The Gathering of Friends 2017

Pevans reports from Niagara Falls

I decided to try the Canadian route to Niagara Falls for this year's Gathering. This entails a flight to Toronto and then a 90-minute drive to the hotel. Flying to the US, as I usually do, means arriving at a hub airport, followed by an internal flight to Buffalo and a 30-minute drive. The big difference is only having one interchange instead of two – though it does mean forgoing my usual Sam Adams or two at the bar in Chicago O'Hare airport. My only worry was what US immigration would make of this when I crossed the Rainbow Bridge from the Canadian Niagara Falls to the US town. The process turned out to be quite civilised in the end and one that the driver was very familiar with.

However, my journey started at the new Terminal 2 at Heathrow airport. The first thing I saw as I approached the entrance was a huge screen, just behind the glass wall. I was taken with the bright blue colour, though it did remind me of something. Then I got close enough to read the white text: "A problem has been detected and Windows has been shut down…" As it happened, the t-shirt I was wearing bears the legend "Have you tried switching it off and on again?" Tee hee.

> ### About the Gathering
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> This year's event was the 28th Gathering of Friends, which started out as a weekend get-together by a bunch of gamers, led by Alan Moon (now well known as the designer of *Airlines*, *Elfenland*, *Ticket to Ride* et al). The following year they did it again, bringing some friends with them. This is the abiding principle of the Gathering of Friends: everybody who comes is a friend (and is invited by Alan). This makes for a very convivial, relaxed atmosphere in which anyone can walk up to anyone and ask to join or start a game. Never mind six degrees of separation, at the Gathering it's hard to find someone more than two away.
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> Over the years, the Gathering has expanded in time and space – and moved, too, arriving in Niagara Falls in 2011. Games designers bring proto-types to test and games publishers attend. However, the emphasis remains on playing games and having fun. The event would be recognisable to anyone who's attended a UK convention. It consists of people playing games – most of which they've brought with them. I always have a good time and meet up with old friends – and new.

I'm pleased to say that the journey was otherwise uneventful – I caught up with a couple of recent films on the plane. For once I didn't miss any of the dialogue as I had the brainwave of switching the subtitles on. Arriving at the hotel, I met up with my roommate and usual wingman, Pete Card. Our first order of business was dinner and catching up, for which we adjourned to one of the many Indian restaurants in the town – this one rejoicing in the unoriginal name of the Koh-i-Noor.

Then it was time to get down to the serious business of the week and play some games! *Terraforming Mars* was one of the hits at Spiel '16 last October, but I still hadn't played it. Pete took on the teaching duties and we were joined by a couple of old Gathering buddies, Maryl Fischer and Nick Ramsey. The title tells you what the game is about and it's played over a board that shows a map of Mars. A hexagonal grid regulates the placement of tiles, gradually turning Mars from the red planet to a blue (seas), green (plants) and grey (cities) world. The board also has tracks to show the surface temperature and the oxygen content of the atmosphere, along with areas for marking who's achieved what bonus.

Terraforming Mars in progress – the temperature's above 0 and, look, water on Mars

At its heart, though, this is a card game. Players start each round with some new cards and decide which ones they want to buy – we played with the drafting rules, which seem to be preferred by gamers and give more control over what cards you end up with. Then players take it in turns to carry out an action or two, until everybody has passed. Playing a card is one of these actions. The card may have an immediate, once-off effect, add long-term resources or provide an additional action or effect. As the cards build up, the additional resources ('tags') make players' actions more and more effective.

The key thing players are doing is, of course, making Mars more habitable: adding tiles, increasing the temperature and adding to the oxygen level. However, players will also be building up their positions – and particularly their income – so that they can take more effective actions later and grab some of the bonuses available. Hence, while some cards do provide interaction between players, the game is largely one of doing your own thing. And trying to do it better than the others.

The game's complexity is largely in the cards, of course, and the cards you play will shape the strategy you follow. Nothing much seems to happen for quite a while as players add cards and boost their abilities and power. Then it snowballs. When choosing cards you're looking for synergy between them and familiarity with the game will help this. On first acquaintance, I found it interesting, but felt it rather outstayed its welcome. I put this down to unfamiliarity and my jet lag. *Terraforming Mars* gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. It was designed by Jacob Fryxelius and is published by Fryx Games (www.fryxgames.se), amongst others (Stronghold produce the US edition).

