

Ghost Town

Old Town reviewed by Pevans

Old Town has been around for a while, but designer Stephan Riedel produced a new version at Spiel this year under the Clicker Spiele brand. The sepia photograph of a 'Wild West' town on the cover sets the tone for the game. The idea is to re-create a vanished town, identifying where features like the Saloon, Sheriff's office and undertaker's were located. The game finishes when all the plots on the town plan (the board) have been filled with the building tiles. Players score points as they go –and whoever's got the most wins, of course.

So, scoring points... this is where it gets complicated. Know those logic puzzles that give a set of relationships and you have to deduce how they work out? Well, playing *Old Town* is rather like solving a series of these. Play is governed by the cards each player has in their hand. A card may say that a specific building can only be on certain plots on the board (the north side of Main Street, for example). When a card is played, markers for the building are placed on the appropriate plots (those on the north side of Main Street in my example). Any spare markers for that building are kept by the player – these are worth points.

Once there are markers on the board for a building, further cards played for that building reduce the options. If the next card says our building is orientated east-west, only the east-west plots with markers count. The player removes markers from the board (from the north-south plots in my example), scoring a few more points. If there's only one place a building can go, the appropriate tile is placed on the board and the remaining markers removed. This can be quite a few points.

Even better, removing markers from the plot where the building tile goes may mean that another building's location is certain. This can be placed, too, and its markers taken off the board to score the player even more points. This is the key to the game: spotting opportunities to get several buildings down as the result of a single card play and score lots of points.

I haven't mentioned one wrinkle. Each player has a couple of buildings in front of them. Some of the cards (most of those in play during the game, in fact) refer to 'my building'. So when a player puts one of these cards down, they have the option of which of 'their' buildings it refers to. This is rather clever. It gives players some flexibility and focuses play on the buildings they have. One tip: at the start of the game, pick buildings that are named on cards you hold, otherwise it may take a while to get them on to the board.

One of the drawbacks of this kind of game is that there will always be cards that can't be played. "The Doctor's office was on the south side of Main Street" is pretty useless if the markers for the Doctor are all on the north side. Similarly,

cards may just reflect the situation on the board (“The Doctor’s office was on the north side of Main Street” in this case). These cards would clog up players’ hands and reduce their options. However, as an alternative to the usual play, players may play two such cards to remove a single marker from the board. This is quite powerful because it can be **any** marker. And even a single marker may spark a chain reaction that puts several buildings on the board and scores lots of points.

This is a very clever and, I think, unique game. It does involve a fair amount of thinking but isn’t too heavy – though anyone who struggles with spatial awareness may find it a pain. To win, players have to be able to see the consequences of their actions and spot the opportunity to make a big score (as I normally fail to do!). There is no grand strategy to this; it’s simply a question of taking advantage of the cards in your hand. I rather like this game and look forward to playing it some more.

Old Town was designed by Stephan Riedel and published (in Germany) by Clicker Spiele. It is a board game for 1-4 players, aged 10+, and takes about 60 minutes to play. It is available from specialist games shops in Germany for around 20 Euros.

Pevans rates it 8/10 on his very subjective scale.

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