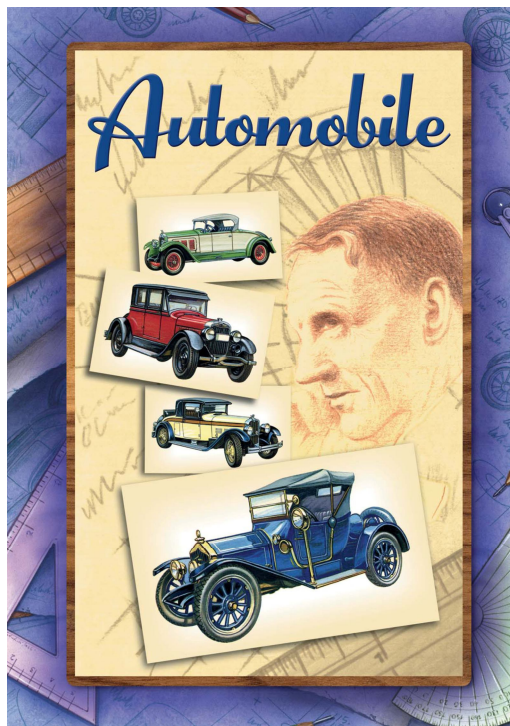


## **Any Colour You Like...**

### ***Automobile* reviewed**

The latest game from Martin Wallace—and the latest in the Treefrog line—is a game about the early years of car making. Or perhaps I should say automobile manufacturing, since we're in the USA. As you'd expect from a business game, it's quite complex, but the learning curve isn't too steep. What's more difficult is mastering the game. The aim is to have the most money after the four turns that comprise the game. Players start with \$2,000 and it is quite possible to end up with less than that.

The first thing that struck me on opening up the box was the garish colour scheme. The game divides the market for cars into three types. The mass market is denoted by a colour scheme that's mostly black with blue edging. The mid-market uses yellow-orange with a mottled pattern and the luxury market is shades of light blue to silver. It's certainly distinctive, but I'm tempted to advise playing this in dark glasses.



Everything happens on the large board. Around the edge this is a series of large spaces, each illustrated with a model of car and outlined with the appropriate colour scheme. The models start in the top left corner with the basic Duryea (mid-market) and wrap round to end with the luxury Cadillac 452—a car that's crying out for the addition of a couple of heavies in fedoras toting violin cases. The Model T Ford is in the top right corner in its traditional colour: dark blue.

These spaces are where players can build factories—rectangular wooden blocks in their colour. The cost of building a factory is shown in the space and goes up as you move along the series of spaces and, effectively, technology advances. Players also have a brown 'parts factory' block. This costs a standard amount to build and reduces the cost of building cars in the factories it is stacked with.

Only one player can build factories in each space, but building in a space further along the track requires some 'research and development'. The currency for this is white 'R&D' cubes: 1 cube for one space ahead, 3 for two spaces and so on. Players start with a small number of R&D cubes and can pick up more during the game.

Having built factories, players use them to make cars. A table on the board shows how many cars can be manufactured in a space—depending on the number of

ordinary factories and the type of space—and how much they cost. Luxury car factories produce the fewest cars, expensively, and mass market ones produce the most cars, but cheaply. Players have a heap of wooden cars in their colour and place the appropriate number with their factories to show what they've produced. Note that players have to spend cash to build factories and more to produce cars—that starting money doesn't go far.

One important point is that there's a minimum number that each space with factories produces. If you have three factories in a mid-market space, you will be producing at least eight cars there (if you produce any at all). This matters because the demand for cars is quite definitely finite. Producing cars that don't sell is a quick way to be an ex-car maker—just ask, well, lots of people. In the game, as well as losing money by not selling cars, players get loss points—black cubes and discs—for unsold cars. I'll come back to these later.

Once players have made some cars, they need to sell them to make money. At the top of the board, inside the models track, are areas for sold cars in each type, showing the selling price. Before the main selling begins, players can unload some of their production through their distributors. Three areas on the right hand side of the board, one for each type of car, are where players can place their wooden 'distributor' pieces.

When a distributor sells a car, the piece is moved to one of the limited number of squares for the type of car sold—as the game goes on, more squares are available. Players get the full price for cars sold through their distributors and the distributors remain for next turn. However, any unused distributors go out of play and, worse, you get a loss point for each unused distributor. As with many aspects of this game, moderation is the best approach: you want to get distributors in play, but you will be penalised for using too many.

Most sales, however, are made through the game's main demand mechanism. This starts with a set of tiles, numbered 2-5, in a bag. Each player draws one or two out of the bag at the start of the turn, giving them some information about demand. Total demand is, of course, all the players' tiles. However, this varies from turn to turn. In the first turn, each player has one tile and they all go into the mid-market.

This is the key part of the game as it influences everything players are doing. For a start, you can see that the mid-market is the place to be at the start of the game—it's the only type of car with any demand. However, if everybody's producing mid-market cars, it's very easy to over-produce. And, as I've already noted, you not only lose money by producing cars you don't sell, you get loss points as well. Producing luxury or mass market cars is possible in the first turn, but you need to get distributors in place to sell them.

