

UK Games Expo 2013

Pevans went to the NEC

This year the Expo was in a new venue. The Hilton Metropole is a large, modern hotel on the National Exhibition Centre site (next to Birmingham airport, in between Birmingham and Coventry). This makes it easy to get to – it has its own railway station and is just off the M5 and M42 motorways.

Personally, though, I preferred the old journey: stroll to my local station and ride peaceful trains into the centre of Birmingham. This year, it was stroll to my local station, take the tube to Euston station and catch a fast train to the NEC. This brought back memories of travelling to and from Birmingham in my university days (though not on Pendolino trains back then).

Once there, the signs for the hotel led me through the NEC and then outside and across service roads to what seemed to be the rear entrance of the hotel. The Metropole is huge, with a lot of function rooms for the Expo to occupy. These are grouped in several sections, joined at the extensive bar/reception area. Two big, linked rooms made up the trade hall, which was being set up for the weekend when I arrived around lunchtime on Friday.

I spent the afternoon and evening getting the lie of the land, chatting to old friends and playing some familiar games. There was plenty of space for ‘open gaming’ and the Expo organisers provide a very useful games library. The roster I played was *Agricola*, *Princes of Florence*, *Innovation* and *St Petersburg*. It seems my speciality is coming second – except for *St Petersburg*, a game that has never grabbed me.

Descending from our room on Saturday morning, my roommate – Pete Card – and I were directed to the “Overflow breakfast room.” This turned out to have a conservatory area and we had a fine breakfast bathed in glorious sunlight. The room also provided a view of people arriving – a steady flow even before the official opening time. It looks like the change of venue didn’t put anyone off attending.

My Saturday was largely taken up with the *Memoir '44* tournament, which I signed up for after enjoying last year’s event. This didn’t occupy my whole day, though (and is covered in a separate article), so I was able to take a look at some of the new games. The first that got my attention was *Hydra*. This is a little two-player abstract game played on laser-engraved boards with light and dark laser-engraved square wooden tiles (the same production as Hopwood’s *Mijnlieff*). The aim of the game is simply to cross the board – one player going east-west, so to speak, while the other goes north-south – by playing a line of your pieces.



Playing *Princes of Florence* at the Expo

As you'd expect, most of the tiles are parts of the hydra's 'body,' connecting tiles in a straight line. One of the tactical ploys is to cut your opponent's line, placing your tile on top of theirs, forcing them to start again. A new start costs them several tiles, limiting their options.

Further tactical opportunities come with the Hydra head and tail tiles – players only have a few of these. They allow you to branch or turn, either avoiding your opponent's line or giving you the tempo to place after them and break their line. You can also take back a tile from a 'dead' line as your move, giving further options (and fresh tiles, should you need them).



A game of *Hydra* in its early stages

Hydra is a neat little game. It plays quickly and offers lots of tactics from its simple rules. A neat production touch is that the boards you play on clip together to make the box for the game. However, while I can appreciate two-player abstract games, I prefer



Promised Land with the achievements along the bottom (and glare from the lights)

not to play them, so this doesn't rate highly in my book. To find out more, see the publisher's (TallTree Games) page on Facebook: www.facebook.com/TallTree.TallTree

One of the things I particularly wanted to see was the Ragnar Brothers' latest: *Promised Land*. Given the title, it's not surprising that it is set in ancient Israel and has the Israelites facing off various invaders as the years (centuries?) go by. In *History of the World* style, the Heathens are a succession of aggressors, scoring points for being beastly to the Israelites: conquering, enslaving, carrying off the Ark of the Covenant and so on.

In opposition are the Hebrews. They play in much the same way, attacking the Heathens and defending Israel. At the end of the game there is potentially a bonus for either side, depending on how much of Israel is left. However, players mainly score points for what they achieve during the game. One intriguing touch is that there is a track of achievements that players must progress along and this is different each game.