This was enough for my first evening and I hit the hay. Pete and I follow what I think of as the American model for breakfast: we go out for it. In part, this is a response to the options available in the hotel: Starbucks or TGI Fridays. So Tuesday morning was our first foray to the "Third Street Retreat", a couple of blocks along the street. As the week

went on we found more Gathering attendees breakfasting here, but our companion this Tuesday morning was Steffan O'Sullivan, whose company is always a delight.

Returning to the hotel, the three of us set up a game of *Pax Renaissance*, another title released at Spiel '16 and the latest in Phil Eklund's "Pax" series. Ralph Anderson made a fourth for what was another voyage of discovery for me. In this one, players are the major banking families that bankrolled the powers of 16th-17th century Europe. Think Fugger, Medici *et al.* The European countries do appear in the game, but are something the players can acquire!

While *Pax Renaissance* is a card game, there are playing pieces. Some of these are for the players, while others represent different military forces tied to the major religions of the period – religious wars being another facet of the period. A set of cards provide a map, centred on the Mediterranean. Important on this are the major trade routes as pieces on the routes (*between* cards) are players' major source of income. Money is used to buy cards into players' hands, whence they can then be played.
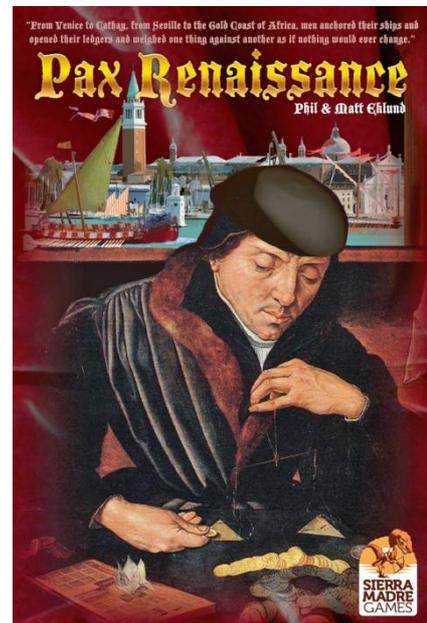
Apart from doing things when they're played, cards build up players' holdings in the West and East (though ne'er the twain shall meet). Triggering either side lets a player carry out an action from each card. Hence, the more cards you can get down, the more you can do. Thus the obvious strategy is to buy and play lots of cards. Which in turn requires income. And that's before you consider what those actions actually do.

Oh boy, this is a complex game. Playing it for the first time can't do much more than familiarise you with the mechanics and some of the actions (particular actions and circumstances simply don't happen in every game). Working out how to put all that together will have to wait for a second play. Or a third. And then there's all the historical detail included on the cards.

As players work their way through the cards, 'comet' cards will appear. Buying one of these lets a player activate one of the winning conditions, which can then be claimed by a player who meets its requirements. A comet may well be bought as a preventative measure, triggering a winning condition that nobody can achieve rather than letting someone else choose one that they can win. This is something I failed to do, letting Steffan take the win. My excuse is that I still had little idea what I was doing!

Pax Renaissance was designed by Phil and Matt Eklund and is published by Sierra Madre Games (www.sierra-madre-games.eu). It gets a provisional 8/10 on my highly subjective scale and I fully intend to play it quite a bit more.

After a lunchtime sandwich, it was time for another monster game. In this case, Uwe Rosenberg's latest, *A Feast for Odin*. Lotte Schueler fought off a nagging cough to introduce Pete and me to this epic. Just setting out all the boards and pieces took a while, but a lot of the game's mechanisms had a certain familiarity. They are clearly further developments of earlier Rosenberg games: *Le Havre*, *Ora et Labora*, *Glass Road* and so on.

Look at all those bits! This is *A Feast for Odin* in play

This is "a saga in the form of a board game", according to the rules. The players are leaders of Norse tribes, aiming to build up their community through the traditional Viking activities: trading, raiding and colonising. The large central board lays out all the actions available to players. Most actions have several different flavours, requiring different numbers of workers. Since each action (usually) can't be re-used in the same round, sometime players have to take the more expensive version, even if they don't need the extras.

Each player has their own board as well. This holds the various items they acquire – goods, livestock, ships, equipment and booty. A lot of these can be 'promoted' to increasingly valuable items. A feature of players' boards is that a lot of the spaces are marked '-1'. An important element of the game is arranging your stuff to reduce your negative points at the end of the game.

