

UK Games Expo 2009

Pevans was in Birmingham

I say this every year, but the Masonic halls of The Clarendon Suites in Birmingham make an unusual setting for a games convention. The building really is a warren with rooms tucked away in odd corners that connect to other rooms that you've already visited. There is plenty of room, though, for trade stands, displays, demos and tournaments. The organisers did another sterling job this year and report that several hundred more people came through the door than last year.

As I was attending with my JKLM hat on (though JKLM shirt would be more accurate), I was busy all weekend demonstrating various games. This means I had limited time for looking round and the games I saw most of were the ones I was demoing! So let me start with these.

Days of Steam was JKLM's major launch at the show—though the game is actually published by Stratamax with JKLM handling production in Europe. I played the game for the first time at Spiel last year and was quite impressed with it. It's a tile-laying game that offers a distinctive take on railway games. Players take it in turns to lay square tiles or to move their locomotive around the network of railway lines the tiles build up. What's different is that you need 'steam' points to move your loco and these come from laying tiles. Hence there are times when you have to lay tiles, even if this helps the other players!

Adding 'town' tiles to the grid brings in coloured cubes, which are worth points if players can deliver them to a town of the same colour. The problem is that laying a





Sector 41 in play at the Expo

town gives everybody else the opportunity to grab the cubes before the turn comes back round to you! This makes for a lot of jockeying for position and building up a head of steam before adding a town to the network. This is a clever game that is more demanding than it first appears, but plays to a satisfactory conclusion in under an hour.

Sector 41 is a new space exploration games from Scimitar Games in the US. It's played over a grid of tiles, initially turned face down, that represents part of the galaxy—sector 41, in fact. Each player has a 'mother ship' tile, which they can move along one edge of the grid. This is home to 'Explorer' ships that players use to explore the sector, turning over tiles they land on. Many of these tiles will shunt the explorer ship further along (or delay it), but players are looking for planets that contain the rare mineral 'Glynium'.

Now the fun really starts as players score points by getting Glynium discs back to their mother ship. However, other players can steal the Glynium en route. This is where the different tiles can be really useful—providing a quick route for your ships to get home. It's also where the mother ship's ability to 'fold space' comes in handy. Instead of moving it, you can use your mother ship to shunt a row of tiles, shifting the tile from the far edge to the near edge, *Amaz(e)ing Labyrinth*-style. This is particularly useful when you can bring a far-away Glynium planet next to your mother ship!

The game is enhanced by colourful graphics—based, in part, on images of real outer space phenomena provided by NASA—and neat playing pieces. *Sector 41* requires more thought than I expected as you line up tiles and try to establish useful routes to your mother ship. It's good stuff.

Also from the US (the publisher is Balls Out Entertainment), *Playing Gods* is a bonkers game of smiting the followers of other gods! The board shows the Earth, surrounded by a circular track. Players move their 'god' piece along this, picking up 'Wrath' and 'Conversion' cards. When they land on a portal to a continent, they can use these cards to remove or convert followers of other gods, while the owning player can counter these attacks if they have the right cards. Running out of believers takes a player out of the game and the last god standing wins.

As you can see, this is a very silly game, but provides plenty of opportunity for mayhem. It seemed to go down particularly well with families where the youngsters had great fun smiting their parents' followers! The other attraction of the game is the playing pieces—with the Gatling-wielding Buddha a particular favourite. Okay, it's a not even a slightly deep game, but it does provide some mindless fun.

Having launched at Spiel '08, *Jet Set* (from US publisher Wattsalpoag) was not a brand new game, but it's one of my favourites and, I think, the best of Kris Gould's games so far (and they're generally of a pretty high standard). My full review of the game is in *TWJO* 93 (and on my website), so I won't go on at length here. *Jet Set* is all about establishing airline routes around Europe. Players have to balance income against victory points and, the key to the game, gauge the right time to set up their 'final flight'. An excellent game and well-received at the Expo.

Next to JKLM were the Ragnar Brothers, showing off *Monastery* (see my full review—*TWJO* 90 and on my website) and the designs for *A Brief History of the World*. This is a re-working of their brilliant *History of the World* and is scheduled for publication in October (and launch at Spiel '09). While the original intention was to streamline and speed up the original game, the re-development has introduced

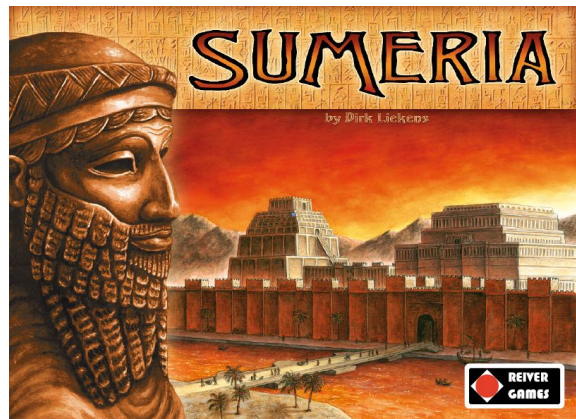


new features and replaced whole sections of the rules. It looks like this will be a radically different game, while retaining the feel of the original. I can't wait...

The Surprised Stare team were on the other side of the Ragnars. This being an odd-numbered year, their new game was a card game designed by Tony Boydell, *Fzzzt!*. This went down well with the Expo crowd and won the show's Best New Card Game Award. The game is about building wacky robots, with players gaining special abilities from the robots they acquired in previous rounds. Each round is a series of auctions, players using the cards in their hands to gain robots and 'Production Units' that can give bonus points at the end of the game. I didn't get the chance to play *Fzzzt!* at the show, but it's high on my list to try.

