components of the game are the stack of hexagonal tiles, representing buildings and ships, and the bag full of wooden 'meeples' – workers. Players use their workers to bid for tiles or to operate buildings – whether these are in their own village, someone else's village or being bid on. Workers in winning bids go back in the bag, while players get back those on buildings in their own village (regardless of who put them there).

There's an awful lot going in this game – most of it embodied in the buildings and what they do. Clearly, you're looking for the right buildings to produce the right resources, skills and workers to generate enough points to win. How you do this depends on which buildings are available and which ones you manage to get. Phew! I've played *Keyflower* several times now (mainly as a three-player game) and, while I'm comfortable with how to play the game and am having a lot of fun, I'm nowhere near winning. *Keyflower* is for 2-6 players, aged 13+ and takes about 90 minutes to play. It gets a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Portuguese publisher Mesa Board games has produced some interesting games and had two new titles at Spiel. The first of these (alphabetically) is *Kosmonauts*, The bold colours of the board, showing the solar system with the orbits of the planets (plus Halley's Comet), immediately caught my attention. However, this is not an intricate, realistic simulation of space travel like *High Frontier*, but a fast-playing race game.



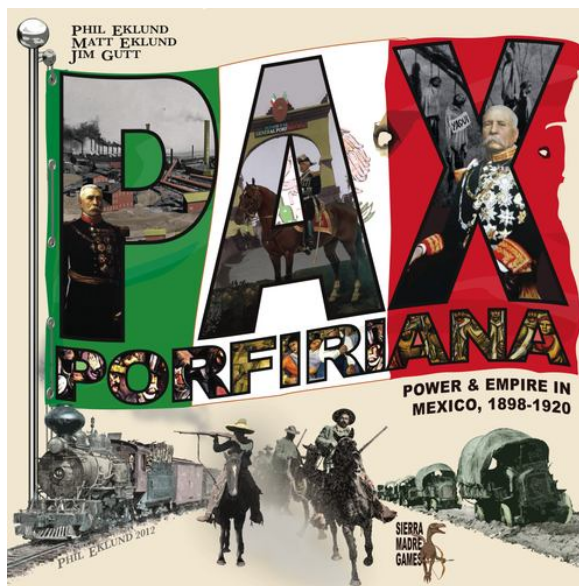
Kosmonauts on display at Spiel (M)

Each player starts with their rocketship at Earth and aims to race round the solar system, visiting (nearly) all the orbiting objects (that is, the planets plus comet). Two things make this tricky. First, the planets (and comet) move in their orbit each round. So you're aiming at where the planet/comet will be when you arrive in its orbit (one tactic is to arrive ahead of it and wait for it to catch up). If a ship stays 'on' the planet, of course, it will be carried along – another useful tactic, especially when using Halley's elliptical orbit to scoot from inner to outer parts of the system (or vice versa).

The second tricky bit is that movement is Newtonian. The ships continue moving in the direction they're going, unless players modify this by using up some of their fuel. It's a little tricky to get your head round at first. On top of this, players also need to re-fuel, which uses up a turn on a planet. Players get points for visiting the planets and comet, according to the order they arrive. The game ends once one player has returned to Earth, giving the others a couple of rounds to complete their trips. Most points wins, of course. *Kosmonauts* is not a particularly deep game, but it's good fun (provided it keeps moving at a reasonable pace) and you do have to think a bit. The game is for 2-4 players, aged 8+ and takes 60 minutes to play. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Having just mentioned *High Frontier*, the next on my list is from the designer of that game, Phil Eklund, and his imprint, Sierra Madre Games. *Pax Porfiriana* is a card game of the Mexican revolution that contains an awful lot of history. Not least because Sierra Madre's first game was *Lords of the Sierra Madre*, a board game of the Mexican revolution. That's more than twenty years' worth of further research and refinement to go into the new game.

The players are 'Hacendados' (tycoons) in northern Mexico, looking to build up their own economic, military and political empire across the region. This is done by acquiring cards – there's a neat mechanism for the market – and playing cards. Some cards represent enterprises, significant people or military forces and stay in front of players, generating income for them. Other cards are events or incidents that are used when played (though some may linger for a while).



The aim is to overthrow – or succeed – the Mexican dictator, Porfirio Diaz. As the game starts, there is peace – the Pax of the title. This continues until someone plays a card that introduces martial law, say, or provokes the Americans into intervening. These change the 'state' of the game and introduce a different economic and political climate. The state of the game defines the way in which Diaz can be overthrown. This is triggered by a 'Topple' card and, when it's played, the player with the most points in the appropriate criterion wins – if they have enough points!

