# All for one and one for all

## Pevans looks at co-operative games

My current infatuation with *Robinson Crusoe* got me thinking about co-operative games in general. At first glance, it's a contradiction in terms. Surely the idea of a game is to compete – and win! – against the other players, isn't it? With a co-operative game, the players have to work as a team. Their opponent is the game system and the players win or lose as a group. For my money, this means the game has to have bags of atmosphere and must be a tough test – with a very real chance that the players can lose. It is a very different approach to gameplay, but one I enjoy – in moderation.

It must be some 25 years ago that I remember playing *Sauerbaum* (it was a nominee for the 1987 *Spiel des Jahres*). Designed by Johannes Tranelis and published by Herder Spiele, this is a delightfully simple game of trying to defend a tree from acid rain. The acid rain arrives in the form of drops – blue discs – which start at the top of the tree and work down. Players move their pawns according to the roll of the dice, aiming to remove the raindrops. The trick is for players to make the best use of their moves and clear the acid faster than it arrives. As I recall, this was a tricky job with no guarantee that the players would win. There wasn't too much atmosphere, but it was a delight to play.

However, *Sauerbaum* is far from being the first co-operative game, as a quick look on BoardGameGeek will show. In particular, Jim Deacove has been designing co-operative games for decades. His games are aimed at children and families and are published by Family Pastimes in Canada and Zonnespel (Sunny Games, whose trademark is their bright yellow boxes) in the Netherlands. I've played several of these, including *Max the Cat*, which is probably the best known. This is great fun, as the players try to get various small critters home without falling prey to the eponymous Max. A meta-game element is persuading small boys (and me!) not to walk creatures straight into Max's jaws.
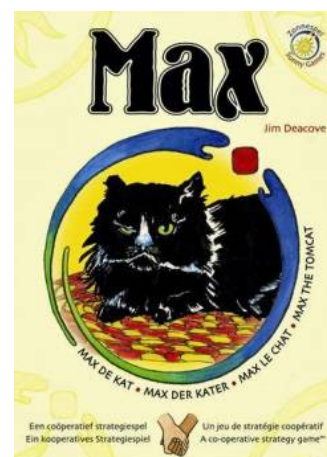
The catalyst for the more recent crop of co-operative games, aimed at gamers, has to be Reiner Knizia's *Lord of the Rings* (published by Sophisticated Games and others) in 2000. This game is a *tour de force*. When I first played it, I didn't

really notice that it was co-operative rather than competitive. I was just bowled over by the brilliant way the game reproduces the plot and atmosphere of the book, puts some serious obstacles in the way of the players and keeps increasing the pressure as players are pulled into the thrall of the Dark Lord. It is brilliant.
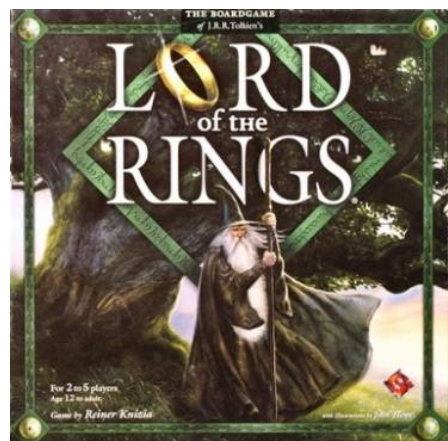
After playing it a few times, however, I began to feel constrained by the plot. There is no way of avoiding the set-pieces taken from the book. Players know which encounters they can take more of a risk with

Shadows over Camelot: three catapults threaten and the Knights have won two white swords

and where they can afford to take 'damage'. In other words, experienced players begin to play the system rather than the game. This is true of any game, of course, but I feel it particularly damages a game like this, which you play for the experience as much as anything else. What *Lord of the Rings* did was to show games designers and players that you could have a serious, challenging co-operative game. It remains a terrific game, though, and I was surprised to see that its rating on BGG is below 7.

What happened next – as far as I'm concerned – was *Shadows over Camelot*. Okay, it was a few years later (2005) that Bruno Cathala and Serge Laget's game appeared from Days of Wonder. Here there is no plot to constrain the players. Instead, there are several quests – get Excalibur, defeat the Black Knight, find the Holy Grail – and the knights choose when to deal with which quest. They also choose who will deal with each. This provides an individual element to the game. The players decide as a team who will do what, but each player gets to do their own thing. However, while the knights are dealing with some foes, other threats are getting more urgent. In particular, the constant Saxon attacks on Camelot put the players under real pressure in deciding which quest to deal with and when to divert forces to stop the Saxons.