I was thoroughly captivated by what I saw of *Promised Land*. It clearly has touches of *History of the World* – which is an excellent pedigree as far as I'm concerned – while being a very different game. The Ragnars launched the game on Kickstarter to raise publication funds (the offering ended mid-June, having raised nearly 150% of what was needed). Having seen the game at the Expo, I put in my pledge and await my copy (due in November). To find out more (there's the designers' diary, for a start), see the Ragnars' website at www.ragnarbrothers.co.uk

Once the trade hall had closed, it was time for dinner and an evening of games. Saturday's games were *Glory to Rome* and *Antike*, two games I enjoy, but hadn't played for a while. It was thus a fun evening, especially as I won *Glory to Rome*!

After another breakfast in sunshine, I spent Sunday looking round the rest of the new games. There's no organisation to my report, it's just the order in which I came across them. I was first grabbed by Dave Cousins to see his game, *Rock, Paper, Scissors, BANG!* (in my day it was "stone" not "rock" – I blame American influences). This is another two-player abstract, played over a 5 x 5 grid of black and white squares. Each player has a set of pieces (thick discs), each with one of the symbols on it: a stone, a pair of scissors, a sheet of paper and ... a stick of dynamite!

To start the game, players take it in turns to place their pieces on the board, covering everything but the central square. Once that's done, they start moving them. A piece can move one space to an occupied square, but only if its symbol 'beats' the symbol on the piece it's jumping on top of. This quickly builds up stacks of pieces, but the piece on top is in charge. Dynamite beats everything, but also obliterates the stack!



Rock, Paper, Scissors, BANG! ready for the first move



Forbidden Desert at the Coiled Spring stand

When nothing can move any more, the game ends and players score points for the height (-1) of each stack they control (by having their piece on top). This is another clever little game. It has simple rules (there's even an aide-memoire for the paper-scissors-stone relationship), but lots of tactical play. It's also good fun – especially with clever use of the dynamite.

Dave publishes as North and South Games and there's more (including a print-and-play version of *Rock, Paper, Scissors, BANG!*) on the North and South website: www.northandsouthgames.co.uk

Distributor Coiled Spring was showing several new games, including the new print of *Keyflower* (from German publisher Huch! and Friends). However, the game that got my attention was *Forbidden Desert*, Matt Leacock's kind of sequel to *Forbidden Island*. Like the original, this is from Gamewright in the US (and several European publishers).

As with *Forbidden Island*, this is a co-operative game. The players are a band of adventurers, threatened by encroaching sand dunes – rather than by a sinking island. The aim of the game is to recover all the pieces of “a legendary flying machine.” Gameplay is rather different from *Forbidden Island* with a deduction mechanism for locating the parts the players are looking for.

As well as the threat of sandstorms burying them under dunes, the players have to cope with the shifting sands moving things around and the constant heat – run out of water and it's game over! *Forbidden Desert* looks absolutely gorgeous and sounds a terrific successor to *Forbidden Island*. I look forward to trying it out on the family.

However, I then spotted people flicking piles of cubes across the room. Another Gamewright game (distributed by Coiled Spring, of course) is *Cube Quest*, a wargame where you flick your cubes at the enemy's! I just had to give this a go. As I expected, it was very silly and huge fun. And there are definite tactical elements.



I'm not sure my widely-scattered forces are up to this: *Cube Quest* in play

The aim is to knock your opponent's 'King' out of the area marked on the board. You can pile your cubes to defend your King, but this makes it a bit difficult to attack. The icons on the several types of cubes have different effects. You get the effect of the icon on the side facing up when the cube lands.

This means some cubes are more effective in attack – since you're more likely to be able to flick them again – while others should only be in the defence.

Several copies of *Cube Quest* were available to try out and they were generating a lot of laughter. From my brief experience, it is great fun and totally silly. Shame it's only a two-player game... (hint, hint). You'll find out more (on these games and lots of others) at the Coiled Spring website (coiledspring.co.uk) or from the publisher, Gamewright: www.gamewright.com.