The game plays simply: players use their Viking workers to take actions, acquiring and promoting stuff in different ways. Once everybody's run out of workers, the round completes with the eponymous feast and some other housekeeping. The games lasts 6-7 rounds and then the points are totted up. With lots of different actions available, there are numerous ways of playing the game. I followed a farming route, rather than the

more usual Viking activities, and this proved quite successful – it certainly made it easy to provide enough food each round.

It may be that I've played too many of these games, but *A Feast for Odin* didn't really grab me. It's a perfectly decent game that I'm happy to play again, but I won't be rushing to put it on the table. I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. *A Feast for Odin* was designed by Uwe Rosenberg and is published by Feuerland Spiele (www.feuerland-spiele.de) and others, with the English language (US) edition coming from Z-Man Games.

A game of *Love Letter* filled in until dinner time, which was a chance to catch up with more old friends from Gatherings past.

After dinner I bumped into Greg Schloesser, *Counter* editor and all-round nice guy, who co-opted me into a game of *Sagrada* with two other Gathering veterans, John Palagyi and Larry Levy. This is a dice game of constructing stained glass windows. No, really. The dice are translucent and come in five bright colours. Each round, the start player draws dice at random, rolls them and chooses one. The next player chooses one and so on, with the last player taking two and everybody else getting a second in reverse order.

Playing *Sagrada*: two rounds so far

The chosen dice go into the player's grid, gradually filling this as the game goes on – if you get it right, you'll have just enough dice to complete your grid. However, the grid is marked with spaces that must be filled with a particular colour or number. What's more, you're not allowed to place dice of the same colour or number next to each other. Suddenly the game's looking a bit tricky.

Players get to choose a grid card at the start of the game and get a number of chips, according to the difficulty rating of their card. These can be used to take extra actions during the game – swapping over a couple of dice, perhaps. When the dice run out, the game is over and players score up. There will be several public goals – so many points if a column contains all different values, perhaps – that players score points for. Each also has a particular colour of dice that's worth points to them. Unused chips are worth points and empty squares on their grid lose players points.

Sagrada is a neat, attractive game that provides an entertaining challenge without being too taxing. Greg clearly loved it (I saw him playing it several more time over the next few days), but I wasn't so enthusiastic. I give it 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Sagrada* was designed by Adrian Adamescu and Daryl Andrews and is published by Floodgate Games (floodgategames.com).

We then moved on to try *Century Spice Road*, complete with playing mat. One of the attractions of this game is the chunky coloured wooden cubes that represent the spices. In a nice touch, these come in little bowls rather than being heaped on the table. However, it's the cards that fuel gameplay. These, too, are nicely done: large format with colourful artwork.

Each card clearly shows what it does: allows a player to pick up cube/s of specific colour/s or lets them convert cube/s into different one/s. Players start with a set of the same cards and use these to get the right set of cubes to take a victory point card. They can also pick up extra cards that are not in the starting sets, letting them convert cubes in different ways. Players can only do one thing in their turn, though: play a card to acquire or convert cubes, claim a VP card or buy a new action card. Or pick their cards back up again.

I quickly realised that I needed to build an engine to generate cubes and set about acquiring the cards to do this. Of course, other players kept taking the good cards! However, I eventually got something that worked fairly effectively and set about picking up victory points. Then somebody got their fifth VP card and triggered the end of the game. Adding up the points gave us a winner. It wasn't me.

Century Spice Road is a neat, lightweight game with high quality production – it reminded more than one of us of *Splendor*. It's certainly a game I'll play again, but I won't be going out of my way to do so. I give it a provisional 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Century Spice Road* was designed by Emerson Matsuuchi and is published by Plan B Games (www.planbgames.com).
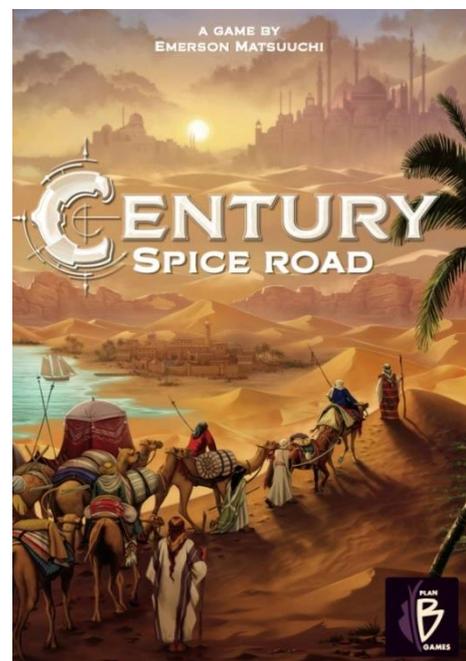
Wednesday morning's breakfast included Steffan again. He then went off to run a test of his latest RPG project which, sadly, was for role-playing newbies only. All I can say about this is: my name is Inigo Montoya…

