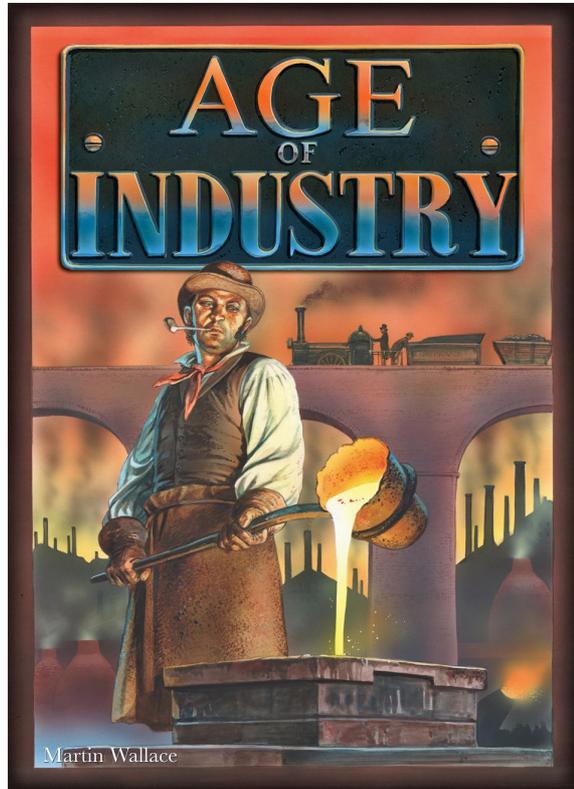


## Coal, Iron and Railroads

### *Age of Industry* reviewed by Pevans

Astute readers will have noticed that I'm something of a fan of Martin Wallace's games. *Age of Industry* is his latest. It's a business game that's a development of his earlier *Brass*. It's often referred to as *Brass-lite*, which I find a bit disparaging as it's certainly no lightweight. I had a bit of a problem with *Brass* as it is quite tricky to learn—everything seems to come in pairs, but each half of the pair works slightly differently. This makes it very easy to get things wrong. What Martin has done with *Age of Industry* is to streamline and simplify the game system a bit, while adding some new elements. However, I don't intend to review it in comparison with *Brass*. I'll treat it as a completely new game and then sum up the differences for *Brass* aficionados.



*Age of Industry* comes in the same chunky, A4 box as other recent Treefrog (formerly Warfrog) games. It has quite a heft to it, too. Inside is a high quality double-sided board, lots of cardboard pieces, a hefty deck of cards, plastic money and a few wooden cubes. There is also an A4 display for each player, one side of which is in English and the other in German. Players use this to lay out most of their pieces ready for playing onto the board. And, of course, there is a substantial rulebook with rules in both English and German.

The game is about the Industrial Revolution and the development of early industries. One side of the board shows Germany with connections to neighbouring countries, the other New England with shipping lines to the rest of the world. Both maps have a network of railway lines connecting cities, which have spaces for the player's square 'industry' tiles. Players build industries and connect them with railways—at a cost. They get money back by 'selling goods' in different ways from their industries. At the end of the game, they gain points for cash in hand, their railways and their industries. And the player with the most wins, of course.

Okay, let's start with the industries. There are six types of industry. Players start with a set of tiles in their colour: several for each industry in a number of 'technology levels'. These go on the players' displays in ascending order and can only be played in this order. The spaces on the display show the costs and rewards for each tile. Above each space is what is needed to build the tile, in dollars and raw



The New England board—note the only coal mines tucked away in Pennsylvania

materials (coal and/or iron). Below is the amount players get when the tile sells its goods and is flipped over. This is clearer than trying to cram all this information onto the tiles, though it does mean you need more space to set out and play the game.

Coal mines and iron works are the simplest industries. When you build one, you place coal or iron cubes on it, as appropriate. Players use the cubes when building other industries—as long as they can transport it to the building site. Once they've all gone, the tile is flipped over to show it's done its stuff and the owner gains the appropriate payout. Cotton mills and factories work in tandem with ports. They produce notional goods that are exported through ports as a player action, flipping the pair(s) of tiles. Finally, there are ships that, on the New England board, provide shipping lines to export markets (used like ports) and coal imports. These flip once the market and coal cubes have been used.

The other major component of the game is the deck of cards. The main use of these is to build an industry. They also control the length of the game—it ends when the

draw deck runs out and at least one player has used up their cards. They come in two distinct types: industry cards and location cards. The cities on the board are grouped by colour and symbol. Location cards have the same colour and symbol combinations and allow a player to build any industry in an area of the colour/symbol. Industry cards show a type of industry and allow players to build an industry of that type anywhere on the board—provided they have a railway line connected to that city or an industry in the city already (where they're allowed to have multiple tiles in a city).

As you can see, building industries is a key part of the game and is one of the actions players can take in their turn. Players have two actions per turn and half a dozen possible actions. Building an industry tile involves playing a suitable card, taking a tile from your display and placing it in an appropriate location on the board. I've already mentioned some of the restrictions on what you can place where. In addition, ports, coal mines and ships can only go on spaces printed with the appropriate symbol. And, if you need coal or iron (or both) to build the industry, there must be a connection to a source of the cubes on the board or to a port through which you can import them (at a price).

