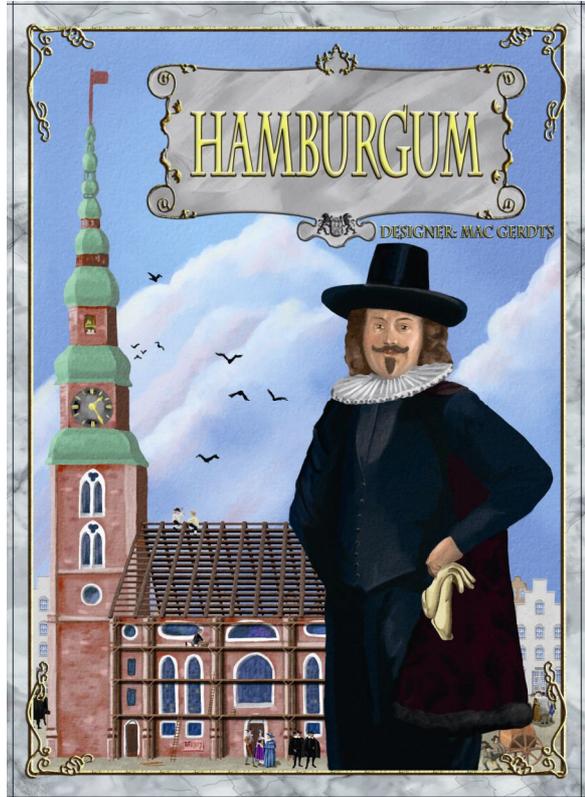


Hamburgum

Reviewed by Pevans

I don't know what it is, but I've been having real trouble getting to grips with a couple of the big games I've been playing recently. One of these is *Hamburgum*, which really impressed me when I first played the prototype. (If you must know, the other is Martin Wallace's *Brass*, which I find annoyingly fiddly and frustrating).

Hamburgum is the third 'roundel' game from designer Mac Gerdts and publisher Eggertspiele. (The other two being the excellent *Antike* and *Imperial*.) This means the key mechanism in the game is an eight-segment circle. Players move their pawn round this (up to three segments for free and extra segments at a cost of one victory point each) and carry out the action they end on. But I'm getting ahead of myself: let's get the basics out of the way.



Hamburgum comes in a substantial box, which remains pretty full when you've broken out all the components. The large board shows a medieval city on each side. One is Hamburg (Hamburgum), the other is London (Londinium). Around this are various areas for playing pieces and a scoring track around the edge. On the Hamburg side of the board, these are annotated in German, while the London side is in English. In practice, this makes little difference as the text isn't significant, apart from the actions on the roundel. It is a bit easier to learn the game using your native (or most familiar) language.

The game is all about building the city's churches. The cities are divided into parishes, each with its own church, plus a cathedral church. Chunky wooden church pieces are used to show when each is complete. In each parish are spaces for players to mark the buildings they've put up, identified by type. A network of lines connects these and the churches. The connections are significant as you can only set up a building if it's linked to an existing building of yours or a church you have donated to. The topography of the two cities is slightly different, so there are some differences in the options available in Hamburg and London. However, my experience is that this is only a minor consideration when playing the game.

There are three commodities that players can produce: beer, sugar and cloth. (I approve of any game that involves beer!) These are represented by substantial wooden cubes in three colours. One cube of each colour is used to show the current value of the commodity. This goes down as production capacity goes up. Players sell these commodities for cash – good solid cardboard coins – and spend the money buying raw materials. There are three of these: bells, bricks and timber. In a neat touch, timber is wooden sticks, bricks are rectangular clay pieces and bells are ... bells. Miniature bells with clappers that actually make a noise. Excellent!

Players use the raw materials to build buildings and ships and to donate to the churches. For each church, there is a set of tiles, representing the five donations required to build the church. Each scores victory points for the player who holds it. The first tile for each church is always a plain 5 points. After this, players have their choice of the other four. These score points for one of: the number of buildings the player has in the church's parish, the number of donations they've made, the number of ships they have or the number of buildings of a specific type they have. As you can see, the value of most of these is likely to increase as the game goes on and there are tactical considerations in which type of tile you choose. However, players can only hold one tile of each type. Collecting a second of the same type means that one of them must be scored immediately.

On top of all this, players have a set of pieces in their colour. Wooden discs are used to mark where they have donated to churches, with a thicker one to mark victory points scored. Players mark their buildings with rectangular cardboard pieces, showing a responsible citizen (male on one side, female on the other). They also have some nice wooden ships in their colour. Each player starts with one of these in the first section of the harbour. This shows that each ship can hold up to three of one commodity. As more ships are built, the existing ships are pushed through the sections of the harbour, reducing the number of goods they can hold. Finally, each player has a pawn for the roundel. There are also useful crib sheets that outline the actions available.