On first acquaintance, I found *Pax Porfiriana* rather baffling. However, once I understood the mechanism for winning (build up your points in one of the criteria, switch the current regime to the one you need and use a Topple), I realised how it works. It is definitely a game in which you need to establish your position and build on it –

there are no quick wins here. It is also packed full of historical incident and fact and worth playing just for the experience. *Pax Porfiriana* is another terrific game from Phil Eklund and gets an initial 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. It is for 2-5 players, aged 12+, and takes 2-3 hours to play.

The second game from Mesa is a different kettle of fish. *Ragami* is about guardian angels. The board shows a city from above: blocks of buildings separated by streets. Down on the streets, souls are in conflict: open to temptation and beset by demons. Players each have an angel, on the rooftops, and a saint, on the street. They use these – perhaps with the support of other players – to resolve the conflicts and chase off the demons. But new conflicts are always appearing...

Dice are used quite a bit in *Ragami*, for indicating strength as much as for rolling. Each conflict is represented by a die with the uppermost face showing its strength. Each turn that a conflict isn't dealt with, its strength goes up until it is removed from the board (score one for the bad guys!). Similarly, each player has a die that shows their reserve 'virtue' and this also increases each turn. They can also gain 'power points' (white cubes) by assisting other players, which is a neat touch. These can then be used to bolster their own strength when resolving a conflict.

The number of actions available between all the players each turn depends on the roll of dice. One die goes against each action on the board to show how many times it can be used that turn. The positions are chosen by the player to the right of the start player, who can also alter the values of the dice (within limits). This is a very clever mechanism that provides players with some interesting decisions each turn. *Ragami* is a highly tactical game for 2-4 players, aged 10+, and takes 80 minutes to play. I enjoyed it, but found it a bit too abstract for my taste: it gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

The Stratamax team seems to have got a taste for quality production since the second edition of *Tammany Hall*. I was introduced to their latest game, *Sheepdogs of Pendleton*



Playing *Ragami* at MidCon (P)

Hill, with two words: "Big wood!" And indeed, inside there are both lots of wood and some large pieces. The big figures are players' shepherds, which will be placed on the hill depicted on the board. This is divided into sections each with a points value – which is higher the further up the hill it is.

The smaller wooden figures are the sheep – in the players' colours again. These go into pens at the bottom of the hill and will eventually set off up the hill in a group. Players score points when sheep meets shepherd. The points depend on how far up the hill the sheep gets, of course. The clever bit is that, within restrictions, players can place other people's shepherds and move other people's sheep. So your sheep may not get that far up the hill!

There's one final piece: the wolf! This provides another way of getting at other players by having their sheep taken out by the wolf. However, the game is not a free-for-all. Play is regulated by cards: each player has a hand and what they can do in a turn is limited to the actions available from cards in their hand. If you don't have a wolf card, you can't move the wolf. *Sheepdogs of Pendleton Hill* is not the deepest game, but it's entertaining and has some surprising tactical subtleties. It's for 3-5 players, aged 10+, and takes about 40 minutes to play. I give it 7/10 on my highly subjective scale for the time being.

And then I played (finally!) *Snowdonia*. Double wow! Tony Boydell has created something special for Surprised Stare Games – and quite different from the card games he's designed in the past. I am only sorry it's taken me so long to get to it! The game is about the construction of the Tramroad railway up Mount Snowdon. While the board is



Sheepdogs of Pendleton Hill on display at Spiel '12 (M)

illustrated with the mountain, the track is represented by the line of cards that is laid out around three sides of the board.

The cards show stations and the intervening stretches of mountain-side on which track will be laid. However, the railway bed must be excavated first. In game terms, this means removing the 'rubble' cubes laid on each card. Excavating is one of the actions players can assign their workers to each round. So, too, are laying track and building stations. Both of these require raw materials – stone, coal and/or steel (produced from iron ore in another action).

The board shows the actions players can take, the raw materials available and other useful stuff – such as the



Snowdonia on display at Spiel '12 (P)

weather. The amount of work that goes on depends on the weather: the work rate goes up if it's sunny, down if it's raining and stops altogether if the fog descends. The game cleverly pushes things on regardless of the weather, which stops it from bogging down.

Add into this cards that players can acquire and use for special actions during the game and/or bonus points at the end and locomotives that allow players to hire an extra worker and there's an awful lot going on. However, it's all so well integrated that you don't notice the complexity. *Snowdonia* is terrific stuff and I give it an initial 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. It's for 1-5 players (there's a solitaire option), aged 8+, and takes about 45 minutes to play.

