

Spiel '04 Notes from Pevans

Introduction

I enjoyed Spiel as ever. It is always refreshing to see the enthusiasm everybody (customers, publishers, designers, journalists at al) brings to the show. Not to mention all the new games. Experience has taught me that it just isn't possible to see everything at Spiel. Scour the halls for the four days of the show and still someone will tell you about a great game that you missed. Nowadays I don't even try. Particularly this year when another hall has been added to the show, making it bigger than ever, and I only had two days to do the rounds. So this report is very selective: it covers just a few of the 400+ new games that were on show. But then, I was only one of 149,501 visitors!

I have been adding to these notes as I have played games since Spiel. I shall continue to do this, so keep an eye out for new versions of this report.

As always, I must give my usual disclaimer. I often describe games by referring to other games. This is not meant to imply that one game is a copy of another, it's simply a quick way of getting across what the game is like.



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2F Spiele

2F Spiele had no new game this year as designer Friedemann Friese has been busy. Not least with the new editions of *Funkenschlag* (as *Power Grid*) and *Finstere Flure* (as *Fearsome Floors*) with Rio Grande Games. *Power Grid* is a terrific game – improving on the already good *Funkenschlag* – and *Finstere Flure* is a strong favourite at Swiggers games club, so I recommend both games.

Abacusspiele

Abacus had several new games, as well as Michael Schacht's *Hansa*, published earlier this year. *Moguli* is a two-player abstract designed by Reinhold Wittig and published in a nice wooden edition. Uwe

Rosenberg has come up with a new pizza-themed card game, which can be played on its own or as an expansion to *Mamma Mia!* It's called *Sole Mio*. As a fan of the original game, I'm interested to see how the new game works. There's also a new edition of *Ein Solches Ding* (Urs Hostettler), which is a neat game in which players build up a list of characteristics until it's clear there isn't any "such thing". As the game is entirely text, this edition is really only going to work for German speakers. The same applies to *Wie ich die Welt Sehe* (How I See the World) from the same designer. This sounds similar to *Apples to Apples* as players pick one of the several answers available to a specific question.

Adlung

As expected, Adlung Spiele had a selection of new card games from a variety of designers. The most interesting of these was *Im Auftrag des Königs* (On Behalf of the King), designed by Lorenz Kutschke. Players compete to complete knightly quests and thus win the favour of King Arthur. They have to improve their abilities to successfully complete the quests and this means competing with the other players for the available action cards. Not too demanding, I suspect, but it sounds interesting. *Teamwork* (Michael Andersch) is a card game version of the parlour game where two players, speaking one word each in turn, try to describe something to the rest of their team. The remaining new games seem to be aimed at children. *Flix Mix* is a pattern-matching game from Bernhard Naegele. *Geister und Gespenster* is a ghost-themed game by Eugen Wyss. *Oups* is a memory game by Karsten Adlung.



Power Grid in play

alea

Ravensburger subsidiary alea used their space to show the prototype of their new game for next Spring. This was *Louis XIV* by Rüdiger Dorn – subtitled intrigue at the court of the Sun King. It's a card game in which the players – courtiers at Versailles – try to get the King's ear. There was a lot of competition to try the game and I didn't get a chance to do so. It was received well by those who played it, so I look forward to seeing the production version early in 2005.



Fifth Avenue

Alea's production games this year were Wilko Manz's *Fifth Avenue* (English language version from Rio Grande), which I found disappointing, and *San Juan* (another Rio Grande publication in English), the card game developed by designer Andreas Seyfarth from his earlier

board game, *Puerto Rico*. Stefan Brück, main man at alea, was very pleased to be awarded "Card Game of the Year" for *San Juan* by *Fairplay* magazine.

Amigo Spiel + Freizeit

Der Untergang von Pompeji (The Downfall of Pompeii) comes from Amigo. "Escape from Pompeii" might be a better English version of the title as that's the theme of this board game from Klaus-Jürgen Wrede. The immediate attraction is the conical volcano in one corner of the board. Yes, you get to chuck your opponents' bits into it! (Sound effects are optional.) The first stage of the game has everybody placing wooden cubes in their colour around the city. Then Vesuvius erupts. Now you move your cubes out of the city and spread lava tiles across it. Whoever saves the most pieces from the destruction wins.

The game encourages players to think carefully about where they're placing their cubes in the first place. And then to plot their moves in the second part – there's a clever movement mechanic, which provides some tactical options. For me, the thinking doesn't match the fairly lightweight theme in what is meant to be a fun game. I can see that the game is aimed at the family market, but I'm not sure throwing my nieces and nephews into the volcano will go down too well!

