

Eat your heart out, Machiavelli

Princes of the Renaissance reviewed by Pevans

My favourite game at both the 2001 and 2002 Spiel games fairs was published by Warfrog. So I thought I'd better give their 2003 game some close attention. It was always going to suffer in comparison with the magnificent **Age of Steam** from 2002, but it does stand up pretty well. **Princes of the Renaissance** – designed, as always, by Martin Wallace – is a very different game, however. It's also a fairly complex game, so the problem for the reviewer is where to start to get the idea of the game across.

Well, how about the board? **Princes of the Renaissance** has a smallish board, showing a map of Renaissance Italy. The main features are the major cities: Venice, Florence, Milan, Rome and Naples. Each of these has a counter on a track that indicates the city's status. At the end of the game, the cities are worth points according to their relative position. Having a stake in the top cities will score you a lot of points and is definitely one way to win the game. However, the ranking of the cities fluctuates during the game, so part of the tactics is to build up the cities you have a stake in. And do down the others, of course.



For each city there is a set of tiles in the same colour. Players can have up to six of these – though no more than three different colours. It's these tiles that are worth points according to the city's ranking at the end of the game. Each of the tiles also provides some sort of bonus, income or special ability. So, as well as

looking to score points from them, you buy tiles to provide a tactical advantage or to further your overall strategy. For example, Giovanni Medici is a Florence tile. He gives you a discount when paying to become Pope (!) and an income of 1 Influence point each 'decade'.

Princes of the Renaissance is played in three decades, during which players carry out actions in turn. As I'll explain later, the end of the decade is under the control of the players. At the end of the third decade, you tot up the points to see who's won. At the beginning of each decade players get income, which they will then spend carrying out their actions. There are two forms of currency in the game: Money and Influence. Both are spent in carrying out actions, but some actions require cash and some need influence. It is easier to increase your money income than your influence, but which you need will depend on your strategy for the game.

The simplest action you can do is to buy a tile. Two types of tile can be bought: troops and treachery. Troop tiles represent different types of military force and have an attack and/or defence value. When a player is involved in a war, you add up the attack values of their troops if they're attacking, the defence values if defending. Some of the city tiles give bonuses for different troop types. These will be important to anyone pursuing a military strategy. Troops cost money to buy: the most expensive (cavalry and artillery) are the most powerful. These two also provide an influence income. A standard start to the game is buying both – with 5 or 6 players there aren't enough to go round, though. You're limited to one of each type, too, so you can't build a purely artillery army, for example.

Treachery tiles are one-off special actions and cost one money and one influence to buy. You're limited to holding two (some city tiles allow you to hold more) and, generally, you play them in your turn. Probably the most used type of Treachery card is the 'Freeze Bid'. This stops someone else from participating any further in an auction – very effective when only two of you are left! The next most used is 'Bribe Troops' which removes one troop tile from consideration in a war.

Other tiles are auctioned, rather than bought. Starting an auction is the second action a player can take. So, if you want a city tile, you have to offer it for auction – it's bid for in money. The starting price is always double the status of the city it's from. This leads to an interesting tactic of deliberately reducing the status of city in an effort to buy tiles cheaply and then boosting it back up again. Easier said than done! The auction goes round the table, each player increasing the bid or dropping out. Last bidder remaining wins and pays whatever their last bid was. (See how useful those 'Freeze Bid' cards are?)

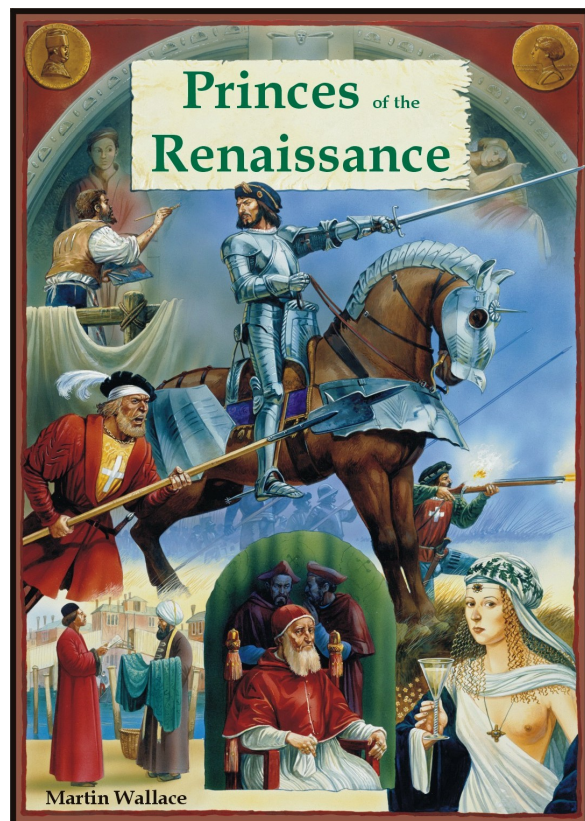
In each decade a set of four 'event' tiles is available. These, too, are auctioned off and each of the tiles shows whether it should be bid for in money or influence. Most of the tiles are artists: Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci et al. These are either worth Victory Points at the end of the game or raise the status of a city (purchaser's choice). In the first two decades, one tile is a Merchant bonus – very

useful for anyone following a Merchant strategy (a lot of city tiles are Merchants, who bring in income each decade). In the third decade the tile is 'French Invade', which drops the status of a city by two levels. When the fourth event tile is sold, the decade ends. So, as I mentioned above, if you've done all you want to do in a decade, you put an event up for auction to hasten the end of the decade. However, my experience is that there's always something else you want to do – unless you've run out of money and Influence.

