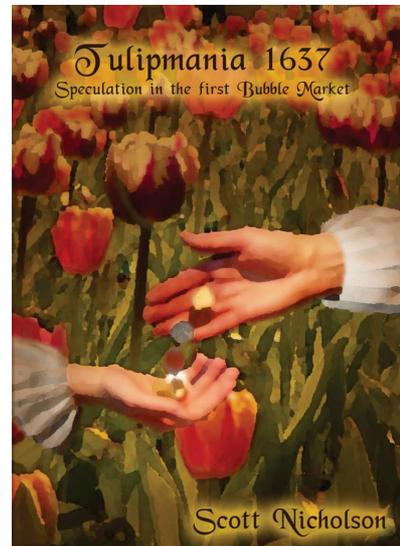


Tulips from Amsterdam

Tulipmania 1637 reviewed by Pevans

There's an old joke about hamster jam, but I think I'd better leave well alone. The subject matter of the game is, of course, the first financial bubble—the runaway speculation in tulip bulbs in Holland in 1637. A phenomenon that has been repeated several times in the intervening centuries with other products and in other markets. However, before I get into the game, I'd better disclose my interest: *Tulipmania 1637* is published by JKLM Games and I run its sister company, JKLMnP Distribution, so I have a commercial interest in this game.

I also have a gamer's interest in the game as the theme got my attention the first time I heard about it. It has been an ... interesting experience. I initially found the game counter-intuitive and struggled to work out what was going on. It turns out to be rather different from the trading game I was expecting.



The smallish box (about A5 in size) contains a small board, a pack of cards, paper money and a bag of wooden tulips (blooms) in five colours. Most of the cards are 'buyers' in the five tulip colours. There is a set of cards for each player, showing the actions available to them each turn. The last two cards are used to show the current player (this one is printed with a synopsis of the game turn) and who has the priority in ties.

The board shows the market for tulips as a matrix of price squares: one tulip piece of each colour is moved on the board to show the current price of that tulip. The squares are linked by arrows that show the way the prices rise and fall. They increase gradually as players buy tulips, moving to the right (and up), wrapping round the board. However, if players speculate, the price jumps up vertically via a 'transition' space. The top row of the matrix consists of gold spaces. When a tulip hits one of these prices, the bubble bursts and the price immediately drops down that column.

This is the heart of the game. To maximise their return on their tulips, players want to sell at the top of the market. To do this they need those buyer cards I mentioned. Every player with a buyer and a tulip of the colour that's just peaked sells one tulip at the top price. The price drops (down the pink arrow) and everyone with a second buyer card can sell a tulip and so on. Once the buyers run out, players who still have tulips sell them in the same way, so everybody gets something for their tulips. However, the price drops off rapidly, so they may not be making much profit (though this does depend on what they paid for them).

When the penultimate tulip's price bursts, the last one follows suit. Players tot up their money and whoever has the most wins. This makes for a quick end to the game, which players need to be aware of. Knowing this, players will tend to be careful as the tulip prices near the top. The ideal situation is to be able to force the price to burst in a tulip that you hold tulips and buyers for. Hence, you have to watch out for your opponents doing the same thing. Though it's much easier to describe this than to achieve it, of course.



A section of the board

Let me return to the beginning, though. Much of the set-up depends on the number of players. For a start, the number of tulip colours in play—and the number of each tulip—depends on the number of players. The players get a tulip of each colour (that’s in play) as their initial stock, some cash, three buyers (again, in the colours that are in play) and their action cards. The tulips start at an initial price of 50 florins and a couple of buyers are turned over from the deck for players to draft.

Each turn starts with the current player putting one of their tulips up for sale. The others each play an action card face down and then reveal them. The highest ranked action, using the priority card to decide ties, gets the tulip. Then the current player gets to pick another buyer card, while these are available (each player should get three more buyers). Finally, they may buy a tulip from the bank—but this cannot be the same colour as they sold earlier. Like any other purchase, this increases the price of that colour of tulip. Then it’s the next player’s turn.

