

## Of Tommies and Thunderbirds

### Pevans reports from the 2015 UK Games Expo

The Expo has been getting bigger each year since its move to the Hilton Metropole at the National Exhibition Centre (NEC). This year additional space in the hotel was given over to exhibitors in the trade halls and a 'marquee' set up outside to replace the lost gaming space. Next year sees a big change as the exhibition/trade space moves to Hall 1 of the NEC proper, leaving the rooms at the Metropole for tournaments and other gaming. But that's not until 2016, so let me fill you in on this year's event.

Before I get to the games, however, the feature I most appreciated at this year's event was the outdoor 'food hall'. A bit of the car park in front of the hotel's main entrance had been closed off and was given over to an impressive array of food trucks – including a double-decker bus with a bar! The selection of food was remarkable: from the predictable burgers and sausages to Indian vegetarian, Asian noodles and Mexican burritos.



I was particularly taken with the prominent display of food hygiene certificates – how can you resist a hot dog stand with a top hygiene rating where the 'dogs are checked with a thermometer while cooking? I sampled several of the vendors over the weekend and each time the food was excellent. It was noticeable that choice was limited on the Sunday as several vendors had sold out! Clearly it was not just me who appreciated them. It was certainly more imaginative – and a bit cheaper – than the fare offered by the hotel. Having said that, the hotel did have several snack and drinks stands in strategic locations indoors.

As always, my main interest is in board games, so that's what I'll report on here. Bear in mind that there's a lot going on for role-players, miniatures enthusiasts and CCG fans as well as us board gamers. A lot of the stands are retailers, too. In general, I don't mention these, but there is a huge range of games and related products available. I should also give my usual caveat: when I say that a game is like another one, I am not suggesting that it is in any way a copy. This is simply a shorthand way of describing a new game by comparing it to something better known.

I'm never sure how to organise these reports. Last year I went through the exhibitors in alphabetical order. This time I'll go for a geographical approach and work my way through the halls. Separate from the hotel's main foyer, the Expo's reception area was just outside the big Monarch Suite. This was divided in two parts this year: one side for exhibitors, the other for tournaments. Before heading in, though, I should mention the family area, to one side of this lobby. This appeared to be a great hit, with youngsters and families playing the various games available.

My first find was behind reception, and just outside the Monarch room proper, where PSC Games was showing off the just-launched *The Great War*. PSC Games is an off-

shoot of The Plastic Soldier Company ([www.theplasticsoldiercompany.co.uk](http://www.theplasticsoldiercompany.co.uk)), who produce detailed model soldiers in hard plastic. No surprise, then, that *The Great War* uses just such models as its playing pieces. The game itself is designed by Richard Borg and is, in effect, *Commands & Colors: WW1*. That is, the core of the game is Richard's simple wargame system that originated in *Battle Cry* and is now best known from *Memoir '44* and the *Commands & Colors* games.



Apart from the excellent models, what I like about the game is the way the tweaks to the game system have provided the flavour of trench warfare. The effectiveness of machine guns and heavy artillery (when it's on target) are pitted against the high level of protection afforded by the trenches. The issue for players is that, in order to win, they have to move their troops out of the trenches.

Trench warfare sounds like it could be a pretty dull basis for a wargame, but I have to say that the scenarios I've played so far have been anything but. True, some patience is needed (particularly compared to *Memoir '44*), but that's a good thing as far as I'm concerned. Expansions to the game are planned and I'm told these will extend the game with scenarios for the early war and the late war. The former will have more open battles, before the trench systems were established. The latter will include tanks – plenty of scope for PSC to provide more models!

I was very taken with *The Great War*. So much so that I'd played two scenarios before the end of the weekend! It gets a definite 9/10 on my highly subjective scale and expect a full review in these pages in due course.

Behind PSC was German publisher and distributor Pegasus Spiele ([www.pegasus.de](http://www.pegasus.de)). Their stand featured some of their recent titles, including the 2014 *Spiel des Jahres* winner, *Camel Up*, from eggertspiele, and Pegasus's own *Istanbul*, winner of the *Kennerpiel des Jahres* (the enthusiasts' Game of the Year). Across the aisle, Looney Labs' Andrew Looney was demonstrating all things *Fluxx* ([www.looneylabs.com](http://www.looneylabs.com)). And alongside them was Xi Cards ([www.xicards.com](http://www.xicards.com)), showing off *Xi Cards*. This is a *Magic the Gathering*-style card game of duelling wizards. It's a two-player game with players casting spells and summoning creatures to reduce their opponent's life points.

