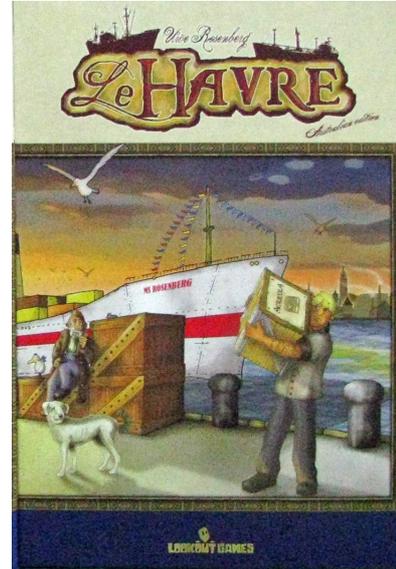


## What Uwe Rosenberg did after *Agricola*

### *Le Havre* reviewed

I keep describing this game as “what Uwe Rosenberg did after *Agricola*”. The designer’s notes in the game make it clear that this is correct: the game was designed in December 2007. It’s quite a feat that it appeared in finished form at Spiel ’08 the following October. The long list of playtesters gives some idea of how this was achieved. As you’d expect, given the popularity of *Agricola* over the last year, it was one of the must-haves at Spiel.

Like *Agricola*, it is a development game where the players are constrained to a few actions each round. Again like *Agricola*, players need to provide a certain amount of food at the end of each round to feed their workers. Unlike *Agricola*, these workers are purely notional. The amount of food is the same for each player and is set for each round, depending on how many people are playing and which version of the game they’re playing. Hence, players can see what’s coming and plan for it. Not that this makes it any easier.



Food comes in the form of some of the many commodities that are available in the game. Each fish counter, for example, is worth 1 food. Turn them into smoked fish and they’re worth 2 food apiece. This is one feature of the game: each commodity can be turned (literally – the counters are double-sided) into an ‘improved’ version. Iron becomes steel, clay becomes bricks and cattle become meat! (aka 3 Food) Players can always buy food, in effect trading money for food, and can take out a loan to do so. However, it’s the most money that wins the game, so spending money on food is draining your victory points. What’s more, loans cost interest and have to be bought back (at a premium) at the end of the game.

The most effective way (as the rules suggest) of reducing your need for food is to build ships. Each ship provides a certain amount of food each round. In a neat touch, the ships are printed on the reverse of the cards for the rounds (the front shows how much food is required and so on). The pool of available ships thus grows as the game progresses. Building a ship requires certain raw materials (more of those commodities) and the use of a Wharf.

At the heart of the game are 30 buildings (cards), two of which are wharves. Each building allows the user – or, in some cases, the owner – to do something. Such as to turn iron into steel, clay into bricks or cattle into meat. Or, indeed, to build a ship. Some of these actions use up energy and, again, some of the commodities (wood, coal) count as energy. The buildings can be built or bought. Buying buildings can be a good move if you have the cash. Building them requires raw materials (wood, bricks, maybe iron or other things) and the use of a building that allows you to build.

The second difference between buying and building is that buying does not cost an action. Each time it’s a player’s turn, they can do one of two things: pick up a stack of a commodity or use an (unoccupied) building. However, they can buy buildings freely. Since most buildings are worth

what you paid for them at the end of the game and other players have to pay a fee (usually 1-2 cash or food) for using your buildings, this is a good way of spending surplus cash. Mind you, at the start of the game cash is tight. It's only later on that you may have spare cash lying around.

The game does not allow players to take out loans willy-nilly, so it's not a game where you can borrow large amounts to invest. However, it is certainly possible to engineer things so that you have to take loans. Provided you can pay them back before the end of the game (so that they cost less), taking loans does not seem to hurt your chances of winning. And there is a very useful building that allows players to get rid of loans cheaply.

Each round is a series of seven actions. This makes things quite interesting. Generally, each player gets two actions each round. However, with four players, one of them only gets one action in a round. That's worth planning for. In a three-player game, one player gets three actions a round. Again, it's a useful thing to bear in mind. The actions are controlled by a set of seven discs, whose sequence is randomly chosen at the start of the game. Each disc shows two commodities and one piece is added to the available stack of those at the start of the action. Over the seven actions this provides more of the basic commodities (fish, wood) than the more valuable ones (iron, cattle).

Having added commodities, the current player gets their one action. In the early part of the game, this will usually be to take a (stack of a) commodity. You need these for food and energy, to get buildings and to convert to more valuable materials. As more buildings are built/bought and thus available, players will usually get more out of using a building. So the piles of commodities build up to the point where they become irresistible. What a player chooses depends on what they are trying to do. You have a limited number of actions during the game and towards the end you have to focus on how you're going to use these.

*Le Havre* has all sorts of neat touches. For example, the set of 30 buildings is the same every time you play. At the start of the game, these are divided at random into three piles and each pile then sorted into numerical order with only the top building in each pile available. This means the buildings will appear in the same general sequence, but the detail will be different each time. Number 1 will clearly be on the top of one pile. But number 2 may well be under it and so can't be built/bought until later.

The structure of the game is pretty obvious. Stock up with commodities, get some buildings, add more commodities, improve them, get more buildings and so on. It doesn't matter too much



which buildings you own as you are able to use anybody's buildings. However, having the buildings you want to use means you don't have to pay a fee to use them. And you can't guarantee other players will put the buildings you want into play. Commodities and buildings complement each other, of course. The buildings you want will depend on the commodities you have and what you want to do with them.

Hence, while each player's overall strategy is pretty much the same, there are lots of routes to achieving this. This allows players to pursue their own strategy – though there are also tactical considerations. As you may have noticed, there isn't much interaction between the players. In effect, this is only done by denying things (a specific commodity, the use of a building) to other players. Not something to do all the time as you need to build up your own position, but a useful tactical option.

*Le Havre* is a big, clever, absorbing game, though not as immediately appealing as *Agricola*. There is a lot to think about, but, at the same time, you only have a limited number of actions through the game. This actually gives you more to think about. You really don't notice the time going by, so it comes as something of a surprise to find the game has taken three hours.

*Le Havre* was designed by Uwe Rosenberg and is published by Lookout Games. It is a strategy board game for 3-4 players and takes around 3 hours to play. It gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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