

THE 7TH CITADEL EXPLORE THE COLLAPSING

EXTRA
CONTENT
INSIDE

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December

tabletop GAMING

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BEYOND THE SUN

The new space race
from Rio Grande

XENOLANGUAGE

Or, how to talk
to aliens

SOLO ADVENTURE GAMES

It's dangerous to
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PEER SYLVESTER

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The King is Dead: Second Edition refreshes the accessible yet strikingly deep game with updated graphic design, gorgeous new artwork by Benoit Billion, and a brand-new asymmetric game mode for advanced play.

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Welcome



**NOW
PLAYING...**
*Lost Ruins of
Arnak*

We're exploring new worlds in this issue of Tabletop Gaming Magazine, whether that's the weird, dark medieval fantasy of *The 7th Citadel*, the digital world of *The Digimon Card Game*, or the outer reaches of space in *Beyond The Sun*.

If that wasn't enough, we take a look at the chatting-to-alien game *Xenolanguage*, and explore piratey classics with *Treasure Island* in How We Made.

Christmas is just around the corner, and if you've got a gamer who has nearly everything, our accessories guide will give you a few ideas for stocking fillers. And if you're looking for a family game to play together after the turkey, our Ten of The Best Mystery Games will set you up for an evening of collaborative sleuthing, solving and escaping.

We've also got a chunky played section this month with a huge 33 games reviewed and rated, including two dazzling Must-Plays. Perfect for those still adding to their Christmas list for the year. But for now, it's time to play on...

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Christopher John Eggett Editor

QUICKSTART

“In *The 7th Citadel*, we've mostly replaced the 'survival' aspects with 'adventure'”

Bruno Sautter on the changes found in *The 7th Citadel*, p20 ➤

“There's never really a limit on what size of card you can play in your turn”

Goto and Kawashima on *The Digimon Card Game*, p40 ➤

“The next stage of humanity is now in your hands – how will you steer the future of the species?”

Dennis Chan on *Beyond The Sun*, p50 ➤

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AT A GLANCE

CATCH UP WITH OUR MOST RECENT PODCASTS AND LOCKDOWN KIT

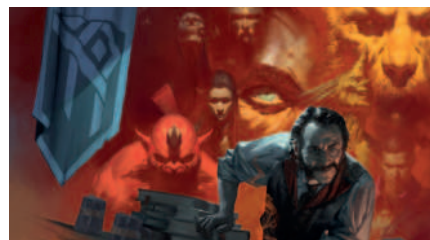
We've been hard at work putting together other ways for you to enjoy everything Tabletop Gaming aside from the magazine in your hands. Here's a few that we're quite proud of.

Our YouTube channel is full of exciting video content from our recent Virtual Tabletop Gaming Live. You can drop by to watch creators of games you love talk about their games, catch up with highlights of 2019, and even see How We Roll play a Call of Cthulhu Scenario. Plus, we're putting together fresh new content for you over the coming weeks, subscribe on YouTube now so you don't miss out [ttgami.ng/TTGYT](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCtTgami)

The podcast continues with recent guests James Wallis (previously of this parish) talking

about games mechanics and Ross Connell of More Games Please on game photography and handsome games. Subscribe in your preferred podcatcher app to listen [ttgami.ng/Podcast](https://www.ttgami.ng/Podcast)

And finally, we hope lockdown will be about to be lifted by the time you receive this magazine, but if not – or if you're looking for lists of free games, print and plays and a good time all round, visit our Lockdown Kit here to get started [ttgami.ng/36oQQ8t](https://www.ttgami.ng/36oQQ8t)



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS CONFIRM VIRTUAL PLAY WEEKENDS

Following on from the success of organised virtual play *Dungeons & Dragons* in events such as D&D Live and D&D Celebration, new monthly virtual play weekends have been confirmed, offering what they're calling a 'mini convention' for you to play with fellow gamers around the world.

These are going to be organised by Baldman Games, and hosted by DMs, with your entry fee paying towards the DM's themselves, who are vetted by Baldman Games. These will each include the option for tabletop play, new D&D Adventurers League adventures, submission by DMs for adventures to be run outside of the Adventurers League, and organisation through Baldman Games' Discord.

The dates to play include December 11-13, January 15-17, February 19-21, and March 12-14. Games themselves will be two to four hours long (with a longer timeslot allocated to allow for any technical difficulties or overrun). Registrations are open through the Yawning Portal.



KNOW YOUR NUMBERS

30

Meeples in the new *Carcassonne: Hunters and Gatherers*

\$226,000

Paid by rapper Logic for a shiny Charizard card

176

Pages in *Stargrave: Science Fiction Wargames in the Ravaged Galaxy*

9

Ships per side in Mantic's new seafaring wargame, *Armada*

211,000

words in *Cyberpunk RED*

172

Cards in the new Critical Role version of *Munchkin*

BUY THE BEST GAMES OF 2020

2020 may have been a write-off for your social calendar but it wasn't for games! **The Best Games of 2020** is a guide of all our reviews of this year's must-play games.

ROME & ROLL EXPANSION CONFIRMED



PSC Games (The Plastic Soldier Company) confirmed at SPIEL Digital a new expansion to their *Rome & Roll*, called *Gladiators*.

The expansion to this game will be designed by the original team from *Rome & Roll*, with Dávid Turczi and Nick Shaw, and will head over to Kickstarter in early 2021. It will add the element of entertainment to the game, where now, you're not just rebuilding the city of Rome after the great fire, but you're also ensuring gladiators provide appropriate entertainment for Emperor Nero.

"Our aim with the *Gladiators* expansion was to enhance the combos that made the core game kick, and push them to eleven," says designer Dávid Turczi of the new mechanics offered in the game.

The expansion will include an additional asymmetric character class named the Rudiarius, a retired gladiator and veteran of the colosseum with the ability to call in favours to get ahead. That's going to let you manipulate new elements, allowing you to play a little differently and as a new experience. Physically, you'll see a new Colosseum sideboard, gladiator dice, new shared advisors, a neutral foreman, and new blueprints.

The game will be coming to Kickstarter in Q1 2021, so you've not long to wait before you can get backing.

NEW EDITION OF CARCASSONNE: HUNTERS AND GATHERERS FROM Z-MAN GAMES

In Issue 47 we celebrated the 20th anniversary of the much loved classic *Carcassonne*, and it appears the good news keeps on coming, as Z-Man Games have announced a new edition of *Carcassonne: Hunters & Gatherers*.

The game was originally available in 2002, and has been one of the most popular versions, seeing you head back to the pre-historic age. This new edition will include much of the same gameplay, but now with updated art, and additional menhir tiles for unique effects. In it, you'll fish, hunt, and gather from the landscape, all while competing with other tribes to claim natural features. Instead of building a medieval landscape, you're swapping the cities and monasteries for natural features. Though there's no firm release date, Z-Man Games have said to look out for the game later this winter, so we can likely expect early 2021.



We asked...

Following on from our *Call of Cthulhu Scenario* in last month's issue, we asked what tips would you give to a new GM on their first attempt?

You said...

Just relax - don't overthink it. Have a start, a middle and an end. Accept that the players will sabotage everything between those points. See GM'ing as a game of its own - if you can get to the expected end point, you win, no matter how they get there.

@GamesByShep

As GM it's not necessary for you to know all the rules verbatim. In fact, if a situation can be resolved without dice rolls, do it. Storytelling and roleplay come first.

@CandlekeepR

Remember: you are not the only one responsible for the fun and for it being a good game. Players are the centre of the game - get their buy-in to helping you make it a great game. Talk to players about what they want and like. Let players know what you want. Tell stories. Have fun.

@MaxBantleman

Make sure you are comfortable with the basics: how to resolve a task, combat, and sanity, depending on the ruleset. Everything else you can house rule comfortably so long as you are fair and consistent. It's better to keep things moving and let the players do what they wish.

@DickWizardry

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FIRST TURN

SANDY PETERSEN

The master of horror RPGs looks back on what called him to Cthulhu way back in 1981

Interview by **Dan Jolin**

BACKGROUND

"Cthulhu first called me when I was eight years old. I found a book in my dad's storage pile: a 1942 edition of *The Dunwich Horror and Other Stories* by H.P. Lovecraft. Until I was in my 20s, every single person who had heard of Lovecraft had learned about him because I had told them. I was his flag-bearer, as far as I can tell. By the time Chaosium asked me to design *Call of Cthulhu*, I'd already done some expansions and things for *RuneQuest*, and articles for their magazines. That was on the strength that I really liked Lovecraft and I'd never missed a deadline."

COMPONENTS

"I started playing *D&D* the year it was published, in 1974, so I'd been role-playing almost as long as it existed. Every game that came along, we'd give it a whirl. In 1978, we tried *RuneQuest* and that was so good it eliminated *Dungeons & Dragons* from our roster. *Call of Cthulhu*, of course, is based somewhat on *RuneQuest*'s skill-based system, but I knew it couldn't be the same, because Lovecraft's heroes are so fragile. They go nuts. They panic. They swoon. And the monsters are unthinkable terrible – fighting them can't be your plan."

OBJECTIVE

"I love horror movies. I love horror stories. I wanted a game to reproduce that feeling, where the characters could be stalked through a dark house, or explore some haunted woods and have something terrible happen to them. So I designed *Call of Cthulhu* to be the game I wanted to play. For example, I really like World War Two games, but I haven't ever designed one, because the ones I have satisfy my need for World War Two games. But there was no game doing the horror theme, so I needed one."

SETUP

"The two things I had to come up with was how to make the monsters completely terrible, and how to have the players do something other than just go fight monsters. I couldn't have combat be the main point of play. The

weakest monster is a cultist, who by definition is just as tough as a player, and probably better organised and more ruthless, right? So the thing I had the players do was investigate. To make the monsters really scary, I came up with a sanity system. In my head, it was just another weapon monsters have, but during the first playtest – the 'Haunted House' scenario – the players were acting more afraid in response to the sanity rules, which were producing a highly desirable behaviour for a horror-based game. That's when I realised I'd somehow lucked out onto something."

HOW TO PLAY

"*Call of Cthulhu* is a contrarian role-playing game, where instead of the usual sequence of 'you kill monsters, you get rewards, you get tougher, you kill stronger monsters' you decrease over time and go insane. But save the world. It is the game of living through a horror story. Or not living through it, but hopefully doing some good."

END OF THE GAME

"I thought it would be an obscure cult game that the several hundred other people in the world who had heard of Lovecraft would play and that was it. But instead it turned out to actually be introducing Lovecraft to people. So I helped spread Lovecraft! I mean now, like, Cthulhu's a meme, right? I'm constantly travelling to conventions around the world. In the '90s I worked on video games like *Civilization*, *Doom* and *Quake*, which reached far more people than *Call of Cthulhu* ever did. But I'm never invited to a convention because of what I did on *Doom*. It's always *Call of Cthulhu*."

STRATEGY TIPS

"Make a physical version of your game and then relentlessly modify it based on playtesting. Just make *something*. Get some cards, write on them. Get a board, draw a board. *Cthulhu Wars* was drawn on poster board, you know? *Call of Cthulhu* was typed up on an IBM Selectric. I had something right away and got it out there early." ♦

“Until I was in my 20s, every single person who had heard of Lovecraft had learned about him because I had told them”

YOU CAN PICK UP THE STARTER SET FROM THE GAMES STORE

tabletopgaming.co.uk/games-store/rpgs/



Play a free Detective case right now

1 DETECTIVE: A MODERN CRIME BOARD GAME - SEASON ONE

This streamlined and slightly pared back version of the *Detective* series from designer Ignacy Trzewiczek sees players solve a handful of cases using only their wits and powers of deduction. It's a game that is almost entirely freeform in your sleuthing – you'll be given information, and leads to follow, but how you interpret and discuss the situation amongst yourselves is the only way you'll solve the case. Using a slick digital database entry system, that multiple players can access at once, meaning your forensic combing can bring about eureka moments as well as wonderful red herrings.



2 CAPTIVE

The just released graphic novel adventure sees you play out an interesting and exciting version of the movie *Taken*. The game comes in the form of a graphic novel where you are attempting to track down your daughter, kidnapped by a strange set of cultists, in a spooky house. With classic choose your own path mechanics and interesting choices which really do rely on your ability to 'read the room' – although in this case it's a beautifully drawn comic panel – it's an interesting entry worth exploring. The use of stats and the timer system means that the way you approach any situation will be based on your own strengths as well as how much time you've already wasted.



10 OF THE BEST MYSTERY GAMES

Exploring a mystery, whether that is one that sees you tracking down a killer, escaping a locked room, or even travelling through time to set the right things right, is a one of the great cooperative gaming pleasures. If you're thinking about how you're going to get people to play games together after Christmas dinner, we think there's no better way than solving one of these boxes together. Join us then for ten of our favourite games where you're the sleuth, or at least, you're trying to be.

Picked by **Christopher John Eggett**



3 UNLOCK!

The *Unlock!* series has you solving a range of puzzles – anything from crimes at the circus to strange public challenges offered by millionaires. All of these scenarios see you applying a good mix of lateral thinking and scouring cards for secret number. The range of puzzles hidden inside each adventure is staggering – some require taking a different look at the card in front of you (literally), whereas others might need a bit of deduction from clues generated via the game's smartphone app. The latter also tracks your time in the game and offers hints if you really do get stuck. A great accessible family entry. We like *Timeless Adventures* particularly.

4 TIME STORIES: REVOLUTIONS

This is the younger sibling of the titanicly popular *Time Stories* game. Rather than investing in a series of expansions over time, players can pick up a single 'blue cycle' box and get playing straight away. These games use the smart 'pick a card from the panorama to explore' adventuring technique. While a lot of the games of this list are very explicit about how to win the game, *Time Stories: Revolutions* often asks you to work out what you need to do for the best outcome as well as how you're going to do it. This approach makes for a very fluid feeling game that can leave a bit of chin scratching even amongst seasoned players.



5 CHRONICLES OF CRIME

Chronicles of Crime comes in many flavours – including the recent *1400* entry reviewed in this magazine. Pick your era and flavour of crime, whether that's noir, the 1980s, or the 1400s and get to work solving it. The game, like many on this list, uses an app – but in this case uses some clever QR code technology to lead players around. Expanding your collection is as simple as downloading new cases to solve. A great addition for those who are happy leaning on technology during their gaming.



6 DECKTECTIVE AND DECKSCAPE GAMES

These small, one-off games tend to use a different gimmick between boxes. While in one you'll be setting up a scene by slipping cards into the box, and using a 'discard to uncover' system, others might use a 'multiple path' deck exploration mechanic. While these games don't offer as much brain burning joy as others, they also have the benefit of being very accessible for a range of ages and can be quite a compelling way in to the world of mystery and crime solving games. *Escape From Alcatraz* plays with some fun tropes in a jolly, trashy way, and is a great place to start.



7 EXIT: THE GAME

You've got to get out of this game somehow. The *EXIT: The Game* series is an interesting way to explore the escape room in a box style game for this list, as it's one of the few which don't tend to use some kind of smartphone app. Instead you've just got pen, paper, a booklet and a decoder disc to work out which symbols to follow down the rabbit hole. Oh, and maybe some scissors. Yes, these games are ones which will ask you to occasionally rip up the box to find some hidden clues. It adds a bit of drama – or a very final form of legacy gaming – and is well worth it for those who just want a screen-free evening. *The Pharaoh's Tomb* is the classic from this line up.



8 ADVENTURE GAMES

If, instead of escaping something you want a bit of adventuring, then the sister title to the *EXIT* series is here for you. A narrative, story-led game that might remind you of point and click adventures like *The Curse of Monkey Island* and *Broken Sword*. Somewhere between a sleuthing detective game, and an escape room, players will be working out how to override systems and puzzles with a strange collection of objects and a strong dose of lateral thinking.



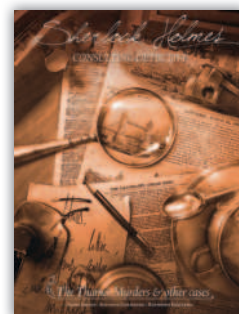
9 DETECTIVE: CITY OF ANGELS

Maybe the most 'board' game on this list, and one for hobbyists. It's 1940s LA and you're going to noir your way to the bottom of this case. With beautiful hand painted art by Vincent Dutrait, players take the role of investigators trying to close a case – or that of the antagonist, The Chisel. This secondary role is one of feeding players slightly misleading information during interrogations. A great asymmetrical take on the 'whodunnit' genre from Van Ryder Games.



10 SHERLOCK HOLMES CONSULTING DETECTIVE

Race against Sherlock himself to uncover and untangle these twisty cases, and he won't hold back, however elementary your detective skills might. With new cases still coming out for this 1980's classic, there's plenty to be getting your teeth into, hounds of the Baskerville style. Setting the blueprint for many games in this genre, players will be spending time running around London, interrogating various people and reading the day's paper for clues before, usually, being disappointed they got it all wrong when Sherlock reveals his findings. A classic worth investigating.





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Role Call

If you've ever wondered about the sheer range of experiences RPGs can offer, look no further than this month's **ROLE CALL**

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



THOSE DARK PLACES

This rules-light, atmosphere-heavy little RPG aims to prove that you don't need slaving monsters to make space exploration scary. At least, not when you have a half-dozen people stuck in a tin can, drinking recycled water and spending their days staring into the void, months away from any help. Have fun.

Osprey Games | £15



ALICE IS MISSING

Marketed as 'A Silent Roleplaying Game', *Alice is Missing* aims to tell the story of a missing high school student entirely through the medium of text messages. The PDF version of the game has been drawing rave reviews, and this boxed set only looks to make running and playing the game even easier.

Renegade Game Studios | £17



CYBERPUNK RED

After some lengthy delays, the latest edition of the classic *Cyberpunk* – don't laugh, it claimed that name back in the 80s – finally looks ready to hit shelves, roughly in time with the long-awaited *Cyberpunk 2077* videogame. Strap on your mirrored shades and strut your way down to Night City.

R. Talsorian Games | £43



TALISMAN ADVENTURES

Set in the same old-school fantasy world as the boardgame, *Talisman Adventures* promises a classic dungeon-crawling, monster bashing experience filled with loot and magic items aplenty. Does it look particularly revolutionary? Nope. But that doesn't mean it can't be a comforting slice of entertainment and excitement.

Pegasus Spiele | £37



PATHFINDER (2E) BEGINNER BOX

The new starter set for *Pathfinder's* second edition is a hefty pile of cardboard and paper. Alongside the typical stripped down versions of both players' and GMs' rules, pre-generated characters and dice, the box is stuffed with a big old map to explore and more than 100 standees showing off heroes and monsters alike.

Rowan, Rook and Decard | £33



HAVE YOU PLAYED?

STAR WARS: HOTH ICE PLANET ADVENTURE

It's a classic game that's been given a retro re-do. We take our chances to defeat Darth Vader nearly 50 years after we were first asked to

Words by **Charlie Pettit**

A long time ago (40-50 years) in a galaxy far, far, away (the stores in the 70's and 80's), Star Wars mania offered us everything from cringeworthy Christmas specials, to homeware, to action figures, to everything in-between – including, of course, a small but steady board game collection. One of which, was *Star Wars: Hoth Ice Planet Adventure*, which came onto the scene in the 1980's, made by the now defunct Kenner. You can spot the iconic style from 30 paces, but a copy of the original game at auctions can set you back within the region of £300, in varying conditions. Fear not, however, as Hasbro's retro collection has seen to its return, offering a chance to relive that original Star Wars nostalgia, with the benefit of a Luke Skywalker action figure too.

WHAT IS IT?

Let's start with a preface that this is not a game that would clamber to the top of the BGG Top 100 list these days. When it was released, board games were still generally considered to be for children, meaning you come to expect cheaper, lighter, and simpler games. For that

reason, instead of a dice, all of your actions are dictated by a plastic and cardboard spinner, that you'll flick to either find out how far you move forward, or the outcome of your battle with Stormtroopers, an AT-AT, Probot, Boba Fett, or the villain of the piece (it could be no other at this time) – Darth Vader.

Of course, it wouldn't be a game of this era without Darth Vader being there at the end of your journey – and he'll lurk on the board awaiting your challenge. The board itself contains minimal detail, but you can't miss the big bad right in the middle. To defeat him, you'll need a minimum of ten force cards, which you can pick up in a few ways. Firstly, by collecting two force cards every time you pass the rebel base (and £200... no wait, wrong game), and secondly by challenging the other enemies. You'll bet force cards from your hand, and if you spin and land on the right space, you'll get the same number of force cards back in bonus.

Luck plays a huge part in this game, which usually balances the scales between older and younger players, removing most of the skill element that allows for an advantage. Then you add in the equivalent of chance

cards and tiles, in incident cards and adventure tiles that you'll need to resolve as you land on them to spice things up a little. Finally, when you're ready to battle Darth Vader, you'll keep spinning on your turn until you land directly on Darth Vader's tile. To win, you'll spin once for every force card you own, hoping that one spin will land on the sought section to mark your victory. Fail to win, and you'll be back at rebel base, starting all over again.

It's incredibly simple, so much so that there's not really more rules to those above, and whilst the rules are printed really pleasingly in the same format that they were in the previous editions, the instructions could have been a half page. Perfect when you consider trying to introduce your family to a game from your own childhood, that any barrier to entry is almost completely removed. Plus, as anyone can win, bragging rights to have defeated Darth Vader remain untouchable.

WHY SHOULD YOU TRY IT?

Star Wars: Hoth Ice Planet Adventure is one to try for three types of people – the first being

those who remember the original game, the second being those trying to encourage their children into the Star Wars life early on, and the final being those who appreciate how well reproduced the original game has been reborn in this retro edition specifically.

strange response to a question of why you should play it, but actually it's a delightful change from how we might board game now, and actually a simple enough game to play with younger children too.

With that, you'll have family members knowing the difference between an AT-AT and an AT-ST in no time, the difference between Boba and Jango Fett will be clear, and whilst they may be under the misunderstanding that defeating Darth Vader will make you a Jedi Knight, at least they'll be interested enough in doing so that sharing the world of Star Wars is a simple



connection. Because at the very bottom of this, the game just lets you play uncumbered on Hoth, immersed in the world of Star Wars without much effort. You don't need to read a novel to know how to play (I'm looking at you, Star Wars Rebellion, you beautiful but long winded game), and yet you gain the childish delight of (maybe) being able to fight one of the most iconic villains there is - Darth Vader. 🗡️



It's as close to the original game as it can be, using the artwork inspired by The Empire Strikes Back, except now the box has been artistically weathered to make it look as if it was the same one on your shelf all those years ago. There's a key difference though, the aforementioned figure of Luke Skywalker (Snowspeeder). It's surprisingly a full figure, as in, it retains the typical and expected packaging of action figures that has become so iconic for them. It's high quality, and a nice little addition to the retro edition.

This play on nostalgia helps because it wouldn't earn a Must-Play by today's standards. It plays like a child's game, and that's because really, it is. This is no multi-faceted world building of *Gloomhaven* or miniature heavy like any CMON game, this is a quick, cheap, old style board game with a simple objective and some plastic tokens (and a spinner). You might think that's a

“Of course, it wouldn't be a game of this era without Darth Vader being there at the end of your journey”



RIGHT The ever present villain of the era, Darth Vader waits for your arrival

The Soloist

WE'RE GOING ON AN ADVENTURE...

We're exploring the world of solo gaming one move at a time.
This month: adventure board games

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

One of the joys of solo gaming is that you don't have anyone to argue with. This can also be one of the drawbacks. Whereas some games require the friction between players to form the 'fun' – and this is present even in co-op or collaborative games, in solo gaming, we simply can't rely on this interplay between players. Removing other players means that we're often left without the 'drama' of a disagreement. So, to get that

drama back we need to explore something wild and unknown – and where better to do that than within the hallowed 'adventure board game' category?

To define this kind of game, we're talking about a specific sort of 'wander about on the map' game that includes encounters, choices and the sense of a sandbox or open world. These are the *Grand Theft Auto* style games of the tabletop world. You, the hero, can do pretty much what you want within the space – but

that space is defined by a board. You're not necessarily playing a role in these games as much as you are playing a character. The story you provide will be for yourself alone – pulled together out the mechanics and flourishes of art that fill these worlds.

The fact that you should be doing something specific within the constraints of the game to, you know, win, is really besides the point. Let us then, explore some of the best bits of adventuring alone.

THREE GREAT SOLO ADVENTURE GAMES

It is dangerous to go alone, and frankly, that's why it's so fun. Here are three of our favourite adventuring board games to tackle by yourself.

SHADOWS OF KILFORTH

The most recent visit to Hall or Nothing's world of Kilforth has a sense of adventure generated by a shifting plane of location cards which you'll be travelling through. At the end of each turn the 'night' event deck dishes out a card which will cause something dangerous to happen as well as flipping a location to the Gloom side, making it more dangerous to pass through. A massively replayable and varied adventure which changes depending on your preferred hero's journey.



POSTHUMAN SAGA

An excellent slice of *Fallout*-ish irradiated life here, with a world of discovery before you. What kind of mutant will you meet next in the wasteland, you might wonder as you retreat to a safe location after being ambushed by yet another disturbing creature. *Posthuman Sagas* is a game filled with direct story decisions about the path you think your character should take, as well as the interesting 'emergent narrative' you get from everything wanting to kill you. The only thing we would like to warn you about this game is the fact that there approximately a million tokens to pop out – so do that bit with a friend, even if you're playing solo.



WHAT YOU DON'T KNOW WILL KILL YOU

Games like our much beloved *Dungeon Degenerates*, the Kilforth series and *The 7th Continent*, all use some method of 'random encounters'. Whether that's the electrified-looking gribbles of the Wurstreich coming out of their biome decks, or the various events and encounters with strangers found in Kilforth, there is a kind of excitement in drawing from these piles of cards. It might just be triggering the same part of the brain that sparks up when we wander through the long grass in *Pokemon* but much of the enjoyment comes from deciding how you're going to risk it.

Not everything has to be a fight either. Encounters in Kilforth can take the form of a quest, or you can spend your time talking a stranger round. Additionally, most of these games have a kind of event deck which will throw things up in the air. This can be in the form of wild weather, a stranger appearing on the horizon, or an increased enemy presence.

What happens with these random events is it feeds into your own sense of making a story. After all, if you're playing solo, it's you that's got to tie everything together. So while you're taking your actions to move the story onwards, you're also ricocheting off elements outside of your control. Maybe you wanted to make a

friend, but now can't because a random weather event has blown some angry goblins into your path. Or you were barely scraping along, until a chance search of an area for loot leads you to an item which might turn your fortunes around. All of these parts come together in a chorus of accidental narrative – giving you something to push against, making your agency in the game all that more valuable.

THE CHOICE IS YOURS

Which is what these games come down to. You have to make decisions by yourself, and to extend the drama further, it will mostly be against your own built up biases. If you had a really awful time in the swamplands last time you passed through – or even an event has made travel through that area more difficult – you're likely to think twice about travelling that road again. In the same way that taking a road event between scenarios in *Gloomhaven* comes with a choice, your 'overworld choices' are informed by how much you want to risk.

To counter this some of these games come with a 'sneak' or 'hide' mechanic, which will make your life easier when it comes to crossing the map (we prefer to stumble into trouble personally). Additionally, running away can sometimes be an option, and this lets you exert

as much control over the game as you can (aside from swinging a sword at goblins) while pushing against its shifting challenges.

And what about winning? While we truly believe it's better to die and have fun, there is something exciting about having the upper hand after many game hours of struggle. When your plan comes together – even if it is just by the skin of your teeth – and you start bringing light back to a world you've suffered a great deal in, that's a pleasing adventure.

Settle in and break out four to fifteen decks of cards and a big old map, it's time to embark on your next adventure. 🗡️



LORD OF THE RINGS: JOURNEYS IN MIDDLE-EARTH

Well, if you're going to have an adventure in a fantasy world, you might as well start here. This app-driven game uses a lot of smart tech to make solo play a breeze – including, joyfully, enemy movement. No longer must we work out what the baddies are up to ourselves. This can lead to genuine moments of surprise and peril, as well as a whole load of good natured 'hobbit-tosh'. Earlier this year the release of the Balrog adventure (properly known as *The Shadowed Path*) means that now there's really no chance of passing on this one.

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my favourite game

CHRISTIAN LEMAY

The founder and owner of the Scorpion Masqué, and the designer of Loot N Run, puts us on high alert for space adventuring in *Space Alert*

Earlier this year I re-assembled a crack team of boardgamers to finish an adventure begun long ago: to complete all eight missions in *Space Alert*. We'd already got through the first five in a previous gaming evening, and we were ready to embark upon the sixth...

Space Alert is a cooperative game in which players take on the roles of the crew of a spaceship, whose only goal is to survive ten minutes of sustained attack. A game, which takes 20 minutes, is played over two phases: the first, which is played in real-time, consists of each player programming up to 12 actions (fire laser cannons, re-fuel reactors, transfer energy to the shields...) while a CD (yes, a CD) plays, outlining all the horrors befalling the crew. In the second phase, both the players' and the enemy's programmed actions are resolved, no changes permitted. Players hold their breath, waiting to find out if they'll survive. I'd love to be able to fully describe the chaos around the table while that CD is playing – each player needs to communicate to the others what they are doing and what they need the others to do. Everybody needs to listen. Everyone is talking. Some people are yelling. Nobody is really listening...