Geschenkt is an addition to Amigo's fine line of card games. Designed by Thorsten Gimmler, this is a minimalist game. It consists of a set of cards, numbered 3-35, and some chips. Players get 11 chips each and 24 cards are selected at random to make the playing deck. The first card is turned up and the first player has a choice: take the card (and any chips on it) or put a chip on it

and pass the decision to the next player. Who then has the same decision to make and so on. When all the cards have been taken, the players score the values of their cards as penalty points less the number of chips they have. However, anyone with a run of consecutive cards (12-13-14, for example) only scores the lowest card.



Der Untergang von Pompeji – the lava spreads across the city

This is a fiendish little game. With only two-thirds of the cards in play, you cannot be sure that any gaps between your cards will be filled. The first impulse is to avoid high value cards at all costs, but they can be attractive once they have a few chips on them. And there's always the chance of stringing together a run that means only one of them scores. Aagh! The game reminds me strongly in style of that other great simple filler: *6 nimmt!*. However, this game has a higher skill level. Or, at least, it appears to have...

Talking of *6 nimmt!*, the co-designer of that game, Wolfgang Kramer, has come up with *Tanz der Hornochsen* (Dance of the Ox-heads – which are the symbols on the cards in *6 nimmt!*), a board game version of the game. This sounds very silly, but the charm of *6 nimmt!* is that it plays very quickly. I'll be surprised if this has transferred to the board game.

Another re-working from Amigo was *Razzia!*, a card game version of Reiner Knizia's *Ra*. The game has been re-themed to gangsters instead of Ancient Egypt (presumably by the other credited designer, Michael Menzel), but is virtually identical to the original game. Apart from the different physical components, the only difference is the absence of 'disaster' cards, which players don't want. This may make it more acceptable as a family game, but I'd rather play the original.

Other new games from Amigo were:

- *Bohnaparte* by Hanno Girke and Uwe Rosenberg – a further expansion for Rosenberg's classic card game, *Bohnanza*;
- *Die Weinhändler* by Claudia Hely & Roman Pelek – a tactical card game of wine trading, which sounds interesting; and
- *Saboteur* by Frederic Moyersoen – a card game about Dwarves digging tunnels and hunting for gold.

Argentum Verlag

A new publisher based in Cologne, Argentum Verlag had three new games for us to see. The one I've played is *Metallurgie*, a clever tactical card game designed by Maik Hennebach. The theme is alchemy: converting base iron to gold (via copper and silver). Players lay cards (of the four metals) on the table in an interlocking pattern. They score points by getting a big enough contiguous group of one metal. Then they take some cards off the table again – potentially revealing a group of a different metal and scoring again. Not a game for those who struggle with spatial awareness, but otherwise quite rewarding.

The second game is *Garten-Zwerge eV* (The Garden Gnomes Society) by Roman Mathar. This is a card game of bidding and bluff as players try to breed a “golden-capped garden gnome” (I kid you not!). It sounds so silly I really want to play it! The third game sounds equally bonkers: *UFOs! Fritten aus dem All* (UFOs! Fries from Space) by company boss Petra Brandenburger. Apparently the idea is that aliens are trying to take over the Earth. By setting up fast food chains! That explains a lot...

Bambus Spieleverlag

There were two new games from Bambus, though I didn't get to play either. The first was *Capt'n W Kidd* by Volker Schäfer, a tactical manoeuvring game and one of the many pirate-themed games at this year's Spiel. The second was *Chinagold* by Günter Cornett, a two-player game themed around prospecting for gold.

BeWitched Spiele

Andrea Meyer's imprint had her new game, *Große Geschäfte* (literally “Big Business”, but called *Mall World* in its English incarnation from Rio Grande). The game is about developing a shopping mall in the middle of nowhere. Players take money from retailers to get their shops into the mall, while trying to achieve their own goals. The game is fairly complex and one I look forward to trying out soon.

Clemens Gerhards

Clemens Gerhards is one of a number of German companies that produce terrific-looking wooden games. These creations are as much coffee-table *objets* as games. This year's new titles were:

- *Baubyron* by Reinhold Wittig – a building game of wooden blocks and pawns;
- *Samas* by Frank Stark – a bluffing game of placing stones; and
- *Trio Trio/Mabambo/Soli-Bi* a trio of games by Frank Stark played with the same pieces – coloured wooden balls on a square board, though I'm not sure where the wombats fit in (to *Mabambo*, apparently).

Clicker Spiele

Clicker Spiele is a new name to me – it appears to be the imprint for designer Stephan Riedel. For this year's Spiel he had a new edition of *Old Town*, which has appeared in slightly different forms before. *Old Town* is like a board game version of those puzzles where you have to deduce the relationship from some apparently unrelated facts. In this case it's deciding where particular buildings were on the plan of a long-vanished Wild West town. The players have cards that give clues as to the location of a specific building ("The Saloon was north of the railroad", for example) or of one of the player's current buildings ("my building was on Main street").