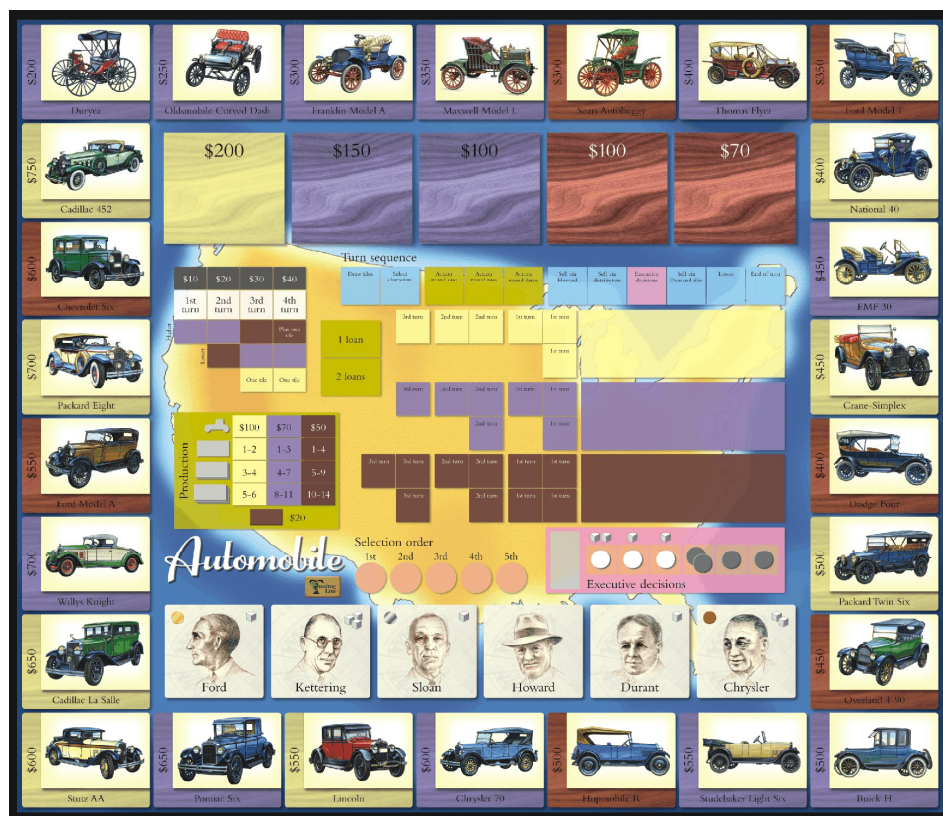
The other factor in what cars you produce is the sequence of the car models round the board. The first few are all mid-market. Since players start with only a few R&D cubes, they can't get very far along the row. However, going later in the turn means

other players have already built factories. It still costs you R&D cubes, but you're counting from the most advanced factory. This certainly makes the first mass market space (fifth) reachable. In four and five-player games, the first luxury car space (eighth) is potentially in reach, too.

Getting back to demand, things change in turn 2—reflecting how the market for cars grew historically. Each player takes two tiles out of the bag at the start of the turn. The higher of each pair will go on the mid-market, the lower on the mass market. There's still no demand for luxury cars! It's two tiles again in turn 3, but the positions are reversed as the mass market takes off. An additional tile is drawn, when the players reveal their tiles, for luxury car demand. The final turn is the same, with the addition of an extra tile for the mass market.

The implication of this sequence is that the mid-market remains the place to be in the second turn. The mass market takes over for the second half of the game with some demand for luxury cars as a sideline. The factory spaces are more mixed further round the board, but what's available depends on how vigorously players have advanced round the board. I've played games where we've only got halfway round as players keep using the same factories for several turns. In other games, players have moved on rapidly and reached the end of the track. Clearly, R&D cubes have more value in the latter case, while they can be worthless in a slow game.

The way cars are sold gives players an incentive to build new factories in advance of the other players. For each type of car, sales start with the most advanced factory.



Version of the board with a more subdued colour scheme

One car is sold from the most advanced factory, then one from the second factory of that type, then the third and so on. This cycle repeats until all the cars have gone or total demand has been met. If there are more cars than demand, it's the least advanced factories that will be hit worst and take most losses.

In between making cars and selling them, players have the opportunity to take 'executive decisions', which may help them avoid being left with unsold cars. One of the actions available here is to close the factories on a space. The player gets their factory pieces back and places a black factory piece on the space (blocking anyone from using it again). They also get most of their capital back: \$100 less than the purchase value of each factory. This provides a way of re-cycling your capital into new, more advanced factories. Closing factories also reduces players' losses: they hand back half of their loss points. Very handy.

The other executive actions enable players to sell more cars from a factory space. When it's that factory's turn to sell, it sells one additional car for each cylinder on the space. White cylinders represent extra features added to the cars (new-fangled things like starter motors, perhaps) and cost R&D cubes. The grey cylinders are free, but represent discounting. Cars sold from these factories are sold at a reduced price. This gives players an interesting decision: is it worth selling more, but making less money, or taking the loss from not selling? Remember that these decisions have to be taken before the demand tiles are revealed. What you do will also depend on what the others are doing—and the turn order is significant here.

