

## UK Games Expo 2008

### Pevans went to Brum for the second Expo

After the success of last year's first event, the second UK Games Expo took place over the weekend of 31st May and 1st June this year. The venue was the same: the Clarendon Suites in Birmingham. This is a fascinating building. Despite having lots of large rooms, it is a real warren, spread over several floors. You go down a corridor, look round a room, go back, down another corridor and find you've come back into the same room. But the next corridor will take you into a little cubbyhole. I think I managed to find all the bits, but I can't be sure.

The building is a Masonic centre and is richly decorated and furnished, in particular with Masonic regalia and memorabilia. This makes it an intriguing setting for a bunch of gamers – though the event aims to draw in a wider audience and, to some extent, succeeds. Pride of place this year was given to a replica of the Tardis and we had a Doctor Who look-alike running around, along with the odd Dalek. I presume this was part of the launch of the *Doctor Who RPG*. There was also a squad of *Star Wars* stormtroopers (one of whom was a little short) led by 'Boba Fett' and escorting 'Princess Leia'. I'm not sure what they were doing there, though I do seem to recall that they were there last year. The various role-playing events going on meant there were plenty of other people wandering around in costume, too.

My weekend was spent demonstrating games on the JKLM Games tables. The good thing is that this put me in the middle of the main board games area. The bad thing is that I didn't have time to play other games or look around. Luckily I was in the middle of the main board games area and I did get away at the end for a quick look round. So here's a round-up of the 2008 Games Expo from my perspective.

The things I can tell you most about, of course, are the games I was demonstrating. The main one was a pre-production copy of *Galactic Emperor* from new US publisher Crosscut Games. This drew a lot of gamers through the weekend. The general response was very favourable, with the game being characterised as *Twilight Imperium*-light or *Twilight Imperium* meets *Puerto Rico*. It's a good ten years since I played *Twilight Imperium*, but the similarity of theme is clear. Even more obvious are the borrowings from *Puerto Rico*, for which there is an acknowledgement in the rules.

The idea of the game is that players are vying for the empty throne of the galactic empire. They start in separate corners and expand the area they control (playing hexagonal tiles onto the board to add extra planets). They also build up their resources and spaceships. As the players' holdings begin to merge (which happens more quickly, the more players there are), the fighting starts. You can win outright by having all your 'ownership' tokens on the board at the end of a turn. My experience is that this is pretty difficult to achieve, so it will only happen if one



player is running away with the game. In this case the others probably want it to end quickly.

More usually, the game ends when the allocated victory point chits have all been taken. Depending on what triggers this, there may be a final scoring and a few bonus points, after which the player with the most points wins. The game is said to take 90 minutes to play and the demo games were certainly completing in under two hours, despite the learning involved.

The way the turns play is by players choosing roles. In *Puerto Rico* style, each player gets to carry out each role with a bonus for the player who picked it. They key roles are the Warlord and the Regent. The former allows players to move their fleets – and start fights (taking over a planet scores a victory point). The latter provokes political struggles for control of the planets. It also allows players to (try to) take over as first player and everybody scores victory points (for the planets they currently control).

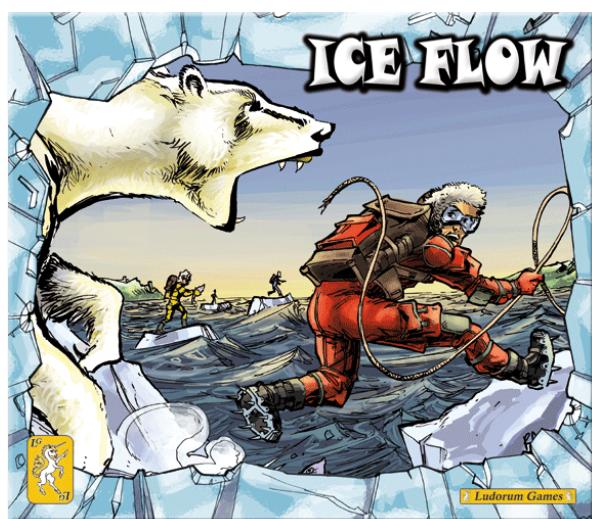
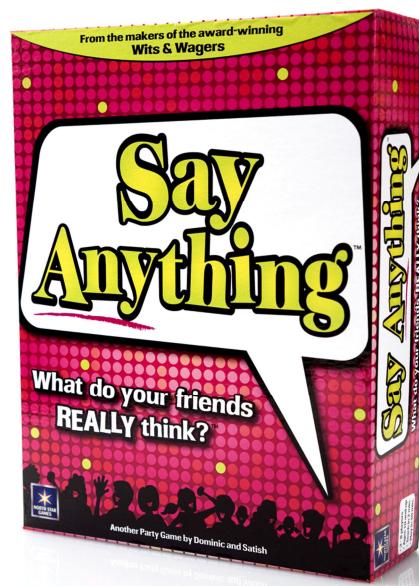
The game plays as you'd expect with an emphasis on exploration and development in the early turns. This switches to warfare in the later turns. The game system makes attack easier (and more rewarding) than defence. However, losing spaceships makes you a target – unless you can quickly build them again. The game works well and was well received at the Expo. It has just been launched in the US and should be available in Europe early in August. Oh, and it has neat spaceship pieces too.