On arriving at the *Cognosis* stand, I was immediately informed that this was not a gamers' game. I suspect it's a bit too daunting for the average gamer – and I'm no exception! *Cognosis* is designed to make Cognitive Ability Tests (such as the 11+) fun and help youngsters get through them. Now I thought the 11+ had been abolished years ago, but what do I know about schools these days?

Be that as it may, *Cognosis* has stacks of questions in the three types: verbal, non-verbal and numerical. The type of question you get depends on your position on the square grid of the board. Getting questions right lets you move up the board, with some spaces allowing you to do other things – such as challenge another player with a question.

To win, you have to reach the last square and answer a final question chosen by your opponents. I can see this being really useful in families with children approaching the right age and a brilliant teaching aid. However, I very much doubt it will be played simply for fun – I always fall down on the non-verbal questions, anyway. It is a well-produced package, though, and deserves to do well. For more about *Cognosis*, see the website at www.cognosisgames.com



The *Cognosis* display

Alongside them was 2D6, a games publisher from Estonia, who were also at pains to make it clear that theirs were not gamers' games. I took that as a challenge! The biggest of the small boxes was *Making Profit: the Boardgame* designed by Aigar Alaveer. This is a relatively simple business card game. Players invest in shares in one of the different factories, enabling the owner to develop it to increase its value – selling shares has the opposite effect. The owner of a factory can run it, paying a dividend to the shareholders and/or gaining cards to develop the factory further.



It's clearly not a particularly involved game, but it looks like it has some tactical subtleties. It's a nicely produced game, too, with decent cards, factory models and poker chips. And it has rules in Russian – you can't say that about many games!



The second game was *Roundhouse Kick*, also designed by Aigar Alaveer. This is a showdown between the players and a selection of monsters (including the fearsome garden gnomes ... okay, maybe not that fearsome). Each turn, players roll dice to attack the monsters, optionally playing a card to increase their attack. Then the monsters get a go, with players (hopefully!) able to play cards to defend themselves.

The player who finishes off a monster gets its card, which is worth points at the end of the game. The end comes when the monsters are all dead. Or the players are! The player with the most points wins. Again, the game is nicely produced with decent cards and dice and some cute little hearts to show life points. The

obvious tactical question is how much to damage each monster if you can't kill it. After all, you don't want to leave easy pickings for the next player... Played at speed, I can see this being good, simple fun and an entertaining filler.

Finally, there was *Puppy School*, a simple card game produced as a promotional item for "the Koerus dog sports club and Royal Canin Estonia." The bulk of the cards are various dog breeds. The others show a set of breeds and are players' objectives. The game is essentially one of drafting the right dogs to match an objective card. Once somebody's completed three (or more) objectives, players count their points to see who's won. Yep, that's pretty simple, but it probably goes down well with dog-loving non-gamers.

All in all, that's an interesting set of games from 2D6 and I look forward to seeing what they produce next. The website shows several other games under development. Take a look at: www.2d6.ee

Gen 42 was interesting people in their neat two-player game, *Hive* (now available in a pocket version), and showing off their other games: *Army of Frogs*, *Junkyard Races* and *Logan Stones*. Find them at www.gen42.com

Gamers who've been around as long as me will remember Wotan Games of old. The resurrected outfit was at the Expo showing off *Sails of Glory*. This is a good looking game of Napoleonic era naval warfare from Ares Games, publishers of *Wings of Glory*, designed by Andrea Angiolino and Andrea Mainini. Given the pedigree, it was not surprising that it had some excellent sailing ship models. Wotan's own game (in prototype form) was *Camelot: the build*, which appeared to involve playing cards to create King Arthur's capital. I'm afraid I wasn't paying attention as my head was full of creaking rigging and thundering cannon. Kismet, Hardy.