Pete and I ran into another old friend, Jim Vroom, who was clutching a copy of *The Colonists*. After my initial experience with this at last year's MidCon (see TWJO 170) I wasn't going to pass up the opportunity to play it again. We played eras 1 and 2 and I thoroughly enjoyed it, though I have to say that it seemed trickier than it was the first time round! Despite being only half the game with three players it took up a lot of the day – not that I noticed, or cared. Mind you, I did win.

We followed this with a game of *Kashgar*, using Jim's bootleg English copy. I still can't understand why there hasn't been an official English language edition of this game. With Jim heading off to eat, Pete and I pulled out *Small Star Empires* and were joined by Nick Ramsey. I mentioned this game in my Spiel report (see *TWJO* 169), but haven't had the chance to play it much. A vanilla game went down well enough that we played again, adding in the exploration tiles.

An early dinner followed, joining the *Counter* crew for a trip to the Griffon gastro-pub. This had over 30 craft beers on tap – I only got to try three of them – and some excellent food. The staff were busy making room for another large group – it turned out to be another bunch of Gathering attendees!

Returning from dinner a few of us tried a couple of prototype games. One of the features of the Gathering is that publishers and designers bring along prototypes and pre-production versions of games to get feedback. However, the golden rule of prototypes is that you don't talk about prototypes, so I'll have to draw a veil over these until the games are in production.

Thursday morning's breakfast companion was Alan Ernstein, designer of the terrific *Tahuantinsuyu* – revamped as *Inca Empire* more recently. Hopefully we will see more from Alan in the near future.

After dealing with my accumulating emails, I joined an august group – Joe Huber, Bill Masek and Michael Tsuk – to try *Papà Paolo*. As I have an unopened copy of this myself, I was keen to see what it's like. The answer is: pizza delivery in Naples. Though probably not much like actually delivering pizzas in Naples, judging by my experience of the traffic.

The game is played over five rounds, after which players tot up their points. Most of these will come from delivering pizzas, but there are also bonuses for developing their business and any undelivered pizzas are minus points. Each round has several stages, the first of which is taking actions. Players have four of these, marked by placing one of their delivery scooter pawns. The key action is taking one of the city tiles. This is added to the player's own 'neighbourhood', with the roads connecting back to their pizzeria.

The other actions include adding another pizzeria to your neighbourhood and making pizzas – represented by square wooden blocks with red, white and green stickers. Actions done, there is then an auction as players bid for their choice of 'investment' and 'delivery' tiles. The investment tile gives players either an immediate action or an improvement to one facet of their business – such as the number of pizzas they make.

Getting the bids down in *Papà Paolo*

The delivery tile says how many pizzas they can deliver this round and how far they can move around their neighbourhood to do so.

It quickly became apparent that there are a lot of tactical considerations in this game. For example, delivered pizzas stay on your neighbourhood, so you'll have to move further to deliver pizzas next turn. *Papà Paolo* turned out to be an entertaining game that requires some thought – though without melting any brain cells. It gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale and my copy is on the table at the Swiggers games group. *Papà Paolo* was designed by Fabrice Vandenbogaerde and is published by Quined Games (quined.nl).

After this I re-joined Pete, who was with Jim Vroom and his copy of *Viticulture* and several expansions. Having recently discovered 'Stone-maier' games (okay, *Scythe*), I was keen to give this a go and we were joined by a couple more gaming buddies, Dan Luxenberg and Brian Stallings. As the name suggests, *Viticulture* is about making wine:

planting vines, harvesting grapes, producing bottles of wine and selling them. And a whole lot more besides.