So back to the evening in question. Successes with missions six and seven required two attempts each; the evening was starting off well. The final challenge, however, looked much tougher. After two resounding defeats, we looked at the time; it was getting late, our energy levels were ebbing. It was nearly midnight, on a school night. We weighed our options – a final attempt, or leave it for another day...

In a sudden moment of madness, we clicked 'play' and the soundtrack filled the room. The start was rocky, communication between players was patchy, uncertain. We did our best to listen but we couldn't keep our focus. We had the distinct feeling that the game was slipping away from us... we were missing an energy cube here, a laser-shot there... At the end of the soundtrack, we grimly began resolving our actions, a black cloud of impending doom over our heads.

As we expected, our first moves were stutter-steps, and we wondered if we should even bother finishing the resolution phase. An enormous spaceship was

headed straight for us, poised to annihilate us. Then, out of absolutely nowhere, a rocket fired. A rocket, randomly programmed in the midst of all the chaos, streaked from our ship toward the enemy, and blew it to smithereens. We'd survived by the skin of our teeth... but we'd survived.

I don't think I've ever experienced an emotion quite like that one in a board game. We literally leapt out of our seats, arms in the air, high-fiving, hugging, stifling our shouts of elation (my kids were sleeping in the room next door), and celebrating as though our hockey team (the Montreal Canadiens) had just won the Stanley Cup.

Space Alert has it all. It is a party game, we laugh as hard in victory as we do in defeat. And it's a crunchier game, offering a certain amount of thought and consideration to keep gamers engaged. It's fast, addictive, demanding, smart, and crazy, all at the same time.

The theme oozes through every mechanism. It's a cooperative game with neither communication constraints or 'alpha-gamer' issues. Each player plays an essential role. It is a game in which the strength of your team really does equal that of its weakest link. The game is unique, evocative, innovative, and, in 2020, still feels fresh.

Space Alert is everything. 🚀

“

Everybody needs to listen. Everyone is talking. Some people are yelling. Nobody is really listening...

”



THE 7TH CITADEL





7TH HAVEN

In a collapsing world, we join Bruno Sautter to find a Citadel of one's own

Words by Christopher John Eggett

We were supposed to be safe inside the citadel. While the realm has been at war for more than 70 years, you are relatively secure within its grounds where you, as a slave gardener, tend to the vicious plants of the necrodroids. These plants are one of the few things keeping your world from falling into the earth. For there are threats out there between these fortress states in the form of giant earth-rending worms, sinking these bastions one by one.

But today, your world is crumbling, and the citadel is falling. Making a brave escape leads you out into the wild. You didn't want to be a leader, but it seems that you've become one anyway, and it's down to you to try and make a safe haven out here in the unknown lands spanning the falling cities, roaming worms, and the harsh environment.

And that's where we start in *The 7th Citadel*, the spiritual sequel to the modern cursed-expedition classic that is *The 7th Continent*. It's a different setting to the cursed island you find yourself on in the

previous game from Serious Poulp, and Bruno Sautter (the designer of the game alongside Ludovic Roudy) is here to take us on a tour of this new fantasy world.

"Apart from the exploration similarities [*to The 7th Continent*], it's a completely new game because it's a new universe," says Sautter, "it's a post-apocalyptic medieval fantasy setting in which you play as a slave gardener who has just escaped the citadel of the necrodroid Ninidazir to find themselves confronted with an even greater threat that you will have to fight against through many hours of play. We designed the world completely from scratch, and we wanted to avoid the goblins and trolls and the *Lord of the Rings* kind of stuff. This is a darker world."

And it's a weirder world too – one that invites exploration for the potential thousand hours of gameplay. Those many hours are one of the things we all enjoyed about *The 7th Continent* – the world was huge and endless feeling, there were hours of play in the box to rummage through and discover. This made for a strange experience while playing – it was almost better to leave parts of the map unknown, because the game would then retain its draw. The mysterious continent is less mysterious when you've seen it all. ▶

THE 7TH CITADEL

Here then we're in for a different experience. The setting you're exploring is the Collapsing Lands, a place where you will be surviving, and beyond that, thriving. This last part is the most compelling for those who are used to expiring on far shores.

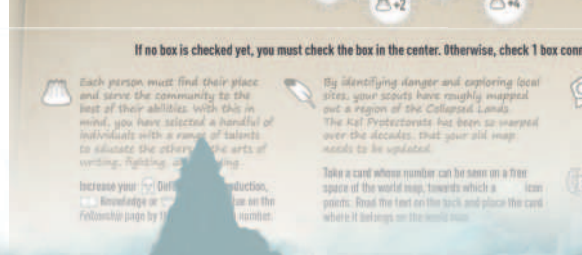
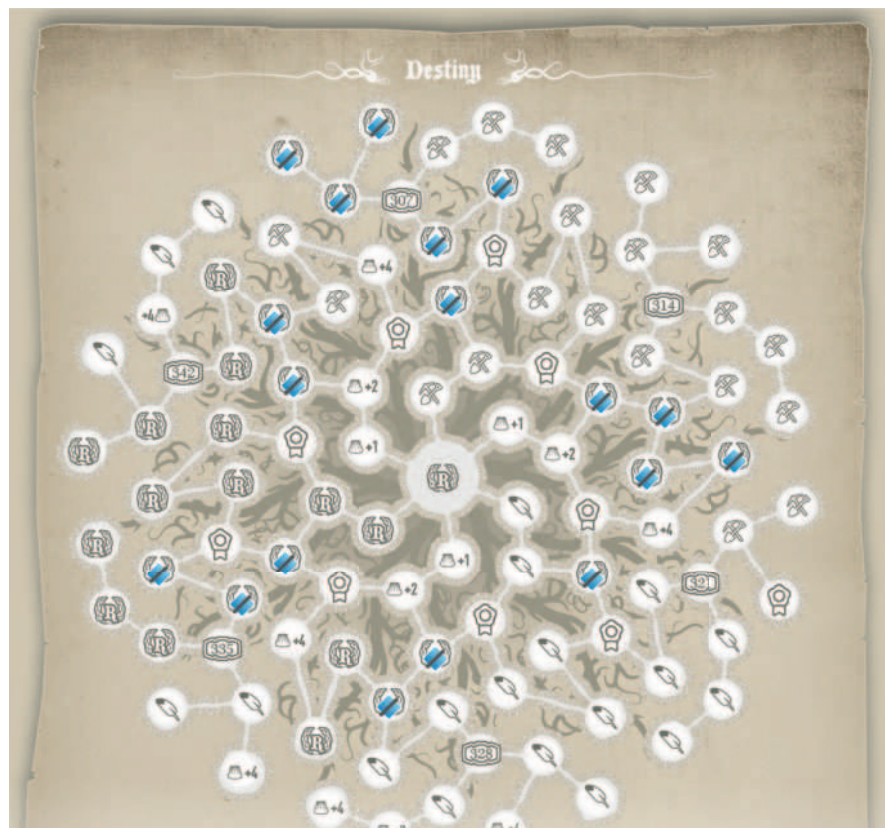
"The main differences between the two games is that, in *The 7th Citadel*, we've mostly replaced the 'survival' aspects with 'adventure,'" says Sautter, "in the last game we had all this 'die and retry' stuff, where your action deck would become exhausted - you had to hunt to eat and regain stamina, craft weapons and so on, and this part is now gone in *7th Citadel* as food is more readily available."

"It's more about living an adventure," he continues "each threat is split into different scenarios, and you will also will lead a community of refugees at your Citadel. So, you will be able to build in your own zone - in the base game there are 28 buildings - so you can choose your way you want to do where you want to go in terms of the kind of city you want to be building."

A NEW HOPE

This is a much more hopeful game than *The 7th Continent*. After all, we don't start it cursed. Players will instead be building up their location using the currency of hope itself.

"You get hope cards during the game, mostly when you do something well - when you help someone, saving a child buried under rocks for example," says Sautter, "you



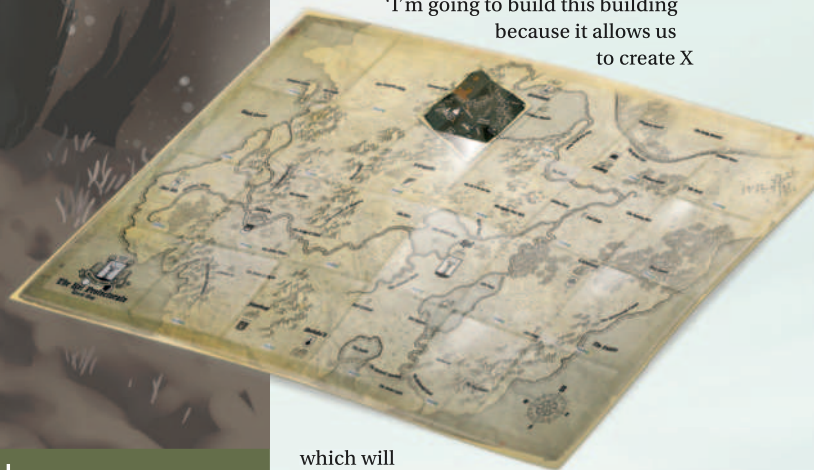
ABOVE The Destiny chart turns hope into tangible benefits for the survivors





you have people to take care of – refugees at your citadel – and you have to make choices that are more and more important worldwide. You have responsibility over people, and your choices will change the outcome,” says Sautter, before explaining there are four characteristics within the citadel – production, defence, knowledge and influence. This might sound like there is more resource management to the game, but we’re quickly informed this won’t be a German style board game of factory management “it’s more like you have choices.”

“And obviously with the choices you make, the outcome might be different,” says Sautter, “you don’t have to spend two hours saying ‘I’m going to build this building because it allows us to create X



which will allow us to make Y’ – it’s not that kind of management.”

Characters also develop new skills using the same set of hope and destiny mechanics. You’ll be improving your deck a little throughout the game by adding new elements. Characters will be matching their class characteristics – including cunning, martial, leadership and arcana. Developing along any of these paths leads to the kind of choices we love in a long adventure game.

Each of the tracks has the familiar numbered boxes seen on other cards, which, when the threshold is reached, triggers a new event or reward. Personal skills are present too, making it possible to develop your character in the way that suits your play style.

“These skills can be turned into successes, or feats for avoiding damage. The more specialised you are at something the better you are at it. To make it super concrete,” says Sautter, “if you find a heavy sword the effect will tell you, ‘when you fight, you can turn the martial icons into successes.’ So, if you went ‘all in’ on magic, then you won’t have

“ It’s a lot about hope. You have responsibility over people, and your choices will change the outcome ”

can use hope cards to unblock skill cards, or when you have five cards you can take a ‘hope reborn’ card that allows you to check a box on the destiny page.”

Destiny is something of your own making here, with a series of branching paths in what looks like a cloud, or a brain. As you tick off aspects of this mix of skill tree and base upgrades you’ll improve not only your character, but the place you’re creating for others looking for safety in this strange world.

Your choices in this world seem to matter a lot more than they did in *The 7th Continent* – by virtue of them effecting other people. While there were cases in the previous game where you would be presented with a choice, there was only one person you were worried about,

and that person was you. Lifting the curse and the use of the action deck that needed to be replenished so you could continue, made for what felt like a selfish game of survival. The self is all that was important in that game because there was only one way to win, and that is to outlive and cure your curse.

Here the choices you make need to be balanced between what is good for the situation you are in, and the situation that your actions will leave your citadel in. And as the game is scenario based you’ll be coming back ‘home’ a lot before campaigning out again to discover your next challenge.

“It’s a lot about hope. The introductory scenario is called ‘a new beginning’. And that’s what it’s all about. You are a nobody, but now

THE 7TH CITADEL

any martial icons on the class. The character who chooses martial icons is going to be really efficient with this sword. However, you might be able to summon creatures to help him when he does fight. It's really up to you to take your character where you want."

It's clear that a lot of the game has been streamlined from the core system, but it retains that joy of exploration. Players will take actions using a hand of cards, moving and exploring will mostly be free or cheap – depending on the terrain – and more advanced actions requiring a test by drawing cards. Each character has their own deck this time, making it a better group experience than the series previous outing, and also allows a little more agency for players.

Other heavier aspect have been trimmed too, "we've streamlined the action resolution – this used to be seven steps and now it's only four. We also simplified the inventory system, so players are not able to combine stuff anymore, and we don't care about the durability of each of the items they're carrying anymore," says Sautter, "we've changed stuff which we considered a bit heavy in terms of gameplay. And then we've added some components to make the game more rich and tactical. For us, 'rich' means more choices because what we want in the end is when players play to always ask themselves, 'well, I can't do that, then what am I going to do?' Because this is what games are about – making decisions and assuming you have choices."

PUTTING YOUR NAME ON THE MAP

While we are used to laying out any number of cards and tiles on the table as we discover new numbers, complete tasks and overcome obstacles, here we have an interesting legacy style map to go alongside it.

The map of the world comes in the form of a folded map with laminated pockets on it. As you complete quests, and areas of the world, unlocking their new paths through the game, you will slide new cards into those slots. The overworld shifts as your adventure continues, making the mystery of unlocking this new realm one of more permanent change.

Another important change is in how the game behaves between scenarios, "when you run out of life or when you have achieved your goals, you go back to the Citadel," explains Sautter, "you have a place to rest. In this, players can say 'we played for two, three hours. Now, maybe we'd like to call it a night.' And then you also have as a feeling of milestone

moments in the game in which players can say, 'okay, we did this, next time we are going to do this new stuff, this new scenario,' which offers very different outcomes from the previous one."

"You are able to have milestones that allow you to stop at specific moments. You can save the game whenever you want of course," continues Sautter, "we have a savings system that allows you to save in couple of seconds and then reload the game super-fast. This is still here, but most of the time I think players will play the entire scenario. And then whether they have succeeded or failed is they go back to the Citadel to discover the outcome. And then they say, 'okay, we are, we are good for tonight. Let's begin tomorrow.'"

This scenario based focus is welcome to both those who want to 'win' the game as quickly as possible, and those who prefer to simply explore.

"In *The 7th Continent* people who succeed most of the time as the ones that stay focused on resolving their quest. Others are those who play 'tourists' and try to see everything," says Sautter in what is probably the most accurate description to how we like to play the game, "the game tells them to go somewhere and they decide to say 'no, no, no, let's go West because it sounds fun.' Okay, good. You will end up starving somewhere where you're not supposed to go because just like in real life, if you choose to go completely direct different direction, you will end up lost and probably injured or dead."

"Since it's more goal orientated, *The 7th Citadel* has a world map of locations. It's a map of the world from 70 years ago. So, when

someone talks to you about a city in a certain area, you know you'll need to

travel North East, for example. And because you have the map of the old world – which is completely obsolete – maybe now that city has been destroyed, or maybe there's a rift that separates you from that city and you have to find a way to get over there."

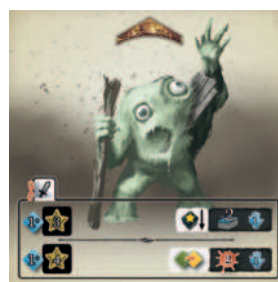
"The game will tell you to update this map by putting cards into it. And sometimes it will, for instance, allow you to start your next scenario from a new place, closer to your destination," says Sautter. This system is designed to help some players, and also add a new feeling of focus to the game.

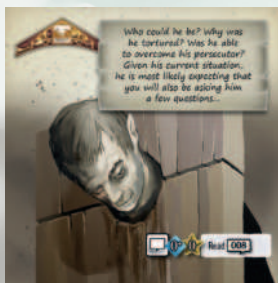
"Some people were a little lost in *The 7th Continent*," says Sautter, "and I mean literally lost. This one will be more explicit about what you have to do and where you have to go."

While the map works as a legacy element between games, the team at Serious Poulp have their own opinions about the 'destructive legacy' that has become more common in the tabletop world. "We are not too fond, as players, of destroying our games. It's always something we have struggled with. There will be no components destroyed in our games."

BY THE BOOK

One of the most intriguing aspects of the game comes in the form of new dialogue books, which function as the main way for players to interact with NPCs. These conversations are stored in a physical book, and use a familiar 'choose your own path' system made famous by Fighting Fantasy and Choose Your Own Adventure books.





"When you meet someone, you can talk to that person like in some video games," says Sautter "you'll have choices a, b, c, and - importantly - when you have discussed something with someone, we've made sure you cannot go back."

The introduction of this book into the game makes for further streamlining of the system, and sets the designers up with a freer space for adding narrative flavour for the game.

"It allows us to do several things. The first one is like kind of 'you cannot do it again and stuff,'" says Sautter, "and although it is basic, we would need to add maybe 400 cards to the game if we wanted to do chapters in cards. So it allows us to add loads of content and story elements really easily. An entire page of dialogue would take at least three cards. As for gameplay, there's a lot of fun stuff"

Naturally, I am sure the first thing we'll all try to do is leave our finger in the previous page. Just in case we don't like the outcome. This has been considered however. In this world, there's magic for that.

"You have a magic skill called 'vision of the future'. It allows you, when you're talking to someone to look at what would be the outcome of one of your answers. And if you don't like it, because you feel like 'Oh my god! I shouldn't say that!' you can go back to where you were," laughs Sautter, "and basically you've had a vision of what if you say this, so you can choose not to say it. Of course, only the character who takes this skill can do that."

Teamwork is much more optional here than in *The 7th Continent*. Instead of moving around together like a lump of cursed people, players are able to move independently - allowing for 'split up and search for clues' situations. It's a welcome addition.

"Everybody has own their action deck and we've changed movement actions as well. So now everybody moves one square at a time meaning you won't necessarily do all of the same things together," says Sautter, "if you are at the crossroads and someone wants to explore an area you might waste a lot of energy if you all go together. Now that player can go off and explore, and you can regroup later."

"It's also something that is easier to understand for players. You move one square at a time on your own, it's straightforward" expands Sautter, "and it allows more tactical choices. Like, 'do we go out together, but then we spend twice as many cards to go there?' or 'do you go alone? I wait here to do something else and then you come back?' But then I cannot help you because I'm not there with you. These are the kind of choices we want players to have in the game."

Aside from these questions of teamwork, or when to let someone wander off to their potential death, individuals have a bigger narrative role to play as well. Each character has a unique action and their own quest. This quest makes for optional replayability.

"The quest that refers only to that character and their story, or which you could choose to play or not. Meaning if you have done it before, you can choose not to do it again, because you already know the outcome," says Sautter, "it's apart from the threats you face in the game - it's a big sidequest."

BEYOND THE CITADEL

With Sautter's main questline coming to a close, we ask what his hopes are for the game's reception and what they're hoping to achieve.

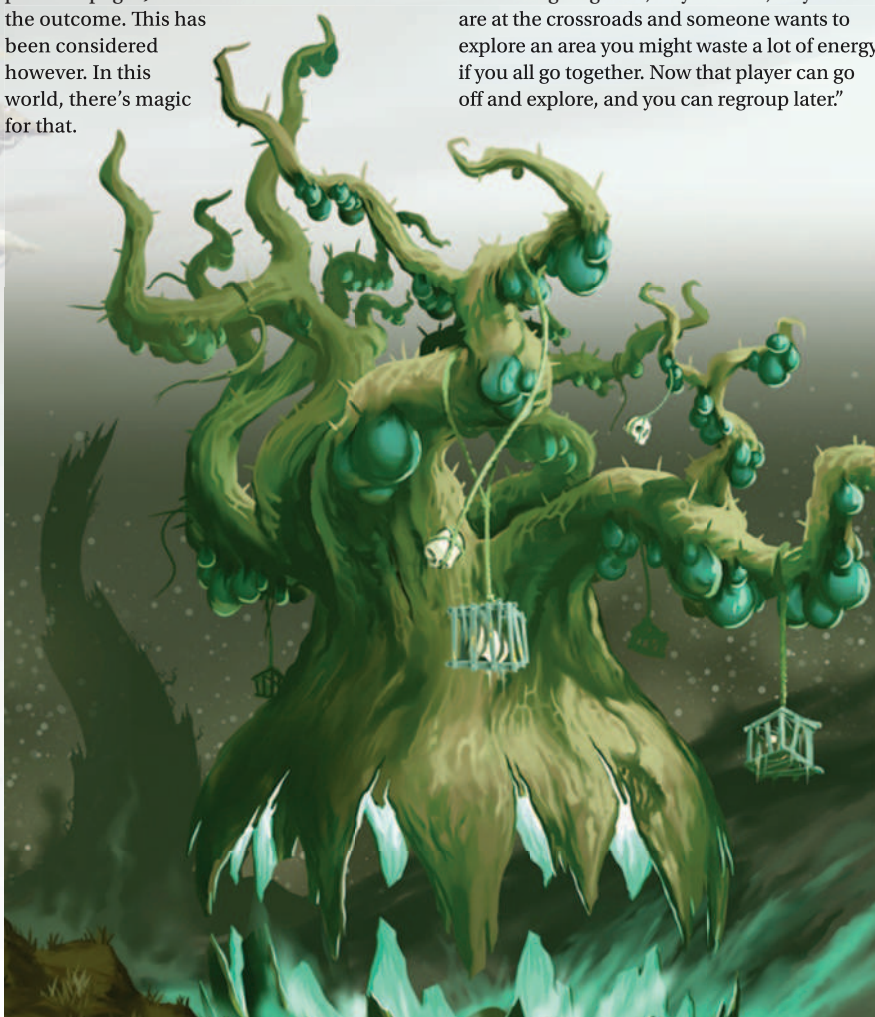
"Novelty." He says, directly, "because what excites us is to find new ways, new stories, new stuff, to bring to the game. I've been playing this game for months in playtesting, and when I came back to *The 7th Continent*, I was surprised at how different *The 7th Citadel* really is. When people come to play this game they'll realise it's really nothing like our last game."

"We needed to reinvent ourselves," says Sautter, about this new adventure, "we are pretty happy with what we've imagined."

There are novelties in the game too, "you know we like to hide stuff, you know we like surprises," says Sautter. Of course, he can't say too much, but there will be easter eggs for fans throughout the game, including the hidden numbers on cards to discover.

The game's Kickstarter has funded to over €3million, with late pledges open now and delivery expected May 2022. We hope that there will be another accessible classic edition coming to retail after that as we saw with the recent release of *The 7th Continent*.

It seemed a little unfair to ask a game designer what's next before their Kickstarter has landed fully - so right now Bruno's answer is simply that he is looking forward to a couple of weeks off. 🎮



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++YEAR 3158++INCOMING TRANSMISSION++

Found Sector D12: Pastime x17 /// >runCheckComplete { GAME FROM
PERSONAL COLLECTION: "CHESS"

message intercepted by Robert Florence

I'm not sure what they are. Metallic creatures, for sure - but it would be a simplification to call them robots. They are something both organic and machine, and - from a distance - they are quite beautiful. They are the conquerors of this planet Earth.

Their propaganda, filling every communication channel, paints them as heroic. They care only about the restoration of the planet that we destroyed. They call us "Flesh Devils". They say that we never deserved this planet. The world's many beauties were wasted on us. They think of us as the last traces of disease in an organism's body. They are walking into a trap.

They travel here now, in search of this vault full of "precious research materials". As I wait, and prepare my forces' attack, I play Chess. Chess is the one true board game. It is pure, perfect, and full of solutions - none of them final. Dismiss Chess at your peril. It is the game of great strategists, great tacticians, great men like myself. It is a war, full of knowable unknowns, and unknown knowledge. It is a fog, through which the opponent thrusts and jabs. It is pure daylight, when victory is assured. Total darkness, when it seems there is no way out.

My favourite piece is the Bishop. The ability to roar, diagonally, across the play space, taking the opponent by surprise - exposing a chink in their armour they had not noticed. It is the lightning bolt of religious awakening through the rigid positions of rationale. It is the touch of God. And the Knight, of course, so dramatic in its approach. The Knight is me, waiting for the chance to enter the conflict's story, waiting until the last, then charging in unstoppably. They will not stop me.

Dismiss Chess at your peril. "But there are so many other games to play," they tell me. They have been listening to these broadcasts, praising the ingenuity of the human race in creating these games. Foolish games about

barbarians fighting through dungeons. Fluff and nonsense about operating little farms, or collecting bird's eggs. None of these games are necessary. None of them are Chess.

In *The Seventh Seal*, Ingmar Bergman's masterpiece, the doomed Knight does not challenge Death to a game of *Zombie Kidz: Evolution or Escape From 100 Million BC*. There is no challenge placed before Death that asks him to collect pollen as a cartoonish bee or take control of a forest in the guise of a woodland creature. Man and Death play Chess. Because Chess is more than a game. Chess *is* the game.

We humans are not devils. We are thinkers. We are brilliantly intelligent, endlessly creative. We destroy, yes - because we see

life how it really is, and the fire of our passion follows. Our scientists, here in this vault, have discovered a biomechanical viral weapon capable of wiping out our conquerors in mere moments. There is our brilliance. Animals destroy, as we do. But only the human race can destroy so *completely*.

I play Chess. The trap is set. The earth cries out for liberation. We have waited long enough. My Bishop hangs back, behind a veil of deception. And I am filled with joy. Because he is who is a master of Chess is a master of life. I am the Knight, and these foul machines will die at the end of my lance. Call us Flesh Devils if you wish. These Flesh Devils have our opponent in check.

Mate will surely follow. ♚



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1 LOKE BATTLEMATS

Although we're slowly adapting to online map building, when we're back in person, RPG prep in hand, there's little better than having a Loke Battlemat spread out in front of you. To go down to basics, these are dry wipe, spiral bound, many-sized printed areas, with everything from fantasy dungeons to cyberpunk mainframes available. Gridded, so to work with size descriptors, and also available with reusable stickers, you can really customise and visualise the RPG setting before your players. Sure, you may need slightly larger pockets than the average person for its pocket sized version, but the point stands: it brings a little extra to the tabletop that adds a lot to the experience itself. From **£8** | lokebattlemats.store



2 CARD SLEEVES

For some, this may be a given. You open a pack of cards, and immediately sleeve them to protect them from damage. Perhaps you use different colour sleeves to dictate different games played, or rarity, or even just favourites – as, of course, a shiny Charizard should always be protected. There's a whole range of sizes and types out there, but if you want to keep them safe (and housed, see number five), Gamegenic stockists will have you covered. Available from **Gamegenic stockists** | Around **£3** | gamegenic.com



LEVELLING UP YOUR GAME

Accessories can be the underdog of the tabletop gaming world, as they're just there, chilling at every game, completely unobtrusive. So much so in fact, that sometimes we miss some of the additions that could turn our comfortable set up into an epic one. So, whether your tabletop could do with a refresh, or you've simply got a difficult to buy for Secret Santa present, we've got you covered with ten great accessories. As always, keep an eye out at your FLGS for any new favourites.

Words by **Charlie Pettit**

3 DICE BAG AND DICE TRAY

Dice. No accessory round up would be complete without finding dice some added bling, and there are choices spanning the internet. Want to keep your dice in a single place? Well, you'll want to take a look at a dice bag. Board Game Solutions have some more funky options than your standard draw bag, and are perfect for showing a little extra personality. In equally keeping them contained, you may consider a dice tray – which easily doubles as a holder for game pieces if needed.