The final section on the board shows seven people who were significant in the early automobile industry. At the start of each turn, players chose one of these—in effect hiring them for the turn. Most of them provide some R&D cubes and most have some special ability that players can use. The sequence of characters is also the player order for the turn. Take Ford, for example, and you'll be going first. You also gain one R&D cube and can build an extra factory. Choose Chrysler, on the other hand, and you're moving last. You get two R&D cubes and the opportunity to get rid of some loss points at the end of the turn (valuable later on, but not so significant in the first turn—though going last in the first turn can be very useful).

I haven't actually described what happens in a turn yet, so let's have a look at how all this is put together. First players take a demand tile or two (depending on the turn) from the bag. This gives a little bit of information about likely demand this turn. Then they choose a character for the turn, setting the turn order for the rest of the turn. There are several considerations here: do you need R&D cubes, do you have any reason for being first or last in the turn order, and how could you use each of the special abilities? It's not a trivial decision as it's really deciding just what you're going to do this turn—and affects your strategy for the rest of the game.

In turn order, players then take an action: they do this three times. There are five actions available. I've already mentioned building factories (1-2 in one space) and making cars (in any or all of your factory spaces within the limits allowed, for the appropriate cash), which are two of the actions. Closing factories is the third—it's





A pre-production version of *Automobile* in play—this shows the colour scheme

available as an action as well as an executive decision (once only per turn). This is very useful for reducing your losses (both those in hand and future ones) and you get most of your capital back. However, it takes an action and reduces your production capacity, which will cost time and money to re-build. When to close your factories is another important decision in the game.

Taking two R&D Cubes is the fourth possibility for an action. Depending on how the game is going, this can be very useful. Or it can be the equivalent of a pass.

The final option is to place 1-3 distributors on the board. This requires some thought as only a few distributors will be used each turn and you will have competition for these spaces from your opponents. However, distributors are really useful for selling cars, at full price, outside normal demand. Once everybody's taken their three actions, one of the special abilities allows one player to sell two extra cars first. Then players deploy their distributors, taking losses if they can't use them all.

Players then get their chance to take executive decisions. Again, this can be an important decision and it's useful to know what the other players are up to. However, the order in which players pass sets the order for choosing characters next turn. So it can be useful to get that first choice, too. Only after this are the demand tiles revealed and the main selling takes place. The turn completes with one last thing: losses. Players get loss points for their factories that aren't the most advanced of their type. A couple of special abilities allow players to get rid of loss points. Then they pay for their losses: \$10 each in the first turn, \$20 in the second and so on.

*Automobile* runs for just four turns. At the end players get full value for their remaining factories and whoever has the most money wins. The one thing I haven't mentioned is loans. Each player may borrow \$500 up to two times when they need the money. However, they then have to pay \$50 interest at the end of each turn. At the end of the game, each loan is repaid for \$600. That's a high rate of interest, but it's the only source of extra capital and sometimes you need it. Though it's perfectly possible to do well without taking any loans.

Phew! There's a lot in this game and, as I said, it's complex. However, at heart it's relatively simple: build factories, make cars, sell cars. Then count the cash. Two things make it harder. The first is the relentless advance of technology, giving the advantage to the players with the best factories. The second is the loss points that come with this. Loss points cost cash. Not too much at the start, but it quickly racks up—a loss point you get in the first turn will have cost you \$100 by the end of the game if you don't get rid of it.

On top of that, you have to deal with the other players. The limitations on every thing you do—and particularly each turn's demand for cars—mean you have to take into account what everybody else is doing. If everyone else is making mid-range cars, should you be? More subtle is the competition for placing distributors and thus ensuring some sales. This then has a knock-on effect on how/when you sell cars in the main selling phase.

*Automobile* is a clever, challenging business game that gives players difficult decisions to make. At its heart, it is a simple game of producing goods and selling them at a profit. However, the game includes both capital costs—building factories—and running costs—making cars. It models supply—what the players make—and demand—the tiles—with a dash of uncertainty as to just what the demand will be. The competition between players can be as cutthroat or as gentlemanly as the real market—and the option of discounting to gain sales volume is a real threat. As in the real world, if one manufacturer is discounting, can the others afford no to?

When I sat down to write this review, I had some reservations about *Automobile*. As I worked through the games, these disappeared. Yes, you can do a lot of analysis and calculating to find the optimal move. Only to have that negated when one of your opponents doesn't react as you expected. (My favourite is producing lots of cars first as a pre-emptive move, only to find everyone else still insist on making lots of cars, too!) I recommend playing the game in the spirit of the car-making pioneers: decide what to do and go for it! You may not win, but you'll have a good time.

*Automobile* is a strategy game for 3-5 players (no suggested age, but probably 12+) and takes about two hours to play. It was designed by Martin Wallace and is published by Warfrog (as part of the Treefrog line). It gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. This review was first published in *To Win Just Once* issue 98 (September 2009).

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The *Automobile* art and board are courtesy of Warfrog; the photo was taken by Pevans.