I couldn't resist *Tweeeet*, the latest game from Corné van Moorsel and Cwali. Apart from the appealing title, the game has some wonderful playing pieces: brightly coloured little birds (with either a red breast or a blue throat) and an assortment of bird food – nuts, fruit, caterpillars and ladybirds! It looks absolutely gorgeous.

There isn't a board as such. Instead, the playing area is constructed ahead of the advancing birds from cardboard strips divided into hexagonal spaces. Spaces may show



Tweeeeet on display at Spiel '12 (M)

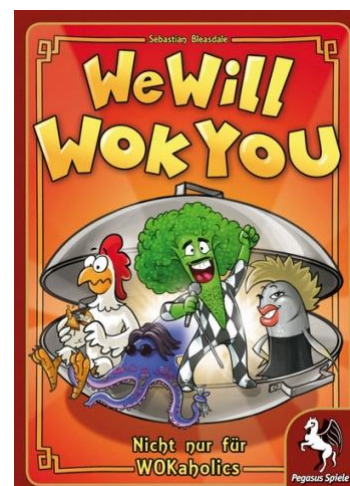
food, in case the appropriate piece is placed on it, or hazards for the birds to avoid. In turn, players move their bird across the terrain and land on some food. They must use enough food for the distance they've moved and then pick up the food they land on.

The last strip of terrain is placed face down to show a row of nests. The game ends when all the birds are on their nest – or have run out of food. Players' scores are the value of the food they have remaining. However, the game is played in teams – robins versus bluethroats – and it's the average score across the team that matters. This allows odd numbers of players to take part without any special rules.

This sounds simple, but you quickly discover the tactical subtleties when you play. Dawdle and you can find no food left. Rush ahead and you won't have as many points as those behind. Eat the wrong bits of food and your teammate has nowhere to go! *Tweeeeet* is a great family game and a nice filler for gamers. It's for 2-6 players, aged 7+, playing in 30 minutes and I give it 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

When Sebastian Bleasdale suggested we play *We Will Wok You* and giggled, I assumed he was having me on. Nope: it's a card game he designed, published by Pegasus Spiele. Though the theme is all Pegasus's work, he insists. The cards come in three types. The Wok cards show the ingredients required for a dish, while the Ingredient and Coin cards are self-explanatory.

In turn, players can take a coin from alongside a row of ingredients, making them cheaper for the next player. Or they can buy a row of ingredients by putting down as many



coins as are already there. A new row goes down, but it's going to be pretty expensive to start with. Or they take a wok card by placing a set of ingredients on the table.

When the cards run out, players score points for the dishes they are able to make from the cards they have on the table and in their hand. It's a neat game, enlivened by the illustrations on the card, and makes a decent filler. I wasn't particularly taken with it, though, and give it 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. *We Will Wok You* is for 2-4 players, aged 10+, and takes 40 minutes to play.

The latest from Friedemann Friese's 2F Spiele is called *Fremde Federn* – which I'm told translates as "To Adorn with Feathers". The English language version (from Rio Grande) is more prosaically titled *Copycat*. The cover picture shows Friedemann in the style of the famous election poster of Barack Obama, so clearly the game is about elections. Though it feels more like an office game as players spend much of their time deploying campaign workers into Federal offices.

As well as taking actions with their workers, *Agricola*-style, players have a deck of cards that they use, *Dominion*-style, to score points and/or buy cards. New cards are purchased from a track and unsold cards move along this, *Through the Ages*-style, to get cheaper each round. This is why the game is called *Copycat*: its key mechanisms have explicitly been taken (with permission) from other games – and there's a dash of *Puerto Rico* as well.



Copycat (or, rather, *Fremde Federn*) on display at Spiel '12 (M)

Having played it once now, the resulting game seems to work satisfactorily. However, it didn't really feel like any sort of election. I definitely need to play it again, but at the moment I give it an initial 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Copycat* is for 2-4 players, aged 12+, and takes about 95 minutes to play.

I'm continuing to play more of the new games and will add my thoughts here as I do. I shall also be writing full reviews of some of the games, which will be published in *To Win Just Once* and on my website. And I'm already looking forward to the next Spiel...

Spiel is organised by Friedhelm Merz Verlag, who did a fine job as usual on this, the 30th event. Spiel '13 is scheduled for 24th-27th October and I fully intend to be there. For more details, see the website at <http://www.internationalespieltage.de/e000.php4>

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