In the gaming section of the Monarch room was the games library, run this year by Thirsty Meeples ([www.thirstymeeples.co.uk](http://www.thirstymeeples.co.uk)). This provides hundreds of games for people to try out during the Expo, fuelling the open gaming over all three days (and nights, too, no doubt).

Entering the Monarch room through the lefthand doors, I was confronted by MAGE Company ([www.magecompany.com](http://www.magecompany.com)) from Bulgaria. They are the publishers of *12 Realms*, *Egraria* and *Hoyuk*, amongst others, and appeared to be concentrating on the latest expansions for *12 Realms* and *Hoyuk*.



The tile dispenser (from the Basically Wooden website)

I almost missed Basically Wooden ([www.basicallywooden.co.uk](http://www.basicallywooden.co.uk)), as they were tucked away in the corner and almost behind me as I entered. They produce all manner of interesting wooden items, including an array of game accessories. These include a fold-down dice tower and accessories for *Carcassonne*, such as the clever tile tower dispenser. Okay, no games, but well worth a look.

Pretty much in the middle of the room I found Ergo Sum Games ([www.ergosumgames.com](http://www.ergosumgames.com)) with several demo tables for *New Earth*. They were rather short-handed when I found them on Friday afternoon, so I didn't get more than a brief introduction to the game, but the game looks very interesting. It's set in a post-apocalypse world with the players struggling to re-build their nation. To do this, they need land and resources, provoking competition with the other players – though there may also be trading opportunities. Players have to keep their population happy as well, so producing consumer goods is a priority!

The playing area is made up of tiles, providing lots of different configurations. The game is card-driven, so hand management is important, but it also has a worker placement element. Altogether, it looks a fascinating package that I look forward to trying it when it appears. Checking the website, I see that another game in the pipeline is a Dan Dare board game. That's a must, just because of the subject matter!



Just along from Ergo Sum was the large stand of Queen Games ([www.queen-games.de](http://www.queen-games.de)) with plenty of opportunity to play their more recent games. I noticed that Queen's boss, Rajiv Gupta, was in attendance this year, underlining the growing importance of the Expo. The games on show included Michael Schacht's *Chef Alfredo*, *Parfum* (designed by Marco Ruskowski and Marcel Süsselbeck) and *Queen's Architect* (from Volker Schächtele). *Parfum* looked particularly interesting with its dice of many colours representing different fragrances.

Reaching the end of the room, I turned round to come back through the stands down the other side. The first thing I spotted as I came round the corner was Big Potato ([www.bigpotato.co.uk](http://www.bigpotato.co.uk)). Mainly because of the packaging of their games. Most noticeable was *Bucket of Doom*: a stack of brightly-coloured plastic buckets (think beach holidays, spades and sandcastles). This is a party game in the tradition of *Apples to Apples* and *Cards Against Humanity*. One player pulls a Doom card ("You're on a plane. There are snakes on the plane. Lots of them."), the others hatch escape plans using an object card from their hand (bagsie the "Samuel L Jackson" card!). Best escape plan wins. Good fun and available in shops following a successful Kickstarter project.

The other two games on display were works in progress. *Mr Lister's Quiz Shootout* (no, nothing to do with *Red Dwarf*) comes in a bright blue box. The idea is to keep on coming





Look: brightly-coloured packaging!

up with answers to a question. First one to run out of answers loses. *Qwordie* is in a tall, bright yellow tin and is a combination of a quiz and a word game. Answering quiz questions wins you letter tiles for making words. Both of these are expected to be available later this year.

The other side of the partition was Steamforged Games ([steamforged.com](http://steamforged.com)) with something called *Guild Ball*. Apparently this is a "Tabletop Fantasy Medieval Football Game". The word "football" is enough to send me in the opposite direction. However, it looks more like a two-player fantasy mediaeval skirmish as it's played using chunky miniatures on a board marked out like a football pitch. I believe a ball is also involved. The game was released last year and seems to have gathered a following. Not including me, though.