As further cards are played, the possible locations reduce – scoring points for players – until there's only one place for a building. The game's over when the town plan is full, though not all the buildings will be played. The scoring system is rather clever. In effect, it means players will generally be able to score a few points on early turns and a few points each turn in the end game. In the middle of the game, there are occasional opportunities to make a killing. Spot one of these and you're well away. This is a clever, quick-playing game that offers quite a challenge.

Cwali

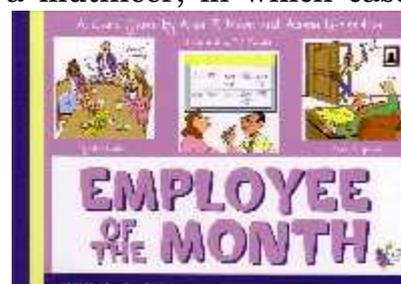
Corné van Moorsel had two new games for us this year, though I didn't get to try either. *SeaSim* is a two-player game of predatory fish. This is nicely produced with a board full of wooden fish, but it's not my kettle of fish. (Sorry.) *Typo* is a word game played with letter cards. What makes it different is that players chose their cards secretly, reveal them and then play in alphabetical order. Cards are added to what's on the table, but must make something pronounceable. It sounds like a neat twist on traditional word games and should be multilingual.

Damm Egmont

A new publisher from Norway brings us *Mytteriet på Little Blue* (Mutiny on the Little Blue) by Kristian Østby. The players are all pirates on the Little Blue, which is sailing round the Caribbean digging up treasure. Unfortunately the Captain is showing his age and finds it hard to distinguish the other crewmembers. So players negotiate with the Captain to be the one who goes ashore with him at each island. The treasure the two of them collect will depend on who that crewmember really is – unless they're a mutineer, in which case they take over as Captain. This is a pure negotiation game that is undemanding fun to play.

Dancing Eggplant Games

US publisher Dancing Eggplant Games (formerly Diet Evil Games, but that's not important right now)



had the latest in their range of fun card games on show. This is *Employee of the Month*, designed by Alan R Moon and Aaron Weissblum. The idea of this is that, each turn, players bid for a pair of cards, one showing Brownie or Kudos points, the other Suspicions. The bidding is by taking one of the Favour cards on display (either Boss Favours – such as working late – or Workmate Favours – like buying the drinks).

The game is scored when all the cards have been used. Whoever has the most Boss Favours is regarded with suspicion by their Workmates, and whoever's got the most Workmate Favours attracts the Boss's suspicions. These players (and it might be the same person) count their Suspicion cards as penalty points. Conversely, the player/s with the fewest of each type of Favour count their Kudos as positive points and everybody counts Brownie points. This is a very neat little game. There may not be much to it, but it bounces along very quickly, players have decisions to make and there are some tactical subtleties.

The Dancing Eggplants were also handling the stand for their compatriots, Jolly Roger Games. This included another new card game from Moon and Weissblum: *Clocktowers*. This game has the players building clocktowers by laying lines of cards up the table. The idea is to get them the correct length with the right roof on and avoid letting mice and cats get in. It's another quick-playing game that sounds quite fun.

DaVinci Games

DaVinci Games had a lot of new titles on display, with more to come. One was *Dodge City*, an expansion for *Bang!*. This adds some new characters and extra cards to the game and allows it to be played by 3 or 8 players. *Dancing Dice* (by Silvano Sorrentino) is a quick dice game themed around dance marathons. Players roll their dice and arrange them into 'dance sequences', aiming to get better sequences than their opponents – or a sequence that confers a special power. Gradual elimination will leave one winner. It sounds like fun!

Ostrakon is a card game, also by Silvano Sorrentino. This is more of a party game. The cards give questions and themes which players must respond to. The other players then vote on whether their response was good enough or whether to 'ostracise' them. Aimed at a younger audience is *Tuchulcha* by Marco Donadoni. While the theme is about Ancient Etruscans sacrificing to their Gods, the game is essentially a Ludo variant. Mayfair Games is publishing an English language edition.

Word Jam is an interesting variant on word games from Walter Obert. In this one, the letter cards are consonants only. A selection of letters is laid out, each worth a different value. Players then try to make a high-scoring word incorporating these letters. The first to come up with something has the initiative: the others decide whether to back that player or try to find something better. Depending on how this works out, players score points. After eight rounds

the highest total wins. This sounds like a clever game and should work in most European languages.

DaVinci has teamed up with Mayfair Games to produce English language editions of their games. As noted above, *Tuchulcha* is included in this, as are *Dancing Dice*, *Word Jam* and other, older daVinci titles.