Board Game Solutions | From **£10** | boardgamesolutions.co.uk



4 MINIATURES PAINTS

Ever wanted to pimp your minis? Even if you're not a wargamer, there's a certain joy in painting up the miniatures that comes with a game – and it seems a shame to leave lovely miniatures completely nude. Painting miniatures takes skill, but having the right paints themselves makes it a whole lot easier. It's an easy recommendation to suggest the Citadel paints as either a starter set to get the foundation colours, or to top up an existing collection. But there's also some great 'special' ones that make a real difference. Exit 23 for example offer some metallic paints too, which will make any miniature stand out. From around **£14** | exit23.games



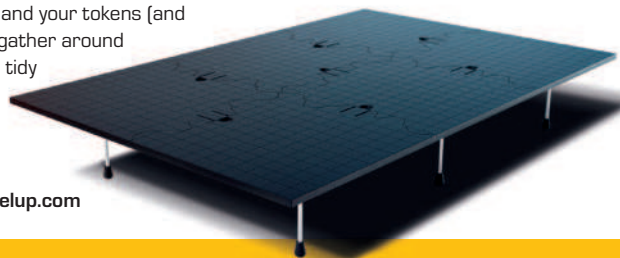
5 WATCHTOWER 100+ CONVERTIBLE

If you're keen to protect your cards, be it trading cards or game cards, the Watchtower 100+ is the accessory for you. In essence, it's a sturdy storage tower, with a removable drawer sealed by magnets. As in the name, it'll store up to 100 cards, keeping them safe on your shelf, and safe for any travel. The smaller drawer is perfect for the little extras – status tokens, dice, or anything else. And the best part? It looks great, you can pick and swap in different covers to suit your preference (though we maybe think it looks fabulous as a block colour). Available from **Gamegenic stockists** | £27 | gamegenic.com



6 LEVEL UP TABLE

Picture the scene. You're playing games on your dining room table. Problem is, once you've got the board or map out, the tokens or cards you need now hang precariously from the side. One wrong move from the player opposite will nudge the centre map into your pieces, and suddenly they're on the floor. To add to the nightmare, in scrabbling to return them, a piece ends up under a chair, and now it's damaged too. Alternatively, you spend the time like a startled pigeon, ready to leap into action at the sign of a potential tumble, an anxious way to spend the evening where you should simply be having fun. Buying a new table, or better yet, a gaming table, may be superseded by the option of buying something like Level Up. These will allow you to raise your game onto what is essentially a table on your table – letting your map or board remain risen above, and your tokens (and drinks and food), to gather around and beneath it. It's a tidy solution to an issue we're all familiar with, and a great accessory to boot. From **£56** | buylevelup.com



7 FOLDED SPACE BOX INSERT

There is an indisputable split in board gamers. When our favourite board games offer us expansions, it's exciting, with more to add to our gaming. But also, more real estate on the shelf. The dispute therefore is this – do you remove the inserts to store the expansions in the original box to save space, or do you keep various expansions, taking up precious potential new game shelf space? There is, of course, an alternative option, which is a board game insert. We like the Folded Space laminated foam inserts for their strength and ease. They also have an impressive number of game box options, including a personal favourite, *Mysterium*, with space for all its expansions too. From **€8** | foldedspace.net



8 PLAYMAT

There are a number of reasons you may want a playmat. Firstly, they're that additional immersive experience for any game. Playing in space? Let's see a nebula. Playing Pokémon? Let's add some suitable additional colour into the table. Secondly, it's an easy way to protect what is likely what doubles as a dining room table beneath it. Finally, it's functional. Playing card games can be frustrating when the card is bumped or moved and it scatters across the table. Adding a neoprene playmat, means your cards are far more likely to stay in one place. Looking cool alone might not be the reason you should buy a playmat, but it does feel like a really good reason to do so. **Ultra Pro Playmats** | From **£15**



9 ALL ROLLED UP

When you travel (when you can) to play games, be it to a friend's house, a friendly local gamestore, a competition, or wherever you may be off to, bringing all of the necessary parts of the game in a cumbersome box always isn't the easiest task. While there are plenty of bags and box options available, sometimes it's best to take just the components you need. Enter, All Rolled Up. It'll take more than 100 dice, pens, counters, cards, chips, or however you want to fill it. Once in place, you simply roll it up, secure, and keep your tokens safe. It's also available in multiple colours and styles from *Call of Cthulhu* to *Mutant Year Zero*, there's plenty to pick from. From **£18** | allrolledup.co.uk



10 GAME MASTER SCREEN

Game Master or Dungeon Master screens are a core part of the RPG game set up. Your GM will be withholding details from you, and how better to do that than with a physical barrier that prevents you from peeking? Add in the fact your separation integrates you further with your fellow players, your adventure feels more valid between you. Screens aren't just pretty for players to look at however, but essentially cheat sheets for the GM/DM, containing important character information on the side facing them. Our one to note at the moment is actually part of a kit, with *Dungeons & Dragons* Wilderness Kit, that gives not only a gorgeous screen, but a map, journey tracker, reference sheets, and more. Enquire at your **LFGS** | Around **£20**





HOW WE MADE TREASURE ISLAND

Marc Paquien marks X on the spot of this treasure of a game, and gives us a map of how he got there

Words by **Owen Duffy**

For generations, people have been fascinated by pirates. Whether they're depicted as swashbuckling adventurers or merciless villains, the idea of a lawless life on the high seas has a timeless appeal, and from *Peter Pan* to *Pirates of the Caribbean*, there are more buccaneering books and movies than you can shake a cutlass at.

But while there's no shortage of pirate stories to choose from, one in particular stands out in readers' minds. Since its publication in 1883, Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* has imprinted itself firmly in the popular imagination. A tale of murder, mutiny and hidden riches, it has played a huge part in establishing our image of pirates today – bandanas, pet parrots and treasure maps included. Over the years it's sold millions of copies and been adapted repeatedly for cinema

and television, with even the Muppets putting their own spin on its much-loved story.

In 2018, French game designer Marc Paquien brought the familiar tale to the tabletop. His game based on the novel put players in the shoes of the villainous Long John Silver and his crew, all scouring a tropical island for buried treasure. It's also one of the most inventive and exciting games of recent years, making creative use of an array of unusual components and exploiting the distrust and duplicity of its players to create a tense and unpredictable contest.

We spoke to its creator to discover how he took a classic work of seafaring fiction to gamers' living room tables.

SEAWARD HO!

Marc Paquien hails from the region of Drôme in southeastern France. With its mountains,

olive groves, imposing chateaux and medieval stone-built towns, it's the kind of place that looks like it could have come from the pages of an adventure story itself. It was here that he had his first experience of games.

"I started to play hobby board games in secondary school," he says. "I enjoyed adventure game books, and a friend of mine used to borrow his brother's games, such as *Illuminati*."

"After a long pause while I concentrated on my studies, I started playing board games again and met Cédric Millet, the designer of *Meeple Circus*. We discovered that we shared a similar taste in games, and we rapidly became really good friends. Cédric started to design games, and I had been planning to get into game design for a while, so seeing his energy gave me the impetus to start my own projects."



Paquien's first published game, *Yamataï*, was a co-designed project with Bruno Cathala, whose previous credits include *Five Tribes* and *Kingdomino*. It saw players captain fleets of ships sailing around an Asian-inspired archipelago kingdom building palaces and ceremonial gates, and met with a largely positive response on release. For his next project, though, he had something more unusual in mind.

Treasure Island divided players into two dramatically different roles. One became the notorious pirate captain Long John Silver, while the others played as members of his crew. Following a dispute between the pirates and their leader, however, Silver found himself locked in a fortified tower while his shipmates scoured the island in search of his buried treasure. The game saw him waiting for an opportunity to escape before rushing to reclaim

his booty before his crewmates could nab it for themselves.

With such a solid thematic grounding, it would be fair to assume that Paquien started out with the novel as the basis for his design. But in fact, the original concept of the game arose from a mechanical idea.

"It might sound odd, but I didn't have the book in mind when I started working on *Treasure Island*," he explains. "Instead, I started with the idea of an open central board that wasn't split up into squares." ▣



HOW WE MADE TREASURE ISLAND



"If you're playing as one of the crew, at the beginning you feel lost and then you slowly start to build an idea of where the treasure might be. The pace rapidly accelerates when you start pursuing a lead, and at the same time you're checking out what your opponents are doing. I also wanted to create a sense of freedom – of really exploring this vast island. At any time, pirates can choose any action they like or go wherever they want. Freedom to explore a whole island, isn't that cool?"

"For Silver, choosing clues was at the heart of the design," he adds. "I knew that clue cards had to generate different shapes on the board to ensure that Silver couldn't give the exact same information several times, but it was very hard to turn this simple principle in to 18 different clue cards, especially when these clues all had to be properly balanced and easy to understand. But it works, and it gives the players a feeling of constantly getting closer to the treasure."

On occasion, Silver could also blatantly lie to the other players, making it even tougher to be sure when to take him at his word. On every round his player placed a face-down token on the board, with some allowing him to give false clues. The pirate players could spend an action to look at Silver's tokens to check his tokens, but while this offered a sliver of certainty, it also gave rise to a particularly clever trick.

"I've seen so many good Silver moves," Paquien says, "but one I especially appreciate is what I call the 'Silver Double Bluff.' For example, a player could give a clue that

“It might sound odd, but I didn't have the book in mind when I started working on *Treasure Island*”

"After the game was picked up by its publisher, Matagot, I called them up to tell them that I wanted to use Stevenson's book for the theme. It turned out they'd had exactly the same idea and had been planning to make the same suggestion to me!"

A TREASURE MAP

The game's board showed a map of a tropical island, complete with sprawling jungles, mountain ridges, rivers, roads and a smouldering volcano. Each player also had their own miniature board showing a smaller copy of the main map. Before the beginning of the contest, the player portraying Silver secretly marked the location of his treasure

somewhere on their own board. Then, over the course of multiple rounds, his former crew attempted to locate it before he could escape and claim it for himself.

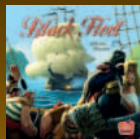
To assist them in their search, they relied on a string of cryptic clues from Silver. In each round, Silver's player played a card to determine the type of information to reveal. But the scheming captain could derail his rivals' efforts by giving them the least useful hints possible, for example, by waiting until players focused their attention on a particular site and then revealing that it was nowhere near it.

"It was important that the game had increasing intensity over time," Paquien says.



SHIVER ME TIMBERS! SIX OF THE BEST PIRATE GAMES

BLACK FLEET (2014)



This family-friendly take on high-seas adventure sees players control merchant ships and pirate vessels, aiming to ferry goods between harbours

dotted around the board while attacking their opponents and plundering their precious cargo, all in under an hour of playing time.



LIBERTALIA (2012)

Italian designer Paolo Mori's cutthroat card game sees players command pirate crews all competing to loot the same ships. To emerge

as the winner you'll need to play the right pirate cards at the right moments, securing the choicest items of treasure and avoiding cursed items that can harm your chances of victory.

MERCHANTS & MARAUDERS (2010)



An open-ended, sandbox-style game of scurvy sea dogs in the Caribbean, *Merchants & Marauders* hands each player command of a ship and lets

them chart their own course to greatness. Trade goods, battle your opponents, upgrade your ship and attempt lucrative missions to emerge as the most feared pirate of the age.

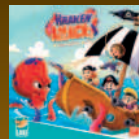
RIFF RAFF (2012)



Stacking games are hard enough at the best of times. But imagine playing *Jenga* or *Rhino Hero* in the deck of a ship rolling through rough seas. *Riff Raff* challenges you

to place a succession of items on the sails of a wooden ship that tips, rocks and sways wildly on its base. It's about as difficult as it sounds.

KRAKEN ATTACK! (2020)



Designed by the father-and-son team of Antoine and Estoban Bauza, this kid-friendly cooperative game casts players as the crew of a pirate ship battling a terrifying sea monster. Fire the cannons, swing your sword, repair damage and try not to let a giant plastic octopus drag you to your doom.

JAMAICA (2007)



A racing game with a difference, *Jamaica* sees players become pirate captains circumnavigating the titular island. Crossing the finish line first earns you

gold, but so does stopping off along the way to hunt for treasure, or stealing from your rivals. It means that being in first place might not bring you victory, forcing you to strike a balance between speed and skulduggery.

eliminates 40% of the map from the search. They play a bluff token, but give a clue that's actually true. So a pirate checks the clue, thinks it's a bluff and spends all their time searching in the useless part of the board."

This kind of subtle misdirection was at the heart of the game, but equally important was its impressive physical production. Its boards were coated in a wipe-clean surface, allowing players to scribble notes and mark off previously searched areas with dry-erase markers. It came with plastic compasses, templates to mark search areas and an articulated wooden arm to help draw circular marks on the map – the kind of thing you'd expect to see a sailing ship's captain use with a battered old chart.

"In this game it was important to have what we call 'toy factor' in designer vocabulary," Paquien says. "I came up with some of my own ideas and expectations, but Matagot went even further. And these tools are cool because they make sense for the game."

"There are some other games which used their components in clever ways. I've seen *Flyin' Goblin*, which looks fun. *Meeple Circus* is an excellent example, too. *Unlock* is very impressive, because it only uses cards and a smartphone app but it seems like there is no limit to the creativity behind it. And I can't forget *Looping Louie*!"

Since its release, the game has met with positive reviews, and Paquien has developed an expansion adding some new elements to the mix. He also has some intriguing new projects in the pipeline.

"The *Captain Silver* expansion will be in shops soon," he says. "It's made of two new

modules. First is a new map of Revenge Island, hand-drawn by professional cartographer Misty Bee. The new map works with two new types of clues based on level lines on the board. The second module is Silver's ruses, which you can use to fine-tune the difficulty for Silver. It also introduces some cool things such as a traitor among the pirates, an escape tunnel for Silver and a new plastic template acting as an area with restricted views. As a bonus, it comes with new pens with 'chalk' ink which pops really well on the board. It's a real improvement for the game.

"My next game, *Pachacamac*, will be completely different. It's a fun card game with simultaneous play for up to seven players. It's a simple design that provokes strong feelings. It has very innovative gameplay

based on real-time drafting, and the publisher is doing some incredible work on it. It recreates an Aztec solar ritual with lots of interaction and speed. It will be available in 2021."

"And I'll be releasing another project next year with Matagot. I'm very happy that we'll be able to release a big game based on another classic of English literature: *Peter Pan*. The artwork is by Jérémie Fleury. I loved his work on *Yamatai*, and once again it's incredible. It will use the same dry-erase board as *Treasure Island*, but with completely new mechanics. The rules are easier, it's fully cooperative, and once again it's very innovative. I can't wait." 🏴‍☠️



the independent shelf

LIFEFORM

Join us for another game of cat and mouse, or rather, humans and xenomorphs, in *Lifeform*

Words by **Charlie Theel**

Lifeform is one of the most overlooked games of 2019. Coming from Hall or Nothing Productions by designers Mark Chaplin and Toby Farrands, it quietly stalked onto the scene like a xenomorph crawling through an air duct. This release needs to be brought to the foreground. People need to know.

The most remarkable aspect of this experience is that it hews closely to a hidden movement game while defying some of the genre's criterion. The majority of the players take on the role of crew members, managing a hand of cards which are played to perform actions. You dash about the hulking 'Valley Forge', a freighter drifting through space and now contaminated with an alien lifeform. The aim is to collect supplies and prepare for evacuation in the ship's shuttle. Self-destruct has been initiated and your home is going to be torn apart in violent fury.

If this sounds familiar it's because you've seen one of the greatest films ever created; *Lifeform* is a love letter to *Alien*. While the majority at the table are advocates for the characters, one takes on the role of the beast, controlling the tempo of play and engaging in a partial directorial role. Yes, you get to be that perfect killer of an organism as well as Ripley.

The alien is represented on the board by two standees, blips registering as possible locations for the intruder. Of course the crew's scanner is malfunctioning due to a nearby ion storm so you can't quite be sure where this preternatural thing is hiding.

This dual positioned threat is wildly entertaining. You're fighting the clock as the ship is about to explode, hustling about and trying to fulfil your objectives while the lifeform player is cutting you off and planning their menacing attacks. There is a legit sense of terror as you can't actually harm the xenomorph. The best you can do is hit it with a shock prod or duck away



– provided you have the cards in hand – as you attempt to avoid an encounter at all cost. If you run into the blip representing the actual horror then you immediately perish if you don't have one of these defensive cards. Yes, death comes swiftly and indiscriminately on board the ISMV Valley Forge.

What makes this game so damn special is that intense atmosphere. Players control more than one character so you're never eliminated, but the pain of losing Captain Solomon or XO Cameron is blistering. There are numerous



fantastic flourishes which support the narrative's tension, elements like a rogue android which can be unleashed, the spilling of acidic blood, and even a lonesome cat which can stuff things up.

While the structure of play is the same game-to-game, the specific details that emerge tell a unique story mix. At its core this is an *Alien* story generator that feels remarkably faithful in every way. It succeeds at its goals admirably provided some of the most enjoyable gaming moments of my 2019. While more bombastic games like *Nemesis* may grab the spotlight, don't cryosleep on *Lifeform*. ☾

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FIRST CON

We talk to Thorny Games' Hakan Seyalioğlu and Kathryn Hymes on 'Language Gaming' and their new 'chatting to aliens' game, *Xenolanguage*

Words by **Pearse Anderson**



The two halves of Thorny Games, Hakan Seyalioğlu and Kathryn Hymes, love the world tabletop miniatures and goblins, but you'd be hard pressed to find any games of theirs that fit in that world. Instead they have been designing and releasing award-winning games that tap into something even more primordial and essential to gaming – language itself. Their past tabletop roleplaying games include *Dialect*, where players create a new language amongst themselves, and *Sign*, where players embody deaf Nicaraguan students attending school and slowly building their own sign language. These games have bridged both the ENnie and Indie RPG circuit, where they won awards, but also spaces where tabletop games aren't as prevalent, like South by Southwest, or university linguistics programs.

Now, Thorny Games is nearing the end of their Kickstarter campaign for their newest release, *Xenolanguage*, a game inspired by empathetic first-contact films like *Arrival* and *Contact*. In *Xenolanguage*, players roleplay as the biologists, linguists, and government officials tasked with meeting an alien species and trying to understand their communications (which appear on the board through a Ouija-like channelling board and series of glyphs.) *Xenolanguage* was fully funded within 20 minutes of the Kickstarter going live, and if past games are any sign (no pun intended), *Xenolanguage* is about to make a splash in the tabletop world. Thorny Games was able to sit down this fall to discuss game design, why science-based gaming matters, and how players interact with their games in different languages.

Tabletop Gaming: When did you realize that *Xenolanguage* was the next game you were going to make?

Kathryn Hymes: A genesis for a board game idea, for us, is sometimes a combination of theme and mechanic. One special thing that we've been able to really bring to gaming is the use of language to tell really interesting stories about people. Language is inherent to us as people, and we're so excellent at it. It separates us from androids and animals. At the same time, it's just really inherently playful. We always have been looking to see how we can use language to tell interesting stories. And we love the kind of stories about first contact through language. So found a really interesting way of mechanizing that which really excited us—through a channelling board that is custom built for a game itself. We've been following this idea, exploring and digging in for years.

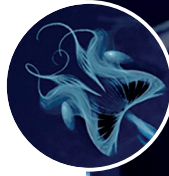
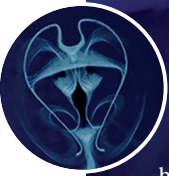
Hakan Seyalioğlu: For a long time it was a mystery how we'd get players to talk to something that isn't there, unless we're having one player be that other entity, which wasn't that interesting to us. So instead we used this ages-old divination technique of a channelling board.

KH: Talking to your subconscious turns out to be the most alien thing. We found it to be really successful.

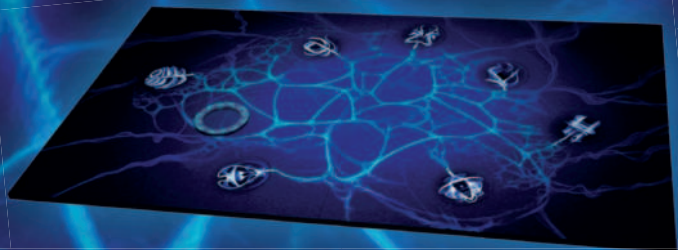
HS: Yeah, if you flipped over three cards from a deck, you'd know it was random, right? How much are you really going to read into that? But when it's your subconscious making a message from aliens, you really spend a lot of time on it.

TTG: Most people aren't able to safely meet for tabletop gaming sessions in person, so how will the channelling board mechanic work in the *Tabletop Simulator* version of the game?

HS: Yeah, basically everyone works together to move their cursor over the alien symbols and the middle planchette goes to



TACT



TTG: How does it feel to introduce new players to this world of indie tabletop gaming through your games?

KH: I live for those moments when you see someone who discovers a part of themselves

the one that everyone is hovering at the most. We also had a company do sound design for us at different stages of the game, including when the aliens are talking to us that get you into that meditative headspace.

KH: Meditative, eerie, and unsettling is what we're going for. I think that the sound design really helps that with that, both in the online and analogue version. Sound can be an amazing, immersive way to ground people in the moment.

TTG: What are some of the benefits of the growing and popular genre of science-based games, whether collaborative, like *Pandemic*, or not, like *Wingspan*, that your games have helped spurn?

KH: The audience for gaming is increasing all the time. Present circumstances, obviously, but even before that, it feels like we're in a golden age for both variety and creative force. We found a lot of success with our previous games because they're attracting a group of people that may not otherwise think of tabletop gaming as being their jam. Having a worldbuilding and language-building game, like *Dialect*, is a game that I would've wanted to play as a baby. And I want to play now! A lot of these games, like *Wingspan*, feel like reaching a hand out to people who might not have had a gateway game before.

HS: Despite being a game about scientists, *Xenolanguage* isn't a very scientific game, it's much more emotional and memory-based. But there are so many more people who are aware of games, and interested in getting into games that speak to their specific audiences and passions, who can really find similar people in a way that they couldn't before. Like, for us, some of our biggest fans are like undergraduate linguistics departments. We're getting big licensing requests from universities where entire classes want to play.

that they wouldn't have done otherwise in a game. You can see new players light up at their own ability to collaboratively roleplay, and tell stories, and be in awe that they have an amazing creative capacity out there that's waiting to be lit up.

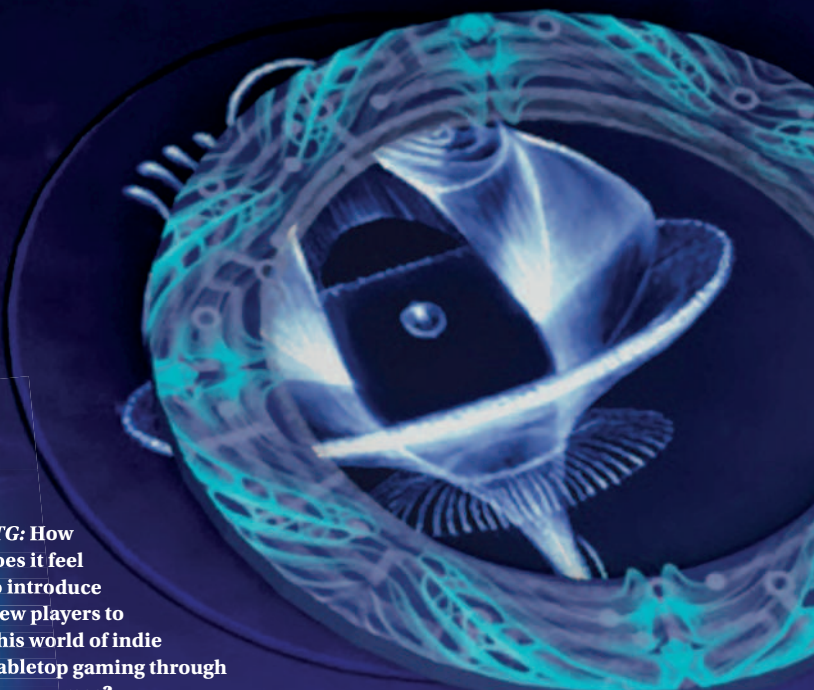
HS: But also, people who identify as gamers who come into games with a lot of preconceptions about what games should be and how they should work can be harder to bring in that new players. Our games are very different, even from other indie RPGs. A lot of times it's easier to bridge the gap with a new player than someone who has a lot of calcified notions in their mind. At no point in our games are you going to roll a die and figure out if you succeed or fail—it's much more collaborative than that.

KH: There is a sweet spot that you have to find where you give enough tools that you are helping someone tell a particular kind of story that they've signed up to play, but not getting in their way.

TTG: Do people use the languages they've created in-game after the game is over?

KH: We get a lot of folks that make an in-group 'secret handshake' like language, not just in *Dialect* but also *Xenolanguage*, where players are defining alien concepts we don't have words for. You can feel a lot of personal connection for those words because you've made them. We can see players take those words, kind of like artifacts or trinkets of play, and use them after a session, though they need an explanation of a world for us to get it. It's super cool.

HS: Our big thrill right now is that the Japanese edition of *Dialect* just got released, so we're watching Twitter as people post about it. Because you really have no idea how people interact with word generation and dialect in different languages. Probably very different from how we do in English. 🌐



“ Talking to your subconscious turns out to be the most alien thing ”

around the world in 80 plays

GREECE

Words by **Chad Wilkinson**

Moving on from last month's quick stop in Finland, we travel south across the Baltic Sea and the bulk of central Europe to arrive in Greece. This grand, mountainous country is often considered as being the cradle of western civilization, home to democracy, philosophy, and the Olympic Games. But what of board games?

Whilst games demonstrating physical prowess certainly became the enduring Greek pastimes, board games undoubtedly held a place in ancient Hellas. Famed philosopher Aristotle once wrote that "a citizen without a state may be compared to an isolated piece in a game of Petteia" – referencing the popular, grid-based, chess-like game. Perhaps more influential though is Greece's answer to Backgammon. Dating back to around 3000 BC, the checkers and dice game Tavli has stood the test of time, essentially becoming the country's national game. Possessing an interesting structure, Tavli is a game of three parts played sequentially in matches of three, five, or seven points. It can still be seen in Greek-run cafes worldwide.

In the more recent history of the 1980s and early 90s, exclusively Greek board games were less widespread. The publisher El Greco were nonetheless in the business of translating games such as *Risk*, *Crossbows and Catapults*, and the legendary *HeroQuest* for a Greek audience, before selling off to Hasbro. Fortunately, Greek game design was soon to be on the rise with the country now home to several unique publishers and acclaimed designers.

The Athens based Artipia Games has become an established publisher in the tabletop hobby, with its founder Konstantinos Kokkinis opening its doors in 2011. Their first game was Kokkinis' own design *Drum Roll*, a circus themed explosion of colour featuring drafting and set collection mechanics. Later releases included a stream



LEFT TO RIGHT The amusing components of *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Drum Roll*

of successful games from designer Vangelis Bagiartakis including the drafting and tile placement sci-fi epic *Among the Stars* and its bucolic reimagination *Fields of Green*. Bagiartakis also designed the dice-rolling city builder *Dice City* and contributed to the real-time madness of *Kitchen Rush*. Another of Kokkinis' designs, the frantic real-time miniatures game *Project: Elite*, was simultaneously released through fellow Greek publisher Drawlab Entertainment. Interestingly, both publishers also specialise in producing useful components for game designers, with Artipia Games focusing on blank cards and basic tokens and Drawlab offering extravagant metal coins and even dice throwing catapults.

Drawlab's first game was 2014's *Spells of Doom*, a one-on-one, hand management miniatures game co-designed by Evangelos Foskolos and Stelios Kourtis. 2016 saw the release of their most popular design, the mesmerising communication and deduction game *When I Dream*. Designer, Chris Darsaklis followed this up with the similarly bonkers *Alice in Wonderland* in 2019, a party game with its own musical teapot timer.

Whilst many Greek publishers cater to established gamers, the country is also home to a number of small companies looking to introduce casual players to the hobby. Efi Karagouni and Christos Papachristou are the founders of the board game company

My Greek Games. Aiming to be both fun and educational My Greek Games publish a number of distinctly Greek themed designs covering both mythology and history. Simple card games such as *Nous* and *Anemos* rely on speed and matching skills, whilst the more visually elaborate *Odyssey* takes players on a roll-and-move adventure through the epic voyage.

Zax & Yoma are another design duo hoping to break open the hobby to new gamers with a mixture of simple and more ambitious titles, including the minimalist and puzzly *Unlock* and the brooding neo-noir mystery game *Gomora*.

Our delve into Greece's tabletop culture, both ancient and modern, has painted a picture of a country with a rich tabletop culture, home to fascinating Classical era designs and ever-intriguing modern titles. With an increasing number of designers and publishers, Greece looks set to unleash some promising games in the future. 🇬🇷





5-10
PLAYERS



AGES 8+



30
MINUTES



THE **SECRET** NEIGHBOR PARTY GAME





TEN OF THE MOST ANTICIPATED DIGIMON CARDS

Words by Ross 'Wossy' Gilbert

With the Digimon Trading Card Game finally announced for an English language release I was asked to come up with a list of the 10 most exciting cards we'll be seeing in Booster 1.0 (scheduled for a January release, with a special presale in November) and Booster 1.5 (February). This list is based on early tournament results in Japan, where the game has been out a little while, along with interesting mechanics and a little bit of personal preference from me.

CHAMPIONS OF THE DIGITAL WORLD

Digimon are back, and they're ready to rumble in a new trading card game

Words by **Christopher John Eggett** Art courtesy of **Bandai Japan**

On the release date of this issue of the magazine into the shops, Digimon returns to the UK. Agumon and friends are back and in the form of a trading card game that uses some smart systems, cool monsters and a whole host of Digimon flavour. We spoke to Kohei Goto (the main designer of the *Digimon Card Game* in Japan, previously known for *Battle Spirits*) and Tatsuro Kawashima (the main designer of the English version of the game, as well as the *Dragon Ball Super Card Game*) from Bandai about the new card game, and where it goes from here.

In the wilds of the earth's communication networks, a universe of Digimon live and thrives. These creatures, with the help of their human counterparts can digivolve into wildly powerful creatures, to do battle and occasionally fight evil. These creatures are intelligent and capable of human speech, and as such have their own myths, will and intention in the Digimon universe. In this

new trading card game, players will duel using their Digimon, digivolving them into mega and ultimate forms to secure victory. The paths to doing this are many and varied, but Goto and Kawashima introduce the basic goal of the game, "players digivolve and raise mighty Digimon to attack their opponent's security stack. The winner is the player who delivers the knockout blow when the opponent's security area is reduced to zero."

Many readers' first introduction to Digimon will be through the virtual pet toy. Much like the infamous Tamagochi, but with the benefit of being able to make your Digimon battle one another by pushing together two of the small, keyring sized devices together. Others may know the universe from the *Digimon World* videogames from the late 90s-00s games for various incarnations on Nintendo and Sony Playstation consoles. And while there have been various Digimon games released in recent memory, what makes this the moment to release a Digimon Card Game?

"Digimon has always had a passionate and dedicated fanbase, but the timing never felt right," says Goto and Kawashima, "this year, the new Digimon anime has released in Japan to a massive fan reception. The Digimon video games have also contributed to Digimon being back in the public consciousness, so we figured this was the perfect time to release a trading card game."