Before we get back to the roundel, there is one other significant component in the game: the solid rectangular tiles for the six types of buildings. Three of these are production buildings, allowing the owner to produce an extra beer, sugar or cloth for each one they own. The Merchant buildings are simple: build one and you get £100. The Captain buildings get you a free ship and add a 'Flying Dutchman' ship to the harbour. These carry no goods, but occupy a space, pushing the ships along more quickly. The final set of buildings, the 'Officials', provide the owner with some sort of bonus. Cash for each building or for each donation and so on. There are two sets of these. The standard set is numbered and bought in strict sequence – this is a bit simpler when you're learning the game. The alternative set allows players to look through and choose the one they want – which I prefer.

Phew! There are a lot of things in this game. But what happens in a turn is very simple. Move your pawn to the action you want and carry it out. However, while some actions are very simple, others can take a while. There are three production

actions, one for each commodity. Land on this, take a cube (plus one for each production building of the same type you own). Simple. There are two trading spaces. Here, players can either sell their goods or buy raw materials. Selling goods is limited by the ships each player has and the section of the harbour each is in. The price the goods fetch starts high and drops as production buildings for each commodity are built. Players can always sell excess goods that their ships can't hold, but for a minimum price.

Buying raw materials is based on a simple table, according to the number of things you are buying. So, two bricks and a timber are three items and will cost you £100. Add a bell, that's four items for £150. (Five is £200, 6 £260 and so on.) The crucial thing for game play is that you can either sell or buy; you can't do both in the same action. As there are two trading actions on the roundel, you can go to one, sell your goods, then hop to the other in your next action and spend the cash on raw materials. However, the two trading segments are opposite each other, so it will cost you one victory point to move the four spaces from one to the other. Worth doing occasionally, when it matters, but not regularly.

Once you have the raw materials, there are three segments that allow you to spend them. The Dockyard allows you to buy ships: each costs a piece of timber. New ships are added to the first section of the harbour (allowing each ship to carry up to three of the same commodity). If there are already as many ships in this section as there are players, the existing ships are first pushed along the harbour (to the two section, the one section and then back to their owner). Players visit the Guildhall to



construct buildings. Each costs a brick and a timber. You are also limited by the number of each type available and whether you can connect to a space of that type on the board. This is where a bit of planning helps: donating to the churches that give you a tactical position on the board. However, your plans can be easily upset by what the other players are up to, so keep an eye on them!

The Church segment is the key to the game. This allows players to make donations towards construction of a church and/or score donation tiles. As you'd expect, donations get more expensive the more that are made. The first donation is just one brick, the second, a brick and a timber, and the fifth and final donation for a church is one brick, one timber, one bell and 10 cash for each citizen (i.e. building) the player has (lots of buildings will make that fifth donation expensive). Completing a church with the fifth donation gets you bonus victory points and the first church to be completed is worth most. A player who has completed a church has the added benefit that they are no longer restricted in where they can place buildings. This makes it very worthwhile to be the first to complete a church. The other side of this is that players should beware of making it too easy for someone else to complete a church. (If everybody makes one donation to the same church, for example, the fifth person gets to complete it and does rather well out of it!)

The game ends when the last church is complete. Players score any donation tiles they have not already scored. They get 50 cash for each commodity and raw material they have left and every 100 cash is another victory point. In a close game, these few points can matter, but they are not all that significant in terms of your overall score.

There is a clear narrative to *Hamburgum*: produce commodities, sell them, spend the cash to buy raw materials, and use these to build buildings and ships and donate to the churches. The important thing to remember is that making donations and completing churches score victory points. Buying buildings and ships does not – though they affect the number of points you score. It is very easy to get caught up in getting more buildings, only to find that other players have grabbed the bulk of the victory points.

One of the things that I have gradually realised is that tempo is important in this game. It often goes faster than I'm expecting. I'm still building up my position and the game is almost over! So bear this in mind and keep an eye on the speed with which other players are building up their positions. Key thing to watch out for, of course, is when people buy a bell (players may only hold one at a time) as that usually means they're looking to complete a church. On the other hand, they may just be trying to mislead everybody else.

Position on the roundel matters, too. It's worth looking a few turns ahead and working out what you want to do when. It's all too easy to end up buying materials on the far side of the roundel from the 'Church' action. Then you either have to fit in an extra action (which slows you down) or pay victory points to get round. (I just don't look far enough ahead, I think.)

Hamburgum is a surprisingly subtle game. Apart from what you are actually able to do, each action has other implications. Your position on the roundel for one thing. This constrains your options for your next action and, in turn, influences the speed with which you can carry out your strategy. There are also plenty of tactical options available to players. For example, buying several ships just before scoring a ship tile. All in all, *Hamburgum* is a really impressive game that is giving me, for one, something to think about. It gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Hamburgum was designed by 'Mac' Gerdt and published by Eggertspiele (in German and English). It is a strategy board game for 2-5 players, aged 12+, and takes about 90 minutes to play.

This review was first published in *Gamers Alliance Report*, Spring 2008.

© Copyright Paul Evans 2008. All trademarks acknowledged.