Players have five options when a tulip is for sale. The easiest is to pass. Almost as simple is to offer to purchase the tulip (ranked 2). If successful, the buyer pays the seller the current price of the tulip and gets the tulip piece. The price goes up along the green arrow (e.g. from the starting price of 50

florins to 75). Alternatively, players can speculate (ranked 4). If successful, the price jumps along the gold arrow to the transition price (e.g. from the starting price to 150 florins). The buyer pays the seller this price and gets the tulip piece. The price then jumps again to its new level (e.g. from 150 to 250 florins).

As you can see, either way the buyer gets an asset whose price is now more than they paid for it. However, speculation drives the price up much faster—though it does reward the seller with more money. Money is tight at the start of the game, though, so there’s limited scope for speculation using the players’ own funds. This is where the second use of those buyer cards comes in.

The rank 1 action card is “Purchase by Proxy”. If this is successful, the player discards a buyer of the same colour as the tulip on sale and the bank buys the tulip. That is, the seller gets the current value of the tulip from the bank and the tulip piece goes into the stockpile. You won’t be surprised that the final action card is “Speculate by Proxy”, ranked 3. If successful, the player discards 2 buyers of the appropriate colour. The bank pays the seller the transition price and gets the tulip while the price goes up again.

Using buyers as proxies is a good way of driving the price up without spending your own cash. This gives you a higher base price for selling your own tulip, of course. However, it does give one of your opponents some extra cash. What's more, it uses up buyer cards that might have been better deployed selling a tulip whose price has just burst. My current thinking (which may well change as I play the game more) is that it's worth using 1, at most 2, buyers to push up the prices of tulips I'm selling.

There's one special case when selling a tulip: if all the other players pass. In this case, the selling player can use their own buyers to purchase or speculate in the tulip. The bank pays out and gets the tulip piece. If the seller passes as well, the price of this tulip drops. It goes down the pink arrows, just like when the price bursts, with the bank paying out the transition price and the price then dropping further. It's worth mentioning this because it can be a useful tactical option to offer a tulip that no-one can afford. The price drops, taking this tulip further away from bursting, while you still get cash for it—hopefully more than you paid for it in the first place.

There's one other wrinkle that you need to know about. If a player causes the price of a tulip to burst using either Speculate action, the other players have to discard a buyer of that colour (if they have one). The idea is that some buyers get cold feet and bail out of the market. This means that the ideal situation in *Tulipmania 1637* is to have three or more buyers of a tulip that's for sale and is just below a burst space. You can use two buyers to burst the tulip price and ensure you can sell yours at the peak price. It doesn't happen too often.



Tulipmania 1637 in play at Spiel '09

It took me a couple of games to realise this, but the game is far less about the mechanics of the game than it is about the players. This is one game where you have to do a lot more than just keep an eye on what your opponents are doing. This is the key to the game: being able to take advantage of your opponents.

The obvious parallel is with Poker. While most of the information in the game (cash, tulips) is open, one key piece of information is hidden—what buyer cards each player has. This you will have to deduce from what they do and which other buyers they pick up. And this is why I'll never be very good at this game. Most of the time I have enough trouble keeping track of what I'm doing without trying to work out what everybody else is doing! (I'm rubbish at Poker, too—apparently even my tells have tells...)

Tulipmania 1637 tends to start slowly. Players buy and sell tulips to increase their cash and to tailor their mix of tulips and selection of buyer cards. At the same time, they are gathering information on what their opponents are up to. Once the first tulip price bursts, there's suddenly a lot more money in the game and things move much faster. The cash provokes a lot more buying, so the other prices will burst quickly and the game often ends faster than you expected.

Now I've got to grips with how *Tulipmania 1637* works, I quite enjoy the game. It's a real struggle to manipulate things the way you want. Much of the time it won't work, as everybody else is pulling in different directions. This makes it all the better when it does go right. So, it's not the game I was expecting, but it is a captivating challenge.

One last thing: the game's designer, Scott Nicholson, has produced a very useful introduction to the game as part of his 'Board Games with Scott' series of videos: episode 61 at www.boardgameswithscott.com.

Tulipmania 1637 was designed by Scott Nicholson and is published in the UK by JKLM Games. It is a strategy card game for 3-5 players, aged 10+, and takes about 60 minutes to play. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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