We played with the *Tuscany* expansion which, among other things, divides actions between all four seasons (the standard game has just two – summer and winter – essentially). Not that players will necessarily take actions in all four seasons – they have a limited number of worker meeples for use across the year/round. Actions start with the things you'd expect: plant vines, harvest a field, fill an order – which is the way to score points. However, players can also sell grapes or give tours to gain some quick cash, build structures to improve their wine or give extra options and recruit new workers. Most actions can be taken by more than one player – depending on the number playing – but some action spaces also offer bonuses, making turn order important.
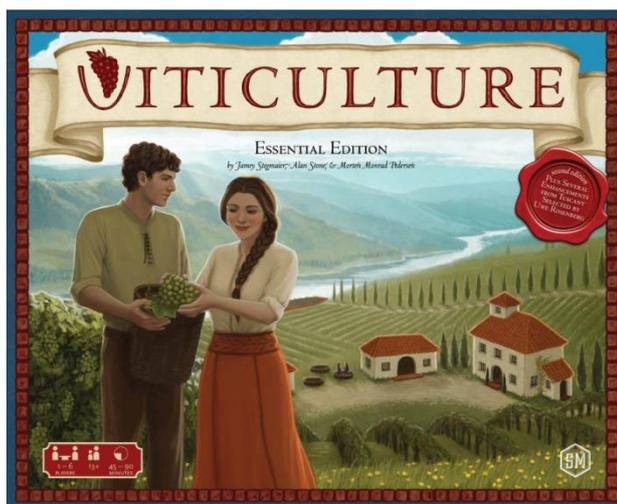
Turn order is a whole tactical sub-game in itself. Players chose where they want to go in turn order, gaining a bonus that gets more useful the later the slot they choose. Clearly, going later in turn order may mean you are frozen out of particular actions, but the bonus may be worth it. Conversely, if you really need to go first, you just have to forego any bonus. Add in to this acquiring and using visitor cards (often letting you take an action at a discount), ageing wines in your cellar to make them more valuable, the different grape varieties and wines…

The game continues until the end of a year/round when somebody has achieved a specific number of points. Of course, the player who triggers this may not be the winner once everything's been added up. I thought I was holding my own through the game, only to be eclipsed by some stonking scoring in the last couple of rounds. *Viticulture* is a really intricate game. Yet I found it very easy to get into, perhaps because the framework of the game logically follows the process of wine-making. I have to say I'm smitten: *Viticulture* gets a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale and I may have to resort to desperate measures – like buying my own copy – to play it again. *Viticulture* was designed by Jamey Stegmaier and Alan Stone and is published by Stonemaier Games (with other language versions from other publishers).

Pete and I went for an early dinner to the Third Street Retreat to discover that it was happy hour. This provided an added incentive to sample the craft beers on offer. Nicely lubricated, we returned and picked up a copy of *The Oracle of Delphi* to try. Nick Ramsey joined us and we benefitted from a rules explanation from Kris "Wattsalpoag" Gould. It's essentially a race game, as the winner is whoever is first to complete the players' missions and return to Zeus – at the centre of the 'board'.

Rather than a board, the playing area is a hexagonal grid of tiles representing the sea and islands of Ancient Greece. Each player has a 'ship', which they move across the sea to complete twelve tasks: three each of four types. Depending on the type, these involve

The Oracle of Delphi in play – lots of stuff scattered across the islands

picking up and delivering something (a statue or an offering) or going to specific places (build a shrine or defeat a monster).

The actions available to players each turn depend on their 'oracle dice'. These show coloured symbols, each representing one of the Greek Gods and constraining the action taken. For example, a blue symbol lets you move a ship to a blue space. Hence the colour of the dice is crucial, though there is some scope for changing them. Players roll their dice at the end of their turn, potentially providing bonuses for their opponents.

On top of this, players may take 'injuries' each round, drawing cards that will then limit their actions until they get rid of them. So, this is a pick-up-and-deliver game with the luck of the dice a significant factor. It's fun, bit didn't really grab me. *The Oracle of Delphi* gets a provisional 6/10 on my highly subjective scale. It was designed by Stefan Feld and was published by Pegasus Spiele (www.pegasus.de) with a US edition from Tasty Minstrel (tastyminstrelgames.com).

My player board in *The Oracle of Delphi* – note my dice on the left, ship on the right and completed quests at the top

Mike Allen, another Gathering veteran, joined us to try *Fabled Fruit*. This is an intriguing card game from Friedemann Friese where players collect and play different fruits to acquire the 'fabled juices'. Thus three pineapples and another fruit will get you a #1 'location' card/juice. The stack of uncollected location cards provides an action players can carry out to pick up fruit. That stack of #1 cards will let you draw two Fruit cards into your hand, for example.