Man the guns! *Sails of Glory* miniatures

I could not resist *Legacy*: it had a printed tea towel as a board. This used to be the trademark of the Ragnar Brothers' games, so there was an immediate nostalgia element! The game has some neat wooden pieces and lots of cards. The important ones are Ideologies as you get points for these. You also get points for holding territory – though the game is about political power rather than military. Ideally, your Ideologies will help you win more territory and your territories will allow you to play more Ideologies. First to a set number of points wins.

I was quite taken with this and got to play it later in the afternoon. I was roundly beaten by my two opponents – the lovely Ted and Ursula. However, both of them had already played several times. I invested in a copy and it's had a couple of outings at Swiggers since. *Legacy* is quite a chaotic game, but I'm enjoying it so far. Designed by Aaron Billingham and Ken Nicholson, it's published by them (as Billy-Nic Games) and you can find out more at www.legacy-boardgame.co.uk

Medusa Games is Expo organiser Richard Denning's imprint for his game designs (notably *The Great Fire of London 1666*). On show here was a prototype game about London Bridge. This is the old London Bridge, the one that was covered in buildings. Players build the bridge – the foundations, spans and the buildings – filling in sections with material while trying to avoid the various events that can damage parts of the bridge. This is in an early stage of development at the moment with Richard's *The Great Museum* the next game likely to be produced. There's more about Medusa's projects on their website: www.medusagames.co.uk



Playing *Legacy* – I'm joint 2nd ... for now

One of the best displays was *Cycling Party*, being promoted by the game's designers, Diego Hernando and Leandro Pérez. The game was set out with lots of scenery – which doesn't come with the game, they were quick to make clear. The game is about bicycle road races using large hexagonal tiles of different terrain as the setting for each race – or stage in a longer game.

All the things you'd expect are here: forming the peloton of riders, breaking away, getting dropped. Not to mention specialist riders who are better in certain terrain or circumstances. On first acquaintance, it has a lot going for it and the designers claim it's "the most realistic cycling board game." It will be interesting to see how it stacks up against other games in the genre. For more information see: www.cyclingparty.com

One game I didn't get a chance to look at more closely was *Ringames Words*. This uses an intriguing mechanism of sliding concentric rings printed with letters. Once the mechanism has been set, players identify words within areas of the same colour, scoring points according to the length of the word. It's an interesting mechanism that I'm sure will appear in other games. To find out more, see: www.ringames.es

Gavin Birnbaum (alias Cubiko Games) generally has a new game each year. This year it was *Steeplechase*, a horse-racing game. It comes in Gavin's signature wooden box and is played on top of the box. This shows the racecourse, which is set out with wooden blocks for the jumps. Players must decide whether to use the movement chip they've been given or swap with another player while trying to avoid the jumps. Good, simple fun.



The *Cycling Party* display

Apart from *Steeplechase* and *Cubiko* itself, Gavin also had abstract connection game, *Foundation* and *Yellow Jersey*, his Tour de France game, available to play. These are all attractive wooden games. The full portfolio is on the website: www.cubiko.webs.com

Surprised Stare Games were surprised by the success of *Snowdonia* last year. The game has already sold out, so they didn't have copies to demo and sell at the Expo. Instead, they had some older games: *Totemo*, Tony Boydell's 3D stacking game, and *On the Cards*, Sebastian Bleasdale's clever trick-taking card game. The other Surprised Stare designer, Alan Paull, showed off his prototype wargames: *Mission Command* is a miniatures wargame of the Western Front in WW2; *Carrier Strike* re-creates WW2 naval battles in the Pacific in just 16 cards – plus some dice. *Carrier Strike* looked particularly interesting as it's all about reconnaissance and bluff and was being played with some neat models.

A second edition of *Snowdonia* is on the way, being produced by US publisher, Indie Boards and Cards. As well as reproducing the original game, Indie is producing an expansion with two new scenarios. One where players use large amounts of dynamite to blast through the Eiger in Switzerland and the other where they build the cog railway up Mount Washington (New Hampshire). The games are being financed on Kickstarter (the project closed on 8th June with \$55,000 of its \$40,000 target!) and will be launched at Spiel in October.