Just along the aisle was Quirkative ([www.quirkative.com](http://www.quirkative.com)), launching their gladiatorial combat game, *Orcions*. Players buy and equip orc gladiators to win a final battle in the arena. However, the early stages of the game involve moving around the board to collect orc cards, aiming to make sets. These sets are what the players then use to battle it out to be top dog. Sorry, orc. The game sounds an odd mixture, but seemed to be going down well with those trying it out.

Behind the orcish goings-on were two smaller stands. The first was Terrorbull Games ([www.terrorbullgames.co.uk](http://www.terrorbullgames.co.uk)), best known for their controversial *War on Terror*. This year's game is called ... wait for it ... *The Hen Commandments*. I would have run away, but this was no time to be chicken. Damn, they've got me doing it now! The game sounds equally bonkers.

Each round a new commandment is given (six words on 'egg' cards drawn at random). Players chose one of the virtues from their hand and, if they're the only one to have chosen it, argue why their chosen virtue best fits the new commandment. The others vote on the best argument, providing bits of corn (it's chicken feed!) to the winner(s). The player with the most corn after a set number of rounds wins the game.

Demoing *The Hen Commandments*

I'm not sure whether the game is an inspired piece of madness or just madness, but it should be good fun. Once everyone's finished making chicken and egg puns. The game was a successful Kickstarter project earlier this year and should be available in December.

The second stand was Griggling Games ([www.grigglinggames.com](http://www.grigglinggames.com)) with *Quartermaster General*. This had passed me by until several *Counter* writers picked it in their top games of 2014. Designer Ian Brody was on hand to explain the game and show off the forthcoming *Air Marshal* expansion. This adds extra cards and neat aeroplane pieces to the game along with new rules to handle the increased number of cards in play.

The game re-fights the whole of World War II across a map of the world and puts the emphasis on supply. There are six major nations (Germany, Italy, Japan, Russia, the UK and the USA) grouped into two sides (Axis and Allies,

natch). Each nation has a few models to represent armies and navies and a deck of cards. The mechanics of the game are simple: in turn, each nation plays a card and does what it says. Then they draw their hand back up to size. Most obviously, cards may let a nation remove an adjacent enemy piece or build a new piece themselves. However, most of the cards do something else: inflict economic damage on an opponent, provide a counter to an attack or give the nation an advantage.

The game is clever enough in itself, but I'm particularly impressed that it can be played by any number from two to six. If there are fewer than six, some players control multiple nations. So far, I've played it three-player, four-player and six-player and it worked well in each case. Having said that, I was underwhelmed by my first experience, but it's growing on me. Talking to Ian, he made the interesting point that, while new players find the Allies tend to win, they quickly learn strategies for the Axis. Expect the *Air Marshal* expansion to be available later this year. Now that I'm up to speed, *Quartermaster General* gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.



QMG Air Marshal expansion



Coming to the last block of stands between me and the exit, I found Thames and Kosmos ([www.thameskosmos.com](http://www.thameskosmos.com)). This is a new distributor, making Kosmos products available in the UK. Their main emphasis is Kosmos's educational science kits (chemistry sets and the like), but they are handling a few board games (notably *Lost Cities*) to begin with. I have every hope they'll expand this, making more of Kosmos's fine games available in the UK.



*Tinker Tailor* on display

Also in this final block was Medusa Games ([www.medusagames.co.uk](http://www.medusagames.co.uk)), the imprint of the Expo's main man, Richard Denning (*The Great Fire of London* being his best known design). I'm used to this stand showing prototypes of Richard's games, but this year there was a published game. *Tinker Tailor* is an intriguing card game based on the nursery rhyme. The aim is to collect goods cards. Players score points for sets of the same good and for sets of different goods. There are also points for remaining money.