The reaction has been positive around the world. There has been a strong community growing in forums, on social media and on Youtube - many specifically for translating the Japanese cards into English. The amount of work that is being put in by a growing western community can't be overstated. So when Bandai announced that yes, the game was finally coming to the UK in 2021, the response was huge.

DIGITAL CLASH

The core system behind the *Digimon Card Game* is Chrono Clash. It's an innovative and swingy system, designed to ensure a match



10 BEELZEMON (BOOSTER 1.0)

The interesting thing about Beelzemon is that it breaks the usual rules of Digivolution, allowing you to Digivolve into this level six Digimon from a Level three Impmon, just so long as you have 10 cards in your trash. Combine this with the ability to delete a level three or four Digimon when you do so and you've got reasons to be excited.

09 WARGREYMON (BOOSTER 1.0)

Blocker allows you to redirect an attack towards one of your resting Digimon or whittling down our security stack (their route to victory). Reboot unsuspends this Digimon on your opponent's turn as well as your own. Put them together and you have the rare Digimon that can give you great advantages on both players' turns.



DIGIMON CARD GAME

10

9

8

7

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DIGIKNOW?

GET TO GRIPS WITH THE DIGIMON TCG QUICK

- ▶ Digimon use their DP to fight and defend, the higher value wins
- ▶ Each deck is made of 50 cards
- ▶ Digi-egg decks are made of up to five cards
- ▶ You can digivolve a Digimon on the field, or the raising area, or even play it straight from hand
- ▶ Play cards of any cost, but it will give your opponent more memory to play with on their turn – so watch out
- ▶ Digi-eggs and Digimon in the breeding area can't be attacked
- ▶ Every attack on your opponent flips a security card as a response. This card might swing things in their favour, making attacking a difficult choice



is neither a cakewalk for one player with the right 'mana curve' nor have a player running out of steam because they've not drawn the right cards at the right time.

"The core Chrono Clash cost system hasn't changed. The memory gauge is an important part of *The Digimon Card Game*, as it allows players to carefully strategize, plotting the best time to launch their biggest threats. Fans of the cost system that made Chrono Clash unique will definitely enjoy that aspect of *The Digimon Card Game* as well," say the designers.

And they're right. The memory gauge is a numbered track leading from a zero in the centre, to a ten at either end – as seen across the top of this page. When players play a card

for the memory cost listed, they move the token toward zero, and potentially into the other players' side of the memory gauge. Play a seven cost card? Move the memory seven points towards your opponent. If it passes the zero, the turn swaps to the other player. This means there's never really a limit on what size of card you can play in your turn, only how much memory you want to give the tamer across the table from you.

"One of the most unique parts of the Chrono Clash system is that players are never drawing dead hands," explain Goto and Kawashima "due to the way the cost system works, it is always possible to play what is in your hand, which gives the player a tremendous amount of agency."

The designers have kept this core system straightforward, but added important Digimon features to make the game feel right for fans. "While the base system from Chrono Clash is the same, everything else that surrounds it is different, and very much designed around making fans feel like they are part of the Digimon universe," they say, "we've added elements to this that revolve around the themes of evolution and growth, reflecting the themes of the series. The end result is a game system that gives players considerable depth around deck building and game play decisions."

DIGIMON DAYCARE

A big part of Digimon is raising these creatures and digivolving them into more powerful forms. This is where the Digi-eggs come in. These are the cutest (and sometimes fluffiest) part of a Digimon's existence. Trainers can create a Digi-egg deck, which is played into the breeding area, separate from their main deck. This raising area is where you can spend your memory to safely digivolve your Digimon. While in this

area the Digimon cannot be attacked by the opponent, but equally the powerful effects of evolution are not available.

"Since you spend a lot of time digivolving your Digimon from Digi-eggs to their In-Training, Rookie, Champion, Ultimate, and Mega forms, the game system does a great job of making players feel like they're raising their favourite Digimon," the designers say. And because of the free-flowing nature of digivolution – you can transform most Digimon of any matching colour into one of many higher level ones – having this safe breeding area is a key part of building credible threats to your opponent.

"One of the major ways of strategically approaching playing is how you build your decks. The Digi-egg deck gives additional options to players to consider, and can help players use multi-coloured decks."

This additional bit of deck building adds a certain depths to the choices you'll be making away from the gaming table. It's an often-repeated idea that games of this nature are at their best when they 'live in your head' when you're not playing them. *The Digimon Card Game* offers us this kind of 'daydream deckbuilding' through this optional deck. That's right, you don't need to go armed with a Digi-egg deck at all, and you can always play out your Digimon from hand for their full cost.

Digivolution on the field offers more benefits in exchange for the risk of course. Tamers only pay the lower cost to add a colour-matched and legal card to the Digimon in play. The second card gets added on top of the first, with the enhanced effect of the previous card still showing below, and active. While you can't attack with a Digimon that has been played this turn, you can attack with one played a previous turn and recently digivolved, making for explosive plays chaining a digivolution into a powerful attack. ▶



08 METALGARURUMON (BOOSTER 1.0)

When you attack you get to play a level three or four Digimon from your Digivolution sources without paying the cost. This lets you play extra Digimon, like the Garurumon that unsuspends one of your Digimon, without using your resources. And that is a pretty big advantage.

07 DIABOROMON (BOOSTER 1.0)

One of the weirder Digimon seen thus far, Diaboromon actually summons copies of itself (tokens) when it attacks, flooding your board with extra Digimon. You can even sacrifice these tokens to keep Diaboromon from being deleted, giving it time to summon even more tokens. Weird, but oh so useful.





06 BLITZGREYMON (BOOSTER 1.5)

Having the ability to evolve from Red or Black level five Digimon means this can fit into a lot of decks but it's the skills that really sell BlitzGreymon. Piercing allows you to perform a security check after deleting a resting Digimon (no more choosing for you) and De-Digivolve two means that you get to devolve one of your opponent's Digimon to a previous evolution stage, giving a lot of utility in a single card.

05 SHINEGREYMON (BOOSTER 1.5)

This is a Digimon that loves tamers, gaining an extra 1,000 DP for each tamer you have in play and having an excellent skill that rests all of your tamers on digivolution while allowing to choose an opponent's Digimon to lose 4,000 DP for each one rested. Buffing your own power while lowering your opponent's is likely to lead to a board advantage.



DIGIMON CARD GAME



of that, every time you level up a Digimon, you get to draw a card, making evolution part of your deck's engine too. Not only are simple 'build it bigger' plays available, but a more subtle 'controlled draw' kind of deck – especially if it includes blocker Digimon – could be viable.

Combat comes in the form of tapping or 'suspending' a card. Players then can choose to attack a suspended Digimon (one that attacked last turn for example) or the player themselves.

"Attacking the opponent directly will cause a security check to occur. The top card of your opponent's security stack is flipped," explain Goto and Kawashima "if you flip over a Digimon, you fight it. Special security effects can also be triggered by this check. You perform security checks until your opponent has zero cards in their security stack. If you land another attack on your opponent after that, you win the game."

The security stack, which is randomly drawn from your deck at the start of the game, works as a player's health. Once all

cards in the stack are removed, a single attack will knock the player out. But because each card in the security stack has a chance of swinging the board back in your favour – either through its security effect, or destroying the attacking Digimon – there's always a risk when someone swings in for the win. "We believe the random element generated by the security stack lends battles a sense of drama and excitement," the designers say.

BIGGER IS BETTER

Naturally, things have been difficult in developing the meta for the game with the current Coronavirus outbreak

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP

LEFT An example of the booster box, a few digimon cards, and a red starter deck



– get the biggest Digimon in play and you'll feel like a winner even if you get knocked out. It's certainly what we'll be doing in our first games.

"We've seen a player be extremely close to losing with a big difference in the size of their Security Stack in comparison to their opponent's," say Goto and Kawashima of their favourite swing moments during play "and then a powerful Option Card like Gaia Force is in their Security Stack. Suddenly, the game has turned and what seemed like a sure victory is far less certain. Everybody gets really excited to see the situation get turned around."

It's these moments that the game is made for. It's a high intensity game of chaining out combinations of cards to secure the board, or swing for your opponent's face. But with it of course, comes the threat that you're giving your opponent more to play with when the turn switches.



continuing. Mass gatherings like the kind of events that Bandai would usually run alongside a game's launch have not yet become common again in Japan. Some deck archetypes have emerged however, say the designers, "as far as archetypes go, we've seen players in Japan explore 'big' Digimon decks, decks revolving around Digimon played from the security stack, and multi-colour decks."

"However, the most exciting to us is the 'big' Digimon deck style where players create really powerful Digimon after several digivolutions," the pair continue. There's a natural draw here



04 CERESMON (BOOSTER 1.5)

My personal favourite Digimon on the list Ceresmon has the wonderful Digisorption ability that allows you to suspend on your Digimon to lower your Digivolution cost. Far more fun however is the skill that allows you, after Ceresmon is in play, to rest your opponent's Digimon when using this skill on other Digimon in future turns.

03 IMPERIALDRAMON DRAGON MODE (BOOSTER 1.5)

Another Digimon that fits into multiple decks, having the ability to evolve from Blue or Green level five Digimon, Imperialdramon is all about 'Jamming'. This guarantees your Digimon will not be deleted by security Digimon when attacking your opponent's security stack. Not only does this Digimon have Jamming itself but when you Digivolve into it you unsuspend all of your Digimon that have Jamming.



CTRL, ALT, ART

We all love alternative card art, here's a few of our favourites from Digimon TCG alt art Dash booster packs.



ABOVE, LEFT TO RIGHT Alternative art for Gabumon, MetalSeadramon, and Puppetmon. All of the alternative art version of cards offer the artists a chance to try out some interesting styles



The pair discuss how they're supporting the competitive scene, "we plan on launching large online events globally and store events will be supported in all regions where it is

safe and legal to host events. For stores that are closed due to the pandemic, they will also be able to access promotional materials to support their communities. We'd love it if players can participate in whatever events are available to them."

We asked whether there will be a different kind of meta developing for the western release. After all, the sets that are being released all at once here were revealed more slowly in Japan. Starting from a full array of tools is likely to remove some of the 'staples' that develop

"We believe the English meta will develop a little differently to Japan due to the changed release schedule, and obviously as large-scale events ramp up, that will become more apparent."

When asked the important question of what the pair's favourite Digimon is, the chorus is simply "Omnimon," before continuing, "One of the more exciting cards is Omnimon from the first set. It has a simple design, but its effects are extremely powerful."

DIGIMON WORLD

The tutorial app is available in English right now. This app lets players learn the game and

uses cut-down versions of starter decks. It's not a full digital experience, but more of a little taste of how the game plays. Still, this isn't the best way to get into it, "starter decks are the best way to get your hands on the game and experience it firsthand," says Goto and Kawashima.

The whole team has put a lot of effort into the upcoming organised play for the game, when it's allowed to happen.

"We've made lots of efforts for organized play for both the *Dragon Ball Super Card Game* and will be doing so for the *Digimon TCG* as well. And of course, we plan on doing so in the future."

"As for what's next for the Digimon, we'd like to create products with original characters, or perhaps even a board game. Something different from what everyone else is doing. Bandai's got plenty in the pipeline at the moment, but we hope you're looking forward to upcoming releases. We can't wait for players to start playing Digimon from November on."

For now then, it's time to get pre-ordering our decks for the next stage in our TCG evolution. 🎮



02 OMNIMON ALTER-S (BOOSTER 1.5)

You start with a skill that devolves each of your opponent's Digimon by one stage. You move on to a skill that deletes all of your opponent's Digimon with 5,000 DP or less (which will be a lot more after the first skill). You finish with a skill that makes you unblockable for a turn and you have one of the best Digimon we've seen.

01 OMNIMON (BOOSTER 1.0)

The first Level Seven Digimon revealed and the Digimon that has been dominating the tournament scene in Japan, with very good reason. At 15,000 DP it's the most powerful Digimon we've seen so far with a skill that when Digivolved allows you to delete all of your opponent's Digimon with a name you choose (e.g. all of their Agumon) as well as a skill that can allow you to use it twice in one turn makes this the dominant Digimon in pretty much all the relevant Blue and Red decks.



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I WANT MORE GIRLS WITH GUNS, HELMETS AND APPROPRIATE FOOTWEAR IN TABLETOP MINIATURES, AND I WANT THEM NOW

Sara Elsam asks, where are the all the Ogre ladies?

Words by **Sara Elsam**

I was playing the *Blood Bowl* video game recently, and as I moved between lumbering orcs to terrifying rat people, I wondered, where are the women units?

Warhammer, for all its blood-soaked wonders, has an absolute dearth of them across all of its games. I pondered this as a trove of scantily-clad white lady cheerleaders waved their pom poms about. Ah, here's where they are.

But still, I felt sad. Where was my bulky lady Ogre? Or even, gods forbid, a plain human unit, perhaps with a ponytail and practical armour. Nope, not here. It was just beards and pecs and occasionally a long-limbed sexy elf-lady super model. You know, like in reality.

It reminded me of the first time I came across *Kingdom Death: Monster*. I was sold pretty quickly on the ultra-violence and unending death of it all, until I saw them. The miniatures.

At first, they started out as multi-breasted monstrosities, which made me queasy, but I figured, 'all in the name of horror,' before I came across the rest of it: tied up chicks with gagged child-like faces, pin-up style models donned in micro-bikinis and thigh-high boots (good to know someone could find breast implants in a post-apocalyptic world of eternal nightmares), or their Halloween treat, 'Devil Satan' who wears a dress held together with pentagrams and presumably, the sheer gravitational pull of her chest. She is also carrying a literal basket of dicks. According to the site, she's a 'fun' survivor stand-in. So, not even a character, just a flesh mound to gaze at with your mates. Not far removed from the cheerleaders of *Blood Bowl*, out on the sidelines but ever-so-attractive.

As I looked at the poor, horribly disfigured ladies of *Kingdom Death*, with their perfect

little 'oh' mouths and tender child-like limbs, it became pretty clear to me this game was made for men – not all men of course, but a type clearly present in the world of tabletop gaming.

That the erotic subtext didn't even stick out that much, because apparently, these male gamers like all their adventures caked in a bit of breast and gasping. Stoking the 'fires' of our imagination indeed. And it's a shame, because they're beautiful miniatures. Lovingly crafted. And that just seems more creepy than anything else, because of what they are.

And it's frustrating, because being a woman in the real-world is difficult, and you want to escape for a while into some fantasy world, whether it's murdering your friends or trekking across some vast black plain littered with rivers of blood or whatever. But there it is, the marker of reality: sexism. Running rampant in our imaginations as much as it marches ever grimly on in real life.

And men folks say, "it's just a fantasy" and I say, like future predictive authors of dystopias, "it's not, completely."

Because fantasy is just an extension, a dreamlike symbol vision if you will, of currently prevailing trends and notions. And the fantasy of women trussed up in revealing clothing, or not even being there at all, missing and silent, reflects the messed-up way a lot of folks see us. And the designers, creepy, or otherwise, that defend that egregious design decisions with claims that sex sells or it just doesn't matter, are really only justifying the objectification of women as a means of entertainment.

The fact that some men feel entitled to that vision says even more. I saw one board game company defend their decision for a white, rail-thin, big-bosomed medic as being a 'lady who likes to dress sexy' as part of her personality.

After all, nothing says character development like a mammoth rack. I for one, would prefer a woman noted for the blood she sheds on the football pitch, the cursed books she reads, or how gracefully she conjures up horrors from the beyond. Or even just women that can do everything a man does in these games: a regular marine, medic or librarian. Someone who gets a helmet and isn't donned in 'boob plate.' Someone who represents the woman we know, want to be and that can also maybe kill us at fifteen paces. 🍆

December

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BEYOND THE SUN

THE FINAL FRONTIER

We join Dennis Chan for his debut game. Join us as we explore the furthest reaches of space, and the full extent of an upgrade tree

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

As first games go, this is an interstellar point to be launching from. Dennis Chan, a software engineer by day and a games designer by night, is the creator of *Beyond the Sun*, a sprawling and crunchy game of intergalactic upgrade paths and deep space exploration. Published by Rio Grande, the game comes with some prestige, and a whole lot of upgrading and resource management. We talked to Chan about his game, and what sparked the engines for this exciting launch into the breach.

"In 2015, I was obsessed with the computer game *Civilization V*. I just loved its tech tree, and the feeling of excitement every time I 'powered up' with a new technology," says Chan, "And then I thought, 'Hm, I haven't seen a single board game that has a real tech tree like that.' So, I started doodling tree structures on my notebook and wondered what kind of boards I could construct with it."

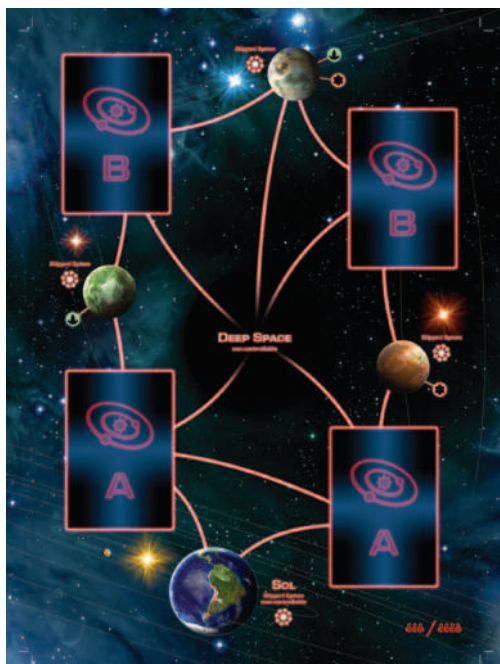
This is the heart of *Beyond The Sun*. While plenty of games have this kind of 'upgrade path' mechanic in them somewhere, there's something fundamental to the way it appears in *Beyond the Sun*.

"As for what to put inside the tech tree, 'worker placement' immediately came to mind. In games like





“Every game is different, and players have to make interesting choices every turn”



Agricola, *Le Havre*, and *Lords of Waterdeep*, players start the game with basic and core actions only, and as more buildings and spaces get unlocked, the decision space grows,” says Chan, “So I thought, ‘what if players unlock new spaces in a tree-like fashion, and what if players get to choose what gets unlocked?’ Combining those ideas, the initial prototype for *Beyond the Sun* was born.”

GROUND CONTROL

It’s a pretty lofty place to start your game design career, so we asked Chan how he moved from just being a gamer, to designing games.

“When I moved to Boston in 2012, I was looking around to meet gamers, and I stumbled upon the Boston Board Game Prototyping Meetup. I didn’t know anything about design at the time but had a lot of interest in it, so I attended, watched, and learned,” says Chan, “I played a lot of prototypes, some great, some not, but it was the not-so-great ones that inspired me – I learned that no game came out perfectly on the first try, it was not embarrassing to show people an incomplete idea, and those ideas were often the ones that sparked the most interesting discussions.”

“I distinctly remember that my first idea came from a playtesting session, where the designer wanted to go in one direction despite me suggesting a completely different direction – which I thought was more interesting – so I went home and started making a different game based on my own suggestion,” says Chan, laughing.

This decision tree, found in the middle of a prototyping session, was clearly an omen for the mechanics which followed.

Beyond the Sun isn’t all mechanics of course, the sci-fi setting is one of a last hope for humanity amongst the stars. The choices we make aren’t just to win the game, they’re the path humanity will take in the hope of rebuilding. Chan explains, “it’s a sci-fi civilization game set in the near future where we barely managed to get out of the solar system alive before we fought ourselves to extinction.”

“The next stage of humanity is now in your hands – how will you steer the future of the species as you enter the spacefaring era? Will you engage in endless conquest or dedicate yourself to science? Players will decide a different fate in each game by choosing different technologies and revealing different events, and it is up to you to use your resources wisely and adapt to changes in the new world.”

DEEP SPACE

At the start of the game, everyone has access to the same technologies. These technologies are the basic building blocks of *Beyond the Sun*, offering initial abilities like exploring a new sector of space,

“You have just figured out how to leave the Solar System, but not much else,” says Chan, “from that point, players have four upgrade paths to choose from – four level one technologies. These are the same every game but randomized in positioning.”

Once players have upgraded to these technologies, the board opens up further – and where you take your little slice of humanity is a vital choice.

“Level one tech doesn’t provide particularly exciting powers, but what they enable afterwards is key. Level two research requires the player to possess the associated level one tech, and each level two technology chosen must inherit the same colour of the level one tech before it. This creates two interesting effects: first, if you are the first player to reach a certain branch of the tree, you are granted exclusive access to powerful actions until your opponents reach the same branch. Second, because of the random positioning of level one techs and the random order in which next-level technology cards are offered, the tree develops very differently every game.”

“You can have a game where the majority of technologies is military, which makes researching difficult and creates a lot of activity in space, or you can have a game where the majority of technologies is economic, which creates a resource-rich game and minimizes galactic conflict,” says Chan, before offering “a utopian society?” with a laugh, “every game is different, and players have to make interesting choices every turn.”

These choices can leave you with the feeling of locking in your progress path through the game. We have all experienced the strangely disappointing



BEYOND THE SUN

feeling of having to backtrack on a skills tree, whether in a video game or otherwise. It's a hard feeling to fight, and while progressing a tree that someone else has already got access to is a difficult pill to swallow, playing catch up might be the best way to win sometimes.

"I would say *Beyond the Sun* actually requires players to constantly adapt to changes in the game state," says Chan, "due to the high variability of the tech tree and the fact that you cannot be the only person choosing new technology cards, you have to keep watch of two things constantly – what common theme the technologies are leaning towards, and what state the galaxy is in."

This kind of board reading is a draw – plotting your future moves, even if it hurts – to put you over the top in the end can be extremely satisfying. If it works.

"There were many instances during playtesting – myself included – where a stubborn player decided to stick to a single strategy, thinking that would be an easy win, only to realise that based on the way things were developing and how other players were acting, they had to pivot and change course."

"This feeling of 'the game pushing back' may be uncomfortable to some players, but that is also what makes this game refreshing – while you can set a general strategic direction, the game also demands you to adapt and be opportunistic."

We are, after all, not going to survive in outer space without a willing attitude.

Beyond the Sun has a few interesting components for a heavier Eurogame. It uses a system of tokened resource tracks, which when removed, will reveal the currently accessible amount of resources. Like the main race board, there's going to be a certain amount of 'missing out' if you only pursue one track or resource type.

"It's a very streamlined way to track both game pieces and player income at the same time, without making the game fiddly and distracting players from the fun," says Chan, "the two games that did it very well were *Eclipse* and *Through the Ages*, and that was where I drew my inspiration from. In *Eclipse*, every planet you control takes a cube away from the corresponding track matching the planet type. You use the cube to mark the planet, and at the same time, the absence of a cube advances your income level. In *Through the Ages*, every population you put to work takes a token away from the growth track, which makes the next population more expensive. *Beyond the Sun* uses a combination of the two mechanics."

Beyond the Sun uses cubes in the supply columns, and discs on the production tracks to show what resources are available. The production track covers both food and ore, the former which unlocks the population in the supply columns as more discs are removed, whereas the latter works as the currency in the game. "The removal of production discs can be achieved by area control – expanding your base of

operations in space, or automation – discovering more efficient production methods. As discs leave the player track, player income increases," explains Chan, "as for population supply, the more population you grow, more columns get emptied out, and eventually, your civilization reaches the capacity for growth. You will have to grow more food by taking out more food discs, or find a way to use supply cubes directly by employing and android workforce."

There is a dynamic flow of resources throughout the game as players open up their options. The choice is of course – what option to open up next?

SPACE WAR

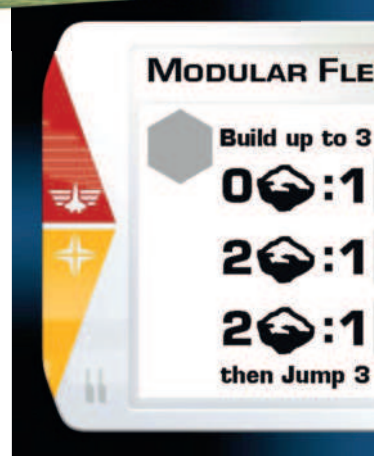
Those six sided cubes on the supply track aren't just for your population however, they can become explorers in deep space too. While one of the sides counts as a population token, and another as a generalised

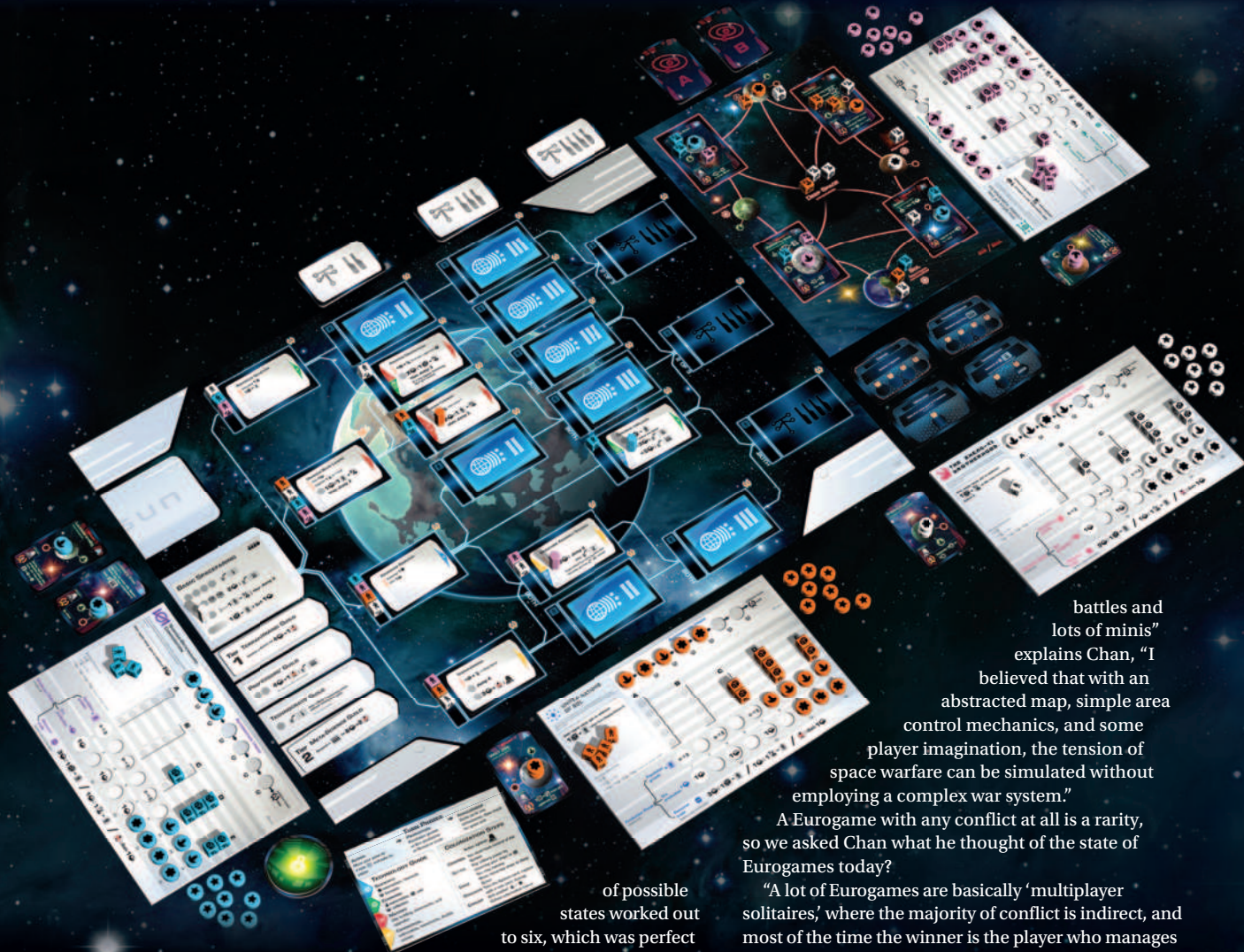


supply token, the other four are given over to different strength spacefaring vessels. This was a later development in the game's design.

"In early versions of this game the tracks held merely tokens and not dice. The next breakthrough didn't come until the exploration board was added as the third system of the game. In the original exploration board, ship power was tracked on a tiny one to four strength track next to each system location, where players placed their population tokens on a numbered slot based on the type of ship they built. That was incredibly clunky," says Chan, "eventually, I noticed that a single unit of population can really only be one thing at a time – are they onboard a spaceship? Are they dedicated to research? Are they idle? The number

CLOCKWISE FROM RIGHT The entire board set up including player mats and exploration board, an example of an action card, and the beautiful box soon to be adorning your shelf at home





battles and lots of minis" explains Chan, "I believed that with an abstracted map, simple area control mechanics, and some player imagination, the tension of space warfare can be simulated without employing a complex war system."

A Eurogame with any conflict at all is a rarity, so we asked Chan what he thought of the state of Eurogames today?

