

Collecting cheese

Last Train to Wensleydale reviewed by Pevans

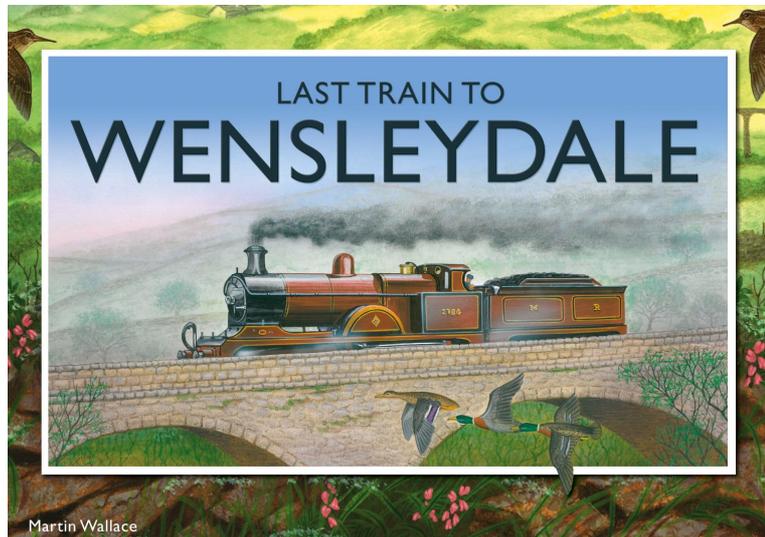
There's nothing new about a railway game from Martin Wallace—except that Martin continues to surprise us by coming up with something different. And *Last Train from Wensleydale* is certainly different. The game is about the short-lived railway companies in the Yorkshire Dales that acted as feeder lines for the two major railway companies' routes into the area. However, these railways can't make money long-term.

The owners' strategy is thus to grab the immediate profits and sell out to the big companies. You can quickly see that this will make for an interesting game.

As I mentioned in my report from Spiel, the board has a really gaudy colour scheme to represent the landscape. The livid red lobes are the Dales themselves. The bilious yellow bits between are the valleys and the lurid green is the surrounding pasture land. All of these are divided into discrete areas. To set the board, players draw white and orange cubes at random and place them on the mountain and pasture areas. Then any white cubes (representing stone quarried from the mountains) are removed from the pastures and orange ones (Wensleydale cheese produced by dairies on the pastures) from the hills. What's left is available for the railway companies to ship and earn money from. My advice is not to let me do this or you'll end up with a very sparsely-populated board. However, the distribution of resources is part of the game. You need to take account of this when planning what you're going to do.

Next onto the board are the people. These come in three colours and are placed on the towns around the board. The white ones are local people opposed to the railway coming to their town. They have to be removed in order to build a line into that area. The others (red and green) welcome the railway and want to travel to a mainline station (town) of the same colour. As the distribution of these is random again, some will be close to where they want to go while others will be in the far corner. As with the goods cubes, the game will be easier or harder, depending on just where the pieces are.

Central to the game are tracks on the board that show how much influence players have in different areas. The white one is influence with the Government, allowing



players to remove objectors from the board. It also governs the order in which players lay railway track on the board. Brown influence points are used to 'hire' trains each turn and to decide the order in which players do this. You need these to transport goods and passengers, gaining income for that turn and victory points at the end of the game. This is the most important track and players are allowed to use other influence to buy brown points—though it costs 3 to buy 1 brown. Players use red and green influence to persuade the major companies to buy their railway lines.

At the start of each turn, players gain 'investment' cubes (representing small investors in the company) and use these to get extra influence points. There is a grid of eight squares, each showing a number of influence points in different colours. A random extra point is added to each square. Players take turns to bid for a square, overbidding any previous bid, until each player has two undisputed squares. They gain these influence points, adjusting their markers on the tracks and setting the order of play for laying railway track and hiring trains.

Which influence points you bid for will depend on what you want to do that turn. White and brown points are always useful, so everybody wants them. Whether you want red or green points depends on which railway you want to buy your lines. Though there is an argument that any points are good, provided you can choose when to use them—and have enough when you need them. The key is that you need to have a plan for the turn (at least) at this point so that you know what points you want to bid for. How much you bid is more difficult to work out... However, you also want to hang on to some cubes for building railway lines.

Then it's time to build a railway line. Players can build one contiguous line, which can be as long as they like, provided they can pay for it—with investment cubes and any spare influence. They lay track segments, each connecting two areas: a segment costs one cube/point if both are pasture, anything else costs two. Players also have to use white influence points to remove any white pieces from the areas and red or green points to connect to a mainline station. The aim here is to connect to areas that contain cheese, stone or passengers in order to ship them. This is why turn order is important—though other people can build into the same areas (as long as it's not the exact same route) and grab things first.

This makes the player order for hiring and using trains important too. Only nine trains are available, each carrying a different combination of goods (stone or cheese) and passengers. They cost more (in brown influence) the more they carry and each can only be taken by one player. Players take it in turns to either reserve a train or to take a goods cube or passenger piece from the board and place it on one of their trains. This is where you can steal a march on someone who's built into the same areas as you.