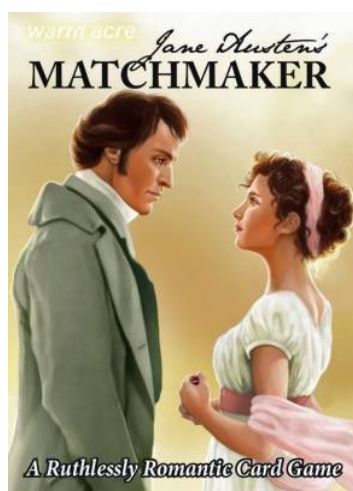
Each round the first player draws a number of role cards (Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and so on). They choose one to play, keeping it secret, and pass the cards to the next player. Once everybody's chosen a card, the roles take effect in order: Tinker, Tailor, Soldier and so on. Roles may mean collecting goods and/or money cards from those available, after which players may use their money to buy more goods. The game lasts a set number of rounds and whoever has the most points is the winner.

The tricky bit is, of course, how the different roles interact and what you know of the cards that other players may have. Not to mention what goods and cash are available. I got to play it through at the Expo and it worked very nicely. It's simple enough on the surface, but the complexity in the interactions does make you think and it's entertaining to play. I was quite taken with the (primitive?) style of the artwork, too. *Tinker, Tailor* gets a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

No games event would be complete without the appearance of a new zombie game. The last stand I came to in the Monarch Hall was Dice Sports where I found *Z War One*

([www.zwargame.com](http://www.zwargame.com)). This is a co-operative (although not-so-co-operative options are available) board game of surviving the zombie hordes. That sounds pretty standard. The gimmick is that the game is tied in to a continuing comic book, each chapter providing a scenario to be played out on the board (if I've understood it correctly). Having said all that, the game's Kickstarter campaign was cancelled just after the Expo, despite having more than raised the money required.

Having dealt with the Monarch suite, it's a short walk past lots of smaller rooms – used for role-playing sessions, tournaments and Expo volunteers – to the next of the trade halls, the square Kings Suite. Again, there were a few stands just outside the hall proper. The one that caught my eye was Warm Acre Games ([www.warmacre.com](http://www.warmacre.com)), who were familiar from last year. In particular, they had the revised, production edition of *Jane Austen's Matchmaker*.



I've finally played this and it's a delightful little card game. The cards are all characters from half a dozen Austen novels. Players start with a heroine, displayed in front of them, and can add other ladies from their hand to this display. They use their gentlemen cards to propose to other ladies. This is where it gets interesting. The proposer can discard cards to increase the gentleman's 'charm'. If the target can't match his charm, the wedding is on. If she can, then she **may** turn him down.

A successful proposal means players swap cards and will score the points on the card they get. Hence, you're trying to use low-value gentlemen (cads and bounders, basically) to win high-value ladies. Or maybe offer a deal with a higher value gentleman (hello, Mr Darcy!). The game certainly charmed me and it's been closing sessions at the Swiggers games club in recent weeks. *Jane Austen's Matchmaker* gets 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

I entered the Kings Suite on the righthand side and meandered round to collect all the stands. The first thing I bumped into was the large space – technically, two stands – taken by distributor Coiledspring Games ([coiledspring.co.uk](http://coiledspring.co.uk)). I was delighted to see that this space was given over to tables for people to play the games – and Coiled Spring distribute some cracking titles. In particular, they have Gamewright's range of terrific children's and family games, Gigamic's excellent abstracts and a good selection of strategy games.

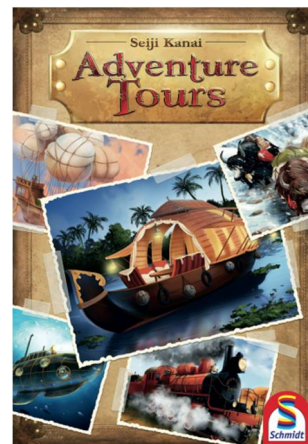


Part of the Coiledspring area



I looked at a couple of games from Coiledspring. The first was *Pints of Blood*, which is a tongue-in-cheek zombie game (think *Shaun of the Dead*). It's a co-operative game where the aim is to survive the zombie apocalypse. And get a pint. The players are stuck inside a pub and have to keep the zombies out until they get rescued. It's a different slant on the whole zombie thing and looks like fun.

*Adventure Tours* is more of a family game where the players outfit expeditions. It's a card-driven game where players acquire the provisions and equipment to meeting the requirements of an explorer. Playing an explorer gets an immediate bonus and earns money at the end of the round – unused cards cost cash, though. Most money is what wins the game, after a set number of rounds. Not too challenging, but it looks a decent game – not least as it was designed by Seiji Kanai, the man behind *Hanabi*.