One important point is that you are allowed to build over existing industry tiles. You can always build over your own tiles, provided you do so with an industry of a higher technology level. All the building restrictions still apply, so you have to have the right card, be able to ship in coal and iron and so on. In particular, you must still follow what's printed on the space on the board. Hence only a coal mine can be built over a coal mine. However, you could build a mill over an iron works.

Phew! It may only be one action, but the restrictions on building an industry make it the trickiest part of the game—as well as the most useful. New players will need to go through these rules carefully so that they understand just what they can and can't do. Even then, you'll probably make some mistakes in your first couple of games. This is when you need a lenient approach from your fellow players, so that you can take back things that aren't working!

The second possible action is to build a railway link, connecting two cities. The restriction here is that you must have an industry in one of the cities or an existing railway line connecting to one of them. In addition, after your first, you'll need one iron and one coal to build each link, so you need the connections to bring these to where you're building. However, don't think this is a network game. Building a network can be useful, but you don't need a connection of your own to use a Location card. Hence, players tends to have several small networks around the board rather than having everything connected together.

I've already mentioned the "Sell goods" action as the way you flip over pairs of cotton mill/factory and port industries. In fact, in a single action, you can sell goods from (that is, flip) as many of your factories and cotton mills as you like. However, for each one you flip, you must also flip a port or market that is connected to the specific factory or cotton mill. The markets are on the edges of the board (on the

Germany map) or accessible via shipping lanes (in New England) and are used just like ports. However, nobody needs to build them and nobody gets any money for using them. One wrinkle here is that you can use other people's ports to sell your cotton/goods. In turn, this makes building ports for others to use a valid tactic.

The fourth action available to players is to develop their technology. This allows players to remove the lowest industry tile of one type from their display. Players' first factories and ships are of technology level 0 and cannot be built on the board. Hence the Develop action is the only way to get rid of these so that you can build the more valuable, higher level tiles. This applies to all the industries: you can develop away the lower, less valuable tiles. In addition, you must discard a card when taking this action, which can also be a useful thing to do.

Drawing two cards is the fifth action. Players start with a few cards, but have to use this action if they want any more (and they will or they won't be doing much in the game!). As well as the deck, two cards are face up and you can take either of these or a card from the top of the deck. Players are limited to holding nine cards and can't draw if they already have nine. As I've already said, you will need to draw cards several times during the game. However, doing this uses up an action, so timing is important. The cards available are important too. Generally, location cards are more valuable as they allow you to build without already having a connection to that location. The industry cards become more useful later on in the



A player display plus pieces

game when you have railway lines on the board and may want to overbuild an existing tile.

Finally, there is a pass action that allows you to discard a card. It's really only useful if the game is nearing its end and you want to get rid of a card or two.

You'll have noticed that I haven't mentioned money. That's because money is handled as part of the other actions. Players start with no money. That's right: you have nothing! Any time you want to spend money, you take a loan of \$10 from the bank. This isn't an action, you just take loans and cash as needed (luckily you don't need to provide collateral). Similarly, if you have the cash, you can repay a loan at any time. This is useful because you have to pay 10% interest on your loans at the end of every complete round. It is quite possible to take a loan to build something, flip it as your second action and have enough cash to repay your loan so that you don't pay interest. And end up with a little surplus.

Let me see, what haven't I mentioned? Oh yes: the money you spend each turn is put into a box next to your turn order disc. At the end of the round, the order of play is changed for the next round. Whoever spent most goes last, whoever spent least goes first. Any tied players retain their existing position. This is a neat mechanism that gives players something more to think about when deciding what to do each turn. A tactical trick when in last place is to spend less than everybody else. You then go first in the next round, effectively giving you four actions in a row.

The game ends at the end of a round when the cards have run out and at least one player has used all their cards. Players then get cash for their railway links, depending on the number of industries they connect. This gives a small incentive to connect the larger cities. They have a last chance to pay off any loans and then turn cash into victory points at the rate of \$5 for 1 VP. To this they add the technology level values of each industry they have on the board. If anyone is still stuck with loans, they cost 5 VPs each. And the player with the most points wins.



As you can see *Age of Industry* is a complex game and you'll need to play it a couple of times to be comfortable with the mechanics. Then comes the trickier challenge of winning! Clearly, you will get most victory points for the higher technology level industries. First, though, you'll need to build or develop the lower ones. Building seems to be the better option: developing takes an action and uses up a card (speeding up the game) for no reward. Building industries will bring you the cash that will make it easier to build the most valuable, most expensive tiles. It also helps if you're the only player building that type of industry so you're not competing directly.

The game's mechanics mean that it's advantageous to be able to take advantage of what other people have done. The most obvious example of this is building a railway to an unconnected city. If you don't use your second action to build something there, it's unlikely there'll still be a space left for you by your turn comes round again. Conversely, the player before you building a railway gives you an opening for building something. A corollary of this is that it's useful to have a wide selection of cards in your hand to give you plenty of scope for where you can build.