The other feature of *Shadows over Camelot* is, of course, the traitor. It is entirely possible that one of the players is actually working for the downfall of Arthur. Thus, while players are discussing who does what each round, they are also eying each other suspiciously. Ignominiously failing in a quest may be the sign of a traitor, or it may just be incompetence (that's me!). This clever mechanism puts more pressure on the players – particularly the one traitor. For me, this game isn't as atmospheric as *Lord of the Rings*. While it does a decent job of presenting elements of Arthurian legend, I don't find it as immersive an experience. It's still a cracking game, though.
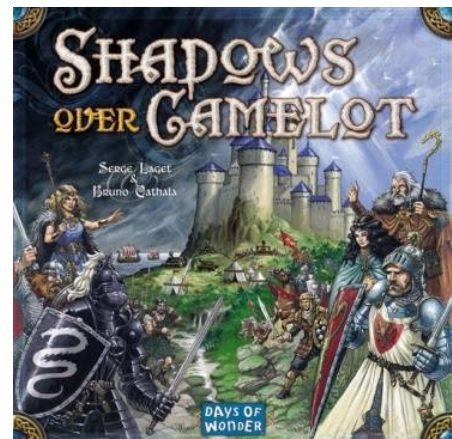
And then there was *Pandemic*. My feeling is that it was Matt Leacock's 2008 game from Z-Man Games (and others) that really kicked off the wave of co-operative games we've had in the last few years. As the name suggests, *Pandemic* is about fighting viruses that threaten mankind across the world. The game has deceptively simple mechanisms, one of which is the clever way in which outbreaks tend to be reinforced rather than diluted when re-cycling cards that have already been played. (Essentially, discards go on top of the deck rather than being shuffled in.)
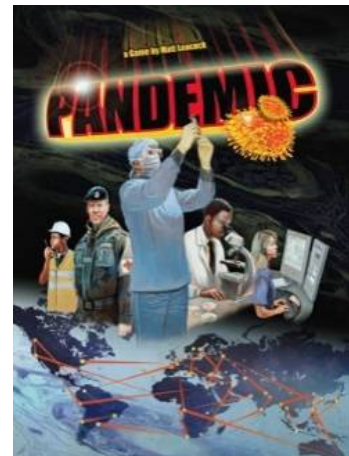
The sense of jeopardy is huge in *Pandemic*. Sudden outbreaks put the players under pressure and you can feel the tension as cards are drawn when the players are on the limit. The atmosphere is enhanced by each player having a different 'character', with particular abilities and strengths. This can make it obvious which player should do what, but often it's the nearest player who has to deal with an outbreak, not the character best-suited to the job.
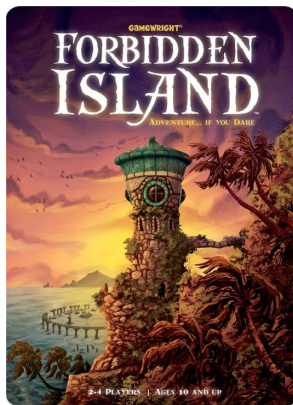
Pandemic's success continues with several expansions and Matt has developed the mechanisms of the game into two family-orientated games: *Forbidden Island* (Gamewright et al, 2010) and *Forbidden Desert* (Gamewright et al, 2013). These are both terrific games for family play (I've got plenty of use out of my copy of *Forbidden Island*), but with gamers I'd go for *Pandemic* every time. For me, it stands out because of the simplicity of the mechanisms and the pressure it puts the players under.