Days of Wonder

US company Days of Wonder had a substantial stand to celebrate their *Spiel des Jahres* winner, *Ticket to Ride*. A small expansion to the game (some extra Tickets and scoring options), called *Mystery Train*, was given away on the stand. Head honcho Mark Kaufman promised a European version (that is, with a map of Europe for the board) for next year.

Eagle Games

Eagle Games is best known for big board games (think *Axis & Allies*) with hundreds of pieces. *Bootleggers*, they tell us, is a hybrid between the 'German' and 'American' styles of game design, though the designers are all American: Steve Gross, Don Beyer and Ray Eifler. The story is that the players are all mob bosses, competing to produce bootleg whisky and sell it to Chicago speakeasies. The whisky is wooden cubes and players stack their whisky in model trucks to deliver it. Add in the plastic mobster figures in different colours and the atmospheric artwork and you have a good-looking game.

The aim is to accumulate the most cash over a set number of turns. But the key to the game is getting 'influence' (those mobster figures) into the different



Bootleggers – a deal in progress

speakeasies. A player without influence can't sell, while having a majority gets you a rake-off on sales. Cue mob wars! And Jimmy Cagney impressions. With a nice bidding mechanism at the start of each turn, the game repays a bit of thought as well as being fun to play.

Eggertspiele

One of the big buzzes early on in the show was about *Neuland*, designed by Tobias Stapelfeldt and Peter Eggert and published by Eggertspiele. The game is about the development of the eponymous new land, starting as virgin forest, fields and mountains. Players build buildings to produce materials to build more buildings to produce more materials. At the end of this sequence of production are the various cultural advances that score victory points. With limited actions each turn, players have to plan carefully to produce what they need – or use goods stored from the previous turn. I thought this sounded like my kind of game and was impressed when I got to play it. A full review is in progress.



Neuland in play

The second game on the Eggertspiele stand was *Power-Soccer* by Fritz Behrens. This is a football game played with a pair of special dice. The football theme was enough to make sure I gave it a wide berth!

Face 2 Face Games

Face 2 Face Games is another US publisher making an impression in Europe. (The company was in my good books right from the start by publishing a new edition of *I'm the Boss*.) *Boomtown* was designed by Bruno Cathala and Bruno Faidutti and is a card game about the Gold Rush. Players bid to gain mining concessions. They try to get majorities in the towns (as being Mayor of a town gives some advantages) and to make sure their mines produce something. The aim is to have the most money at the end of the game. The game has some very clever features – such as the distribution of the money paid for a mine between the players. It is quite fun to play and careful play deals with the random elements.

Also billed as a Face 2 Face game was *Warriors* by Richard Borg and Alan Moon. This turned out to be the English language edition of Phalanx's *Monster & Mythen*, which is due out in January 2005. Also expected was Joe Huber's *Ice*

Cream, but production problems meant that it was not ready in time for Spiel. It's now expected in January 2005.

Gigantoskop

A new (to me, anyway) company from Sweden, Gigantoskop had two games on show. The first is *Kablamo*, a board game of Russian Roulette, the second is the unfortunately named *Spank the Monkey*. Designed by Kristoffer Krämer, *Kablamo* gives each player a board representing the six chambers of a revolver. Play then revolves round (sorry) circular cards that correspond to the bullets. These have different actions on them and are loaded onto player's boards. Each turn players turn their board one chamber on and fire their guns by showing the topmost card (bullet). The actions take effect – which may kill you, change bullets around and so on. There seems to be some scope for 'programming' your gun to avoid being killed for as long as possible, but I'm sure other players will interfere with this. Otherwise, it's just a very silly game. Which sounds good to me.

Spank the Monkey is a silly card game by Peter Hansson. The players are all workers in a scrap yard where a monkey is running loose (don't ask me!). Players build up piles of scrap by playing cards until they get high enough to reach the monkey. Then they spank it. To teach it a lesson, presumably. The heart of the game is the fast and furious card play as players try to sabotage each other, defend their own pile of scrap and build it higher. I don't think I need say any more.

Hans im Glück

Carcassonne – die Stadt (*Carcassonne – the City* is the title of the English language version, published by Rio Grande) is the latest of Klaus-Jürgen Wrede's *Carcassonne* games – separate from the expansions to the original game – from Hans im Glück. The basics are the same: players take it in turns to lay square tiles, building up a plan of, in this case, the city of Carcassonne, and scoring points for contiguous features – roads and markets in this case. Where the game differs is about two-fifths of the way through. Now you can add wall sections (chunky wooden blocks) as well, extending a wall around the city. Placing



Carcassonne – die Stadt – a completed game

guards on the wall sections gives another way of scoring points, as does adding towers to the wall.