The other side of the entrance was Backspindle ([www.backspindlegames.com](http://www.backspindlegames.com)) with their crazy game of Mexican wrestling, *Luchador!* The new game is *Clacks*, another Discworld-themed game (Backspindle also publish *Guards! Guards!*). As far as I could see it's an abstract game played over a four by four grid of tiles.



*Wash Dash* on display at Spiel '14

Once past the Coiledspring area, I was pleased to find Brain Games ([www.brain-games.com](http://www.brain-games.com)) They're a Latvian publisher with some intriguing games. *Wash Dash* was launched at Spiel last October and is a race to be first to get the right selection of 'clothes' pinned up on the washing line. It's an entertaining family game, created by a group of schoolchildren.

*Om Nom Nom*, from 2013, is a light-hearted cards and dice game of hunter and prey with a strong element of bluff. Also a 2013 publication, *Dig Mars* has players 'excavating' piles of tiles in the hope of making discoveries. The question then is whether to keep them for points or use them to improve your equipment. Both interesting games that deserve to be better known.

Next stand along was New Entertainment with *HexAgony* ([www.hexagony.co.uk](http://www.hexagony.co.uk)), which was published last year. This is an abstract game of trying to make complete hexagons in your colour using tiles that are shaped like two triangles stuck together at their bases. That is, each makes up a third of a hexagon, so you have to get three down to score. It's not my kind of game, but it seems to have a bit of a following.

Reaching the back of the room, I turned back and immediately encountered the large Asmodee stand. Run by Asmodee's UK subsidiary, distributor Esdevium Games ([www.esdeviumgames.com](http://www.esdeviumgames.com)), this featured games from several publishers in the Asmodee family, including *Days of Wonder* and *Fantasy Flight*.





Lots of people playing *Zambezi* – and other Burley games

Coming back down the room, I went past Sopio ([sopiocards.com](http://sopiocards.com)) with the eponymous card game of stick figure drawings that I first saw last year.

I then ran into Burley Games ([www.burleygames.com](http://www.burleygames.com)) where Pete Burley and sons were busy demonstrating prototypes of their new game: *Zambezi*. This has players racing their boats along the river of the title. Along the way, they must navigate around – or across – various hazards. They'll be fine if they have enough fuel and equipment. Otherwise, they may have to take drastic action, such as throwing crew to the crocodiles!

However, the game is not just a race, as players use their journey to capture footage of African wildlife and pick up valuables from the wharves along the riverbanks. All of these elements score points to determine the winner. While the game is clearly aimed at family play, I think there's enough about it to keep hobby gamers interested – and challenged. *Zambezi* was a Kickstarter project that ended successfully a couple of weeks after the Expo. I look forward to seeing the finished product this Autumn.



*Lembitu* on display

Just behind Burley was ATB (Across the Board) Games ([atbgames.co.uk](http://atbgames.co.uk)) with their football game, *Socceristic*, which I first saw back in 2012.

Looping across to the left hand side of the room, I found 2d6 ([2d6.ee](http://2d6.ee)), the Estonian publisher I first came across a couple of years ago. Their new game, *Lembitu*, is named after

Estonia's great hero and is set in the fight against invaders from every side. Their moves determined by die rolls, the invaders extend along the road network towards the capital. The players must co-operate, pooling their actions to push back the invaders and build castles to block them. The players win if the invaders don't get to the capital. It looks an interesting game, with artwork I think I should describe as "primitive", which creates the atmosphere. Definitely worth trying.

A bit further along was Maverick:Muse ([themaverickmuse.com](http://themaverickmuse.com)) with the production edition of *oddball Aeronauts*. The game was launched at last year's Expo and then on Kickstarter. As I noted, this is a card game of duelling airships with terrific artwork.

Also returning this year was Thirsty Knight Games ([www.thirstyknightgames.co.uk](http://www.thirstyknightgames.co.uk)) with the production edition of their card game, *Every Round Counts*.