Find out about all Surprised Stare's games on their website – www.surprisedstaregames.co.uk – and Indie is at www.indieboardsandcards.com

I was amused to see that retailer Games Lore was promoting the new printing of Ted Alspach's *Suburbia* (Bezier Games) as "*Sim City* in cardboard." It's not an inappropriate description, I'm just amused by the idea of promoting a board game by reference to a computer game!

Another regular was Pete Burley (aka Burley Games), once more demonstrating his *Take it Easy!* and *Kamisado*.

Alongside Heron Games's stand was designer Mike Hayes with his *Classic Warlord* – better known to us long-in-the-tooth gamers as *Apocalypse*. This is the name used when it was published by Games Workshop (in the days when they published board games). This new version is played on a monster board, but remains the same game of (as I recall) building stacks of nuclear bombs and annihilating everyone else! Ah, simple pleasures... Find out more – and buy the game – at the website: classicwarlord.com



Veteran designer Mike Hayes (left) shows *Classic Warlord* to veteran gamer Kendall Johns

Andy Hopwood, aka Hopwood Games, had a new card game for us this year. *Disgrace & Favours* is a set-collecting game of unscrupulous social climbing. As well as working out what to collect, players can sabotage their opponents' sets. From the expected playing time of 60-90 minutes, there's clearly a lot more to this game and I look forward to trying it. Find out more at: www.hopwoodgames.co.uk

Chronicle City is Angus Abranson's latest games publishing enterprise. As well as lots of RPG material, Chronicle City was showing some interesting board games from a variety of small publishers, notably a quick-fire battling card game of bubbles and a game all about chocolate. Mmmm... chocolate... I expected to find more details on the website – www.chroniclecity.co.uk – but it's a work in progress.

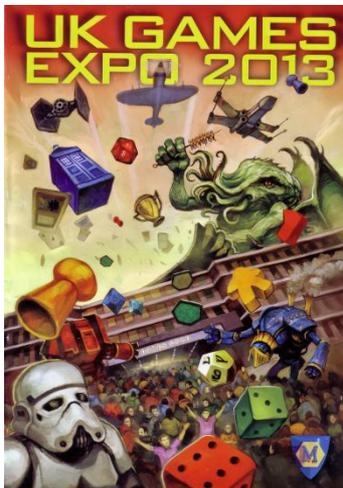
This brings us to Grublin Games Publishing and *Cornish Smuggler*. Another Kickstarter project, this game is just what the title leads you to expect. It's played on a board of western Cornwall, marked with villages and towns (including the wonderfully-named Paul). Players have to buy goods and try to smuggle them past the Revenue men (or just bribe them) to sell them at a profit.

As well as cash, players can use their smuggled goods to increase their reputation and influence. Both Gold and Reputation count in deciding who wins, so players can concentrate on one or the other or spread their bets. While it's billed as a family game, it seemed quite complex to me. I look forward to trying it when it's released – the Kickstarter project raised more than twice its goal. For more information see www.grublin.com



A demo of *Grace and Disfavours*

Distributor Esdevium Games was running lots of demonstrations. I was particularly taken with the giant *Pandemic* board with the demo team in white coats. They were also hosting Steve Jackson Games and there was a plethora of *Munchkin* games and expansions around the place. Esdevium can be found online at www.esdeviumgames.com



I must just mention the programme for the Expo. Apart from giving the essential information about what's happening where and when, it is in effect a little magazine in its own right. It is packed with interesting articles, including one from Richard Breese on his history in games and how *Keyflower* came about. It's available as a PDF on the website.

As far as I'm concerned, the UK games Expo 2013 was a great success. Kudos and many thanks to Richard Denning and the rest of the team. Next year's event is confirmed as 30th May – 1st June at the Hilton Metropole at the NEC and I fully intend to be there. For all the information about the Expo, visit the website at: www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk (and register for the newsletter).

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