"A lot of Eurogames are basically 'multiplayer solitaires,' where the majority of conflict is indirect, and most of the time the winner is the player who manages their own turns most optimally. While this is still my favourite style of play, I think there exists a niche to be filled for Eurogames that include some direct conflict," says Chan, "I am glad *Beyond the Sun* turned out the way it is, because while it is still solidly in the Euro category, it has a confrontation aspect that sets it apart from others. That said, Rio Grande also did a great job in making sure *Beyond the Sun* does not cross that boundary too far - ships are never involuntarily destroyed, and there are no 'direct attack' effects. This 'soft confrontation' allows classic Euro players to step out of their comfort zone just a bit, and creates a different type of tension that multiplayer solitaire games cannot offer. I personally would like to see more of these elements in future."

EARTH IS A DREAM

Where does Chan go from here? "There are a lot of ideas swirling in my head, but none of them are fully formed yet," he says, laughing "however, I want to explore time-traveling as a core game mechanic, and an engine-building game utilizing the software engineering concepts of 'functions' and 'recursions'. And last but not least, a potential expansion for *Beyond the Sun* may be coming down the pipeline as well."

With *Beyond the Sun* ready for us all to explore, we only have one question left. *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*? "If I must choose between the two, I would say *Star Wars*, although I am more a *Battlestar Galactica* guy." 🚀

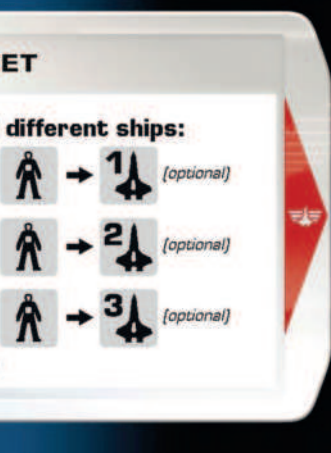
of possible states worked out to six, which was perfect for a cube, and that triggered the 'eureka!' moment."

These spaceships are designed to take to the smaller, less conspicuous deep space exploration board, where players vie for control over planets and their resources.

In a previous version of the game, this board was merely a military track, however this was simply less fun than the variable space now presented "it made the gameplay very dry due to the lack of interesting player interactions," says Chan, "moreover, without a separate 'playground' for players, all the technology actions either reference the tech tree itself or the player board. It does not provide a strong enough tension or feeling of a full 3x-4x game, which was my primary design goal."

"So after some brainstorming and numerous iterations, the exploration board was added. Now the game is based on a 'trinity' of systems: the tech tree system, the player economy system, and the area control system, and they are all tightly interconnected."

"The reason why the exploration board works the way it is now and does not feature a hex map like many 4x games do is three-fold: first, there is practically no table space left to put a giant map; second, I want the tech tree to be the centrepiece of the game, and having a huge map will 'steal its thunder'; third, my goal was to create a Euro-style game after all, and not a wargame involving epic



REBUILD LITE

OH NO! THE WOODMAN TOWER HAS COLLAPSED! Tragedy for some but a lucrative opportunity for your construction company. Grab some workers, head to the rubble and rebuild the tower. Be quick, but be careful! Whoever knocks the tower down will get sued into oblivion.

Rebuild Lite takes the arduous task of resetting a 'wooden tower' game and turns it into a fun experience of its own.

YOU WILL NEED

- An equal number of meeples or pawns, coloured for each player
- A wooden block tower, such as a *Jenga* tower or the tower from *Starcrossed*
- A flat surface to form your foundations

Each player takes a handful of coloured meeples or pawns to represent their workers and names their construction company. Players can only directly move and place their own coloured workers. They can however move the blocks that other workers are placed on.



Next, set three blocks side by side as the foundations of the new tower.

Then, decide a player to go first. The last one to build something out of blocks or a good old fashioned game of rock, paper, scissors should do it.

HOW TO PLAY

Players then roll a D6 to determine what action they have to perform.

1	Roll Twice, do both
2	Place a Horizontal Block
3	Place a Vertical Block
4	Move a Block to the top of the tower
5	Place a worker
6	Move a worker

Blocks can be placed anywhere that they fit so long as they don't touch the table. They can go over the edge of the foundation and sit as awkward as you like.

The block that is to be moved cannot be the top most block of the tower.

Once you have placed all your workers, treat the Place a Worker result as Move a worker instead. Workers must be moved higher up the tower but don't need to be placed at the very top.

If you somehow manage to place every block without knocking the tower down, take it in turns to get all the workers out. And if you still somehow manage that without knocking it over, give yourselves a pat on the back.

The tower that you build will end up weird, wonky, and wonderful and that's all part of the fun. Just like in regular architectural design, the concept rarely survives the construction. Especially as the goal is mostly to not be the one to knock the tower over. Lay awkward blocks, move workers into nasty positions, trap your opponent's workers, do whatever it takes to not be the one to get sued.

For more varied games, change up the starting foundation. Have multiple foundations or a henge, and see which company really is the best.

WHO MADE THIS? Anna Blackwell is a freelance writer and game designer, most recently of *DELVE: A Solo Map Drawing Game* found at blackwellwriter.itch.io. *Rebuild Lite* is a sneak peek at her upcoming game collection, *The Toybox Trove*, a selection of games that use your childhood toys in new and surprising ways like a Pop Up Pirate RPG or a Hungry Hungry Hippo strategy game. You can keep up to date with all Anna's projects by following her on Twitter @BlackwellWriter

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REVIEWS

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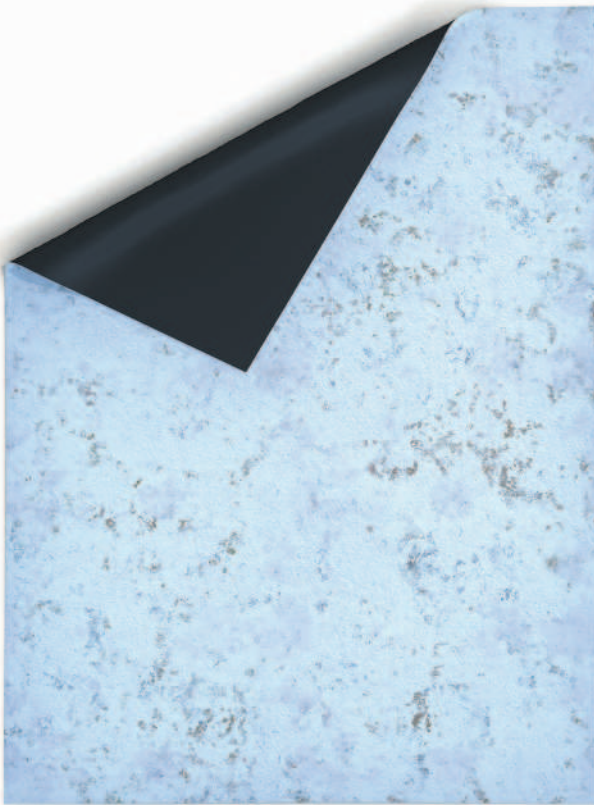
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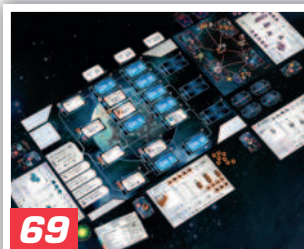
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- 82 EPIC ENCOUNTERS

SHOULD YOU PLAY IT? MUST-PLAY | YES | PROBABLY | MAYBE | NO



1565, ST ELMO'S PAY

Thankfully nothing to do with
any '80s Brat Pack movies

Designer: Tristan Hall | **Publisher:** Hall or Nothing



When he's not inflicting Gloom on the fantasy world of Kilforth, indie designer Tristan Hall likes to engage in a bit of historical re-enactment. Two years after he turned the Battle of Hastings into a neat, sweet two-player card game with *1066, Tears to Many Mothers*, he's doing the same for the 1565 Siege of Malta, in which the Ottoman Empire hurled its 30,000-strong armada against the 500 Knights of St. John and the irrepressible Maltese populace. In reality, the siege lasted three months and three weeks, ending with the supposedly invincible invaders being disastrously repelled. Here, however, either side can win in a sharply focused and immersive asymmetric duel that re-uses 1066's 'Historic Epic Battle System'.

Mechanically, there are no differences between the two games, so players familiar with Hall's Saxon-vs-Norman original can dive straight in here, and even mash the two games up, should they fancy an anachronistic clash between, say, William the Bastard and Mustafa Pasha.

As before, there are three frontiers (formerly called wedges), along which both players must array their cards

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 166 Cards
- ▶ 40 Red wooden teardrop tokens
- ▶ 40 Green wooden teardrop tokens
- ▶ 22 Cardboard attribute modifier tokens
- ▶ 1 First player token
- ▶ 1 Solo play resource dial

(characters, units and leaders) in rows. You pay the cost to play them in resource points and discarded cards, carefully managing your hand to gradually create an ever-shifting, combat-oriented tableau. The first player to defeat two of the three frontiers wins the game, unless you manage to take out your opponent's leader first, or the other player burns through their deck, in which case you'll achieve a swifter victory.

But while cards can enter the fray from the start, those frontiers can't be properly contested until a series of objectives – historic-event milestones specific to your faction – have been achieved, one by one, making the game as much a race as it is a battle.

There is a strong narrative element, which delivers its chronological and character-based beats with punchy, immersive flavour text. This, you soon realise, is fundamental to the experience. After all, Hall's research is impressively thorough, with every card relating to someone who really lived and fought at the battle, or

something that really happened, its text complemented by some wonderfully vivid artwork.

It's here that *1565* distinguishes itself from its 11th Century-set progenitor, especially through the way its story bears out the asymmetric elements of the gameplay. In this sense it's marginally superior to *1066*, perhaps because it's based on a conflict where the two sides were more extremely contrasted. The Ottomans are all about superior numbers and artillery, constantly bombarding their foes in wave after wave of attack. The Knights, meanwhile, are more about resilience, bearing up under extreme pressure and trying to prevail with fewer, stronger troops.

As with all of Hall's games, a solo play mode is included (with the added bonus of a resource dial for the AI player, replacing *1066*'s fiddly paper chart), but *1565* is far better enjoyed as a straight-up head-to-head, where the clash of momentous, history-changing forces is more truly felt. 🏰

DAN JOLIN

PLAY IT? YES

16th Century conflict comes to life in a superbly engaging two-player card battle that encapsulates one of history's greatest sieges.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED 1066, TEARS TO MANY MOTHERS...

It's a no-brainer, really. If *1066* Conquered your Williams, then *1565* is guaranteed to, er, Valette your Jean Parisot.

CALL TO ADVENTURE: THE STORMLIGHT ARCHIVE

A novel experience

Designers: Chris O'Neal, Johnny O'Neal | **Publisher:** Brotherwise Games



Call to Adventure is a board game about making a character, and taking them through a journey of growth and experience to eventually fulfil their destiny. The multitude of generalised fantasy tropes in that description is not, however, a fault. Rather it is a very solid base which can encompass a lot of fantasy worlds and stories because as exciting it is to create a character in a fantasy setting, it is even more appealing to do so in the familiar, beloved world. The one that, for example, exists in a well-known series of books. Having tried this out via expansion route with Patrick Rothfuss' *The Name of the Wind*, this time *Call to Adventure* series took a step further with a standalone follow-up based, once again, on a very much beloved series: *The Stormlight Archive* by Brandon Sanderson.

If you are unfamiliar with the books this won't affect your game, however, as a fan, the merging of this universe with *Call to Adventure* template is significant. The artwork on the cards has always been a standout feature of *Call to Adventure* games, and seeing key moments and characters from the novels depicted on its cards feels incredibly exciting. In any other game, this would be a minor point, but in *Call to Adventure* the art is so good that any card is worthy of enlarging and hanging it on the wall. Each

artist's name is clearly printed on the card. It is astonishing to see how many different people contributed to the deck, adding their unique characteristics to the scene, while also making it feel like every card belongs in the same world.

In terms of gameplay, *The Stormlight Archive* follows the standard *Call to Adventure* formula. Players begin by choosing their origin, motivation and destiny cards. These are placed on individual player boards and any subsequent cards gained throughout the gameplay are tucked under them. Each turn players either gain trait cards or attempt to succeed in challenges by rolling rune tokens. These serve as an alternative to dice, but are flatter and consequently a bit more cumbersome to roll. The end of the game is triggered when players collect a number of tier III cards, then victory points are calculated to determine the winner.

This is also when players are encouraged to tell the stories of their characters using the titles of the cards they have collected. It is, after all, why you created the character in the first place. Except, it is very easy to forget this while playing the game because it has two competing goals: one is to pick up cards that tell the best story, while the other is to get the most victory points with the highest valued cards and matching set of symbols.

The latter has a stronger allure as you spend the majority of the game picking up cards that either give the most victory points or best runes. At the end of the game, you suddenly remember you need to combine them in a somewhat coherent story.

The character progression is less about their journey, growth and development, but more about symbol optimisation, making creating a story an after-thought. This is fine, there are character-building games, like *Roll Player* that only focus on creating a character through a gameplay puzzle. This allows for a single playthrough or a created character to be 'imported' into a separate RPG. The same could be done with *Call to Adventure*. Except, here the game premise uses storytelling as part of its selling point, while at the same time serving up a familiar victory point and matching symbols puzzle game.

Even despite this, *Call to Adventure: The Stormlight Archive* is a compelling play, especially for those who love to tell stories and would appreciate its improv-style challenge. This is doubly true for the fans of Brandon Sanderson who would cherish such a beautiful depiction of his stories in art.

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? MAYBE

An easy sell for the fans of Brandon Sanderson's work, *Call to Adventure: The Stormlight Archive* maintains and capitalises on the element that made this series standout: its art. However, those who are interested in the character-building puzzles may find its gameplay a bit too simple.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 34 Character cards
- ▶ 72 Story cards
- ▶ 48 Hero and anti-hero cards
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 24 Rune stones
- ▶ 60 Experience tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED CALL TO ADVENTURE

This standalone does not stray too far from the template that *Call to Adventure* has set out initially. If you enjoyed it, *The Stormlight Archive* gives more, set in a beloved fantasy world.





ZOMBIE TEENZ EVOLUTION

When there's no more room in hell, the dead will go trampolining

Designer: Annick Lobet | **Publisher:** Le Scorpion Masqué



2018's *Zombie Kidz Evolution* was one of the first legacy games aimed squarely at young players. A curiously cheerful game about a group of plucky kids caught in an undead uprising, it saw players battle to secure their school against a horde of reanimated corpses. But its bright, stylish cartoon art ensured it never got too scary for its target audience.

Now its creator has returned with follow-up *Zombie Teenz Evolution*, and while there's plenty here to appeal to fans of its predecessor, it also comes with a collection of new twists and challenges. Where *Kidz'* action unfolded in the confines of a besieged school, *Teenz* widens its scope with a board showing a grid of city streets. You and your friends will need to work together to venture into the zombie-plagued environment, retrieving supplies from buildings before the dead manage to force their way inside.

Like other legacy games, *Zombie Teenz* plays out over the course of an ongoing campaign, with players unlocking new rules, features and components as they play. On each playthrough you'll attempt to form human chains to pass crates of supplies from the buildings on

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Game board
- ▶ 4 Teen pawns
- ▶ 4 Zombie horde tokens
- ▶ 4 Overrun building tokens
- ▶ 4 Crates
- ▶ 2 Dice
- ▶ 1 Event deck
- ▶ 1 Sticker sheet
- ▶ Various Secret Components

the corners of the board to your stronghold in the centre. While you're doing it, though, you'll also have to contend with the rising threat of the ravenous dead. Zombies crawl from sewers, shuffling towards buildings and attempting to force their way inside. If they overrun the entire city, you'll lose the game.

It means that, in classic co-op fashion, you'll need to split your attention between pursuing your goals and dealing with problems as they arise. And while the first mission feels a little flat and repetitive – bash a zombie, grab a crate, bash a zombie, grab a crate – you soon start to reveal interesting new elements hidden in sealed envelopes which you can unlock by achieving an array of in-game objectives. While going into detail about any of them would spoil some of the fun, there are new character-specific powers to unlock, companions to meet and ways to hold back the tide of the dead.

At the same time, the game ramps up its threat level, making the zombie

antagonists more dangerous and difficult to deal with. The result is a carefully balanced progression where every time you get a new tool to help you in your struggle, you also find yourself with a new undead challenge to deal with.

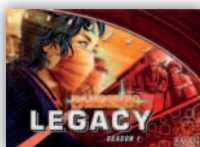
It's also worth pointing out just how smoothly the action flows. Individual turns tend to be lightning-fast, and it's rare to find yourself waiting very long for an opportunity to do something. And each playthrough runs from 15 to 20 minutes, making it very tempting to play two or three sessions back-to-back.

It may lack the depth and storytelling of games like *Pandemic Legacy* or *Charterstone*, but *Zombie Teenz Evolution* is playing for a very different audience, and its vibrant colours and zany elements (Undead clowns! Zombies on trampolines!) mean it's perfectly pitched for family game nights. 🎉

OWEN DUFFY

PLAY IT? YES

Zombie Teenz combines bingeable legacy game appeal with fast-playing simplicity.

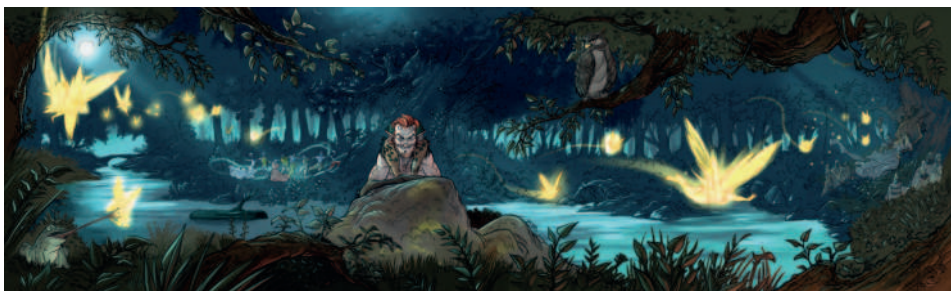


TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED PANDEMIC LEGACY: SEASON 1

Like the disease-fighting smash hit, it blends cooperation, planning, unpredictable events and rising tension.

TIME STORIES REVOLUTIONS: A MIDSUMMER NIGHT

Designers: Antonin Merieux & Manuel Rozoy | **Publisher:** Space Cowboys



TIME Stories Revolution: *A Midsummer Night* is another instalment in a *TIME Stories* 'blue cycle' of standalone missions. It is more compact than the original game, in some instances minimising or altering components to better suit this new format. The board is gone, and so are the dice, replaced by a randomised deck. In fact, as many elements as feasible have been replaced by cards, including tokens, which actually benefits the game as it lets it show off the pretty artwork.

As for the gameplay, it has retained the core *TIME Stories* principles.

Players are time travellers, embodying various characters through the ages attempting to solve a mystery. In this game, they take on the role of fantastical characters in the world where several fairy tales coexist together. The name on the box gives one away – Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Others are better left unmentioned because it is best to dive in as unspoiled on the story as possible. Suffice to say, there are plenty of reference to several well-known fairy tales and – even if it takes a *Time Stories* fan to spot them – to previous games as well.



The biggest change for the 'blue cycle' games is that they were designed for a single playthrough, rather than several replays as the original *TIME Stories* were. You don't need to sit through multiple several hour sessions to see the end of the story, but this comes at the cost of replayability. Yet, it is possible to fail a mission of *A Midsummer Night*, in which case you will need to return to it anyway.

As for the story itself – carefully tiptoeing around spoilers here – it suffers from a little aimlessness, especially at the beginning, but is much improved by some clever puzzles throughout the gameplay. A *TIME Stories* fan is bound to find plenty to like here, whereas for a newcomer, *A Midsummer Night* is a good gateway option to see if they get a taste for time travelling. 🍷

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? MAYBE

ALMA MATER

Designer: Richard Garfield | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast



The struggles of getting people into a game as storied, complex and frankly, old, as *Magic: The Gathering* is always going to be a little Sisyphean. But here's another attempt from Wizards, with *Jumpstart*. *Jumpstart* takes a stab at removing one of the most daunting parts of *Magic* by



slicing away the deck building element. Instead, players can smash together two booster packs and get a totally playable, and dare we say, good, deck. Get four booster packs and you and a friend are away. Pleasing names occur when these decks are put together, for example, 'Smashing' and 'Rainbow' gives you a multicoloured deck that aims to wallop the opposition. The smart part is that you don't lose any of the fun in choosing the character of your deck, even if you're not choosing the individual cards.

The downside is that you're still going to have to watch a video or read the rules online, even if you remember half of it as we did. The cards have been chosen for simplicity, with only basic keywords included, so the amount of looking up is limited. It may have also

helped to have useful 'token' cards as are sometimes included in standard boosters (cards with a number of +1/+1 tokens in them, or token minions) that fit the theme. While we were happy enough to rip up some scrap paper to make tokens, it might have been confusing for some.

So, while it doesn't teach you *Magic* it does get you into actually playing the game quicker than nearly any other attempt while maintaining a little bit of authorship for the player. If you're coming back to the game, this is a great way to start converting others in your group. If you're brand new it's the best place to dip your toe in the water. 🍷

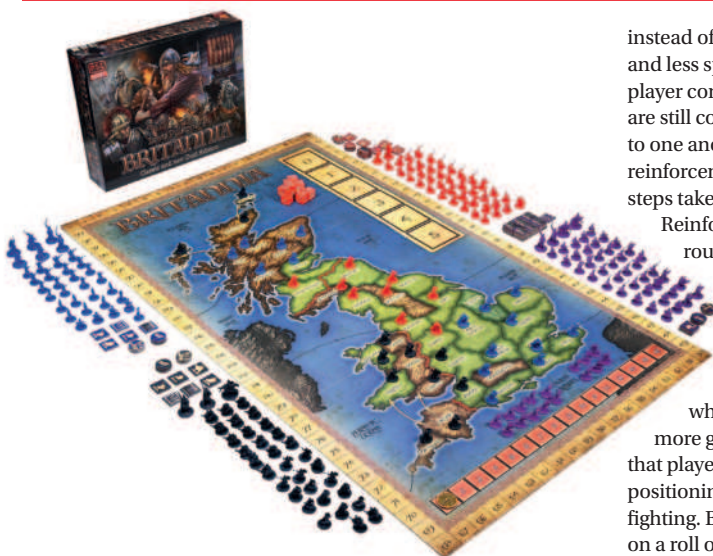
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

BRITANNIA: CLASSIC AND DUEL EDITION

Roll Britannia

Designer: James Pulsisphere | Publisher: PSC Games



instead of sixteen, with less factions and less special timeline events. Each player controls multiple factions that are still considered independent to one another, each with its own reinforcement, combat and scoring steps taken in turn.

Reinforcement is calculated each round instead of points that retain between rounds, leading to less units on the board. To compensate, each unit can take two hits instead of one in combat, which when combined with more generous retreat rules means that players are rewarded for clever positioning as much as outright fighting. Battles still see players killing on a roll of five or higher and all attacks

And teaching is the key word here. *Duel Britannia* feels like the perfect tutorial game, being a sharp, tantalising contest that teaches players the fundamental aspects of *Britannia*, that is still rewarding to play in its own right. The Attack/Defend switch at the halfway point ensures players get a varied and entertaining experience, with the changes made allowing them to make mistakes without being aggressively punished. The two on two team mode is also great for players unfamiliar to wargaming to tag-team with someone more experienced to see if this style of game is right for them.

It's this variety that gives *Britannia* the edge over other large scale wargames. If you own something like *Twilight Imperium* or *Diplomacy*, you know the heartbreak of having the game sit on your shelf for months (if not years) at a time between plays. *Britannia*'s flexibility in playtime and player count lets you play more frequently and even introduce people to the genre. Not everyone is ready to jump straight into a four plus hour gaming session, but seven hundred years of war in sixty minutes? Now you're talking.

It's important to stress that if you don't think you could ever see yourself playing an all-day wargame, give this a pass. But if you love the idea and want to encourage others, *Duel Britannia* might be one of the most accessible and polished wargames currently available, providing a strong base camp to explore this genre. 🍷

MATTHEW VERNALL

PLAY IT? YES

Few wargames offer such versatility in player count and experience. Great for fans of the genre or players looking to see if wargaming is their cup of tea.

Reviewing old wargames is pretty thankless. *Britannia* first released in 1986, with minor cosmetic and balancing tweaks over the years. This edition is definitely the best it's ever looked, with hundreds of distinctive miniatures, useful player aids and an easy to read board. However, little of the core game have changed and it's the same slightly antiquated yet still solid wargame. Love wargames and British history? Definitely an easy recommend. Hate wargames with a passion? Nothing here will change your mind. Where this edition shines is the unknown. What if you *don't* know what your emotions are towards wargames? Enter *Duel Britannia*.

Designed for two players or two teams, this version (included in the same box as Classic) effectively condenses the original's four hour minimum epic to a spry sixty minutes. Each of the four original factions are split between the two players, putting Anglo-Saxons against 'Brython-Vikings' (i.e. everyone else) offering each player an opportunity to attack and defend.

The game takes the originals core mechanics and streamlines all of them. It now plays over seven rounds



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Double-sided Game Board
- ▶ 210 Plastic miniatures in four colours
- ▶ 10 Six-sided dice
- ▶ 6 Player aids
- ▶ 94 Cardboard tokens

are rolled simultaneously, keeping them tense and hard to know exactly when to run away.

Scoring has been dramatically simplified; instead of a unique list for each faction to score in various ways in each round, now factions score for holding marked areas of the board and the territories surrounding it, as well as rewards for burning or holding forts and killing leaders. This makes it crystal clear when a faction is doing well or not, thereby teaching players if they're playing correctly immediately.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RISK

If you're a veteran wargamer you already know if *Britannia* is for you. But if Risk is your only point of reference for tabletop warfare, then *Britannia* is the next best step.

Photography by More Games Please



THE KING IS DEAD SECOND EDITION

Long live the king!

Designer: Peer Sylvester | **Publisher:** Osprey Games



He's dead, and what awful timing. There is a power vacuum in Medieval Britain, and you'll want to be on the right side of the scuffle when the mud settles. And that's what we're going to be doing in *The King Is Dead* – now presented in a beautiful and occasionally gold foiled second edition.

The King Is Dead sees players set out a lovely looking board (thanks to Benoit Billion) of randomly chosen cubes into the various areas of Britain. Each cube represents one of the factions – the Welsh, the Scottish and the English – and having the most of these in an area at the point of conflict will award that area to majority faction. And of course, we're going to be trying to influence which faction owns the most areas of Britain to come out on top when the coronation comes around. Would be power-holders have a hand of eight cards, which they take turns to play – or not – as both players passing their turn is what triggers the next power struggle. The order of these conflicts is dictated by the order they are randomly placed around the board

(in positions one through eight), so you always know what the next contested region will be. But whether it's worth expending a vital card to swing your way is the tricky part.

And what is your way anyway? Each time an action is taken, by playing a card, players take a single influence cube from the board to add to their court. At the end of the game, the faction you have the most of (or more of than you opponent) is 'yours' when it comes to totting up who made the best of their influence. Taking influence from the board has a strange counter-intuitive waltz about it, you've removed influence from an upcoming struggle, making it more likely a faction will lose, but at the end you're more likely to be backing that faction.

Choices like this make up the character of the game. Because power struggles are only resolved when both players pass, the game can feel very asymmetric. You can pass, your opponent can play a card that changes the state of the board, and now you have to think about whether it's worth committing another action to the game at this point. You can end up playing reactively, caught off-guard by an unexpected move or bluff from your opponent, or be left playing out everything early, and letting your

opponent play their hand for the final few moves of the game.

When stability is in question, the French get involved. If there's an equal balance of influence in any region when a conflict happens there, the usual influence disc of the winning colour is replaced with a black 'instability' disk, taken from France. When three of these end up on the board, the French invade – causing a completely different set of win conditions (having the most complete sets). There are some interesting strategies here where triggering an invasion might be to your best interests, even though a coronation is often the much more likely outcome.

The King Is Dead makes you feel like a kingmaker having to bluff their way through court, with each action you take containing real consequences for both you and the opposition. Ruthless, strategic and really quick. We can't think of the last time we had such fun scuffling in the middle ages. 🍷

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? MUST PLAY

A nearly perfect game, now presented at its most beautiful. The struggles of Medieval power feel palpable – and entirely within your control.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Map of Britain board
- ▶ 40 Cards
- ▶ 63 Wooden pieces
- ▶ 32 Counters
- ▶ 1 Cloth bag

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RISK...

Abstracted and made of a narrative of your own devising, *The King Is Dead Second Edition* contains all of the joy of conflict that *Risk* offers – even if there aren't little plastic canons to shuffle around.



ATHENEUM: MYSTIC LIBRARY

Prints Charming

Designer: L'Atelier | Publisher: Renegade Game Studio



Ournate bookcases, a handful of spiders, dripping candles, an assortment of wands and hundreds of peculiar books... this is the very embodiment of a magical library. In *Athenium: Mystic Library*, players are students at a magical school, who've been tasked with sorting out the otherworldly tomes. Each player has their own bookcase in which to stack volumes taken from a couple of wonderful three-dimensional library carts. The game is played over two 'pick and pass' card-drafting phases. Simultaneously, players reveal their chosen Study Cards and execute the actions shown. Each card you play, gives you benefits, enabling you to stack new books, move existing books, acquire a new wand or have a dip in the candle bag. But, in a brilliant twist, each card, which is split into sections, also rewards the players on either side of you – with different actions. So each time you select a card, you're thinking not only about your own bookcase, but those of your neighbours too.