The result of this is that *Carcassonne – the City* is a more tactical and competitive game than the original. The tactical ploys available to players let them improve their own position and curtail their opponents' scoring opportunities. This is clever stuff and makes it a slight improvement on the original in my eyes. However, the addition of a boxful of wooden blocks (for the wall) makes the game significantly bigger, heavier and more expensive.

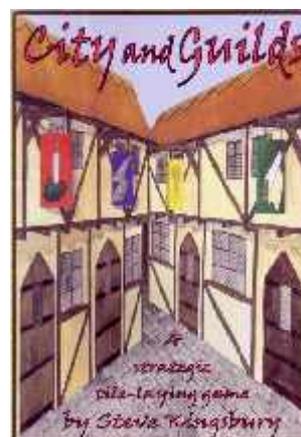
There was also a further expansion for the basic *Carcassonne* game. *Der Graf von Carcassonne* (The Count of Carcassonne) adds the city of Carcassonne (extra tiles) and its visiting Count. The latter may confer extra points on a player or obstruct a player. The company's new strategy game is *Im Schatten des Kaisers* by Ralf Burkert. This has the players as candidates for the Imperial German (Holy Roman, surely?) throne in the late Middle Ages, exerting influence on the Electors who can grant them the title. It sounds interesting, but I'll reserve judgement until I've played it – which probably means waiting for the English language edition (*Shadow of the Emperor*) from Rio Grande early in 2005.

Apart from that, the company was basking in the various prizes awarded to its two earlier publications this year: *Goa* and *Saint Petersburg*. In particular, *Saint Petersburg* won the Deutscher Spiele Preis and the International Gamers' Award for the best multi-player General Strategy game. Both are available in English from Rio Grande.

JKLM Games

We had three new games from UK publisher JKLM Games – though none designed by the main man, Markus Welbourne. *1860* is an 18xx (a combination of railway building and share dealing) game from Mike Hutton, set on the Isle of Wight. This doesn't give much room for railways, so I suspect the game will only support a few players. Ah yes: 2-4 it says here. The novel feature of this game, I'm told, is that companies disappear in the end game as they are nationalised to become part of British Rail.

City and Guilds is by Steve Kingsbury and is billed as a strategic tile-laying game. The tiles in question represent offices and stalls of various guilds and are placed on the layout of a medieval town. Players are trying to gain influence in each block of the town, by placing the most buildings there, and with each guild, by placing that guild's buildings. This gives a tension between the two options, which players have to resolve. A clever scoring system, including a major bonus for getting a long chain of a guild's buildings, makes this a thought-provoking game. Strategy is fairly straightforward, but it's an impressive game.



Richard Huzzey is the man behind *Presidential Election*, a two-player card game of the US elections. Players take the roles of the Democrat and Republican parties, manipulating party policy and the electorate to win their man the election. I don't know if there's provision for vote-rigging or appeals to the Supreme Court, but the game sounds cynical enough that there might be.

Krimsus Krimskramskiste

The nutty types at Krimsus Krimskramskiste had a couple of entertaining card games to show us. *Bad Hollywood* is about movie bad guys. They want revenge on the studios! Players play cards in specific types (suits, in other words) against a studio. When the total reaches the target number, it's all up for that studio. Except that they get an opportunity to draw from the Hero deck to see if someone will save them. Low value cards have special abilities to enliven things further. This is a very light game, but quite fun to play.

The other game is *Stunt Academy*, which continues the film theme by being about trainee stuntmen (and, indeed, women). It's played over four seasons, during which the trainees (players) prepare in the different disciplines available. This is done by spending action points and grabbing cards from the shrinking number that are available. At the end of the game, the trainees graduate: whoever's at the head of the class wins the game. This is another light, fun game that plays well.

Mayfair Games

Mayfair Games had a small stand to show off its English language editions of various publishers' games (notably from Kosmos – particularly the *Settlers* family – and daVinci Games) as well as its own titles. Chief amongst the latter was a new edition of *India Rails*.

Mind the Move

Mind the Move is a new Italian publisher whose first game, *Oltre Mare*, was well received at Spiel (I'm not sure how London Underground will react to the company's logo though). The game has a small board, showing the coastline of the Mediterranean, but this is only a small part of the game. It is the cards that are the central feature, along with the trading between players. The cards are used to limit the number of cards a player holds and the number of cards they can play in a turn. The cards played then give the players their actions for the turn. And the cards stack up and are the main source of Ducats at the end of the game. The player with the most ducats wins.

There are several other ways players can score points during and at the end of the game – including moving your ship around the Med. This means there is always something useful to do, whatever cards you hold. However, the game also allows players to trade cards (and ducats), another way of getting round the limitations of the cards you draw. The end result is an entertaining little game

that gives players plenty of food for thought. My only quibble is that the trading can drag on if a player can't make their mind up. Apparently the game was a limited edition and sold out at Spiel. Let's hope there's a second edition – or it's picked up by a big company.