Pete Burley was next in line, showing off *Kamisado* to the UK audience. This is a very colourful, very clever, two-player abstract game and deserved winner of the Expo's Best Abstract Game Award. Played on an 8x8 board, the eight colours are key to *Kamisado*. The colour of the square you move your piece to dictates which pieces your opponent must move next. Fiendish! See my report from Spiel '08 (*TWJO* 91 and my website) for more about this one.

Continuing round the room brings us to *Sumeria*, the new game from Reiver Games. Designed by Diek Liekens, this is a fairly abstract game set in the ancient land of Mesopotamia. The small board is divided into 8 provinces, each with a city, three towns and three villages. Linking the settlements is a network of roads, divided by a river down the middle of the board. Together, these facilitate and constrain movement between the provinces. A set of tiles gives the current pecking order between the provinces. At the end of each turn, the players with the largest presence in the top three provinces gain tiles, which are worth points at the end of the game.



In each turn, players have three opportunities to place, move or remove one of their pawns. As adding a pawn moves a province up the pecking order, while removing one drops it down the order, this is as much about promoting and demoting provinces as getting pawns into the right place. There is also the problem of running out of room as each province can only hold seven pawns. *Sumeria* is quite a tricky game to get right, but certainly doesn't outstay its welcome, playing to a conclusion in well under an hour.

Across the hall from Reiver was Martin Wallace with the two most recent Treefrog Games. *Waterloo* is the first wargame in the line and a proper wargame it is, too, using wooden figures to good effect. The game reproduces the strategy, tactics and geography of the famous battle. The neat touch is that players can't be sure how much they will be able to get done in a turn. This has the potential of leaving units

vulnerable if the player runs out of steam mid-manoeuvre. Another one I'm looking forward to trying—it's been some time since I played a full-blooded wargame.

The other game was *Automobile*, the first of this year's Treefrog selection, which I pontificated about in *TWJO 95* (and have now reviewed in detail). This is now getting plenty of play at the Swiggers group as players wrestle with Martin's take on the early automobile industry in America. It's proving a tough game to master, but is providing plenty of entertainment along the way. The 'loss' cubes you accumulate from less efficient factories and failing to sell what you produce seem to be key to the game. However, constantly upgrading your factories loses you money, too. I'm coming to the conclusion that my original, cautious approach worked best. Definitely the game of the moment.

Across the far side of the room from JKLM was Terror Bull Games, best known for their controversial *War on Terror* board game. Their follow-up is *Crunch—the Game for Utter Bankers*. As the name suggests, this is a game for the times. Players are CEOs of global banks, awarding themselves the biggest bonuses they can get away with. The winner is the player with the most cash at the end, as you'd expect. However, they have to make money first to be able to pay the bonuses—and the crunch tends to interfere with this. This looks like a fun game and I look forward to giving it a go.

Tucked into the corner nearby was Pants on Fire Games. Their first game is, predictably, *Liar Liar*, subtitled "Who Lies Wins". The quickest way I can describe this is as trivia game meets *Call My Bluff*. There are several types of question, depending on the square you land on, all of which involve lying or challenging lies or both. Players move round the board by answering questions or challenging lies, but also need to get away with lying in order to win. *Liar Liar* is a clever twist on the usual trivia game and won the Best Party Game Award at the Expo.

However, the Pants on Fire boys are not content to rest on their laurels. They already had their second game ready to show at the Expo. *Eurobabble* takes the mickey out of our European neighbours. Players may have to assume a particular accent (mock-Swedish anyone?), mime something in the style of a particular nationality, answer a question that's in a European language, or guess the equivalent in a foreign language of an English word. It had me sniggering after looking at a couple of cards, so this could be a hit too.

Cubiko is a different slant on noughts and crosses. The 'board' is a frame with a cloth stretched across it, divided into the familiar 3x3 grid. Players have to bounce a ball into the square they want to place their piece. The problem is getting the ball to stop bouncing! This is a clever way of making noughts and crosses much more competitive and is a really fun family game. So much fun that it won the Best Family/Children's Game Award at the Expo.

I was particularly pleased to see *Great Fire: London 1666* at the Expo. Still in pre-production form, this is a game designed by Richard Denning, one of the Expo's

organisers. I've played an earlier prototype several times and thoroughly enjoyed it. The subject matter is what you'd expect with players all property owners trying to preserve their buildings from the fire. As the fire is spread by the players, this can be rather tricky! It's not a real gamers' game, but still has plenty to offer gamers as well as being an excellent family game. It was shown at the Expo under the banner of Medusa Games and I hope we'll be seeing a published version soon.

The Best Board Game Award went to the Lamont brothers' sled racing game *Snow Tails*. Originally released in a limited edition on their own label, Frigor Games, at Spiel '08, it was picked up by French publisher Asmodee. They have given the game a big box make-over that looks splendid.

Let me see: who have I missed? Coiled Spring were in attendance with the Gigamic range of good-looking abstract games. Games for the World had Expansion 5 for *The World Cup Game*, completing the set of World Cup tournaments to date. Ludorum Games were back with *Ice Flow* and *Fagin's Gang*. MAG were showing off *Colors* and *Caveman*. If you think I've covered a lot of games and publishers here, bear in mind this is only the board games. I haven't touched on the many role-playing games, miniatures games and trading card games that were on show. Add a huge assortment of retailers and you begin to get an idea of just how much was going on over the weekend. The organisers' explicit ambition is to provide a UK equivalent of the Spiel games fair and I think they're well on the way to doing just that.

The UK Games Expo will be back next year on 4th-6th June 2010. Keep an eye on the website, www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk, to see how things are going.

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Sumeria box art courtesy of Reiver Games. Photos by Pevans.



Jet Set in play at the Expo