The other pre-production game I was demonstrating at the Expo was *Say Anything*, the new party game from the designers and publisher of *Cluzzle* and *Wits & Wagers*. I'm rather taken with *Wits & Wagers* and *Say Anything* is in the same mould. Each player writes down their answer to a question, such as "If you could have a BIG anything, what would it be?" These are revealed and everybody secretly selects their favourite. Then everybody bets on which answer the other players have chosen. It's a clever idea and can be great fun, though I feel it's a little over-complicated.

I demonstrated a few games of *Ice Flow* as well. This is Ludorum Games's new game and is jointly published with JKLM. The idea of this is that players have a team of explorers who are trying to get from their bases in Alaska across the Bering Strait to Siberia (though nobody can tell me why). They do this by hopping from ice floe to ice floe, using ropes to climb over the cliff edges and fish to distract the polar bears. Each turn, players move one of their explorers (or sit still and use rope to do some ice fishing) and may pick up a fish or some rope (they can only carry three things in their rucksack). They also move, rotate or add an ice floe on the board – either before or after moving their explorer.

It's the components that really make the game, though. The ice floes are clear, blue plastic hexagons with some straight and some jagged edges. And there are nice wooden polar bears! The whole ensemble looks very attractive. Playing the game is about looking for the best positions of ice floes for moving your explorers. The problem is that a clear route is open to your competitors as well. Hence it's useful to be able to shift an ice floe after your move to close the route on anybody else. First to get all their explorers across wins the game. I find it a bit dry, but it went down well at the Expo, with games running all the time on both the JKLM and Ludorum tables. It was voted 'Best New Board Game' by the visitors to the show – just like Ludorum's first game, *Fagin's Gang*, last year.

JKLM's other joint production is *Confucius* with Surprised Stare Games. This is a board game designed by Alan Paull and set in Imperial China. The game is essentially about politics: players represent families striving to gain preferment. This they can do in three different areas: getting family members into the Ministries of



Government; raising military units and conquering foreign lands; and building junks and exploring. Intriguingly, the key to the game is giving gifts to the other players. This creates obligations, preventing players from opposing you – and sometimes forcing them to help!

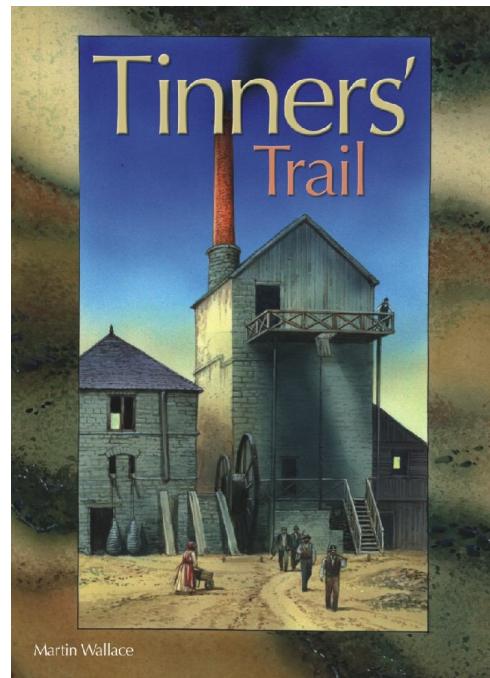
*Confucius* sounds a very interesting game. Sadly, I haven't got to play it yet. Even more unfortunately, only a few sample copies were available for the Expo. The suppliers failed to provide enough of one particular playing piece, so only a few complete copies could be made up. At the time of writing these have still not been supplied, but an alternative source has been found and the game should be available in quantity in August. I look forward to it.

Next to Surprised Stare were the Ragnar Brothers with their latest, *Monastery*. This is another good-looking game with some nicely-sculpted monks as playing pieces. This is another game I haven't played yet, but it looks really interesting. The whole thing is constructed around the elements of monastic life in the Middle Ages. Game turns follow the canonical hours and are divided into 'Study', 'Toil' and 'Service' rounds plus a 'Night' round. Players extend the monastery by adding tiles and using their monks to construct buildings. Each round they accumulate points from the various things their monks are doing. The points are used for letter tiles with any excess turned in for 'blessings'. Blessings are worth victory points, but it's the letters that are worth most to players. They are used to complete the player's fragment of the last phrase of the Lord's Prayer (in Latin, natch) that is the monastery's motto.