Phalanx Games

The big news as far as I was concerned was finally seeing the production version of Francis Tresham's *Revolution*. This is a heavyweight game of the wars between the Protestant Dutch and Catholic Spanish in the Low Countries over the years from 1568 to 1648. The players represent the various factions, which may co-operate to achieve certain goals, but are generally all opposed to each other. While warfare is part of the game, politics is more important as the factions negotiate and alliances shift. I look forward very much to playing this game, but I'll need plenty of time – it's billed as a 5-hour game.



Revolution board
(courtesy of Phalanx)

Monster & Mythen (*Warriors* is the English language edition from Face 2 Face Games) is a thirty-minute card game/wargame from Richard "Battle Cry" Borg and Alan R Moon. That pedigree alone is enough to make me want to play it. Having missed it at Spiel, I just need the opportunity... Anyway, the game has a fantasy setting (Elves, Undead et al) and the players battle it out, gaining points for the troops they still have alive.

Finally, Phalanx had the pre-production version of their *Alexander the Great* game. This seems to be a light, multi-player wargame, set in the lands Alexander conquered. It was designed by Ronald Hofstätter.

Pro Ludo

Pro Ludo is a distributor now moving in to production. First up is a new edition of Richard Breese's *Keythedral*. This features a few tweaks to the rules, but is essentially the same game published (in a limited edition from R&D Games) in 2002. *Hispaniola* is a piratically-themed, trick-taking card game by Michael Schacht. Each hand players bid to establish trumps and then play out the hand of tricks. Winning a trick allows the player to place a marker on one of the pirate ships on the board, dislodging whoever's already there. At the end of the hand, players score according to where their markers have got to. Clearly players want to win tricks in certain colours to establish or defend a tactical position. However, they have little control over whether they can do this, as it depends on the cards in their hand. I found the game disappointing.

Queen Games

There was one really new game from Queen Games this year. *Flandern 1302* is designed by Wolfgang Panning, whose *Lucky Loop* I enjoyed last year. This game is a rather different kettle of fish. Players add districts in their colour to the six Flanders cities on the board. The aim is to have the most districts in a city when it's complete, as that player scores most points for it. Highest total of points when all six cities are complete wins the game.

This is another very tactical game, the core of which is trying to outwit the other players. You have a limited number of actions available and must choose one each turn, playing the appropriate card (face down, initially) from your hand. Since picking up their cards again is a full turn, you can work out what options are available to their opponents. But there are sufficient options to allow bluffs, double-bluffs and simple outmanoeuvring. It's clever stuff, but a bit dry for my taste.



Final scoring in *Flandern 1302*

Queen also published *Die Gärten der Alhambra* (the Gardens of the Alhambra) by Dirk Henn. This is actually an adaptation of Henn's *Carat*, which Queen published in 1993. It's a pattern-matching game that's been re-themed to follow the success of 2003's (*Der Palast von*) *Alhambra*. The original was okay, but not really my cup of tea. Queen's two expansions for *Alhambra* were also on show: *Die Gunst des Wesirs* (The Viziers' Favour) and *Die Tore der Stadt* (The City Gates) add extra options to the basic game.

R&D Games

The latest game from designer Richard Breese is *Reef Encounter*, which looks terrific. Bizarre as it may seem, the game is about the lifecycle of coral. It has quite a complicated sequence of play as players expand colonies of coral across the reefs. Players can protect their colonies with their shrimps (no, really), attack each other's corals (or even their own!) and score points by eating their colonies with their parrotfish – once they're big enough. This is a clever, demanding game that needs to be played at least once to understand how the game works. It is just full of tactical niceties, which the rules carefully point out for new players.

Sagacity Games

The Australian publisher of jigsaw game, *Sunda to Sahul*, showed the prototype of designer Don Bone's latest creation: *Imhotep*. This is a more conventional game of pyramid building. The players bid for the materials needed to allow them to lay another piece on the stepped pyramid. It's an interesting game and I look forward to seeing the finished version next year.



Imhotep prototype in play

Splotter Spellen

Dutch publisher Splotter is known for its big, complex games – with little dashes of humour. Their new game, *Antiquity* is no exception. It comes in a huge box and has hundreds of cardboard counters. Like other Splotter games, this is a game of development and logistics. But there the resemblance ends. In *Antiquity* players are developing and expanding across the board. You start with a city, which takes up space on the board and from which you send out expeditions to explore and establish farms, logging camps and so on. These provide the raw materials you need to expand further and develop your city.