At the back of the room again, now on the lefthand side, I found Grublin Games ([www.grublin.com](http://www.grublin.com)). I didn't see anything new from them this year, but both *Cornish Smuggler* and *Waggle Dance* were proving attractive with visitors.

In the far corner from where I entered was Geeknson ([www.geeknson.com](http://www.geeknson.com)) with their tables for gamers. Okay, there were no games here, but I couldn't not mention them. The specialist games-playing tables they produce are magnificent, not just for the playing surface they provide, but the drawers and storage built in. And they are beautifully made. Shame I don't have room for one.

Coming back down the room for the last time, I found Yay Games ([www.yaygames.uk](http://www.yaygames.uk)) with their new game, *Sandcastles* (no relation to the co-operative children's game of the same name). Plus, of course, *Frankenstein's Bodies* from last year. Also designed by Andrew Harman, *Sandcastles* is a card game of building sandcastles. Players get points for shape and size and can attack (and defend) using a paper-scissors-stone mechanism. It all comes to an end with the big wave. With up to seven players involved, it looks good, chaotic fun.



*Sandcastles* being demoed

The last publisher for me to mention in the Kings Suite is Wotan Games. They were showing off the two games in their Camelot series. *Camelot – the Build* has been out for a year or so now and I commented on it in last year's report. The new game, *Camelot the Court*, was in pre-production form and looked more my kind of game. It's a game of political intrigue, reminiscent of *Quo Vadis*, with the players trying to get their knights close to the King to gain the most influence. The game is card-based, with just eight different cards. The key one is the scoring card. However, everybody scores when this is played, making this a very tactical game. I look forward to seeing more of it. The next game in the series will be *Camelot – the Tourney*, which has the knights jousting with each other.





The *Camelot – The Court* display

There's a direct connection from the Kings Suite to the next trade hall, the Palace Suite, which is the largest. This means I came in at the top right-hand corner and worked my way round from there. The first stand I came across featured Andy Hopwood of Hopwood Games – sharing with 3D Total Games and Too Much Games. The new game here was 6. This is a tin of six different dice games from three Brummie games designers: Andy himself plus Greg Carslaw and John-Paul Treen (the man behind last year's *Next England Captain*).

The tin contains 15 dice of different shapes (familiar to any *Dungeons and Dragons* player!) and the rules. The games are a neat mix of dexterity, bluffing and bidding. None of them takes more than 15 minutes to play, so this is a convenient compendium to stick in a pocket and use to fill in the odd quarter of an hour.

In front of me now was the large Konami stand with all things *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, but I shall ignore this, along with the line of retailers down the right-hand wall of the Palace Suite. Thus the next stand I came to was Black Box Games and the latest from *Lords of War* (lords-of-war.com), a game that has passed me by. On the end of this row, though, was Triple Ace Games (www.tripleacegames.com) with the production version of *Rocket Race*, which I enjoyed last year.

Triple Ace had two new games, which were available as limited editions in wooden boxes for the Expo. The first is *King of Thieves*. Set in the mysterious Orient of the Arabian Nights, this is a game of tomb robbing. Players aim to gain treasures while preserving their all-important reputation.

The second game is *Halfling Feast* (designed by Naomi Styles), a game of competitive eating. After all, what do hobbits do all the time? (I have to say that I find "second breakfast" a very useful concept!) This is a quick-playing card game with players contend to eat a variety of exotic dishes. Action cards provide ways of interfering with your competitors and add a bluffing element to the game. It looks good fun and will be more widely available after it's launched on Kickstarter later this year.



*Halfling Feast* on display



Reaching the other side of the Palace Suite I found Gavin Birnbaum of Cubiko ([www.cubiko.webs.com](http://www.cubiko.webs.com)) busy demonstrating some of his fine wooden games. The latest that I could see was *JamSumo* (played on a small board with a central hole), which was previewed last year. However, Gavin also has an abstract wargame, *Fog of War*, which has been funded on Kickstarter (as a limited edition).



*Guilds of London* prototype

Just across from Gavin, at the start of the next block of stands were Surprised Stare Games ([www.surprisedstaregames.co.uk](http://www.surprisedstaregames.co.uk)) with the prototype of their latest, *Guilds of London*, designed by Tony Boydell. This looks fascinating with players using cards to get their 'liverymen' pieces into the Guilds – a set of square cards set out on the table – and promoting them to Master (the head of a Guild). Control of Guilds is what players are after, but this can also be used to expand your empire further. I'm really looking forward to this one.