There's no actual income in this game. Instead, players add up what they've shipped this turn and subtract the number of track segments they have on the board. The result is used to move their marker on the profit/loss track. There's plenty of room for losses! The positions of players' markers set the order of play for the start of the

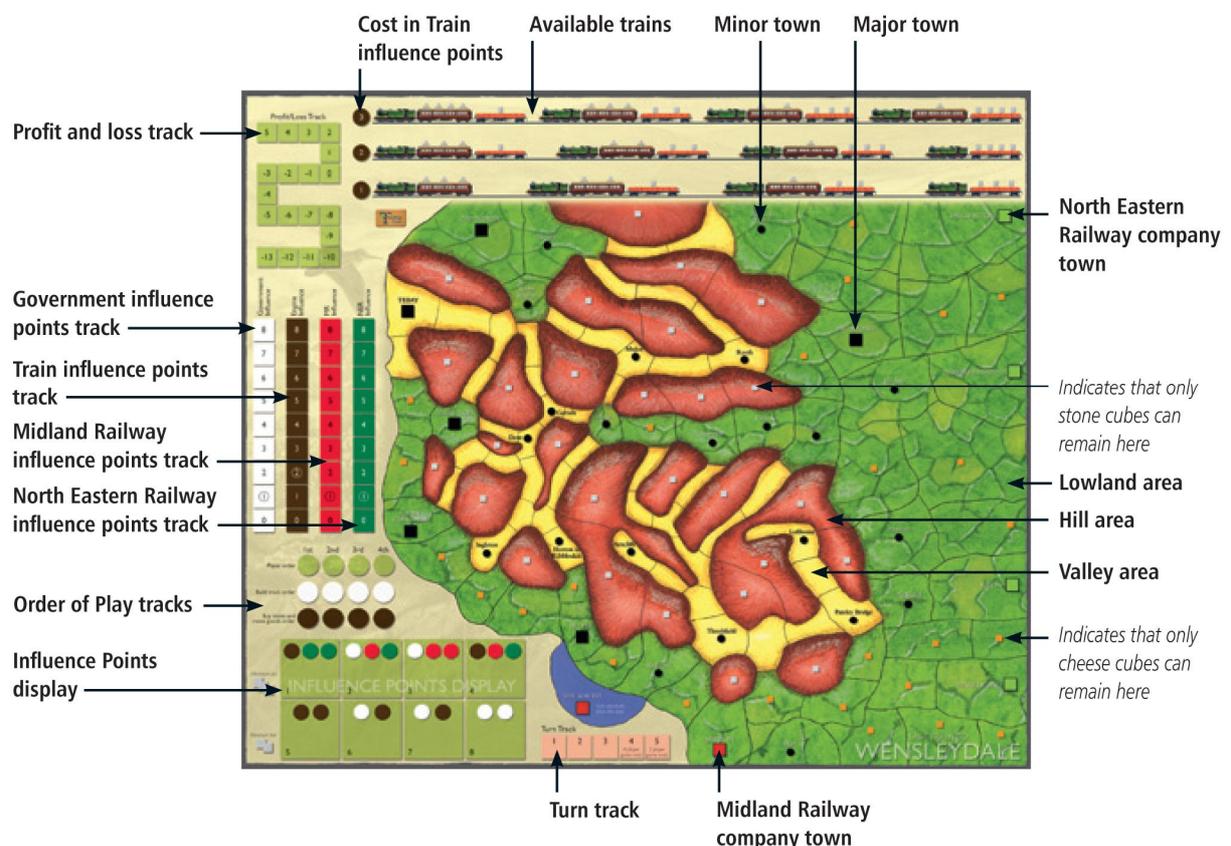
next turn. Players' final profit/loss position is also victory points at the end of the game. It is perfectly possible to be in profit through the game only to make a stonking loss on the last turn. This can be significant in terms of the final scores.

The final action in each turn is to sell track to the major companies. You can sell one contiguous line of track that starts and ends at a town. It costs an influence point of the appropriate colour for each two track segments sold. After four turns (in a four-player game, five if there are three players), players score points. They get a point for each item they've shipped plus a bonus for each set of four (a passenger of each colour, a cheese cube and a stone cube). To this they add their final profit/loss position and subtract the number of track segments they have on the board. The player with the most points wins, of course.

The most obvious thing here is that having railway lines on the board is bad news. In particular, they are a double whammy at the end of the game, reducing your profit, which affects your victory points, and then being subtracted from your points as well. My approach is thus to build disposable railways—build them, use them for one turn and sell them. However, the alternative approach of holding on to track until the last turn can pay off.

The key to the game is definitely taking a careful look at what pieces are where on the board at the start of the game. It's simple to spot the easy pickings, but you

The Board



should also see what else you may be able to reach, perhaps with several turns' effort. The bonus points for sets of pieces can be useful, so it's worth looking for ways to collect sets. However, it's easy to get more points than the bonus by picking up lots of pieces, so you do need to consider your options.

The trickiest thing is getting points in the last turns. If the initial set-up has been sparse, there may not be much left to collect. And if the distribution was awkward, there may not be anything worth collecting. In some cases, the best course in the final turn is to do nothing. I find this rather disappointing. One of the things I expect from a game is that it will involve me all the way through and give me significant decisions to make. Having nothing to do for 25% of the time (in a four-player game) is not what I expect.

That aside, *Last Train from Wensleydale*, is an entertaining game that poses some interesting problems for the players. It is definitely a different sort of railway game, too. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Last Train to Wensleydale was designed by Martin Wallace and published, as a limited edition (each copy numbered and signed) in the Treefrog Line, by Warfrog. It is a strategic board game for 3-4 players, aged 13+, and takes about 2 hours to play.

A second, revised edition has since been published by Argentum Verlag and Z-Man Games as First Train to Nuremberg, which includes the original game as well.

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