Other location cards provide more complex interactions: such as giving another player a banana and getting two cards from their hand. As the location cards are used, the next stack in sequence becomes available. This changes the interactions available to players and these get more involved as the game goes on. The winner is the first to have collected a set number of fabled fruits, depending on the number of players.

The really intriguing bit is the next time you play. By keeping the cards carefully in order, players can start with the set of locations/actions that was available at the end of the previous game. This means that the game will continue to change each time you play until you've worked through the entire deck of cards. We played through several times to see how this changed the game and the answer was not a lot, really.

This is a fascinating idea, and I'm very interested to see how Friedemann will apply this to more complex games. However, I did not find *Fabled Fruit* particularly interesting. It gets a provisional 5/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Fabled Fruit* was designed by Friedemann Friese and is published by his imprint, 2F Spiele (www.2f-spiele.de). The English language edition comes from Stronghold Games (strongholdgames.com).

Players' tokens sit on the card whose action they've just taken in the search for *Fabled Fruit*

Pandemic: Reign of Cthulhu: Investigators in grey, cultists – and Shoggoths! – in blue

Friday was a day out: road trip to Toronto! The main reason for going was to take in a Major League Baseball game: the Baltimore Orioles at the Toronto Blue Jays. It's the best part of twenty years since I went to a ballgame, so I jumped at the opportunity. In fact, most of the British contingent at the Gathering made the trip. There were something like 30 of us on the coach when it left the hotel mid-morning.

We arrived in Toronto at lunchtime – far too early for the game. Our first port of call was Snakes and Lattes, a board game café in central Toronto (and noticeably convenient for the University) for lunch and games. The place itself was fairly basic – bare concrete floor and lots of visible ducting – but had plenty of solid tables and chairs. Plus food and drinks, a substantial games library and a small games shop. Pete and I lunched with our old friends James and Sheila Davis and together we played *Pandemic: Reign of Cthulhu*.

This is essentially the same game as the disease-fighting original co-operative game, *Pandemic*. Except that here the players are fighting the minions of the Old Ones in an effort to close portals and stop Cthulhu himself from arriving. Each has a specific character with its own special ability and part of the challenge is working together to make the best use of the characters. The extra tricky bit in this game is that characters may be driven mad by what they've witnessed, making co-operation problematic.

It is an atmospheric adaptation of the base game, with the same sense of jeopardy. We went close to the wire, but managed to thwart the bad guys in the nick of time and save the world. Until next time… I like the game's ambience and it does make a change from fighting diseases. *Pandemic: Reign of Cthulhu* gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly

subjective scale. It was designed by Matt Leacock (in evidence at the Gathering with a prototype or two) and is published by Z-Man Games (www.zmangames.com) and others.

Pete and I then had a go at *7 Wonders Duel*, which is a clever two-player adaptation of the original game. Since a crucial mechanism in *7 Wonders* is the way cards are passed between players for them to draft their hand, I did wonder how this could be reproduced in a game with only two players. The answer is that each round's cards are dealt out in a pattern, some face up and some face down, with cards overlapping. A card can only be taken if nothing is covering it. This is a very neat mechanism that makes players think hard about the repercussions of each card they take.

Apart from this, the game is much the same. Players develop their civilisation over three rounds, as part of which they may build their particular Wonder. The different card colours continue to represent different facets of each culture: red for military, brown and grey for production, green for science and so on. And points are scored in similar ways. As there are only two players, military strength is a straight fight. It's portrayed on a track that gives bonuses for increasing your military superiority over your opponent – and the possibility of an outright win.

7 Wonders Duel is a clever, challenging game that successfully translates the feel of the original game to a two-player game. I'm not a great fan of two-player games, but this

7 Wonders Duel in play: we've both completed one Wonder and Pete (left) is ahead in military

gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. *7 Wonders Duel* was designed by Antoine Bauza and Bruno Cathala and is published by the sombrero-wearing Belgians of Repos Production (www.rprod.com).

And so on to the Rogers Centre to see the Blue Jays being stuffed by the Orioles. Not a great game, but it was fun to be there. It was after midnight by the time we got back to the hotel, so I called it a night. Many thanks to Daryl Andrews, who organised the whole outing.

Saturday morning is the flea market. I find it very entertaining chatting to familiar faces as they try to sell me their old games! I did pick up a couple of small items – interesting games from a few years back that I didn't already have.