I should mention *Battlestar Galactica* here (designed by Corey Konieczka and published by Fantasy Flight Games and others), since it came out in 2008 as well. Never having seen the TV show (in either incarnation), the theme doesn't have the appeal for me that it has for many. The one time I've played the game, it suffered from having one player who'd played umpteen times and thus knew what was best and ordered everybody else about — an issue with any co-operative game. It's worth noting, though, that its big feature, apart from setting, is the traitor mechanism first seen in *Shadows over Camelot*.
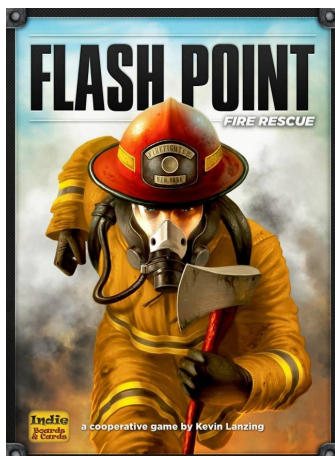
The next co-operative that caught my attention was *Flash Point: Fire Rescue* from Indie Boards and Cards in 2011. Strictly speaking, Kevin Lanzing's original game was *Flash Point* in 2010, re-developed for Indie. I was taken with this because I think the theme – fighting fires and rescuing people – is a good fit with co-operative play. The game does an

Playing *Flash Point: Fire Rescue* – it looks like we have the fire contained…

excellent job of providing atmosphere and putting the players in jeopardy – you just never know where the next flashpoint will be. The mechanisms are not as clever as Pandemic, but again you have the different roles and the feel of a team working together. This is one game where I have my own private goal: rescuing the cat! My introduction to the game is in my report from the 2012 Gathering of Friends and in *TWJO* 124, May 2012.
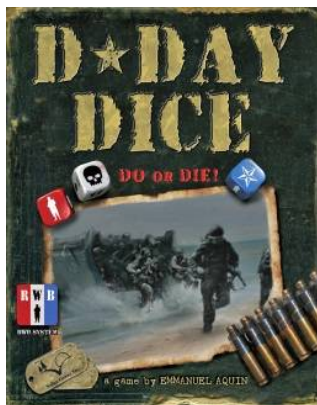
The production version of Emmanuel Aquin's *D-Day Dice* came out in 2012, from Valley Games. This is another game I've only played once, but I was hugely impressed with it. As the name suggests, it's about the 1944 D-Day landings in Normandy with the players as a team of soldiers fighting their way up a beach under fire. The game system pulls no punches – having only just managed to get halfway up the beach, aware that things were going to get worse, I knew we were dead! It delivers bags of atmosphere and huge pressure in a small box with a few dice.

Then last year, I was introduced to *Robinson Crusoe: Adventure on Cursed Island* (see my report from the 2013 Gathering or *TWJO* 135, June 2013). Designed by Ignacy Trzewiczek and published by Portal Games (and others, including Z-Man Games for the English language edition), this is in some ways the antithesis of *Pandemic*. *Pandemic* has simple mechanisms and a global stage.
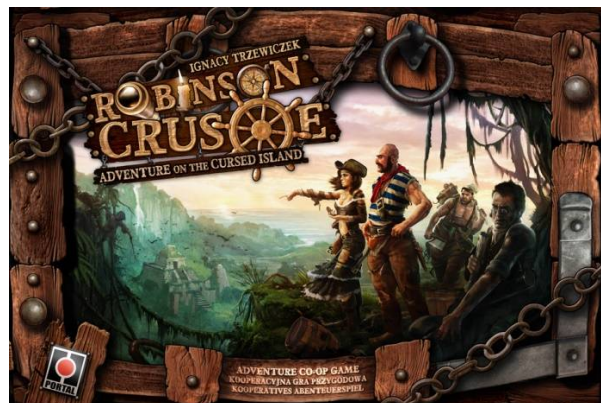
Robinson Crusoe has complex rules and is about a small group on (part of) an island. What they both have is a strong theme, bags of atmosphere and a very demanding challenge.

Robinson Crusoe continues the mechanism of each player taking a character with different strengths and abilities – I'm surprised none of the expansions has added more characters as the game only comes with four. It puts the players under pressure right from the start: you need a shelter or you'll lose life points overnight. You need food or you'll all lose life points overnight. But where do you get them? Which should be first priority? The strength of the game is that it feels like a team effort: deciding what to do and then doing it. It is a terrific game that I am really enjoying playing – and losing!

That's my quick trip through the rise of co-operative games. I'm aware that I missed out a lot – particularly the crop of zombie games. The theme of the surviving humans fighting off the zombie hordes is an obvious match for co-operative play, but I'm not a fan of the zombie genre (or wasn't, until *The Walking Dead* appeared on a TV channel I can see!). So let me know what games I've missed and which are your favourite co-operative games.