A separate grid is provided for each city, on which you fit the buildings you need to fuel your expansion – including houses for your workers. Another neat touch is the way using the land changes it: cut down the trees and forest becomes grassland. Plant crops and the land becomes worn out. The winning condition depends on each player's patron saint – something that can be changed. And each saint provides a special power to their followers. This game absolutely demands that players plan ahead. The risk (for me anyway) is getting sucked in to the intricate detail of managing your estates and cities. Yes, it's definitely my kind of game.

Surprised Stare Games

Bloody Legacy is a card game from a newish British publisher, Surprised Stare Games, and is very much in the *Family Business* and *Kersplatt!* mould. Or perhaps *Kind Hearts and Coronets* was designer Tony Boydell's inspiration. Players want to be the last surviving heir to a fortune. Which means removing all the other claimants – that is, eliminating the other players. So you play traps and try to dodge the traps played on you. Lose too many points and you're out of the round and lose a life. Lose all your lives and you're out completely. Last man standing wins.



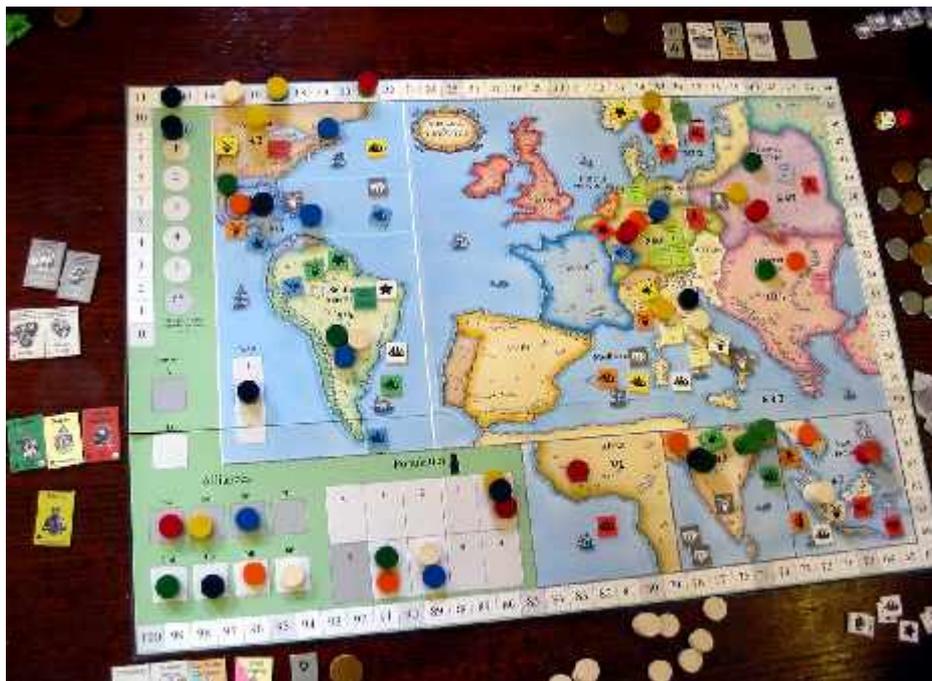
This is a very silly game. It's also great fun! Yes, it's an elimination game, but it's over quickly enough that nobody minds. And the action is fast and furious – if someone takes too long reading their cards (to find out what they are), it could be too late for them. A lightweight bit of nonsense: I love it!

Tresham Games

Apart from the launch of *Revolution* by Phalanx Games, Francis Tresham was promoting his own games at the show. The latest was *1825 Unit 3*, which expands the territory of the game into Scotland. On its own, it is played as a two-player game and has a few special features. It can also be combined with Units 1 and 2 to provide a much bigger game over most of Britain.

Warfrog

Warfrog had their new game, *Struggle of Empires*, stacked up on their stand. I've already talked about this (in *TWJO* 47) and I found it even better on second playing. While there are lots of things you could do, an understanding of how the game works allows you to concentrate on the options that make sense for your strategy. I am sure that more strategies will emerge as people get to grips with the subtleties of the game. I suggest limiting the game to four players when you're learning it, which makes things a bit simpler.



Struggle of Empires in play

I have since tried a couple of the *Age of Steam* expansions Warfrog had available. Both have some changes from the basic game that mean they play a bit differently. The Germany map (originally published by Winsome Games last year) has lots of connections to other countries around the edge. These are very useful destinations for goods, but building the connections is seriously expensive.

On the Korea board, cities are not a set colour. Instead the goods at a city set its colour(s) as a destination. Of course, as goods are delivered, the available destinations change. This should make for a more fluid game and provides some different tactics. However, after the first few turns, I found a number of goods were pretty much locked in place as stable destinations, so it didn't seem to make much difference. We'll see what happens next time.