After actions have been taken, players may score objectives, by placing a wand on a current objective card. These cards show books of different colours placed in certain configurations. If you've assembled books as shown on the card, you may

claim the objective. During clean-up, all four objective cards move right one place... the furthest right card becomes inactive and a new card is added at the far left. This rolling row means objectives are time-limited, creating a sense of urgency and dictating the cards you choose to draft, creating a bewitching tension. But beware, it's quite possible to complete an objective but find yourself wandless and unable to score it before the card disappears.

Bonus points are awarded when you place books of your own colour

There is something utterly delightful about the activity of filling the bookshelves with "Astral Travel for Armadillos", "Oil Painting with Dorian Gray" and "You Are More Than Undead". This game exudes a warm and fuzzy feeling which is echoed in the mechanics. There is no competition for Objective Cards as each one can be claimed by every player and each Study Card provides only benefits, no penalties, meaning you're always pleasantly surprised by the gifts from left and right.

Sometimes you get a dip in the bag.

Each bonus tile found within can be used in two ways – for its special ability or as a candle, which gives end-game points. Special abilities may provide a paired set of books to shelve, a 'wild' book of your choice, a side bookcase (increasing your shelf space), a magic wand or the ability to re-shelve some books. Upon completing each section of your bookcase, you evict the resident spider, giving you a choice of benefits. Again, it feels like you're being showered with goodies.

It's a wonderful theme, so why not dive into it? Put on the Harry Potter soundtrack, dim the lights, pour the mead, light the candles and make sure you announce the name of each book you shelve in a ghostly voice. "Making Hand Soap From Hands" anyone? 🕸

ELLIE DIX



next
to each other.

Completing sections of your bookcase and adorning your shelves with candles will also score you extra points at the end of the game.

Athenium: Mystic Library presents a great puzzle. Each turn leaves you wondering whether it's better to take new books or rearrange some. This is a tile-placement game where the challenge is not in the tessellation or orientation of the pieces (as each book is the same dimensions), but in the order that the books are placed and the configurations you are creating.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Library board
- ▶ 30 Magic wands
- ▶ 5 Student pawns
- ▶ 1 Cloth bag
- ▶ 2 Library carts
- ▶ 5 Main shelves
- ▶ 10 Side shelves
- ▶ 160 Book tokens
- ▶ 60 Study cards
- ▶ 35 Objective cards
- ▶ 40 Bonus tokens
- ▶ 35 Spider tokens



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED: 7 WONDERS

Athenium is not an engine builder, but the 'draft and play' action and the interaction with immediate neighbours smacks of the popular classic.

PLAY IT? YES

Athenium: Mystic Library is a solid gateway game – easy to learn and quick to teach. With simultaneous play and a total lack of conflict, it also works really well for families. It's competitive, but always with an obvious overtone of generosity and abundance.



MERV

Too spicy for some

Designer: Fabio Lopiano | Publisher: Osprey Games



This genre really needs a name. 'European style, non-conflict, modular board with a variety of point systems' games is too much of a mouthful. Personally, I've started calling games like *Five Tribes*, *Istanbul* and now *Merv*, 'Chocolate-Box Euros' as they offer lots of little options for you to consider and are usually quite sweet (if not to everyone's taste.)

Merv certainly succeeds in looking like a chocolate box, with its gorgeous pastel-coloured geometric patterns influenced by traditional Islamic art and its very generous array of tokens, giving the game a luxurious look. There's also a lot to look at; *Merv* sees 1-4 players attempting to build the medieval metropolis of Merv, with points scored for every mosque, library, market, caravansary, city wall and palace interacted with.

If that list seems daunting, you'd be correct. *Merv* is one of the longest board game explanations I've ever done, as each area features different ways to score points, many of which rely on one another and all of them need to be taught before a single worker is placed. Patient players are a must, otherwise you'll be left alone trying to explain how contracts have an appreciating score value.

Once players have some understanding of what each area does, playing the game is straightforward.

Each of the three game years is split into four rounds. In a round, players take turns selecting a column or row from the 25-tile grid in the centre of the board, then selecting an action tile and placing one of their buildings if the tile is empty. That player then gains resources for each tile in the same column or row that has a matching coloured building, before performing the action on the selected tile.

This placement mechanic lets the game organically grow in complexity. Early on you'll play a couple of cubes to make small steps forward, then by the last year you'll have a small fabrication empire that races through progress trees or collect swathes of cards and counters. The game also lets players 'borrow' one another's buildings in exchange for the lender gaining more resources, ensuring that no-one is left trailing behind.

To keep players in check, at the end of year two and three the city is invaded by Mongols, who will ransom unprotected buildings, destroying them if unpaid. This incentivises players to hire soldiers or build walls to defend the city, with extra rewards if they help protect their opponents. These invasions help ground players, as the ones with the best point engines will also be the ones needing to protect their investments. The game also sees players bid for turn order each

round, with players going last often getting camel tokens that they can use to either go first later or capitalize on certain scoring systems.

When players know what they want the game speeds along nicely, but the sheer quantity of options combined with a randomized tile set up (ensuring that an optimal strategy in one playthrough may be unusable in another) leads to long pauses as players deliberate their options. The denseness of the puzzle led to my playgroup stumbling upon game breaking combinations rather than intentionally building them, with others unwilling to intervene as it meant halting their own progress.

If your playgroup hates fighting one another and loves puzzling over a varying challenge game after game, *Merv* certainly has replay potential. But first impressions matter a lot and this game demands a lot of player attention and patience before it starts rewarding them. One for experienced Eurogamers who like a lot of mileage out of their purchase. 🌟

MATTHEW VERNALL

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

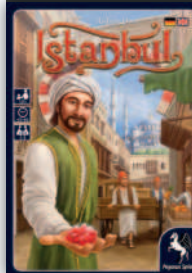
Games that look this beautiful can be somewhat forgiven for overdesigned gameplay, which while excessive and demanding can lead to inventive engine building. A lovely 'little' Chocolate Box Euro.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Game Board
- ▶ 25 game tiles
- ▶ 48 cards
- ▶ 205 coloured wooden pieces
- ▶ 110 cardboard tokens

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ISTANBUL

This Kennerspiel winning game takes the modular tile layout to its extreme. If you enjoyed the path-finding puzzle in *Istanbul* you'll find a lot to like in the randomized streets of *Merv*.



ADVENTURE GAMES: THE VOLCANIC ISLAND

Designer: Phil Walker-Harding, Matthew Dunstan, Chihiro Mori | **Publisher:** Kosmos

Following up last year's well received *The Dungeon* and *Monochrome Inc* is *The Volcanic Island* – a frequently clumsy but nonetheless inventive attempt at bringing the feeling of classic point-and-click adventures of yesteryear to our tabletop.

Playing out across four chapters, one to four players will assume the role of university students exploring the unusual happenings befalling their island home as part of a research project. Cue rumours of smuggling, disappearances, natural disasters, and the unearthing of bizarre ancient knowledge.

Players will cross-reference numbered areas on location cards with the adventure book and hop between them, with very few limitations to movement. Adventure book entries will reveal more story or give players cards in the form of items or clues which players will occasionally combine to create useful items. That's basically the extent of

the mechanics, theoretically leaving ample room for thematic exploration.

But, as you can imagine, there is a lot of flicking back and forth between pages. Whilst there is an optional app – which handily narrates each number typed into it – it's arguably more tiring and less exciting being read to than actively engaging with components.

Unfortunately, even sticking with just the physical components gets tiresome. At several points the game will instruct players to place or remove certain cards and tokens. Sometimes components will even be placed back in the box only to return again later causing unnecessary fiddliness. For a game with so few mechanics there's often a frustrating amount of upkeep.

All of this breaks the immersion of a story which – perhaps due to its length – is already regularly incoherent. Despite a hefty playtime, we also didn't truly engage with our characters due to clumsy writing and an odd lack of agency over their actions.



Yet, even with its flaws, *The Volcanic Island* excels at conveying adventure with minimal rules and flexible exploration mechanics. It might not be the smoothest excursion, but Kosmos' *Adventure Games* system is still a compelling example of and good gateway into tabletop storytelling. 📌

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? MAYBE

SUPERFLY

Designer: Thomas Brückner & Anja Dreier-Brückner | **Publisher:** Iello

Superfly is like the 'hold my Panda-Pop' of family friendly card games. *Superfly* starts off as a simple card collection game, veering towards games like *Uno*, with a 'fly' theme (sadly not the 1986 Jeff Goldblum vehicle) in the form of adorable artistry on the cards demonstrating a range of 'baby' to 'grown-up' flies. That cuteness is overshadowed by some un-'bee'-lievable components, because actually, what other game offers you a flyswatter in the box?

Unlike the garden variety flyswatters, each of the flyswatters in *Superfly* house a different coloured six sided dice underneath a *Frustration*-esque dome. As cards are laid out in front of you (one for each player



minus one, so you're drawn into competition for the cards you want), you'll use the flyswatter on the count of three to swat the card you'd like to add to your hand. If you swat the same as a fellow player, the highest dice roll number wins. Got the same number? You lose the card, and you'll need to exchange your hands.

Not only is this fun to see, but it serves the purpose of breaking up any tie disputes, which, when playing



with younger family members, is wholly appreciated. Is it gimmicky? Of course. But it adds a tactile element to keep things interesting. That, and the instructions are brief, meaning it shouldn't 'fly' over anyone's heads.

In fact, the only part that might 'bug' you is that this is really a family only game, and it won't hold up at an adult game night for long. However, there're only so many games that successfully bridges the gap for a much younger audience, and this does that really well. For a pleasingly tactile game, that sits in the inexpensive range, it's safe to say the family are buzzing about this one. 📌

CHARLIE PETTIT

PLAY IT? YES

TANG GARDEN

Lacking a zing, but a little zen

Designer: Francesco Testini & Pierluca Zizzie | **Publisher:** Lucky Duck Games



A game that leads with components is often one that should win my heart over. And I've been looking forward to the pavilions of *Tang Garden* since it was first announced and Kickstarted last year with its plastic pavilion tops, bridges, and slotted trees. Components, in my mind, should set you free – there's less abstraction in having components and less chance of misunderstanding. The board will speak to everyone around it in the same way that pushing dudes around on the map does.

Equally, if you told me a game would be scored on the view that you built for the various personalities of the game, who themselves would be part of a built-up diorama, then I would jump on the idea. While video games use the term 'walking simulator' as a joke about slower-paced 'story' games, there's space in board gaming for the 'vista creator' genre surely?

Sadly, here, in this beautiful garden (and it is beautiful) that is not quite the case. The game starts as a tile layer – pick a certain kind of tile (water, rock, greenery or special) and place it

somewhere nice on the board. Later you might choose instead to take one of the decoration cards to build out on to the landscape. For this you'll take a couple of cards and build one, hoping there's a space for whatever you select. Each time you take an action like this you're likely to increase the three coloured tracks on your personal player board. When crossing certain thresholds, players can then recruit another character into the garden, placing them on one of the available character spaces already laid by tiles and features. Each of these characters has a certain thing they'd like to see, or not see. This might be water features, or rockland, another character they have presumably fallen out with, or something in the distant vistas.

It's these vistas which, when you slot them into place, start to make things a bit difficult for players. While components should set us free, here they fence us in. Ironically, adding the view of a dragon over the mountain, or waterfalls in the distance, makes it harder to see and place your pieces as play goes on. Bending over the board and squinting at the horizons to work

out what's on them so as to best place your most recently recruited character is the opposite of an immersive experience that good components can supply. Equally, adding your newly recruited characters to a pavilion (which are really lovely and three dimensional) makes it impossible to see which way they're looking without a closer inspection.

The core of the game is pleasing enough, but we stumbled so much in our playthroughs that it simply wasn't worth visiting this garden. With a certain amount of patience, the right players could make something of this somewhat overgrown yard.

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT



PLAY IT? MAYBE

Very sadly, we were let down by the very thing that excited us about *Tang Garden*. It's a game that seems to have been made with the pieces in mind, rather than the people playing it. The game has a good heart, but we weren't willing to do the pruning to find it.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Garden board
- ▶ 61 Garden tiles
- ▶ 54 Decoration cards
- ▶ 60 Coins
- ▶ 16 Lantern tokens
- ▶ 4 Solo lantern tokens
- ▶ 4 Player boards
- ▶ 12 Character cards
- ▶ 12 Character miniatures
- ▶ 8 Large landscape tiles
- ▶ 12 Small landscape tiles
- ▶ 8 Large landscape tokens
- ▶ 8 Small landscape tokens
- ▶ 36 Decorations
- ▶ 12 Cubes
- ▶ 4 Character tokens
- ▶ 1 First player token

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MIYABI...

If the grid-thinking of *Miyabi* makes you want to create a perfect garden, then maybe *Tang Garden* will be a great addition to your greenhouse.





GODS LOVE DINOSAURS

The real food chain magnate

Designer: Kasper Lappa | **Publisher:** Pandasaurus Games



Being a nine ton prehistoric lizard is hungry work. After all, you'll need more than two hundred thousand calories a day, or 140 kilograms of meat, to keep you going, and Nando's hasn't been invented yet. Luckily there are two to five players gathering around a table to help feed these titanic beasts, with a series of smaller beasts.

The game follows a pattern of taking a double hex (like they've been stuck together) from the animal board and placing it in their own personal ecosystem. If you empty of the columns of the board, it triggers that animal's movement.

Players begin with a starting tile of seven hexes, with the three main biomes presented around the edges, and a dinosaur nest in the centre, on a mountain. Each of these has an appropriate creature in it – a rat in the jungle, a rabbit in the plains, a frog in the water and of course, a dinosaur on a mountain. Players place their double hex, and, with that, any associated animals marked on it. This might be more frogs, but it could also be a predator.

When the prey animals are activated by emptying a column they breed, adding an additional



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Animal board
- ▶ 5 Starting tiles
- ▶ 84 Ecosystem tiles
- ▶ 5 Nest tiles
- ▶ 1 Volcano standee
- ▶ 20 Dinosaur meeples
- ▶ 35 Rat meeples
- ▶ 25 Frog meeples
- ▶ 30 Rabbit meeples
- ▶ 25 Tiger meeples
- ▶ 25 Eagle meeples
- ▶ 30 Regular eggs
- ▶ 15 Golden eggs



meeples of the same kind to adjacent hexes. When predators are activated however, they move (as per their pattern), eating everything in front of them, leaving offspring behind. If the dinosaur is in the column activated, then he goes for a wander for a snack too. Of course, the dino is only going to be satisfied (and therefore produce more dino eggs, which can be converted to points or more dinosaurs) if it eats something large enough – a predator for example. Don't feel too bad about the eagle eating all those frogs then, as it too will be someone's dinner.

One of the things players will have to consider for the dino or carnivore rampage isn't only if they could, but whether they should, eat everything. If a carnivore is activated, but can't manage to eat anything on its hunting path, it starves. The game emerges as a series of planned paths through the buffet of small and large creatures – a buffet you're having a lay on during previous turns. Equally, because you're a little in control of

which animals trigger each turn, setting off a carnivore turn before your opponents have set up their prey can be a satisfying strike. It's not massively conflict heavy, but there is a little bit of eyeing up everyone else's ecosystem to make these moves.

The pleasure comes from a well executed plan, whether that's on the offensive, pushing for early activations, or just smart tile placement that promises a good snack pathway. Balancing your dinosaurs at the top of the foodchain – and not turning all your eggs into dinos straight away – has a great feeling to it. Arrange the arrival of everyone's dinner just in time, and you have a perfect storm of points that is as satisfying as a really good lunch. 🦖

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

If bringing out your inner carnivore and carefully managing the meal plan of prehistoric monsters suits you, then there's few better, and simpler, games to get your teeth into.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED KAREKARE

If you're a fan of hexagonal tile laying and building up an ecosystem of your own, *Gods Love Dinosaurs* is a good place to move on from when you're done with the Polynesian expansion that is the underrated *Karekare*.

BEYOND THE SUN

Through the space ages

Designer: Dennis K. Chan | Publisher: Rio Grande



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INTERVIEW
PAGE 50



Beyond the Sun tells you nearly everything you need to know about it from the start. Like tech trees from videogames? Like unlocking resources as a form of progress? Like a bit of space wandering? Then you're all set to strap in for this Euro-in-space.

Having destroyed our own planet and each other, while trashing the solar system on the way out one assumes, humanity has escaped into the great maw of space and must find its path toward some kind of civilisation. Whether that's in the form of automation or space war is entirely up to you. Well, nearly. At the start of each game you'll be randomly dealing out cards into various upgrade slots on the board. These will be face down until discovered and unlocked by your dice shaped spacefaring peoples. Once unlocked they'll be flipped, and

new and exciting 'worker placement' opportunities will be available to you. You've only got one of these actions per turn, so every time you do unlock a new tech, it feels like Christmas – and most of the time you won't be pretending to like what you've got.

The mechanism for ripping open these intergalactic presents is also extremely pleasing. The six sided cubes are converted into population and then applied to the technology, opening it up for everyone to then plant their own flag. The later cards are more powerful, and researching them feels like a reward in itself. However, it's a bit of a trap, as playing catch up can be a better use of your resources, especially if you dodge an action that doesn't necessarily help you when unlocked. No one wants to open a present that suits someone else better.

These cubes can also be converted into ships to explore deep space – which takes place on an entirely different board and includes the rarest of things in a Euro, a bit of conflict and combat. Depending on how the tech tree resolves itself, you might find players complaining that the smaller exploration board should have been their focus since the start. It's hard to know how much conquering of space

should be carried out in this way from the start of the game, but reading your chances as you get more familiar with the game becomes easier, and becoming comfortable a tactical switch is vital if you're going to stay in the running.

All of this comes together in a pleasingly brain burning experience with a punchy feeling of FOMO. What action will you choose, especially when one of your actions is to get more actions for later turns? The split-brain feeling of the second board also adds drama to the situation, and while nothing is truly lost in defeat on deep space, it can still feel like it.

Beyond the Sun is a dazzlingly good game that demands repeat plays through its complex and compelling systems. For those on the hunt for their next big bite of a Eurogame that they can keep coming back to, Beyond the Sun has boldly gone where we've been before, but rarely this well. 🚀

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

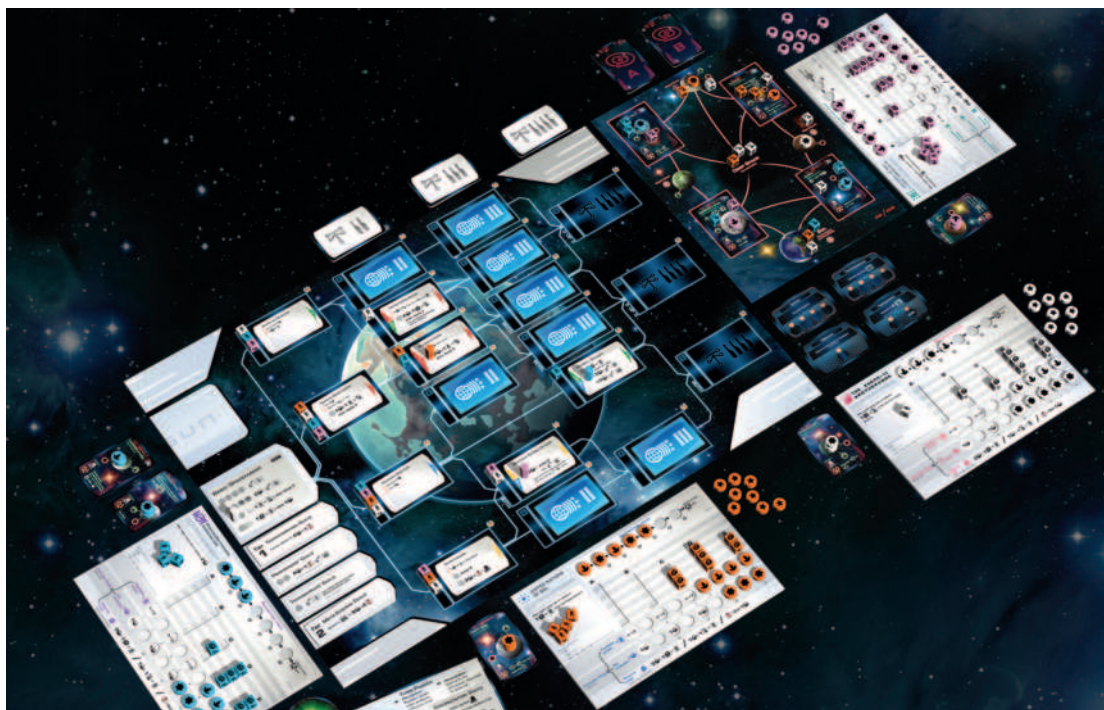
A nearly pure synthesis of many of the best Eurogame ideas of the last couple of decades, Beyond the Sun is one of the smoothest launches into the stratosphere for a first time designer we've ever seen. One giant leap indeed.

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Technology board
- ▶ 1 Double-sided exploration board
- ▶ 46 Technology cards
- ▶ 24 System cards
- ▶ 20 Event cards
- ▶ 10 Achievement cards
- ▶ 60 Ore resources
- ▶ 4 Faction mat player boards
- ▶ 80 Six sided resource cubes
- ▶ 96 Wooden resource discs
- ▶ 4 Action pawns
- ▶ 2 Player aids

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED THROUGH THE AGES...

One of the games that inspired Beyond the Sun seems like a fitting place to start your civilization's journey to the cosmos.





OUT OF THIS WORLD

Smells like teen sci-fi

Designer: Koen Hendrix | Publisher: Devir



Out of This World is a cooperative game of ordinary teens facing the extraordinary. Everyday objects have sprung to life and the town's inhabitants are no longer what they seem. Even worse, the adults haven't even noticed.

Taking thematic and aesthetic inspiration from the *Paper Girls* and *Lumberjanes* series of comics, designer Koen Hendrix has concocted a simple but inventive set collection game of misunderstood nineties youth and suburban sci-fi. Through teamwork and youthful enthusiasm, these quirky characters will battle through one of five scenarios, trading and equipping items, whilst fighting off waves of oddly mundane inter-dimensional monstrosities. Whether it's a demonic bin, bench, or bush, each undefeated foe will eat away precious time, pushing the heroes ever closer to failure.

All of this drama is handled by a deck of cards comprised of era specific items alongside a variety of enemies. Be it a beat up DiscMan or a Nirvana T-shirt, players will be adding these cards to their hand



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 110 Cards
- ▶ 5 Character Cards
- ▶ 1 Time Tracker Card
- ▶ 8 Time Tokens
- ▶ 1 First Player Token
- ▶ 1 Rulebook



from one of five face up stacks, before choosing to share or equip them. Alternatively, cards can be spent on defeating foes. This process of equipping cards forms the meat of the game and also its central puzzle, with a certain total value of them being required to complete scenarios. Equipping requires playing a set of three matching suits or numbers, resulting in the lowest value card becoming equipped. The same goes for passing cards to other players – albeit with a smaller set of two. This renders high value cards difficult to equip, often resulting in characters throwing away powerful items just to equip a measly pencil. Thanks to the accumulating foes, there's simply not enough time to hang around for those perfect cards, ultimately pushing players toward some disheartening but fantastically tense decisions.

This tension persists through other mechanics too, mostly in the form of the walkie-talkie token. This cute little component indicates the active character but also serves as a reminder that *only* that player may talk. Thematically, this represents characters splitting up, in a rush to cover as much ground possible in their search for items, but it also adds unexpected layers of difficulty to how and what players communicate. As an added bonus, the walkie-talkie silences the 'alpha-gamer', cooperative games' much maligned repeat offender.

Games usually take around thirty minutes, but the sense of accomplishment felt after beating a scenario can easily lead to immediately setting up the next. It also doesn't hurt that despite the campaign's short length, every chapter has a sense of progression in terms of the story and the gameplay. Instead of simply adding more foes, each chapter ups the difficulty by forcing players to focus their strategies. Teamwork really is the key to success and later games will rely on how efficiently the various actions, abilities, and items are used to ensure each character is as prepared as possible. Ultimately, it's nice to see a light, campaign-based filler game not resorting to basic rinse and repeat style gameplay, instead asking players to, basically, try harder.

There's a lot to like here, and while it might feel a tad light for some, we can't really fault a filler game that charms players into ploughing through its entire campaign in one sitting. 🍷

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? YES

Out of This World is far greater than the sum of its parts, drawing oodles of nostalgic theme, strategy, and addictive replay-ability from the most basic of rules and components.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED ARKHAM HORROR: THE CARD GAME

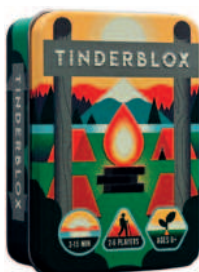
Where *Arkham Horror* thrusts its unwitting players into misery and madness, *Out of This World* turns down the horror, scale, and complexity for a more family-friendly slice of fiendish fun.

TINDERBLOX

Designer: Rob Sparks | Publisher: Alley Cat Games

Ah, the great outdoors – sleeping in a tent, fresh air, building a slightly precarious fire, alerting the local fire brigade and forestry commission – all wholesome things to enjoy. If instead, you're in a caravan with the rain lashing against the window, there's this tiny tinned emulation by Alley Cat to keep you toasty.

It's a reverse *Jenga* affair. Build up the fire as instructed by the card you draw, adding a log or a yellow or red fire cube using some amusingly wobbly plastic tweezers. Knock the fire over, presumably causing a minor incident, and you're out. Some cards contain a combination of items that have to be stacked to the side before being added to the main fire, making for some trickier placement. Additionally, you'll be instructed to



use your weaker hand from time to time by the cards, bringing further challenge to the mix.



While this should all be an exercise in classic 'will it stack' dexterity gaming – the thrill of watching someone else not quite manage to navigate your own horrible placements, leaving you victorious – it is missing something. The challenge isn't quite deep enough to make players want to play again immediately, which is always the sign of a good game designed to play socially. We suspect that at the lower age range however it will be a hit, and worth scouting out for family trips – although not one for car journeys. There is an undeniable enjoyment in 'building up a big fire' and for that, we can certainly recommend *Tinderblox*. 📌

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? MAYBE

THE WRETCHED

Designer: Chris Bissette | Publisher: Loot The Room



You remember that scene at the end of *Alien* where Ripley blasts the xenomorph out into space? *The Wretched* is what comes after that and it's atmospheric, frightening, and downright brilliant.

Using a tumbling block tower, a deck of cards, and a six sided dice, you are tasked with repairing the failing ship and hopefully survive long

enough to be rescued. The chances of that happening are miniscule. Like a lot of solo RPG creators, designer Chris Bissette wants you to suffer – in a good way. Letting yourself inhabit the character, really picturing the actions they have to perform as you pull blocks from your ever less steady tower and feeling their fear, regret, and sadness is crucial to the



experience. Which *The Wretched* captures in a clever little way. After each day, you log what happened via video recording or audio recording. You start each log with "Day X, salvage ship *The Wretched*, Flight Engineer [your name] reporting," and talk about what you've done that day. It's a great way to bring you into the character and as it's a solo game, you don't have to worry about your performance. It's cool to have this little artefact of your game but the purpose definitely seems more to immerse you in the character and the situation.

The Wretched, like most 'zine games, is light on rules and quick to the point. Of the 16 pages, four are tables (representing the various aspects of the ship, crew, and creature) and the rest are mostly setting the scene. This is a perfect example of the kind of incredible design that can come from limitations and thinking small. 📌

ANNA BLACKWELL

PLAY IT? YES





THE SHINING

All work and no game-play makes Jack a dull boy...

Designer: Prospero Hall | **Publisher:** Mixlore



Ah, the Overlook Hotel. Nestled among the majestic Rocky Mountains, this palatial retreat is so welcoming, you'll never want to leave. And you'll never be able to, if you succumb to its dark, mind-warping spirits and join their ghostly ranks as another of its permanent residents.

Adapting the 1980 Stanley Kubrick adaptation of Stephen King's classic horror novel, this latest Prospero Hall offering sets aside the troubled Torrance family, including psychic sprog Danny, and simply casts its cooperating players as a crew of caretakers, presumably on some kind of sweet work-sharing deal; after all, ol' Jack Torrance was able to do it all by himself. Well, up until the point he went ghost-crazy and attacked his wife and child with an axe.

And therein lies the challenge: can you all get through four months (five, if you feel like making it tougher), without losing your minds and, more pertinently, your lives?

As with all Prospero Hall games (see also: *Jaws*, *Horried* and *Top Gun*), the rulebook is slim, the gameplay is snappy and the complexity is as light as a lettuce sandwich. In fact, given *The Shining's*



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 1 Game board
- ▶ 5 Movers
- ▶ 52 Shining cards
- ▶ 16 Event cards
- ▶ 5 Role cards
- ▶ 68 Willpower tokens
- ▶ 15 Health tokens
- ▶ 2 Dice
- ▶ 1 Turn-tracking cube
- ▶ 1 Room 237 first player key ring
- ▶ 1 Rulebook



theme and imagery (beautifully executed by artist Claire Donaldson) render it inappropriate for younger gamers, it feels a little *too* light.

