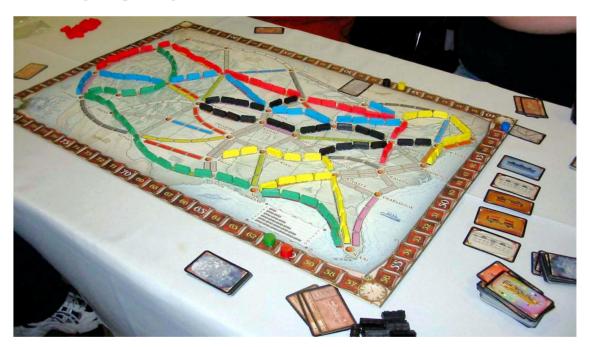# All aboard!

Pevans reviews *Ticket to Ride*

Zug am Zug, the German language edition of **Ticket to Ride**, has just been awarded Germany's prestigious *Spiel des Jahres* (Game of the Year) prize, which is as good a reason as any to review it. This is a first for publisher Days of Wonder – a US company that's only just over two years old – though not for designer Alan Moon. Congratulations to both.

But you want to know about the game. **Ticket to Ride** is about railway routes between cities across the USA. These are pre-printed on the map. You claim them by playing a set of cards and putting plastic train pieces in your colour on the board along the route. So, each turn has a basic decision. Do you pick up more cards or put some down to claim a route? That's not too difficult, so turns tend to move pretty quickly. Usually you get several turns of players picking up cards and eyeing each other. Then someone cracks and claims a route. A flurry of card playing follows as players claim routes they need – or just have the cards for. Then it goes quiet again…

There is some strategy behind this. Okay, you get points for every route you have. The longer the route, the more it's worth. A route with room for just one train is only worth 1 point. The longest routes, with spaces for six pieces, score 15 points. However, to get them you need a set of six cards in the same 'suit' (shown by a colour, a symbol and a picture of a particular railway wagon). Not only that, but the cards must be the same colour as the route – though a lot of shorter routes are neutral and can be taken by a set of any colour. This means you collect cards with some purpose. If you're looking for a six-card set in red, each red card is valuable. And it's worrying if someone else collects red cards.

The strategy element is why this is worrying. On top of the points gained for each route, players score bonuses at the end of the game. These can be very significant in deciding who wins (the player with the most points, natch). So, although scores are accumulated during the game, you can't be sure just who's got how many points.

The first bonus is simply for the player who has the longest line of trains connected together. You can only trace one route, so branch lines don't count – though a loop does. There's thus an incentive to connect your routes on the board and to get as many trains on the board as possible. However, this bonus is only 10 points, which is not usually significant in times of overall score.

The other bonus is for completing 'Tickets'. These show two cities (San Francisco and Chicago, say). If you have a line of your trains between these two, no matter how circuitous, you score the points on the card. (Hands up everyone who's saying **Trans America** at this point. Yes, this is a similar mechanism, but here it's only one part of the game.) The greater the distance between the two cities, the greater the points. However, if you have a ticket and no route, you lose that number of points. A distinct incentive to finish those routes! This is why players want specific routes. It's also a reason for completing the short routes, despite the few points they're worth in themselves.

The Tickets also mean you have a third option for what to do on your turn. Instead of either picking up or playing cards, you can take some new Tickets. You pick up three and must keep one of them – though you can keep all three if you want to. My approach is to buy Tickets early on. I keep those that are roughly complementary (for example, LA to Chicago fits neatly into LA to New York) and build routes to complete these connections. Of course, this does give other people the opportunity to block my connections. Not too likely, as you don't have to follow a set route, but it is certainly possible to be shut out of a city.

Another approach, which another Swiggers regular advocates, is to grab some long routes to start with. This scores you plenty of points. Then take some Tickets and keep those that fit with the routes you've already built. The advantage of this is that the only routes you **have** to take are the connections between what you already have. On the other hand, there's always the "do you feel lucky?" strategy: trust to luck and take Tickets towards the end of the game. The right Tickets are then worth lots of points, if you get them? The Tickets are, of course, a luck element in the game. Being able to throw two away when you pick three gives a way of getting round the bad luck. But being able to keep all three means that good luck is really good news. Whichever way you play it, you can't afford to ignore the Tickets.

So the game plays pretty quickly. It ends when one player has only one or two train pieces left. Everybody gets one more chance to play and that's it. A couple of things follow from this. First off, it means players will generally get to play almost all their pieces. That sounds like good news, but do keep track of how

many pieces you have left. You don't want to have great networks in West and East, but not have the pieces you need to connect them! Second, you need to keep an eye on how many pieces everybody else has left. You don't want to be caught out by the game finishing unexpectedly.

Okay, what have I not mentioned yet? In good Alan Moon style, some cards in **Ticket to Ride** are face up. You have a choice of picking up a face-up card, so you know what you're getting, or a card off the top of the deck. You pick up two cards in your turn. Except that some of the cards are wild (they're locomotives rather than wagons and are a rainbow of colours) and can be played in any set. If you pick up one of these from the face-up selection, you can't take a second card.

And that's it. The mechanics of the game make it easy to play. You have to make some decisions, but they don't need a lot of pondering. There's a luck element, but it doesn't overwhelm the skill. It plays in around an hour. A definition of a *Spiel des Jahres* game? One thing it doesn't have is much interaction between players. Not an issue as far as I'm concerned, but this is not the game to play if you want interaction.

Ticket to Ride will feel familiar to veteran gamers, as there are mechanisms and variations of mechanisms that Alan Moon has used before. All in all, it's a good, middleweight game that will probably get a lot of play at games clubs and conventions. My only (minor) quibble is the scoring track round the edge of the board. It goes up to 80 points, while scores in the games I've played often go above 150. The producers don't seem to have made provision for this, which prompts me to wonder whether they realised the sorts of scores gamers would get in this game.

Ticket to Ride was designed by Alan R Moon and is published by Days of Wonder. It is a board game for 2-5 players, aged 8+, with a playing time of 30-60 minutes. It is readily available in UK games shops at around £30.

Pevans rates it 8/10 on his very subjective scale.

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