Right behind Surprised Stare was Portal Games from Poland ([portalgames.pl/new\\_en](http://portalgames.pl/new_en)). I didn't find anything new here, but I did pick up some add-ons for my copy of *Robinson Crusoe* – notably the King Kong scenario.

Just across the aisle was North and South Games ([www.northandsouthgames.co.uk](http://www.northandsouthgames.co.uk)). Designer Dave Cousins was busy playing *Terrain*, which I saw last year, with the new expansion, *Taxes*. This lets players add village pieces to the board, which then accumulate coins as terrain tiles are placed. Players have the option of moving the tax collector to collect the money, adding to their score. This is an elegant extra element to what was already a clever little game.

One side of the central aisle was retailer Games Lore, who provided a few tables for Czech Games Edition ([www.czechgames.com](http://www.czechgames.com)) to show some of their recent games. Included in this was a prototype of the forthcoming revised edition of Vlaada Chvátil's *Through the Ages*. I didn't get a detailed look at this, but was assured that it is 90% the same game. The key thing is that game play has been streamlined – which will be a relief to those who call it "Through the ages and ages..." – while retaining the feel of the original game. As well as new artwork throughout (in line with the digital version of the game), some cards, particularly the Leaders, have been revised. The finished version should be released at Spiel this October. I'm trying not to hold my breath.

Reaching the top of the aisle, I found Phalanx Games from Poland ([www.phalanxgames.pl/en](http://www.phalanxgames.pl/en)) at the end of the next block of stands. As well as *1944: Race to the Rhine* from last year, they had two other games for us to see. *Czas Honoru* (Days of

Honour) is a two-player card game set in occupied Poland during the latter years of WW2. The Polish player aims to grab rocket parts while the German player tries to secure them. A different theme for an interesting looking game with plenty of opportunity to interfere with your opponent's plans.

*Magnates*, which I think made its debut at Spiel last year, also looked interesting. This has players taking on the mantle of a powerful noble family in Poland in the 16th-18th centuries. They are competing for positions in the parliament, for land and for prestige, but must also defend the country from external threats. While some family members (cards) are highly competent, others are ... less so, giving players another challenge – and the opportunity to mess up their opponents' plans. This is definitely a game I'd like to try.



*Magnates* waiting for players



*Villainy* display

Back down at the other end of this block was the large area of Mayfair Games ([www.mayfairgames.com](http://www.mayfairgames.com)). Unfortunately, production delays meant that Mayfair's headline game, *Extra! Extra!*, hadn't made it to the Expo. Which is a shame as it's definitely a game I'd like to play (I have fond memories of Waddington's *Scoop!* – showing my age). I expect to catch up with it at Spiel.

The games that had made it were Leo Colovini's *Flea Market* and *Hot Tin Roof* and, my favourite, *Villainy*. Illustrated with terrific retro comic-style artwork, this is a game of super-villains. As such, the players are looking to complete their plans. To do this, they must recruit henchmen and build the right team for the job. Committing crimes along the way will improve the villains' stats, also helping them towards completing their plan. And they may have to fight other players! The big finale is a showdown with a super-hero. Cracking stuff and another game I look forward to trying.

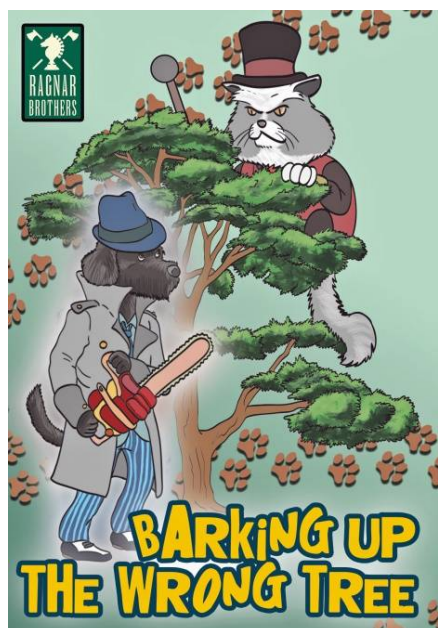
Moving on, I found the Modiphius Entertainment ([www.modiphius.com](http://www.modiphius.com)) stand and, tucked away in a corner, the prototype of Matt Leacock's *Thunderbirds* co-operative game (successfully launched recently on



