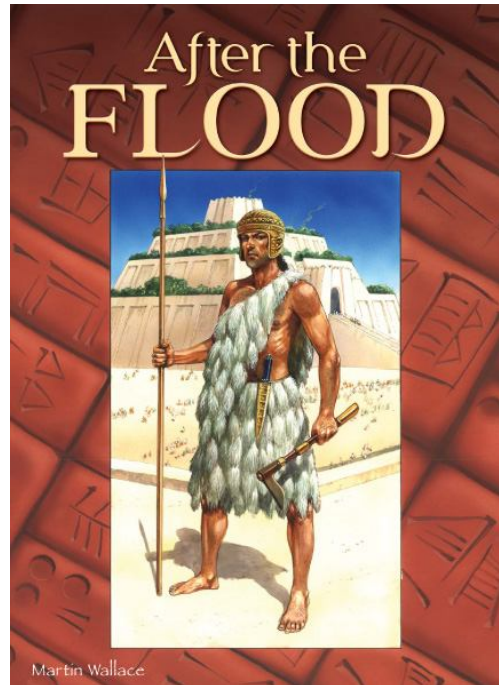


Invading Mesopotamia

After the Flood reviewed

Launched at Spiel last year, *After the Flood* is one of Martin Wallace's Treefrog games, the first three-player game in the range. Now, there are plenty of games that work with three players, but not so many that are specifically designed for three. And this game is only for three players. Like the other Treefrog games, it contains just wooden pieces along with the board (and the rules, of course).

The setting is Ancient Sumer – what is now southern Iraq – where agriculture began. The central part of the board shows Sumer, divided into provinces. These are where players will build cities. Around this are non-Sumerian areas – these are partly abstracted, as there isn't room (or a need) for accurate geography. It's from these areas that invaders will attack Sumer (and, historically, become Sumerian in their turn) and with these areas that Sumer trades – as it only produces cloth and grain itself.



The game is played over five turns (each represents several centuries, to give you an idea of the scale). In each of these, players get the opportunity to invade Sumer, deploy and use their workers, trade for more valuable goods and build cities. At the end of the turn, players get points for the areas occupied by their armies and can spend goods to score their cities. After the five turns, there are points for workers still in play and the player with the most points wins. Simple, eh?!

The turn starts with each player taking workers. There's no holdover from previous turns, so you only have these workers each turn and fewer if you don't have enough pieces available. Players also get textiles and grain (white and yellow cubes) – the goods produced in Sumer. The number of cubes each player gets depends on how many workers they already have in the production boxes printed on the map. This is a very clever mechanism as it's the relative positions that matter.

Hence, while players can start a bidding war (by placing more workers in one or other box), it's not necessarily cost effective. The number of workers only changes the relative numbers of cubes you gain. If you're happy to be third, you only need one worker when your opponents may be using up half a dozen. While the variation in what you get isn't that great, it does make a difference in what you can do during the turn (though goods are kept between turns, so it is possible to build up a stockpile).

The meat of the turn is the players taking actions until everybody passes. As soon as one player has passed, the others must pay something each time they take another action. This allows players to continue doing things – at a cost. When they pass, players may also bid something for turn order for the next turn. Turn order can be important if there's something specific you want to do before anyone else gets the chance.

Apart from passing, players have five actions available to them when it's their turn. The simplest is to build a city, placing one of their big wooden squares in an empty province of Sumer. There's no cost to this, so it's usually the first thing players do in the game. As an added incentive, most provinces provide a special ability to the player who has a city in it. Cities also give players the opportunity to turn goods into victory points.

The second action available is to place workers. This costs one goods cube. Each good has a notional value, so you get to place that number of workers, but only in one place. Workers don't go into Sumer, only outside areas. Here they can act as traders or start an invasion. They can also go into one of the four boxes on the board. Two of these are the Irrigation (grain production) and Weaving (textile) boxes I've already mentioned. The other two are Scribes and Tool Makers. Tool Makers convert cubes of 'Metal' into more valuable discs of 'Tools'; Scribes are used to move workers from one place to another. Scribes are useful tactically, while Tool Makers are a necessity as the only source of Tools cubes.

Most of the areas outside Sumer produce goods. Players with workers (or soldiers) in these can trade goods they hold for what the area produces – a table on the board shows what can be swapped for what. One trade action can involve as many of the player's pieces as they want. They could, for example, trade a grain cube, which they got at the start of the turn, for a metals cube, use a Tool Maker to convert this to a Tools disc and trade this for a Gold disc. The only constraints on one action are that each worker can only be used once and each area only produces one of each good shown. As the notes in the rules suggest, it makes sense to set things up and then make one, big trade. The only problem is the other players getting in the way before you're ready to trade...