Once that had been cleared out of the way again, it was time to play another game. Rodney Somerstein – who had brought an excellent selection of games to the Gathering – taught *Fields of Green* to me, Ward Batty and Mike Young, but didn't play himself. I was in good company, though, as both these two are real characters. The game turned out to be a cracker, too: (modern) farm development in a tile-laying game.

Players start with two tiles: a water tower (crucial for watering crops) and a silo (for storage). The rest of the tiles are shuffled and stacked by type. Players start each round by drawing tiles from the piles and can choose what mix of things they want: more fields initially, say, and more buildings (which score points) later on. Then each player uses one tile from their hand and passes the rest to the next player. And so on.

My farm as *Fields of Green* nears a conclusion

The obvious thing to do with a tile is add it to your farm. However, there is a cost to doing this. It must be placed adjacent to an existing card and may have other requirements on it. In particular, cards may need other cards within a certain distance in order to produce anything (or score points). Early on this is straightforward, but it gets increasingly complicated as the game goes on. Of course, once you know the game, you may well leave spaces in your layout for particular tiles. Whereupon the other players will try to stop you getting one!

Tiles can also be discarded to add a new water tower or silo or to sell food for some immediate cash. Once players have dealt with all their tiles, it's time to harvest. This is when cards need to be in the right place – and there can be a chain reaction: water from the tower to a field to produce grain to feed the horses. Failing to harvest a tile means it's turned over and plays no further part in the game – unless you have a tile that scores for such spaces.

After the fourth harvest, the game ends. Players score points for the tiles they've played plus a bit more for their stored food, left over cash and empty water towers (to reward efficiency). Add in the chance to get equipment, which provides extra abilities, and the potential synergy of the tiles and there's a lot to think about. I was very taken with *Fields of Green* and it gets a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Fields of Green* was designed by Vangelis Bagiartakis (it's developed from his earlier *Among the Stars*) and published by Artipia Games (artipiagames.com), though without their usual baroque artwork. Stronghold produces the US edition.

Another regular feature of the Gathering – as far as I'm concerned – is the Overlord game organised by James and Sheila. This is a team game of *Memoir '44* usually using two sets to give a double-size board. Each side has three Field Generals with a Commander-in-chief in overall charge. This time our scenario was the Siege of Tobruk, which comes as a pre-printed map. We drew randomly for sides and I ended as one of the plucky Aussie defenders under C-in-C Devin Stinchcomb. I had the right flank with

Memoir '44 Overlord game: starting positions on my flank. I'm feeling outnumbered

Memoir '44 Overlord game: final positions on my flank (with yellow British pieces having replaced the brown Russians originally there). Still outnumbered, but holding the line!

Scott Simon in the centre and Sheila on the left. My regular *M44* opponent, Leo Tischer, commanded the attacking Axis forces with Stefan Buchtmann, Terry Egan and James (opposite me) as his Generals.

The Allied forces start in strong defensive positions, but are facing a large attacking force. German tank attacks in the centre cleared the defending infantry out of way, but were hit by counter-attacks from the Allied armour (Devin supplied Scott with a couple of "Armour Assault" cards). Sparring on German right weakened the defenders and they were taken out by a strafing Me 109 (we were using the *M44 Air Pack*). James made several attacks on my positions, punching holes in my lines. However, I was able to re-deploy and inflict losses that stopped him exploiting these – especially after Scott moved some tanks over. The result was a win, 15:12, for the Allies, helped by the two medal advantage for occupying Tobruk. Had we not won when we did, though, it looked like the Axis would probably have won on their next turn. It was, as always, great fun.

Once the *Memoir '44* had been cleared away, James, Leo and I sat down to try the co-operative version of *Days of Ire*, drafting in Jason Henke as our fourth. The game is about the doomed Hungarian Uprising of 1956, pitching the players as revolutionaries against the Hungarian state and its Soviet sponsors. To win, the players must resolve most of the events that keep cropping up, while making sure no-one dies from run-ins with the militia, snipers and Russian tanks.

Threats keep popping up, meaning the players constantly have to decide which one to tackle, knowing that the others will get worse. It constantly feels that the whole thing is on a knife edge and any choice could end in catastrophe. There is a clever mechanism that drives the authorities' actions, one of the many things players have to consider whether to oppose. (The alternative version of the game has one player as the authorities against a team of revolutionaries.)