Kickstarter). An old gaming friend, Michal Cross, is the graphic artist on this and he took me quickly through the game. As you'd expect, players use the Tracy brothers (and Lady Penelope) and the Thunderbirds machines to carry out rescue missions. In keeping with the show, players must also avoid spies who are trying to uncover their secrets. But their biggest threat is, of course, The Hood, whose machinations are the major obstacle for players to overcome.

The game is played over a map of the world, with additional areas for operations in outer space (that's what Thunderbird 3 is for). There are models of all five Thunderbirds along with ancillary equipment, such as the Mole. A clever touch is that the characters are head and shoulders pieces with a peg base so that they can be slotted into holes in the models. My only quibble is that Thunderbird 3 is orange, not red. However, the whole thing is utterly brilliant and I can't wait for my copy to arrive! It gets a provisional 10/10 on my highly subjective scale. Because.

At the far end of the Palace Suite were the Ragnar Brothers ([ragnarbrothers.co.uk/](http://ragnarbrothers.co.uk/)) with their latest prototype, *Barking up the Wrong Tree*. This is a deceptively simple card game of dogs competing over trees. No, really. Target cards (trees) are set out and



players use their hand of dog cards (and the occasional cat) to claim these for themselves. Initially, any tree is useful. However, the bonuses for sets of trees give players more specific goals as the game goes on. They also have more trees and more dogs each round... It's a clever little game and I give it 8/10 on my highly subjective scale on first acquaintance. It was successfully launched on Kickstarter at the end of June, so expect to see it later this year. Meanwhile, the Ragnars' previous Kickstarter project, *DR Congo*, has just arrived in the country and should be out and about soon.

Down the last aisle Gen 42 ([www.gen42.com](http://www.gen42.com)) were showing their clever two-player game of insect battles, *Hive*, and its expansions. Plus the Android app that's now available.



Ooh, ooh, *Thunderbirds!* I want one!



The last of the trade halls is the smallest, the Library. Here I found several familiar faces, including the Historic Games Shop ([www.thehistoricgameshop.co.uk](http://www.thehistoricgameshop.co.uk)), whose fine wooden games I discovered last year.

I didn't find much else to look at here. One of the few was the delightfully-named Happy Otter Games ([www.happyottergames.com](http://www.happyottergames.com)) with the equally delightful *Creature College*. This, they tell me, is a crossover game – apparently between board game and card game. Players have a set of numbered tokens with which they bid for the creatures of the title – cards with charming cartoon-style illustrations. Players then use their creatures to fight battles, research for bonuses and carry out secret missions. All of these are worth points, giving players lots of ways of earning victory. It's clearly aimed at a family audience, but looks like there's enough about it to interest gamers. It's being launched on Kickstarter in the Autumn, so keep an eye open for it.



The prototype of *Creature College*

Playmore Games from Finland ([playmoregames.fi](http://playmoregames.fi)) had brought prototypes of their *Race to the North Pole*. As you'd expect, each player is leading an expedition in an effort to reach the Pole first. Along the way, they must deal with the ever-changing, harsh Arctic conditions. These are provided by the game's clever, rotating board that changes players' cards, positions and the landscape. On top of this, an optional smartphone app adds an auction mechanism and upgrades that complicate the game further. It plays quickly (about 45 minutes) and looks good, challenging fun.



*Race to the North Pole* plus smartphone

The finished product should be out this summer and Playmore will be at Spiel in October (as part of the Arctic Union collective).

I had a great time at the Expo again: full marks to the organisers and the troupe of volunteers who handle the nitty gritty over the weekend. I'm really looking forward to next year's event, which is scheduled for 3rd-5th June 2016. Follow the news on the Expo website: [www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk](http://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk)

© Copyright Paul Evans 2015. All trademarks acknowledged.  
Game artwork is courtesy of the respective publishers  
Pevans took the photos and played with Photoshop