This leaves one other tile that can be auctioned off as an action: the Pope. The position of Pope is available afresh each decade and is bid for using Influence. In the first two decades it brings the holder some money; in the last decade it's worth Victory Points. Once per decade the Pope is also allowed to intervene in a war, using his troops to back one side or other in a 'Holy Alliance'.

Which brings us to wars. Starting a war is the third action available to a player, though only a limited number of wars can be fought in a decade. Except that certain tiles allow extra wars and certain tiles stop wars. Wars are very important to the game as they provide income for those involved, change the status level of cities and bring Victory Points to the winner. The player who starts the war nominates one city to attack and one to defend: e.g. Florence attacks Milan. Then there are two auctions (bidding with Influence) to be Condottiere – that is, to lead the fight for each city. First for attacker, then defender. Each Condottiere receives cash equal to the status of the city s/he represents; though they can't collect this until the start of the next decade. Both Condottieres roll a die: the attacker adds this to the total attack value of their troops and bonuses; the defender adds it to the total defence value of theirs. If the attacker's total is higher, the attack wins. If not, the Condottieres reverse roles and the defender counter-attacks. The status of the victorious city goes up one level (two if they won with at least twice the score) and the losing city goes down one (or two). The winning Condottiere gets a laurel wreath. The first of these is worth 1 Victory Point. Your second is worth 2, the third 3 and so on. So, one or two laurels aren't worth very much. Six or seven, on the other hand, are worth 21/28, which is a large number of Victory Points.

Gaining laurels is a major part of a military strategy. Over the three decades there will be up to 12 wars (15 with 5-6 players) – plus or minus any



extras. So you're looking to win at least half of these. You need to spend money on troops and Influence on bidding to be Condottiere. You also want the bonuses that improve your military strength or give you a discount on becoming Condottiere. The danger is that you miss out on other points scoring opportunities. You also need to look for ways of improving your Influence income in order to continue winning the auctions for Condottiere. You need to choose, too, whether your army is strong in attack or in defence. If one player is going for a strong attacking army, another player can compete by buying a strong defensive army. This way, they can halt the attack and win on a counter-attack (an attacking army will usually have a weak defence).

There are plenty of tactical options around the wars for other players. Apart from the laurels, there's the money. Players often participate in a war simply to gain income – particularly if they're following a strategy where they don't have much other use for their Influence. And then there's the difference it can make to the status of the cities. Remember that you get the points for a city for each tile you have for that city. It's well worth pushing a city up to the 10-point first position if you're going to score 20 or 30 points from that. Having said that, over the three decades there will be plenty of wars and other factors changing the status of cities. It takes a lot of effort to get a specific city to the top. So it works best if two of you are working together to promote the same city – though that usually means the other player is gaining as much as you. One final wrinkle is that you don't have to be the attacking Condottiere and win the war. You might bid to defend a city you don't want to see promoted and make sure you lose!

I've left out one sort of tile. At the start of the game, each player gets a tile for a particular family. This gives you some sort of bonus or special ability, which will often influence the strategy you follow. The obvious one is the Baglioni family, which gives the player a discount on paying to be Condottiere. A clear pointer towards a military strategy.

I've mentioned the military strategy in some detail. It is very powerful, but can be derailed by other players winning the auction for Condottiere. It is also diluted if more than one player is following it. The other obvious strategy is collecting Merchants. There are Merchant tiles for several cities – notably Venice, which has five. Merchants bring in income each decade. With the bonus event tiles – available in decades one and two – Merchants are worth more money and Victory Points at the end of the game. However, you can't get very many VPs for Merchant tiles (a maximum of 12 if you have both bonuses and 6 Merchant tiles, which is unlikely), so you also need to promote your cities to really cash in. Another possible strategy, since you don't know until the end of the game how well the cities are doing, is saving up your money and Influence and buying valuable city tiles at the end.

This is a game that you need to study. The subtleties of the game are in the various tiles and the bonuses they give you. So you need to know what these are and what's available to you. While there are lots of tactical nuances, the game is

largely about the strategy you're following. And to win you need to be pretty single-minded about this. I have to say that I am still learning the game and trying out different strategies. **Princes of the Renaissance** is not as immediately appealing as **Age of Steam**, but it is proving to be a subtle and deep game.

Princes of the Renaissance was designed by Martin Wallace and is published (in English and German) by Warfrog. It is a strategic board game for 3-6 players aged 13+ and takes 2-3 hours to play. It is readily available in specialist games shops in the UK at around £25.

Pevans rates it 9/10 on his very subjective scale.

A version of this review was published in **Flagship** 106 (Feb/March 2004)

© Copyright Paul Evans 2004. All trademarks acknowledged.
Box art courtesy of Warfrog; other illustration courtesy of Boardgame Geek