The board boils the Overlook down to just seven locations, around which players must move to take room-specific actions, mostly involving the collection of willpower tokens. Each player starts the month with a pair of face-down Shining cards, whose hidden total value represents a kind of psychic threat level that must be matched or exceeded by the value of these tokens. The back of each Shining card gives a threat range as a clue, which is handy as willpower is a precious, limited resource that will deplete quicker than you'd like, so you don't want to spend more than you think you'll need.

If, come the month's end, your Shining cards reveal a value higher than your total tokens, you lose it and attack another player. Rather neatly, many of the tokens feature weapon icons, which increase the chance of you landing a hit. If have any axe

tokens and you roll an axe, that's one point of health lost to your caretaking pal... And players start with only three health each. Yikes.

It's very slick and tidy, but you quickly feel the narrowness of your spectrum of choices and the challenge becomes rather one-note after a few plays. Still, there is an advanced 'corrupted' variant to spice things up, which introduces a hidden-traitor element. That's right: one of the group has already gone full-on Mad Jack McMad and is secretly trying to get you all killed. It is a welcome extra layer which, honestly, feels like it should have been baked into the base game, given both its thematic relevance and the extra drama it generates. Our advice is to not, heh, overlook it, and dive straight in with the corrupted. **DAN JOLIN**

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

A good-looking and casual-player-friendly take on a horror-movie classic. It's just a shame it lacks the depth and complexity of its source material.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED HORRIED...

Prospero Hall's previous film-based co-op survival horror game – albeit one you'd feel far more comfortable playing with kids.

TROYES DICE

Designer: Sébastien Dujardin, Xavier Georges, Alain Orban | **Publisher:** Pearl Games



Roll and writes have never hit home with me, it's just been too much like doing vlookups in Excel by hand. Until now that is. *Troyes Dice* is the best roll and write I've ever played, and I've tried to love so many of them. The game uses a circular board of plazas split into day and night, each turn consists of rolling three transparent dice and one black dice – transparent ones correspond to the colour they land on white



(wisdom), yellow (money) or red (influence), while the black flips the plaza it's on.

Players simply look up in the grid of colours and numbers as to what choices they can make. For example a red three offers the choice of gaining some population, gaining three influence, or using the castle action to protect column three from future attacks. And these attacks are what makes the game exciting. In later rounds this black dice will begin destroying the plaza on your player sheet, meaning you've lost your chance to gain any points that way for the remaining rounds. The groans around the table as someone's key means to victory points is destroyed

and they grumpily cross it out is frankly one of the highlights of the game – as is the smugness when you've wisely already protected that part of your player sheet.

This isn't a translation of 2010's *Troyes*, it's its own beast, and one which takes away some that that decade's fiddliness and replaces it with our current decade's scribbleness to great effect. It's a game that begs to be played repeatedly and has, components wise, been beautifully and thoughtfully put together. A wonderful little Eurogame dressed up in roll and write clothes. 🎲

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? YES

TRUST ME, I'M A DOCTOR

Designer: Dr Jack Ford Morgan & Dr Nick Wiggins | **Publisher:** Half Monster Games



Leeches, lobotomies, trepanning, and... fecal transplant. These are just some of the wonderful historical cures waiting for you in this lightweight card game. And it is hilarious.

Each round a player takes on the role of 'The Patient' and presents an ailment of their choice which could be as serious as lesions, cholera, or loss of vision. You know, the sort of things that you might actually see a doctor about. But, seeing as this ye olde times and doctors utilise much more

than medicine, the ailments range into the absurd with paganism, tomfoolery, and blood ghosts among the complaints you will face.

Once the ailment has been revealed, each 'Doctor' presents two cures and waffles on about how their solution is the best. Suffering from severe wind? Well fret no more your humiliating affliction. With just a goblet of corpse brew and some liberally applied torture we can right



your awful flatulence. But it's not all random which cures you apply. Each ailment has two or three symbols on it which relate to the well known medical traditions of: alchemical salves; mysticism, philosophy and psychiatry; and anatomical barber surgery.

Your cures, which have one, two, or three symbols then have to match up to the cure's symbols to properly aid your poor patient. And this mechanic really helps keep the ailments and cures linked in an understandable way, making the explanations that much better. But what makes *Trust Me, I'm a Doctor* so fun is the arguing. After each doctor has had a chance to present their cure it's time to shout "chicanery" and "quackery" and discredit not only their medical credentials but their sexual prowess, mental faculties, and generally act like an academic. Fantastic fun if you enjoy improvisation and history. 🎲

ANNA BLACKWELL

PLAY IT? YES





TUNGARU

Designer: Louis Malz & Stefan Malz | **Publisher:** Alley Cat Games



The island cultures of the Pacific have provided inspiration for quite a few games, from the elegant simplicity of Reiner Knizia's *Blue Lagoon* to bigger, meatier offerings like Stefan Feld's *Bora Bora*. *Tungaru*, from German father-and-son duo Stefan and Louis Malz, is the latest. And while its sun-drenched setting might suggest an idyllic tropical paradise, it quickly proves to be a varied and challenging experience that leaves no time for lounging around on beaches.

The game puts you and your opponents in charge of different communities, all trying to prosper and thrive on its archipelago board. As you play you'll sail between islands, despatching settlers to work the land and recruiting travelling nomads to benefit from their skills and expertise. Along the way you'll trade goods and harvest valuable resources, aiming to spot smart synergies and clever point-scoring opportunities that can edge you ahead of your rivals.

At the start of each round, players choose and reveal a card representing different characters from their communities. Each comes with different bonus abilities. The beggar, for instance, lets you nab resources from other players, while the worker lets you take an additional



action on your turn and the fisher (unsurprisingly) gains you some fish. Once everyone's cards are resolved, you'll move on to the main phase where you navigate your way between islands, spending dice representing workers to take actions as you go. While you can pay for some actions using dice of any value, others require specific numbers, and it takes some careful thought to work out the options open to you at any given time.

Where things really get interesting, though, is when you begin to recruit some of the game's wandering nomads to join your people. They're randomly distributed across the board, and each comes with a new power or ability to exploit. They might let you manipulate the values of your dice, giving you greater flexibility in choosing your actions. Some let you harvest extra resources on your turn, give you extra space to store your goods or let you exchange them for victory points.

But nomads also come with different scoring opportunities, giving new objectives to whoever manages to recruit them. They might reward you with victory points for building

monuments on islands, accumulating particular goods, populating the board with settlers or even recruiting more nomads. In fact, these end-of-game goals are the only way you'll score points, meaning that *Tungaru* is all about creating your own victory conditions, then finding the most efficient way to achieve them.

It's a very open-ended approach, and it's enough to leave you feeling all at sea until you get a few games under your belt and start to understand the most effective game plans. And with an advanced mode that uses a randomised board setup, there's no single dominant strategy.

It is very much a Eurogame – analytical to the point that many will find it a bit dry. And its ever-expanding options means that turns can drag. But if neither of these is a dealbreaker, there are plenty of chewy, chin-stroking decisions to wrestle with. 🍷

OWEN DUFFY

PLAY IT? MAYBE

To get the most out of *Tungaru*, you'll need to enjoy its wide open scoring and analytical gameplay.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKE TEOTIHUACAN: CITY OF GODS

Like the ancient Mesoamerican brain-burner, *Tungaru* does interesting things with dice as workers.

DUNGEON DROP

Designers: Scott R. Smith | **Publisher:** Gamewright



What does the idea of dropping a big handful of resource cubes on your dining table fill you with? Dreadful anxiety for the fear of losing said small pieces, or even having them consumed by child, dog or Hoover? Or the freeing joy of the chaos it's going to create on the table? Either way, that's what we're going to be doing for *Dungeon Drop*.

Players chuck a load of cubes on the table. These represent various treasures and items you'll be attempting to collect – as well as goblins and even a dragon that you'll want to avoid collecting. Additionally you'll be dropping grey cubes to represent the pillars of the dungeon. Make a triangle of these which doesn't contain another pillar, and you can have whatever is contained within on your turn. Monsters take away hit

points, and you'll need a key to unlock any treasure chest cubes you pick up.

All of this is very smart and organic feeling, but is weighed down by the almost constant requirement for dungeon VAR – lest the game become one of on-the-line-or-not arguments where one player begins screaming that the other



cannot, in fact, be serious.

Deciding whether a cube is in or out of the triangle of dungeon you're claiming ends up being a bigger part of the game than the dropping of the dungeon itself.

Sadly the game isn't as chaotically joyful as we had hoped, but instead turns into a contemplative puzzler that you happen to be setting up by dropping a load of cubes. This isn't a bad thing at all, and had we gone in knowing we'd be doing some chin stroking and careful pillar plotting we'd be very happy indeed. In this respect the solo mode is very fine indeed. A good little (dare we say stocking filler sized?) puzzle if you're not scared of the set up. 🎲

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

MOB SITTERS

Designer: Paul Brook | **Publisher:** East Street Games

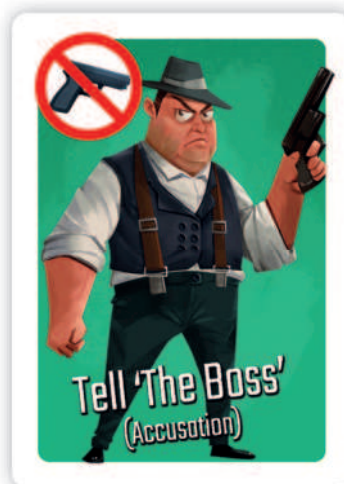


Babysitting isn't the most dangerous or lucrative of occupations – unless you're a borderline kleptomaniac with a mob boss as an employer. Coincidentally, that's the set up of *Mob Sitters*, a take-that card game from publisher East Street Games.

In this quick-playing party game, three to six players will compete to rake in the most dough whilst avoiding both the wrath of their boss and the hand of the law. Sure, money can be made from an honest night's work, but doing odd jobs for the boss – or perhaps even robbing them – is the surest way to make a buck, right?

Whether it's snatching that shiny Mobster of the Year trophy or sneaking the occasional horse head (hobby horse of course – this is a family game) into a rival's bed, players better hold their cards close to their chests. Fellow co-workers won't hesitate ratting out competitors, and the cards in *Mob Sitters* give them just the tools to do so.

Roughly half of each player's small deck is made up of accusation and reaction cards. Accusation cards can be directed at anyone, forcing them to place their illegitimate earnings in a negative scoring discard area unless they respond with a reaction card. These cards literally point a finger either back at the accuser or to an adjacent player depending on



the card's illustration. Very quickly, accusations can start bouncing around the table culminating in a healthy dose of riotous and unpredictable player interaction.

Getting the game up and running is a breeze, helped in part by a clear and concise rulebook and minimal components. It's a simple enough ruleset – which could've easily been compressed over a couple of pages instead of twelve – but the added real-estate certainly helps readability.

It's no lie that *Mob Sitters* is an unapologetically mean game, but with the right group it's a solid fifteen minutes of cacophonous fun. 🎲

CHAD WILKINSON

PLAY IT? PROBABLY



CHRONICLES OF CRIME: 1400

Designer: David Cicurel & Wojciech Grajkowski | **Publisher:** Lucky Duck Games



It's 1400 Paris, and you're going to play a knight blessed with prophetic dreams, enabling him to solve mysteries and gaining a reputation for doing so. With some prophecy hint cards, you're well on your way to becoming the medieval version of Mystery Incorporated, dog included.

Detective games follow a similar format – see a clue with

a number, use that number to search for another card, which should then prompt another numbered card and another, and so on until you solve the case. The difference with *Chronicles of Crime: 1400* is that this is blended with the use of a smart device, using an app to scan QR codes on the cards, enabling it to draw you through the story.

It is initially a little jarring, not least because you're trying to envisage 1400 France with a smartphone in your hand. The less confident you are in where it will take you next, the more you scan within the app to try to work out what to do, meaning almost all of your experience is app based. Plus, depending on the device, depends on how easy it is to share the story and findings that you're experiencing with fellow players.

Playing it solo however, I could zip about from location to location,

sending off my trusty dog to sniff out additional clue, talking to new people, and having a twisty story unfold. Once in a rhythm, I was utterly hooked, pulled into the scandals and gossip as the story developed. The whole experience is immersive and enjoyable, and discovery is genuinely intriguing. When I reached a conclusion, I'd put my resolutions into the app, get a score for my work based on accuracy and time, and be on to the next adventure.

The main failing of this game is exactly the same as others like it – if you're successful, you can only really play it once. Having said that, as a solo game this excelled, and if I could play it all over again without knowing how it all ends, I would. 🍷

CHARLIE PETTIT

PLAY IT? YES

THE LOST WORDS

Designer: Robert Hyde | **Publisher:** Kosmos



Rare is it that you'll be selling a game to people on how slow it is. Yet that's what we're doing here, with *The Lost Words*, a contemplative set collecting game based around famous word nerd Rob MacFarlane's book of the same title. The book of acrostic poems – in the form of spells – is lovingly recreated on to the cards of the game, and is one of the chief causes of the enjoyable slowness. Players are likely to spend time examining their hand not because of the complexity of moves they're able to make, but because many of the spells on the cards are fully reprinted and worth a read. The art on the cards is equally as lovely and magical by way of the excellent Jackie Morris.

The game lends itself to this slow, stalled play. Players set out their four cards, which need to be matched to

win the game. On your turn you can play out a spell card from your hand to cover one of your own cards or you can play an action card which might give you the upper hand – like clearing the top card from an opponent's set or stealing their completed card combinations. It's quite a lot of 'take that' for a game which otherwise feels so gentle, but does keep the game from being beyond paper light.

As an experience then, with the right people, with a couple of nice readings of the cards – *The Lost Words* is an entertaining distraction. As a game of itself it's less satisfying than it could have been – although it solid enough. Make sure you're with the right crowd and you'll fall under its spell. 🍷

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? PROBABLY



AGON

Designer: John Harper & Sean Nitter | Publisher: Evil Hat



Over the years countless tabletop RPGs have used the epic heroes and monstrous foes of Greek myth to add flavour to their worlds, but few – if any – have managed to make something that feels either as Greek or as mythical as *Agon*.

This feeling comes from the way in which, rather than aiming to simulate the feel of a fantasy novel or even a TV series, *Agon* instead aims to capture the feel of ancient stories and legends. It nudges players towards seeking glory and valour instead of simply aiming to win the current battle, prefers to paint the world in broad brush strokes rather than precise detail and always gives its players the chance to do something heroic – rules of physics and common sense be damned.

The core premise sets up the campaign as an *Odyssey*-esque voyage through a fantastical take on the Mediterranean, with the players taking the role of divinely favoured heroes island-hopping their way back home. However, in true mythical style, getting back to their loved ones doesn't depend on the heroes' navigational abilities or thrifty use of supplies. No, instead it's a simple matter of becoming legendary heroes and earn the capricious favour of the gods.

This isn't just a matter of window-dressing or GM attitude, either. The rules spell out the ways to gain divine

brownie points, and note exactly how many of them you need to drum up before getting back to your loving family. There's no way around it, no matter how clever the players might think they are.

The result is a game that can feel a little disconcerting to those of us raised on traditional RPGs, where 'go anywhere, do anything' was always held up as a core part of the medium. *Agon* casually ditches this idea in favour of a much tighter, much more structured experience. While you are completely free to approach challenges in whatever way you might wish and roleplay in any style you could desire, every island you visit follows a familiar format of initial clashes, growing threats and looming finales.

This push towards a heavily codified structure even bleeds through into the core rules themselves. In most RPGs, carrying out a night raid on an enemy camp would require dozens of separate rolls, as each of the heroes try to sneak their way in, saw through prisoners' bonds and battle the commander in their tent. Not so with *Agon*.

Instead, the entire conflict – from the moment the players enter the camp through to the coming of the blood-tinted dawn – is handled by a single roll of the dice. Don't be mistaken, though, this doesn't mean

it's a simple process of counting pips and working out who won. Indeed, one of the most enjoyable things about the game is revelling in the complexities, and above all else the drama, of its battles.

The defining moment of every roll comes right at the start, when each of the heroes has to declare their names and titles to all and sundry. From there, the party weigh up which dice they get to roll and whether they want to invoke the favour of the gods, while the GM, or, rather, the 'Strife Player', sets the challenge level and paints the opening scene.

The fact this is only the first few moments of the action is important, as all the action happens after the results are already known. The players themselves get to narrate what they do in a scene, already knowing how well they did in it.

Some of the rules around the deeply stylised core mechanic can be a little daunting at first glance – the core rulebook comes with an incredibly handy flowchart detailing each phase, and you're likely to need it for your first few sessions – but it all feeds into creating an experience that feels truly unique.

Many RPGs can provoke a table to laughter or shock, but getting a room full of people loudly declaring their heroes' epithets to the world at large is something that only *Agon* has managed so far.

The result is a game that may not be particularly flexible or especially simple, but that absolutely nails its aim of getting players to create epic myths and weave legends that will live on through the ages. Amidst a wine-dark sea of Grecian-inspired games that are, essentially, *D&D* in sandals, *Agon* truly stands out as a breath of refreshing, salty air. 🍷

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

While it may not tick a lot of traditional RPG boxes, *Agon* creates an incredibly refreshing experience that neatly skewers the feel of Greek myth, rather than merely Grecian-themed adventures.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED BAND OF BLADES

If you enjoyed the short-term campaigning and tightly focussed structure of Evil Hat's stellar effort from last year, you'll probably fall in love with *Agon*.



KITTIN

Designer: Simon Milburn & Caezar Al-Jassar | **Publisher:** Alleycat Games



It's not often that a game appears that will fit in your pocket. In some cases, that's because of the wholly inefficient size of some pockets (should we be graced with them), but in most it's because the size of board game boxes are beginning to challenge the iceberg that sunk the titanic. In complete contrast to that then, enter *Kittin*, a small tin game to fit in your pocket that packs a dexterous punch from a tiny paw.

Opening the tin will see you greeted by some bright instructions, some cards, and 24 cat shaped meeples. When you've finished admiring the cat meeples (for they are both impressive and somehow endearing), you'll play against others in a race to build the tower of meeples in the pattern specified on one of the cards. Easy, you may think, but it feels like the spirit of the cat remains within the game, swatting an invisible paw at your tower to knock



it down at the last minute, allowing another player to swoop in and claim the card for themselves.

There are also team rules, and a recommendation to kids to make adults play one handed if they seem too fast, which embraces the fact that this is a perfect little family game, or a great warm up to a regular games night. Though admittedly, it borders on the simple side of things and it's not a new idea in any way, it would survive with flying colours a Marie Kondo inspired clear out, because it really does spark joy. The meeples are cute and well made, they're brightly coloured, the tiny size of the game means it's easy to keep squirrelled in bags for a prompt game pretty much anywhere, and it's a great way particularly to keep the interest of younger gamers. 🐾

CHARLIE PETTIT

PLAY IT? YES

TINY EPIC KINGDOMS

Designer: Scott Almes | **Publisher:** Gamelyn Games

Games in the 4X genre (explore, expand, exploit, and exterminate) have always been known to be big, huge even. Think of video games like *Civilisation* or *Stellaris*, or their tabletop siblings *Twilight Imperium* and *Sid Meier's Civilization: The Board Game*. They take ages to play, have a lot of moving parts and components, and are unlikely to be new player-friendly.

Looking at these giants it is hard to imagine a small game, that fits into a tiny box, uses minimal components and takes half an hour to play, while still maintaining the core feel and strategies that make 4X games so compelling. Yet, *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* has it all while also giving players an option to play with 13 different factions, each with their unique abilities.



Every player starts on their territory, but inevitably – as everyone is competing for the same goals – expand into enemy lands, battling for resources and control. Even if outright conflict can be avoided, players are always in competition with each other – whether rushing to activate the



action they want or be the first one to build the tallest tower. Although the gameplay is not complex, it still has enough strategic elements to ensure that every move matters and the order in which actions are performed is important.

The only area that *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* could have been improved on is the artwork. While there is a certain charm in the way the characters on the faction cards are drawn, the terrain tiles, especially with their dark grey borders, look gloomy and a little dated laid out on the table.

Although not the best looking of games, *Tiny Epic Kingdoms* rules with its surprisingly simple, yet very engaging gameplay. 🐉

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

A GAME OF CAT AND MOUTH

A practically purr-fect party game

Designer: Exploding Kittens | Publisher: Exploding Kittens



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ Folding gameboard/box
- ▶ 2 Magnetic cat paw flickers
- ▶ 24 Plastic balls
- ▶ Cat face



Sometimes, it doesn't feel like dexterity games get their due. It's easy to take a look at a bumper board game box, and think that these are the great games. The ones you get your teeth into. The ones your shelves groan at the weight from. If you compare that to a physically light, dexterity game where you haven't got to plan your move ten spaces in advance or read a rulebook longer than some novels, it rarely wins.

That's a shame, because you have games like *A Game of Cat and Mouth*, that are just an utter delight. The game is handed to you almost like a psychedelic coloured briefcase, complete with handle, which is held perfectly closed by magnets. Upon opening, it falls into two sides, and you'll need to insert a large plastic cat head (of course) that slots into the middle, acting as the divider, card pieces to insert to act as the bumpers, and a magnetic cat paw that sits on either side to become the flicker.

That of course, is the purpose of the game. Half pinball, half arcade basketball, and a dollop of air hockey. The cat paw is held in place by a strong magnet, but which you can use

to teeter the paw into a perfect flicker. You'll then flick the four yellow balls provided to hit the hard to reach nose out, send all of your balls to the other side, or try to knock out the teeth (white balls) of the cat in the centre. Knock all three to your opponent's side, and you'll win the turn, but they can try to flick them back through to your side, so you'll need to be fast and accurate – easier said than done.

There's a balance of skill and ultimately luck – though, with the frequency I lose, this may be the determination of a sore loser. This allows for a surprisingly balanced game however, and one in which achieving a winning streak is beyond satisfying. And whilst the game is limited to two players, they've thought of this – there's a tournament builder available online. There's even a Spotify playlist you can use, featuring hits such as Pinball Wizard and We Are the Champions. You'll be grinning like a Cheshire cat.

For such a lightweight game, it packs a real punch, because it's wholly addictive. Each time you take up the mantle of the cat paw, you're obsessed with finding a new and better tactic

to win. Do you spend time going for the nose? Do you steadily aim for the teeth? Or just try your best to aim every ball between the tiny gap and into the other players side for victory? The sheer enjoyment of such a simple game cannot be overstated. When you're done, you just pull a few components out, and fold the game perfectly back up into its neat little case. There's something pleasing about the contrast between epic battle to neat case within a minute.

The problem is, that as soon as it is packed away, it calls to you, presumably in tiny meows. Meows, translating into "I bet if you played again, you'd win this time", and then a second Meow translating into "I'm so easy to set up", and a third Meow of "just play the game!"

It's a simple concept, executed fantastically, for maximum fun. 🐾
CHARLIE PETTIT

PLAY IT? MUST PLAY

A must play game should be one to recommend again and again and again, and the simple entertainment this gives warrants the recommendation.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... EXPLODING KITTENS

It's a different kind of game, but if you're going to enjoy the humour of *Exploding Kittens*, you'll harness the same for *A Game of Cat and Mouth*.





PLAYED

MAGIC MAZE ON MARS

Frustrating chaos has never been so fun

Designer: Kasper Lapp | Publisher: Sit Down!



Magic Maze had a problem – its theme, already confusing by mixing a modern mall setting with fantasy adventurers, did not quite work with an almost entirely abstract real-time movement puzzle as gameplay. The follow-up, *Magic Maze on Mars* has not made the same mistake. The setting, premise and gameplay intersect perfectly. Players are robots that are preparing the surface of Mars to be habitable for incoming colonists. This task incorporates collecting and moving resources along colourful paths, building domes, navigating trash and avoiding space slugs. Rather than being in charge of the movement of a particular token, players are assigned specific colours and can do any action as long as it corresponds to it.

A player in charge of green and blue can generate the resources of the same colour and move it along the blue or green paths. However, if they come to an orange path, they will need to stop and wait for the player in charge of that colour to move the resource further. Sounds easy? Well, it would be, if not for one more tiny rule: players can't talk to each other. Suddenly, a simple task of getting a token from point A across the map to point B is riddled with player miscommunication and confusion,



WHAT'S IN THE BOX?

- ▶ 27 Mars tiles
- ▶ 6 Bridge tokens
- ▶ 3 Wild tokens
- ▶ 4 Sand timer tokens
- ▶ 1 Warehouse board
- ▶ 6 Action tiles
- ▶ 2 Space slug pawns
- ▶ 5 Colonist pawns
- ▶ 10 Trash pawns
- ▶ 5 Dome tokens
- ▶ 12 Resource pawns
- ▶ 1 'Do something!' pawn
- ▶ 1 Sand timer
- ▶ 1 Communication board



which as you would expect, slows the whole process down significantly. Finally, add a sand timer into this mix and watch as mayhem ensues.

What otherwise would have been a zen game of moving tokens across paths and completing tasks, transforms into a tense, time-clutching race against the clock where players give each other stern stares, wave hands around to get someone's attention and make panicked noises as the last grain of sand drops. There are a few allowed methods of communication within the game, like smacking a big red pawn next to a player on an icon that corresponds most closely to what you are trying to convey. It looks silly and most of the time is entirely unhelpful, but then so is waving hands in front of someone else's nose.

Although the game comes with only five different levels, the randomised tile map layout and natural chaotic player interaction makes *Magic Maze on Mars* feel different each time. As you beat one level, you move onto the next, adding another element that raises the difficulty and makes the new coordination puzzle challenging to solve. The more players you have

around the table, the more you are reliant on someone else to complete a task, which, of course, can only go wrong. It is messy, and even though no one is supposed to talk, loud, with banging of the pawn and rogue exclamations of frustration or alarm. Whether you complete or fail a level, at the end, when talking is finally allowed, everyone laughs, because how could you not?

Some players might not enjoy the uncontrollable chaos of movement on the table in front of them, and then this game is not for them. And there will be plays that are just frustrating and nothing is working well – that is only a natural occurrence in games that rely on the player's mood and eagerness to work. Yet, when it all gels with everyone it is just the right mixture of hilarious and stressful, ridiculous and strategic to keep you wanting to play more. 🎮

ALEXANDRA SONECHKINA

PLAY IT? YES

Magic Maze on Mars proves the importance of good communication, especially when you can't talk, delivering a game that is both ridiculously silly and deceptively hard.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED MAGIC MAZE

If you like *Magic Maze*, then you will find that this Martian-themed instalment matches or improves on all of its aspects.

ARKHAM HORROR: UNDER DARK WAVES

Designer: Daniel Clark, Philip D. Henry, Tim Uren | **Publisher:** Fantasy Flight Games

The latest mammoth expansion for Arkham Horror promises all the same cosmic horror co-op hi-jinx as the base game: yielding additional locations, monsters, characters, scenarios and a few new mechanics angled at amping up tension even further.

As per usual, you play an investigator tasked with averting some unknowable horror. You'll work together through four different phases. The first lets you move about, the second spawns horrors, the third triggers encounters between the players and whatever might be lurking on the board, and the final 'Mythos' stage creates events which creep you ever closer to ultimate doom and annihilation.

Of the new mechanics, the two new Mystery card sets – which sit as locations on the map – provide the most novelty as they trigger divergent



paths in the vein of a choose-your-own-adventure game. Will you call out to the crew of the definitely not cursed vessel, or will you try and sneak abroad instead? As the bulk of the game is based on dice-rolls and co-op wrangling, having an element that introduces multiple choice was refreshing.

Things get high octane fast. Similar to other Fantasy Flight Lovecraftian entries *Mansions of Madness* and *Arkham Horror: The Living Card* game, you barely get a breather before terrifying encounters and spooky enemies are spread in their masses on board. Odds are,



you'll be desperately dashing toward the weapons display or fending off doom before solemnly piecing together your clues.

Under Dark Waves is a very satisfactory entry to the series, giving out much of the same Lovecraftian spooks and struggle, but on a grander scale than the base game alone. The writing and artwork remain excellent and very fleshed out.

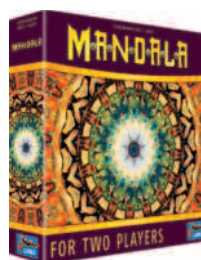
And while the game can lag as you move through seemingly endless events, some of which can feel rather distant, it ultimately makes up for this with its grinding tension and grim surprises. It's one of those rare board games that's still fun even when you all die horribly beneath unknowable waters. 📀

SARA ELSAM

PLAY IT? MAYBE

MANDALA

Designer: Trevor Benjamin & Brett J. Gilbert | **Publisher:** Lookout Games



It's not often players have to iron the board before playing. *Mandala* is one of the few games where we'd advise that you do. The tea towel board (this is written affectionately) is laid before two players and the big deck of cards presenting some lovely looking mandalas is shuffled. Take a hand of cards and then either play them into your side of the one of the two 'mountains', on to the mountain itself, or discard and draw.

Players win a mountain by completing a set of six coloured mandala cards on a mountain, at which point it is destroyed and the player with the majority of any colour used gets the first pick of those colours on the mountain itself. These go into a scoring track where you'll get points for each of that type at the end of the game, the first will land you a single point, whereas the sixth will gain you six points, and end the game in completing your personal set.