Winning Moves

I got to play both the new games at Winning Moves. First up was *Karibik*, designed by Mikhail Antonov and Jens-Peter Schliemann. My magpie eye drew me to this game as soon as I saw it. Model galleons on a map of the Caribbean dotted with gold bars! Okay, calm down, it's all just cardboard. Players move the galleons to pick up treasure and deliver it to their home port. The highest value of treasure at the end wins the game.

The twist is that the player who moves a ship is the one who bids highest. A tie means nobody moves it. Since each player has the same set of chits to bid with, this comes down to out-guessing your opponents. There are opportunities for clever play, which enlivens the game. For example, moving a ship alongside another allows you to steal the treasure. So bidding high for a ship that isn't able to pick up treasure from an island may give an opportunity for piracy. The game is pleasant enough to play, but it's a family game rather than a gamer's game. Rio Grande is publishing an English language edition.



Karibik – aha, Jim lad!

Submarine, from Leo Colovini, looks less exciting by comparison. The board is a cross section of the sea, from surface to seabed. Spread across it are lots of treasures (cardboard counters). The aim is to be the first to collect all the

different treasures. To do this, you all have some nice little wooden submarines. Each player also has a 'mother' ship on the surface and can only move or pick up with their submarines when their mother ship is directly overhead.

This sounds simple, but is actually rather clever. If you simply move your submarines every time your mother ship reaches them, you'll never pick up any treasures. But if you pick up treasures, your mother ship moves on and you can't do anything else with those submarines until the mother ship comes across the board again. Other aspects of the game are equally subtle, providing players with tactical manoeuvres and the need to plan ahead. *Submarine* is not a particularly deep game, but it is much more demanding than appears at first.

Zoch

I still think of Zoch as the masters of the wooden dexterity game, but they spread their wings rather wider than that these days. *Meisterdiebe* (Master Thief) is as much a puzzle as a game. Designed by Frank Czarnetzki, the centrepiece of the game is a casket of drawers that is manipulated and turned over by players. Depending on their role, players are hiding and hunting for different 'gems' in the drawers. A unique game.

More conventional is Franz-Benno Delonge's *Goldbräu*. This has the players vying for control of breweries and beer gardens during a beer festival (my kind of game!). The income from the drinkers is shared between the bars and the breweries, so both generate income for players. As well as competing for ownership, players are also trying to get their own management in place – particularly important for deciding which brewery supplies which beer gardens. The heart of the game is a simple card-playing mechanism. But winning the game is rather more complicated. I like it – and not just for its subject matter! An English language edition is due from Rio Grande.

Niagara is aimed at children, but is good fun for everybody. The game is played on the box, using plastic discs set into a channel representing the river. The discs carry wooden canoe pieces swirling down the river towards the falls. Players are trying to manoeuvre their canoes along the river to pick up a set of gems. And avoid going over the falls. The game plays quickly and neatly. It was designed by Thomas Liesching and Rio Grande is producing an English language version.

Zugames

Another new publisher, this one from Bologna in Italy. Zugames' first game is *Feudo*, designed by Mario Papini. At its heart, this is a simple wargame. Players are medieval Barons, moving their knights, men-at-arms and characters about the board. In this respect, the game feels rather Chess-like. As well as fighting each other, players are also trying to avoid the plague. The King provides a balancing force, supporting the lowest-scoring players. The game is limited by the number of turns and the winner is the player with the most points at the

end. It didn't seem particularly exciting from the brief description I had, but it's interesting enough that I'd like to try it.

Ystari

Ystari is a new French publisher and was at Spiel with its first game, *Ys*, and its designer, Cyril Demaegd. The ancient city of Ys turns out to have been circular and divided into three levels and four quarters. The players are merchants, trading for gems. By manipulating the prices of the different colours of gem, you aim to have the highest monetary value at the end of the game.

Playing the game is about placing brokers (markers of different values) in the twelve sections of the city each turn. Having the highest value brokers in an area gets you gems, extra cash or a special ability (cards). Players also bid to change the relative values of the gems. And they bid for turn order using one of their brokers – who is then not available to place on the board. At first glance this is a clever game with some subtlety that will repay repeated play. It is my favourite of the games I played at Spiel.

Conclusion

Spiel '04 was an interesting show. While no game really stood out, there were an awful lot of good games to try. And even more were published earlier in the year. The number of new publishers was also noticeable. This is surprising as general wisdom has it that the games industry (in Germany at least) has been in the doldrums in recent years. I wonder if the new publishers have been stimulated by the established companies producing fewer games? Whatever the reason, it's good news for us games players. (One final point: why were there so many pirate games at Spiel this year?)

Spiel '05 takes place at the Messe (Exhibition halls) in Essen, Germany 13th-16th October 2005. It is organised by Friedhelm Merz Verlag and more information can be found on the company's website at <http://www.merz-verlag.com/spiel/e000.php4>.

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