We had to abort the game after three days/rounds (out of seven) due to time considerations, but this was enough for me to decide I want to play this game again. I give it a provisional 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Days of Ire* was designed by

Days of Ire in play: That's me top right, on my T34! Brown and red bits are the bad guys

Katalin Nimmerfroh, Dávid Turczi an, Mihály Vincze and is published by Cloud Island (cloudislandgames.com) with a US edition from Mr B Games (www.mrbgames.com).

After an early dinner in TGI Fridays, it was time for the annual ice cream reception – an opportunity to chat while eating large bowls of ice cream. Mmm… ice cream! This is sponsored by Rio Grande Games, so many thanks to main man Jay Tummelson for his continuing generosity. It also gets everybody out of the way while the ballroom is re-configured for the climax of the Gathering: the prizes!

Nowadays there are few organised tournaments, but this remains a fun feature: everybody who wants to participate brings a game to add to the prizes. And everybody gets to pick something to take away. The key principle is that you bring a game of the quality you'd like to get. Thus the standard is high, with several special items, including homemade game boxes and the like, taking pride of place. Additional games are donated by publishers, so this year we all got two picks plus a copy of *Foreclosed* from Mercury Games.

The only downside is that, first, Alan makes a speech. Okay, it's short; it's about thanking the team that organises the event and recognising the winners of the tournaments that do take place. Apart from tournament winners, names are picked at random and I was early enough that my top choice, a copy of the out-of-print *Memoir '44 Air Pack* was still there. Yay!

Saturday evening saw a quick game of *Powerboats*, Corné van Moorsel's excellent race game (he's just kickstarted *Powerships*, a development of the game with rocketships instead of powerboats), followed by a long game of *Terraforming Mars*. For some reason we just weren't getting seas onto Mars and the game went on until we did.

Alan speechifies on Saturday evening – that's part of the prize 'table' behind him

Sunday is always a bit of an anti-climax. People start leaving on Saturday and continue through Sunday, so there are a lot of goodbyes. The rooms feel empty as a result and, worst of all, people take their games as they go, so the selection available dwindles. (Hence why I always take one or two games with me: this way I'm sure to have something to play on Sunday.) I did get to play another game of *Sagrada*, though.

On the plus side, there are a couple of fun tournaments on Sunday: *Can't Stop* and *Liar's Dice*. The former is Sid Sackson's classic push-your-luck game. All you do is roll four dice and move 1-2 of the three markers. Until you can't and you're bust! Only wimps stop rolling to save what they've achieved so far. Unfortunately, I didn't achieve anything, going bust every time I rolled the dice! I had good company, though: Jim McDanold, Floyd Sherrod and Jim Carroll – all excellent guys to play a game with.

Liar's Dice is another classic, this time from Richard Borg, and is all about bluffing. Roll those dice and claim that everybody's rolled a 4! Okay, not quite believable, but I've seen some long odds come home in this game. My game was, as always, great fun. Not least for the entertaining presence of Dan Blum, who – I suspect – had us all just where he wanted us (and went on to the final).

In between the two tournaments there was just time for something else. The irrepressible Mary Prasad introduced *Welcome Back to the Dungeon* to me and Carlos Hernandez. This entertaining card game is a mash-up of push-your-luck with a dungeon bash. Even on first acquaintance, it has some interesting tactical subtleties. Before the intrepid adventurer enters the dungeon, the players 'bid' for which of them that is going to be. They do this by removing equipment (cards) from the hero or adding more monsters to the dungeon (stack of cards)!

Eventually, one player will be left to act as the adventurer: trying to defeat the monsters with whatever weapons they have left. If they manage this, they claim a success card – getting two of these wins the game. However, if they run out of hit points before the end of the monsters, the adventurer has died. Die twice and you're out of the game – being the last person standing is the other way to win.

This is an enjoyable, quick-playing game that I had great fun playing. (Okay, part of this may have been Mary: "Let's not play the Princess: she's rubbish!") It gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. *Welcome Back to the Dungeon* was designed by Antoine Bauza and Masato Uesugi and is published by Iello (www.iellogames.com).

And then it was time to say my final goodbyes and pick up the shuttle for the trip back to Toronto. I took in some great views of the Falls from the Canadian side as the shuttle picked up other passengers. The rest of the journey was uneventful, just lengthy, and that was that for another year. Thanks are due to Alan Moon and the rest of the team for another fun Gathering and I look forward to seeing everybody again next year.