There seem to be a lot of tactical options in the game: which tiles to play, which buildings to construct, where to deploy your monks, how to use your points and which letters to take. This last is not just about what you need, but how you can mess up other players. All these options and the several layers of the game have me very intrigued. Now I just have to find time to play it!

Across the room from the Ragnars was Martin Wallace and the Warfrog team with Martin's latest. This is the first of the Treefrog line, which is intended to be a series of lighter games than the usual Warfrog fare. Each is to be published in a strictly limited edition with just wooden pieces. A fascinating idea and the first game, *Tinners' Trail*, is a good start. The setting is 19th century Cornwall and the boom in the tin (and copper) mining industry.

The game has some clever mechanisms. To start with, each action takes time and the player who takes the next action is the one with the most time left for the turn. The key action is getting



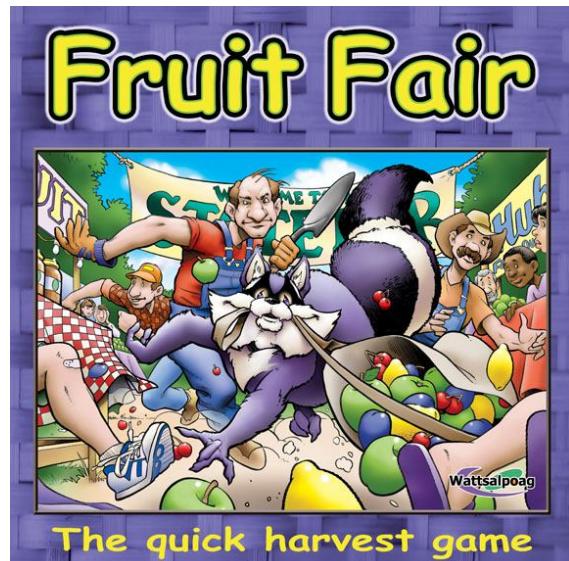
the mining rights for an area of Cornwall – though these have to be auctioned between the players. As well as copper and tin, each mine will contain water, reflecting the problems the real life miners faced. In the game, this is what it costs to get metal out of the mine. Players can also buy various improvements to remove water. At the end of the turn, they must sell what they've mined and invest the money. These are what earn victory points – though players need to keep money for the next turn. *Tinners' Trail* does a good job of meeting the expectations of a Treefrog game. It's clever, medium-weight and very nicely produced.

The Wattsalpoag team had made the trip from the USA to launch their new game: *Fruit Fair*. I had forgotten what a neat little game this is (I played the prototype at Spiel last year). It's essentially a card game: players assign their workers to the four types of fruit. Workers either pick fruit, which players collect, or plant fruit for next turn. Players can cash in fruit to collect prizes that are worth victory points. However, a special ability goes to the player with the most of each type of fruit, so players also have an incentive to hang on to what they've picked. And one of the abilities gives some control over which ability goes with which fruit. The game plays until most of the prizes have been collected and the most points wins. It's not a particularly deep game, but it is a neat game with some tactical subtleties.

*Not Tonight, Josephine* comes from further afield: Australia, in fact. That's the origin of this good looking history trivia game, which I first saw at the Toy Fair in 2005. The game is an entertaining collection of fascinating historical facts. It's still a pretty standard trivia game, though.

At the Expo for a second year was *Symbotica*. This is a neat, children's game with brightly-coloured cards that are played into a grid, matching on colour and symbol. Another re-appearance was Shaun Derrick and *The World Cup Game*, now with three expansions – including Euro 2008 – and with more on the way.

My last minute dash round the rest of the show identified a couple more new games scattered around the show. *Solairis* is a card game of duelling magicians from Myndgames. Players use power cards to fuel their spells in an effort to reduce their opponent's life points. This makes it sound like an imitation of *Magic: the Gathering*, but this is a much simpler game and without the collectible aspects of Magic. Although the publisher bills Solairis as a collectible game with expansion sets due out later this year. I have a copy in my 'to play' pile and look forward to trying it out.



*Identity Crisis!* was voted Best New Quiz Game at the show and was still popular even as the show was closing. The game builds on the old parlour game of sticking a name on people's foreheads and having them work out who they are by asking questions of everybody else. *Identity Crisis!* is more structured and provides information about the people to assist with answering the questions. Players progress through a sequence of person, object, place and animal with the winner being the first to identify all their identities. Play is controlled by position on a board, which decides what questions players can ask. It looks an entertaining game that puts a new slant on an old concept.



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