Each turn three Empires are available, one for each player. Starting an Empire is another action. Each starts in a specific area and the player has to have the most workers in that area. They get a set number of soldier pieces and put 1-2 in the starting area. They can also buy extra soldiers and pay something to equip their soldiers. This is another relative ranking: each player's soldiers are either better or worse than each of the others and are thus more or less likely to win any fight.

Fights happen as part of the 'Expand Empire' action. This allows the player to place one of their allocated soldiers into an area next to one they already have a soldier in. If this is occupied by someone else's soldier, the attacker rolls the dice. Roll high enough (depending on whether the attacking soldier is better or worse equipped than the defender – though the game favours the attacker) and the defending soldier



is removed. If the attacker fails, they can keep on trying while they have soldiers available. As well as expanding into other areas, players can use this action to destroy an opponent's city. And usually follow this up by placing their own in that area. This action can be continued as long as the player discards a soldier for each additional play they make.

At the end of the turn, players score points for areas they have soldiers in. Hence the more soldiers that come with an Empire, the more useful it is. Not just because you can get more areas but because you can use some of the soldiers to make multiple placements in one action. If another player has passed, it's expensive to keep on taking actions, so it's useful to expand your Empire in fewer actions. Soldiers can also trade (and take precedence over workers for trading), so there's a real incentive to get soldiers into areas you want to trade with. Not to mention using the opportunity to remove another player's city to get the province's special ability.

This puts a real premium on getting a strong Empire and using it effectively. A table of which Empires start where when is printed on the board, so it's worth setting up to get Empires in advance. Of course, all the players know this, so the competition for Empires is often in advance of when they appear. This gives players

a choice to make on the first turn: between placing cities and grabbing an Empire. The designer's notes suggest cities should be the first priority, but my experience is that having the largest Empire on turn one is quite an advantage. Don't let anyone capitalise on this!

Once all the players have passed, there a few things to do to complete the turn. First off, a new sequence of play is determined, based on what players have bid when they passed. Equal bids maintain the status quo, so there's a tendency for the order to stay the same until someone really wants to go first. Players then score victory points. I've already mentioned that players get points for areas their Empire occupies. They then have the opportunity to spend goods to 'expand' their cities. It costs a minimum of two wood cubes to do this, with players scoring more points for each different 'luxury' good (the discs) they spend on top of this. The expanded city gets a second layer and can't score again – though it can be destroyed or removed and another city built in the province.

There are thus two major ways of scoring points in *After the Flood*: by occupying lots of areas and by collecting and spending full sets of luxury goods. Luckily, occupying lots of areas gives players lots of trading opportunities, which will allow them to gain the luxuries. However, they also need to have the raw materials to trade up, so they need workers in the production areas to gain these (and Tools). It's simply not possible to do all this in one turn. Players need to use some turns to set up a few big scoring opportunities. The second and fourth turns start with a 'decline' action when players lose some of their workers. This gives the players more tactical considerations: minimising what they lose to decline and preserve their positions from turns 1 and 3.

After five turns, there are more points available for the players with the most workers in the production boxes and areas outside Sumer. These points can be significant, especially if one player manages to get substantially more than their opponents. The Designer's Notes make the point that *After the Flood* is "a long-distance race and it's possible to catch up from quite a way behind."

This is a meaty game with a playing time of three hours – and it does take this long. It's also a game that doesn't lend itself to ready analysis. What players need to do is complex and they are playing for the long term. There are lots of choices and decisions about what to do when. Players need to build up their position both absolutely and in comparison to what their opponents are doing. And they need to do everything. One useful tactic is to eke out your turn to be the last player still taking actions. This costs a bit more, but means you can take actions that your opponents cannot react to until next turn.

I find *After the Flood* to be a really challenging game. It's not enough to do well for one turn, you have to do well over all the turns. And it's not clear just what doing well is. It's all about relative positions between the players. Interestingly, given it's a three-player game, there doesn't seem to be any problem with two players ganging up on the third. Each player needs to do their own thing and there's little scope to

join forces. At the same time, players have to be very aware of what their opponents are up to.

After the Flood was designed by Martin Wallace and is published by Warfrog (as part of the Treefrog Line) as a limited edition of 1,500 numbered and signed copies. It is a strategy board game for three players, aged 13+, and takes around 3 hours to play. It gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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