Loans are unavoidable in this game, but it seems to be best to keep these to a minimum. Building the smaller industries first enables you to pay off loans quickly and build up capital, reducing the amount of interest you have to pay. Unlike some of Martin's other games, taking massive loans does not seem to be a winning strategy. You are stuck with large interest payments and it can take quite a while to flip your industries—especially if other players don't help.

My experience of the game is that players tend to start around the edges of the board, building ports and cotton mills to generate some early cash. As the cities begin to fill up, more railways are built, expanding into the centre of the board. This and the higher level industries provoke demand for coal and iron. Building coal mines (or connecting to coal imports on the New England board) and iron works become a good way of earning quick cash. However, you need to get some higher value industries on the board to stand a chance of winning—just building low value industries will mean you don't need too many loans, but won't bring you too many points.

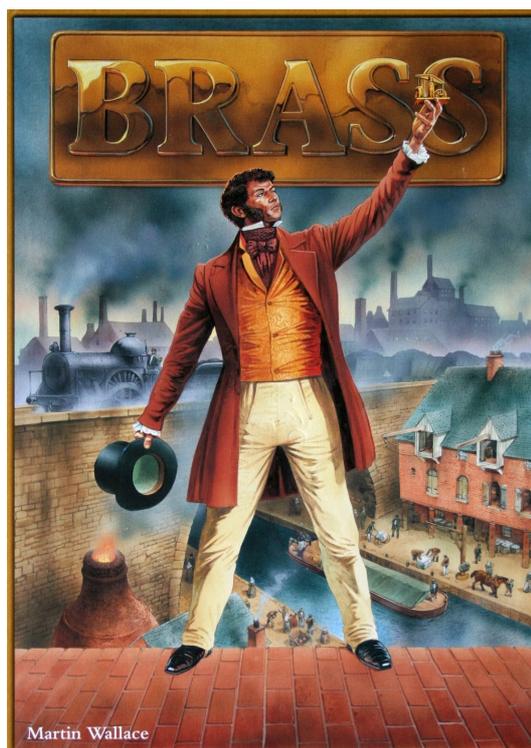
As the board begins to fill up, it becomes harder to find spaces to build. Overbuilding your tiles becomes more attractive. You are, of course, losing the victory points of the original tile when you do this. Hence, it's generally only worth doing if you will be able to flip the new tile and earn extra points from the cash. You should also keep an eye on the number of cards left and how many players have in their hands. It doesn't do to be caught out by the end of the game!

## A few words for *Brass* players

*Age of Industry* is recognisably a development of *Brass* and Martin has done a good job of streamlining the game, removing some of the more cumbersome bits that got in the way. Despite this the game retains a lot of the same feel while playing quite

differently and offering players different challenges. The first thing is: no canal age. This game is all about railways. Nor is there an income track—you just get cash—and no need for a victory point track as you only score points at the end of the game.

Third, location cards refer to an area rather than a specific city, making them more flexible. While some industries are still restricted to specific locations, there's more flexibility for the others as they can be played on any blank industry space. What's more, these industries can be overbuilt with something different. Shipyards have gone, replaced by shipping lines on the New England board. And there is a sixth industry, factories, which are a variant on cotton mills. This gives players a strategic choice of going for one or the other.



While the length of the game still depends on how quickly the cards are used up, it is not the rigid structure of *Brass*. Many actions do not require a card to be played. Taking loans is no longer an action, but is just done whenever necessary, and loans now attract interest, rather than reducing income, and can be paid off. Conversely, drawing cards is an action and when to do so becomes a tactical consideration in the way that when to take loans is in *Brass*.

The external market mechanism has been replaced with external market tokens around the edges of the board that are used like ports. Again, this has much the same effect, but is simpler. However, you don't earn any money from flipping market tiles. Also simplified are the rules for transporting coal and iron: you need a railway line for both. (I never understood why there was a distinction in *Brass*.) In *Age of Industry* you only get rid of one tile when you develop an industry. It also costs a card rather than an iron cube, so there's a very different tactical impact. Developing industries is done more sparingly than in *Brass*.

In *Age of Industry* you don't get victory points for your railways. Instead you get cash, which converts to points, but you're generally only getting a single point for each railway link. This makes quite a difference to strategy. Industries are also worth fewer points than in *Brass*, but most of your points will probably come from industries. Particularly as you score points for them whether they've flipped or not.

## In conclusion

All in all, *Age of Industry* is a terrific game. There's a bit of a learning curve for new players to climb, but it's worth doing for a game that gives you plenty to think about

and some tough decisions. It is sufficiently different from *Brass* to provide a different challenge—and some traps for those who are used to the older game. While it is a complex game, it is simpler and plays faster than *Brass*. It is another cracking business game from Martin Wallace and gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

*Age of Industry was designed by Martin Wallace and is published by Treefrog Games. It is a strategy board game for 3-5 players, aged 13+ and takes a couple of hours to play. It is available direct from Treefrog (at [www.treefroggames.com](http://www.treefroggames.com)) and in selected shops.*

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This review was first published in *To Win Just Once* 109 (October 2010)