As such this is a game of tactical denial of your opponent's set building ability. Because only one of each colour may be played into each mountain, blocking your opponent from completing their set, or gaining multiple high scoring cards is the way to victory. Equally, drawing cards requires placing mandalas into the mountain, which makes them up for grabs at the end and also don't count toward your 'claim' on them. You have to give up something then to keep your hand full enough to have options in the future. It's a smart back and forth, and having two mountains to complete at once can make for interesting 'shifts' in focus throughout a game. One worth getting the ironing board out for. 📀

CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

PLAY IT? PROBABLY



EPIC ENCOUNTERS: SHRINE OF THE KOBOLD QUEEN & LAIR OF THE RED DRAGON

Burning up the box set

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Steamforged Games



Note: This is a review of both boxes currently available from Steamforged, the price is for each box individually, and the page count is approximate for the adventure booklets.

If you've ever tried your hand at running an RPG, there's a good chance that at some point – probably about 20 minutes before the players are supposed to knock on your door – you've looked down at your half-page of scribbled notes and wished you could just pull a full-formed evening of entertainment out of a box.

Well, this fantasy is exactly what Steamforged are hoping to tap into with their *Dungeons & Dragons*-compatible *Epic Encounters* series. These sets package up almost everything you need to run an evening or so of adventure, from miniatures and maps through to stat blocks and side rules, into a roughly shoebox-sized container, so all you need to bring to the table is a handful of willing players and a basic understanding of the *D&D* fifth edition ruleset.

It is, to be honest, an incredibly appealing idea. While many groups are entirely happy to spend years adventuring with nothing fancier than their imaginations and the occasional sketch-map to hand, there is something undeniably awesome about being able to slam down an enormous dragon figurine the moment



the mighty beast makes its appearance in-game. It's the tabletop equivalent of serving everybody's drinks in the appropriately classy cocktail glasses, rather than slinging them all in a plastic cup and calling it a day.

There are, of course, plenty of other ways to make game night feel truly memorable – many of which are cheaper and more personal – but simply cracking open an *Epic Encounter* box is undeniably effective way to hit the goal with a bare minimum of fuss. Really, the only issue with this side of things is that you're only going to get that kind of impact the first time through, but it's not like the miniatures melt the moment you use them so there is a fair bit of scope for re-use and re-purposing.

The price might raise a few eyebrows here and there, but if you're okay with asking your gaming group to chip in the cash that would normally be going towards the evening's pizza things suddenly look much more reasonable.

The two sets currently out for release are the rather grandly titled *Shrine of the Kobold Queen* and *Lair of the Red Dragon*. The first of these sets out a raid on a ragged little village stuffed with diminutive cultists and plays out in a fairly traditional *D&D* style, with plenty of little battles rising to a major showdown with the eponymous Kobold Queen. The second, meanwhile, does exactly what it

says in its title, and though it only offers a single real scrap against a monstrously powerful dragon, it's virtually guaranteed to be a memorable one – assuming anybody survives, that is.

Of the two, *Shrine of the Kobold Queen* is probably the more complete adventure experience, but the battle against the dragon is the worthiest of the title "*Epic Encounter*." You don't need one box to run the other, but if you do decide to pick up both you'll soon find that there's a loose narrative thread between them that can be teased into something resembling a cohesive story.

Indeed, the matter of narrative is handled with a noticeably light touch throughout the sets. There are suggestions of motivations and of greater plots scattered throughout the booklets that accompany the rest of the kit, but these rarely amount to more than a couple of sentences and are clearly intended to act more as inspiration than a sample of strict linear story. These titbits of narrative aren't the most original bits of lore out there, relying on the old tropes of evil monsters and desperate kingdoms, but they hit all the fantasy beats you need to get a game going.

This sketched-out approach to the story side of things means that the vast majority of the booklets can be devoted to actually running the encounters at the table. Here's where the real meat of the adventure lies, and as you flick through the pages you'll find notes about the chambers the party are going to explore, the traps they need to overcome and the stats of the monsters they'll encounter along the way.

The imagination on display throughout is impressive and there are plenty of clever little challenges and small encounters to overcome, but simply having the ideas is only half

the battle of adventure design. With so much information packed into such a tight area it's also vital that the writing is concise and structured to feed the GMs everything they need at a glance, and this is an area where both boxsets struggle. It's easy to read through half a page of description and rules about how much a statue is worth before you realise that there are a half-dozen angry kobolds sitting in the middle of the chamber, and that you should have kicked off a fight five minutes ago.

On top of this, there are also some rather weird approaches to traditional *D&D* design and adventure construction that, while they aren't strictly incorrect, are a little unsettling. Much of this is very minor stuff – such as unusual rules phrasing on enemy abilities and having daggers that deal d8 or d12 damage rather than their customary d4 – but it all stacks up to create a rather disconcerting feeling, as though you're reading through an incredibly elaborate piece of homebrew rather than a professional product.

This is only compounded by the final issue with the boxes' design – their difficulty level.

Now, it's an unfortunate truth that balancing RPG battles can be a nightmare. What might be a nail-biting challenge for one gaming group will be a walk in the park for another, so difficulty is normally an area with plenty of wiggle-room. However, when it comes to the *Epic Encounters* boxes, things have a habit of going far beyond a mere wiggle.

Much of this feels like it stems from the boxes' desire to provide a match for every possible level and configuration of party, rather than picking a level range and working around it. *Shrine of the Kobold Queen*, for example, is an adventure that truly feels as though it has a sweet spot somewhere in the low-to-mid level range. Brand new heroes will be



mulched the moment they push past the first few guards, while seriously experienced parties are going to waltz through with barely any effort, no matter how much you stick to the booklet's difficulty range.

In fairness, the text does flag up that it's best-suited for lower-tier play, but it would be nice to see this given a little more prominence so that potential GMs know that it might take a fair bit of fiddling to get it to gel with their campaign group – ideally before they drop their cash on it.

Lair of the Red Dragon, meanwhile, is a party-killer.

Now, depending on your personal approach to *D&D* this might not be a gamebreaker. After all, many would argue facing a dragon on its home turf bloody well should be a perilous endeavour, and many groups are going to be perfectly content with facing a mighty challenge if the rewards are shiny enough.

However, there are two threads that tip the difficulty factor over from

see the beautiful miniatures, the fiery map and the stack of rules built around combat... well, it can be a little tough to then appreciate that the only winning move to this game is not to play.

Secondly, the difficulty comes less from obstacles placed in the party's way – traps that can be disabled, puzzles that can be solved, strategies that can be out-thought – and more from raw numbers. Facing off an enemy who's overpowering you because you need to play around some special ability or figure out their weakness can be exhilarating; being demolished because the monster rolls enough dice to smoke the party's toughest character in a single hit is just frustrating.

Do these questions over balance make the *Epic Encounters* boxes bad products? No, not exactly. It's simple enough to tinker with the numbers of both sets and adjust the monsters to make everything flow nicely and for the encounter to feel just as epic as the name on the box suggests, even if this does rather undermine the drop-in nature of the sets.

Indeed, it probably says a lot that despite all the niggles I've had with the current set, I'm still counting down the days until the next box hits the shelves. Though *Shrine of the Kobold Queen* and *Lair of the Red Dragon* may be lacking a bit of polish when it comes to adventure design, the core concept behind them is so strong and so appealing that they're incredible fun anyway, and wonderful at making a night at the gaming table feel, appropriately enough, epic. 🐉

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

The idea is rock-solid and the miniatures are top-notch, and while the design doesn't always quite feel right this is still a box full of top-notch entertainment

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DUNGEONS & DRAGONS 4E

Miniatures? Battlemaps? Dynamic terrain effects? This is exactly the kind of stuff that made 4E stand out among *D&D*'s many editions



thematic to problematic.

The first is that, simply, the entire box is set up around the idea of having the party square up to and battle the dragon. When you rock up to your game night and

KOSMOS

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FOR
CHRISTMAS!



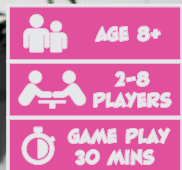
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PAINTING GUIDE



DUNGEON DEGENERATES

Take the hand of doom and let it lead you to the acid vomit punk world of Dungeon Degenerates

Words and photographs by **Andy Leighton**



PAINTS & TECHNIQUES

- » Baharroth Blue
- » Caledor Sky
- » Dorn Yellow
- » Evil Sunz Scarlet
- » Fire Dragon Bright
- » Flash Gitz Yellow
- » Gauss Blaster Green
- » Kabalite Green
- » Krieg Khaki
- » Lugganath Orange
- » Moot Green
- » Phalanx Yellow
- » Pink Horror
- » Screamer Pink
- » Squig Orange
- » Sybarite Green
- » Tau Light Ochre
- » Temple Guard Blue
- » Trollslayer Orange
- » Warpstone Glow
- » Wild Rider Red
- » Yriel Yellow

Each model is split up into 3 stages, each with a list of colours and the corresponding paint that was used for it. Each stage uses a different technique to achieve a similar effect on each element but with different colours.

Undercoat note: these models were undercoated with Chaos Black.

Stage 1 is basecoating. This is applied over several thin layers to provide a solid base colour. You want to avoid the recesses and separate each block of colour with the black of the undercoat.

Stage 2 is layering. This stage involves applying a layer of a lighter colour over the basecoat, leaving a line of the basecoat around the edges. A layer

highlight is much the same, but only applied to certain areas.

Stage 3 is for highlights. This stage involves adding definition, and another layer above the last. This begins to build up the glow. If you find yourself unsure of where to apply the highlights or spot highlights, look over the images alongside the guide and compare that stage to the last.

DUNGEON DEGENERATES

HAND OF DOOM

STAGE 1

Moot Green: Apply a basecoat to the main body of the hand.

Screamer Pink: Apply a basecoat to the vein, ring, stump and fingernails.



STAGE 2

Yriel Yellow/Moot Green: Make a 1:1 mix. Apply a layer over the main body of the hand.

Pink Horror/Screamer Pink: Make a 1:1 mix. Apply a layer to the vein, ring, stump and fingernail.

Squig Orange: Apply a layer to the bones, ring and fingernail.

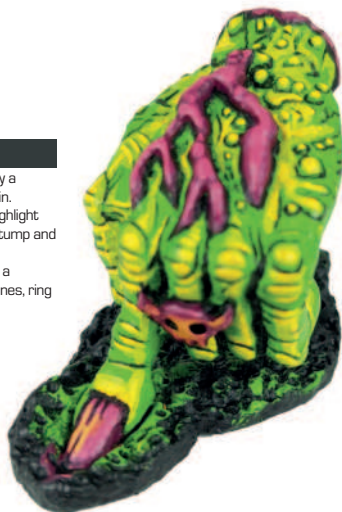


STAGE 3

Flash Gitz Yellow: Apply a highlight layer to the skin.

Pink Horror: Apply a highlight layer to the vein, ring, stump and finger nails.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a highlight layer to the bones, ring and finger nail.



HINTERLANDER

STAGE 1

Screamer Pink: Apply a basecoat to the wolf skin and clothing.

Squig Orange: Apply a layer over the clothing and eyes.

Warpstone Glow: Apply a basecoat to the skin.

Evil Sunz Scarlet: Apply a basecoat to the hair, beard, wolf eyes and sausage.



STAGE 2

Pink Horror/Screamer Pink: Make a 1:1 mix. Apply a layer to the wolf skin and pink patches.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a layer to the clothing, eyes and bow.

Phalanx Yellow: Apply a layer to the skin.

Wild Rider Red: Apply a layer to the hair, beard, wolf eyes and sausage.

Sybarite Green: Apply a layer to the right side of the wolf skin and boot.



STAGE 3

Pink Horror: Apply a layer highlight to the wolf skin and pink patches.

Krieg Khaki: Apply a layer highlight to the clothing, eyes and bow.

Dorn Yellow: Apply a layer highlight to the skin.

Trollslayer Orange: Apply a layer highlight to the hair, beard, sausage and wolf eyes.

Gauss Blaster Green: Apply a layer highlight to the green sections on the right side.



ALLEY CAT

STAGE 1

Squig Orange: Apply a layer to the clothes and eyes.

Warpstone Green: Apply a layer to the edge of the clothes.

Caledor Sky: Apply a layer to the skin, and an edge highlight to the hair.

Screamer Pink: Apply a layer to the edges of the skin.



STAGE 2

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a layer to the clothes and eyes.

Moot Green: Apply a layer to the edges of the clothes.

Temple Guard Blue: Apply a layer to the skin and edge of the hair.

Pink Horror/Screamer Pink: Make a 1:1 mix. Apply a layer to the edges of the skin.



STAGE 3

Krieg Khaki: Apply a layer highlight to the clothes and eyes.

Gauss Blaster Green: Apply a layer highlight to the edge of the clothes.

Baharroth Blue: Apply a line highlight to the skin and edge of the hair.

Pink Horror: Apply a layer highlight to the edges of the skin.

JACK SLASHER

STAGE 1

Warpstone Green: Apply a layer across the model.

Squig Orange: Apply a layer to the head, trousers and scarf. This layer does not cover the whole area, as you will see some areas the green is allowed to show through.



STAGE 2

Moot Green: Apply a layer to the green elements.

Fire Dragon Bright: Apply a layer to the orange elements.

Evil Sun Scarlet: Apply a layer to the blade.

Yriel Yellow: Apply a layer to the skin.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a layer to the trousers.



STAGE 3

Gauss Blaster Green: Apply a highlight layer to the green elements.

Lugganath Orange: Apply a layer highlight to the orange elements and blade.

Dorn Yellow: Apply a layer highlight to the skin.

Krieg Khaki: Apply a highlight layer to the trousers.

DUNGEON DEGENERATES

VOID WITCH

STAGE 1

Screamer Pink: Apply a basecoat to the clothing, hair and right side of the blade.

Squig Orange: Apply a basecoat to the skin, buckles and symbol on the coat.

Kabalite Green: Apply a basecoat to the eyes, lips and left edge of the blade.



STAGE 2

Pink Horror/Screamer Pink: Make a 1:1 mix. Apply a layer to the clothing, hair and right side of the blade.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a layer to the skin, buckles and symbols on the coat.

Sybarite Green: Apply a layer to the eyes, lips and left edge of the blade.

Wild Rider Red: Apply a layer to the trousers and scroll.



STAGE 3

Pink Horror: Apply a layer highlight to the clothing, hair and right side of the blade.

Krieg Khaki: Apply a layer highlight to the skin, buckles and symbols on the coat.

Gauss Blaster Green: Apply a layer highlight to the eyes, lips and left edge of the blade.

Lugganath Orange: Apply a layer highlight to the trousers and scroll.



WITCH SNIFFER

STAGE 1

Caledor Sky: Apply a line highlight to the clothes.

Screamer Pink: Apply a basecoat to the nose and skin.

Squig Orange: Apply a layer to the buckles and gun.

Yriel Yellow: Apply a basecoat to the lower face.



STAGE 2

Temple Guard Blue: Apply a layer to the clothes.

Pink Horror/Screamer Pink: Make a 1:1 mix. Apply a layer to the nose, skin and right hand side of the buckles and gun.

Tau Light Ochre: Apply a layer to the other half of the buckles and gun.

Dorn Yellow: Apply a layer to the lower face.



STAGE 3

Baharroth Blue: Apply a line highlight to the clothes.

Pink Horror: Apply a layer highlight to the nose, skin and right hand side of the buckles and gun.

Krieg Khaki: Apply a layer highlight to the other half of the buckles and gun.



BASES

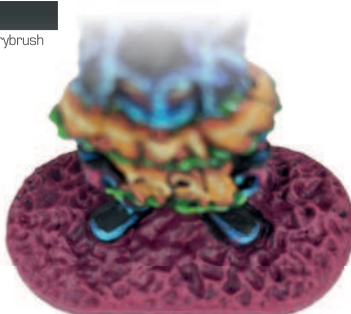
STAGE 1

Screamer Pink: Apply a basecoat to the base.



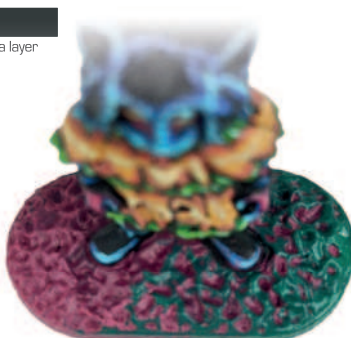
STAGE 1

Pink Horror: Apply a drybrush across the base.



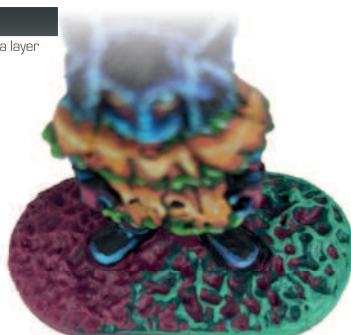
STAGE 1

Kabalite Green: Apply a layer over the base.



STAGE 1

Sybarite Green: Apply a layer highlight of the green.



A NOTE ON 'ACID VOMIT'

The visually striking artwork of *Dungeon Degenerates*, is presented in Sean Åberg's impressive Acid Vomit style. It is eye catching and 'in your face' but it also offers a very unique and interesting way to paint your miniatures. I've used the character portraits from the game as inspiration for the minis in the painting guide.



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GOODTIME GAMES



We speak to Tom Walker about Goodtime Games, a FLGS opening during COVID-19 restrictions

Interview by **Charlie Pettit**

Can you tell us about how the store first got started?

The café was setup by my partner, Melissa and I after we first encountered small 'homely' board game cafés in Taiwan. Over there, one that we really loved was called Joy and Gathering. We'd never had the luxury of having a FLGS that close to us before, so we were really inspired by their setup and took full advantage of their library. We thought long and hard about how we could capture the atmosphere of a place like that on a tight budget, and in a way that was viable in Manchester. We came up with a pricing structure which rewards locals and enthusiasts with an awesome, low-cost venue for their board games nights in a very casual, accessible setting.

What's it like being a FLGS in Manchester?

The local board gaming community here has been so supportive. Especially in light of the pandemic, we really appreciate our members who have kept us going during the quiet times. The local scene here is awesome too. It was such a pleasant surprise, as we're still such newbies to the board gaming world, and total newbies to the Manchester scene – having only really played with our own friends. We've had so much support from local gamers and we

can't wait to repay their patronage with loads of fun events to get them mixing with each other – post-COVID, of course – as they're itching to play party games with bigger groups.

What do you think makes your store unique?

Our store is unique in a few different ways. Firstly, we're really small so there's always quite a bit of interaction between staff and customers. We make a real effort to curate and guide our guest's choice of games and are usually on-hand to teach and discuss different options with our guests before they decide. Melissa and I are both vegetarians and part-time vegans so our menu is fully veggie/vegan; including our signature Taiwanese-inspired, vegan bubble-waffles. We've actually put a lot of effort into our food, which is known for being good value and surpasses peoples' expectations. There are also personal touches around the café including photos of our guests, hand-made tables (made by me) second hand furniture, plants and plenty of natural wood and warm colours.

What titles have you found most popular recently?

Usually our guests are really open to our suggestions, and so our staff tend to have their

own favourites for different groups. Personally, I love teaching *Sagrada* and *Patchwork* to pairs and when there are small groups of flatmates coming in, I'm recommending *Paranormal Detectives* and *Insider*. And of course, Halloween saw a resurgence of the *Betrayal at House on the Hill* and similarly spooky games.

What's been your favourite part of running a FLGS?

Honestly, the favourite part of running a games store for me so far has been getting to know our lovely staff and local members, and indulging in board games purchases of course. My least favourite part so far has been never having enough time to sit down and learn all the new games.

How was opening during COVID-19?

Opening during COVID-19 has been pretty tough, but we're weathering the storm so far. The local lockdowns have hit us pretty hard and it's a real bummer that larger groups can't visit. We've had to really focus on developing our selection and knowledge of two-player games. It's amazing to be open at long last. Getting the place ready to open has been such hard work and to see people enjoying their time here is really rewarding, long may it continue. 🍷

WHERE CAN I FIND IT?

Goodtime Games
212 Burton Road,
West Didsbury,
M20 2LW
goodtimegames.co.uk
Facebook: GoodtimeGames.Manc

THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING FUN FOR ALL THE FAMILY

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** Art courtesy of **Wizard of the Coast**, from *Icwind Dale: Rime of the Frostmaiden*

It's hard to say this without sounding like one of those emotionally manipulative adverts clogging up the holiday airwaves, but the past year has really helped to hammer home quite how important our family and close friends can be. For all of their trials and tribulations they brought, the months of lockdown have helped many of us to share aspects of our lives with parents, children, siblings and cousins that we'd always kept at arm's length.

In my case, 2020 will forever be known as the year I got my mum to play RPGs.

Looking back at it now, I'm honestly amazed that it took that long for me to drag her into the hobby. After all, I can probably attribute a fair bit of my current status as a professional nerd to her simmering love of sci-fi and fantasy stories. She was the one who first introduced me to Pratchett and Tolkien novels, who checked out my first *Fighting Fantasy* gamebook from the library and who endured

long, rambling explanations of *Warhammer 40k* lore from an overly enthusiastic 12-year-old.

With all that in mind, I probably shouldn't have been quite so surprised to find that it only took the slightest of nudges to transform my mother from a mild-mannered schoolteacher and doting grandmother into Scarlett, deadliest rogue in the realms. Barely five minutes into the session she was chucking knives at zombies, bartering with her son-in-law over loot drops and enthusiastically dreaming up a complex plan to sic a couple of monsters on a rival adventuring party.

In other words, she was a natural.

Well, either that, or she had secretly been reading my work in this magazine and taking every single piece of it to heart (in which case, hi mum!).

Playing RPGs with your family like this is a wonderful way to have a great time with those closest to you, and might even help them to

more fully embrace the hobby on their own. With that being said, however, there was no denying that running games for your family has a different feel to GMing a session for your regular gaming group, or even a pack of beginners nervously sitting down at a convention or store game. There are often different expectations and requirements, and varying levels of buy-in to the entire concept of RPGs.

PICK YOUR POISON

No matter what you might think of it, there's no denying that as far as most of the mainstream public are concerned *Dungeons & Dragons* is damn near synonymous with tabletop roleplaying. Even I tend to use the fantasy behemoth to help explain my job to confused but well-intentioned family members, and I spend every single month trying out new systems to feed the Tabletop Gaming Magazine review mills.



You would be forgiven, therefore, for assuming that *D&D* is the easiest and simplest way to get your family playing RPGs. After all, its fifth edition is universally popular, comparatively simply to pick up and comes with an absolute landslide of free resources, tutorials and soundscapes online. A huge amount of its appeal comes from the fact that it is many people's go-to game.

However, while there's certainly nothing wrong with getting your family going with *D&D*, that doesn't mean it needs to be universal.

When it came to running games for my own family, I experimented with the rules-lite, story-rich *Quest* system. Though it lacked some of the depth of more complex games, being able to explain the entire ruleset in a matter of moments helped calm the nerves of some of my less technically minded family members, who were a little intimidated by the sheer amount of numbers floating around more traditional character sheets.

This isn't to say that every single family out there needs to be intimidated by crunchier games of course, but even then it's important to weigh up what kind of genres and playstyles might appeal to your nearest and dearest. Classic fantasy isn't everybody's cup of tea, after all, but perhaps an *X-Files* themed round of *Monster of the Week* might be able to draw in the mystery enthusiasts.

And then there's *Star Wars*. Everybody likes *Star Wars*, right?

THE YOUTH VOTE

At time of writing my only child is about the same age as the latest issue of Tabletop Gaming Magazine, so it'll be a little while before I can trust them to use dice as anything other than a choking hazard. However, once your spawn (or grand-spawn) get a few more age ranks under their belts there are a whole raft of systems designed specifically to accommodate younger players.

Hero Kids and *No Thank You, Evil!* are both light, breezy fantasy games built with the intention of getting children rolling dice and playing out heroic characters. Meanwhile, the *My Little Pony* RPG, *Tails of Equestria*, is a tiny bit more complex but still incredibly rewarding for kids who are invested in the sugar-sweet franchise.

Just bear in mind that if you are running games with kids you probably shouldn't expect too much in the way of a carefully plotted story. Think of it less as writing a tale together, and more as giving them a chance to flex their imaginations.



“While there's certainly nothing wrong with getting your family going with *Dungeons & Dragons*, that doesn't mean it needs to be universal”

Expect to say “yes, and...” to an awful lot of seriously weird stuff, and eject any idea of realism right out of the window. Keeping a bit of rules enforcement in mind is never a bad idea but going along with the wildly sparking brain of a preteen can be a GMing experience like no other. If there's an unconventional, creative and mind-warping way to solve a problem, you can bet good money on a seven-year-old stumbling across it.

Finally, beware of the sheer amount of excitement RPGs create. I know of at least a handful of friends who took advantage of the long months of lockdown to get their children and partners involved in a campaign, and now have to remind disappointed kids that they can't play *D&D* every single night – though apparently the promise of an extra-long session makes for a wonderful bit of harmless bribery.

ONE NIGHT OF FUN

Sometimes your games with your family will go the way of so many supposed one-off adventures with friends, and morph into a full-on campaign. However, when you head into a game night with your closest kin I find it

best to assume that this is going to be a one-off experience.

This is especially true when it comes to folks who live on the other side of the country or, indeed, the planet. I probably wouldn't start a game of *Pandemic Legacy* with someone I only see at Christmas and Easter (well, to tell the truth I've kind of gotten wary of *Pandemic* as a whole these past few months) and I wouldn't start a long-term campaign with them either.

For this reason, I've found great success in running short, snappy bitesize adventures. Little stories and quests that can be pushed through in two or three hours, rather than epics requiring the entire table to stay up through the early hours.

If everybody drinks deeply of the RPG cup and wants more, well, it's a great time to start cracking out the hardback books and searching for more gaming space in your schedule. If not, you still got to share a wonderful experience with those closest to you, and there's a decent chance that *Quest*, *D&D* or whatever else you want to play joins *Catan* on the roster of rainy-day family activities. ●

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tabletop time machine

1973 PAGODA

Pagoda (German *Pagode*, with three syllables) was invented by Valentin Siena, published by the now defunct FX Schmid, and might be considered one of the earliest 'Eurogames'. A two-player abstract with a pretty oriental theme, it belongs to that rare class of abstracts involving pattern-making. The author claims that it's based on 'an ancient east Asiatic astrological game called *Shuti*', which I've never heard of and find no supporting evidence for, and 'has more combinations than Chess or Go', which is meaningless without further definition.

Nevertheless, the *Games & Puzzles* reviewing panel rated it '6/6' and did their best to summarise its complicated and ill-expressed rules, not helped by the total absence of explanatory diagrams in the rule book. But its fans were enthusiastic and, as *Pagoda* is right up my street, I'm glad to have blown the dust off my review copy.

The board has nine by nine squares of alternating red, green and black and is quartered by a clearly delineated central pathway. Each player, Red and Green, has 14 pieces of their own colour, equally divided between 'columns' (round) and 'stones' (square). The aim is to complete a 'building' consisting of four of one's own pieces. The first to do so may either 'declare' and score for it, thereby ending the game and winning (unless the opponent can immediately make a higher-scoring one), or may continue the game hoping to create a more valuable building later.

A building is a pattern of four pieces forming a square. It may be, in increasing order of value, a hut (one per constituent stone), a house (five), a castle (10), a tower (11), or a pagoda (15). The pagoda is a diamond shape with all four corners lying within the central pathway. Each in turn either places a piece on a vacant square, or removes one of their stones for play elsewhere on a

subsequent turn, or moves one of their columns to any other vacant square of the same colour. The scoring is dauntingly complicated: buildings have different values; only stones are counted, not columns (a building consisting solely of columns is a ruin and scores zero); and stones on one's own colour score double. A fence or wall – that's an orthogonal line of respectively three or four of your own pieces – reduces your score. Also, pieces can be captured by enclosure and are then lost.

The problem with this otherwise delightful and original game is its excessive complication and consequent lack of clarity. Being called upon to visualise future possible moves and positions is one thing; but having also to continuously monitor the constantly changing potential scoring value of both your own and your opponent's pieces is really a bit much! Nonetheless, it rewards repeated playing. 🍵

ABOVE The *Pagoda* board mid game offers opportunities to both players

David Parlett is a games inventor and historian, author of *The Oxford History of Card Games* and its sequel on board games, and a visiting professor of games design at the University of Suffolk.

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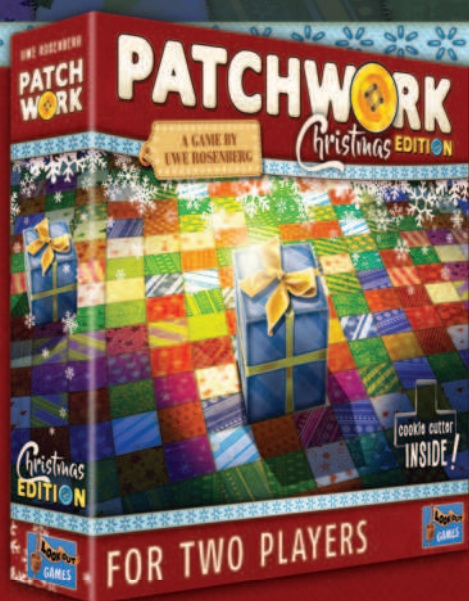
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15-30 minutes



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