

## Back at the NEC

### Pevans reports from the 2016 UK Games Expo

This promised to be a landmark year for the UK Games Expo. Having been at the Hilton Metropole Hotel at the National Exhibition Centre (NEC) for the last two years, this year the Expo was taking over Hall 1 of the NEC itself. This is a big step – taking the event closer to its avowed purpose of being a British equivalent of Germany's Spiel – and a big risk for the organisers. I'm glad to say that it was a tremendous success.



Hall 1 was used during the day for the trade and demo areas, providing plenty of space not just for the stands but space in between (the aisles at the Essen Messe can get very congested during Spiel) and for open gaming and refreshment areas. Tournaments, competitions and evening gaming took over all the space at the Metropole (which was the full extent of the Expo in 2014). This has the added bonus of keeping the hobby gamers largely out of the way of the general public. ;-)

The Expo has also expanded to three days, opening (late) on Friday morning and running through the whole weekend. This, of course, means that gamers were *in situ* from Thursday, even though there were no formal events until Friday. I rolled up for Thursday lunchtime as, with my retailer hat on (as Games from Pevans), I had an invitation to Esdevium Games's "Retailers' Summit". Hosted by the UK's largest games distributor (and part of the international Asmodee empire), this saw presentations from



Setting up at the Expo – Wotan have cheated by just driving a bus in!



Cosplay to the fore for the official opening of the Expo. I love the incongruity of mediæval warriors next to *Star Wars* Stormtroopers next to Disney princesses...

publishers distributed by Esdevium and an opportunity to talk to them and the Esdevium staff. (Plus a free lunch!) This was an early opportunity to see some of the new games and find out about others due for publication later this year.

Come Friday morning and I had my press hat on (as *To Win Just Once*) to attend the Expo's press preview. This took place in the couple of hours before the event opened to the public and took over the large open gaming area in Hall 1. Here, exhibitors at the Expo had the opportunity to present their wares to just the press. I was pleased to see some TV and film cameras (a feature of Spiel is the TV crews touring the event) as well as bloggers et al. This was my second opportunity to get in first!

With the Expo formally opened, I then spent Friday and Sunday tramping the hall and looking at what I hadn't seen earlier – and in more detail at some of what I had seen at the previews. My companion for much of this was the redoubtable Pete Card, my roommate for the weekend. You'll notice that I've missed out Saturday. That's because this is when the *Memoir '44* tournament takes place. It was feted in the Expo publicity as the one tournament that has run at every Expo to date. I've been a participant in recent years and have reported on it separately.

The next question is how to organise my report. One option is chronologically, following my voyage around the Expo and component events. This has the advantage of being in the same order as my notes, but is pretty random as far as anyone else is concerned. Another is to organise it geographically, taking readers on a tour around the spaces used for the Expo. This is what I did with my report from last year's Spiel and I found it hard work. It also doesn't make much sense without a map. So I'm going to stick with my tried and trusted approach of listing exhibitors alphabetically.

The first iteration of this report concentrated on my personal highlights and I have added to this as time has allowed me to expand on my notes. As always, when I refer to a game being like another game, I am not suggesting it is a copy. This is just a convenient

shorthand for describing new games with reference to other games the reader is (hopefully) familiar with.

Let's begin with Alderac Entertainment Group (AEG), one of the publishers I saw at Esdevium's summit on Thursday, where there was a lot of interest in *Mystic Vale* (designed by John Clair). This is a fascinating take on deck-building card games. The twist is that players construct the actual cards, rather than compiling a deck from the cards. The Tarot-sized cards are split into three sections and players' initial cards have only a few of these filled in – some cards are completely blank. Each section provides a power and/or icons for generating resources.

The cards come in transparent sleeves and players add powers/resources by buying transparent overlays that add another ability to the card (it goes into the sleeve over the card). The one thing the initial abilities definitely do is provide the 'manna' players need to buy new powers. These then provide more manna, other resources and special abilities.



Each turn players draw cards from their deck, stopping when they want to, and then use the drawn cards for their actions. However, if they draw too many 'decay' symbols, they're bust and lose that turn. This is a clever push-your-luck element that adds a neat touch to the game. Some overlays provide victory points and players can use other symbols to buy 'Vale' cards for points and constant powers. The artwork is terrific and really builds up the atmosphere of the game's fantasy setting. *Mystic Vale* should be available later this year. There's more at on all the games from AEG at [www.alderac.com](http://www.alderac.com).

After discovering the excellent *Game of Trains* at last year's Spiel, I was keen to see what that game's publisher, Brain Games, had for us at the Expo. Their stand was easy to find as it was a bright ice blue. This was to fit the theme of the new game, *Ice Cool*, designed by Brian Gomez (hmm, do I sniff a pseudonym?). This is an entertaining game of flicking penguins around a network of rooms in search of fish. No, really!

The first innovative feature is the playing area. The game comes in a set of boxes, nested within each other (like Russian dolls). To set up the game for play, you separate out these boxes, put them next to each other and link them together, matching up the holes (doorways) in the sides. Once done, this looks like the plan of a building (the illustrations show that it's a school, in fact) and clearly there are several ways this can be laid out.

The playing pieces are pawns with hemispherical bottoms, weighted so that they bob up again if you knock them over – just like toys I remember from childhood. They are sized to fit through the doorways between the boxes and the game is all about flicking them from room to room. Skilled players can send them on curving paths through more than one room.

The element that holds all this together – literally – is the fish-shaped pegs that clip the different box layers together. These come in the players' colours and players collect them from above the doorways they get their penguin through. First to get all their fish wins the round. Except that one player is 'Hall Monitor', whose job is to catch the other





*Ice Cool* set up and being demonstrated

players. The Hall Monitor wins the round if they can catch each of the other players before anyone gets all their fish.

You play enough rounds for everybody to be Hall Monitor once and then tot up the points to see who's won. Never mind that, I think this is a game to play just for the fun of it. The penguin pieces are actually quite tricky to flick, so you have to learn the knack – though part of the fun is watching pieces bouncing off the walls. It's aimed at children and families, but it is good fun. On first acquaintance, I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. Find out more at [www.brain-games.com](http://www.brain-games.com)

Burley Games had a new edition of *Take it Easy!* Billed as the "Daffodil" edition, this comes in a bright (and I mean bright!) yellow box. If you've not come across it, *Take It Easy!* is one of those ingeniously 'simple' games. Each player has their own board with a hexagonal grid and an identical set of hexagonal tiles. The tiles have three lines of different colours (and values) running across them. The goal is to lay your tiles to make complete lines of one colour, maximising your score for that line. The twist is that one player acts as caller, drawing tiles one by one. All players then place that specific tile from their own set, choosing where it goes: simple but fiendish. It can be played with as many people as you have boards and tiles for – I've been part of a 200-player game.

The new edition has double-sided boards. One side is the standard game, played in the usual way. The second is laid out as groups of hexagons around a central group – not unlike a daffodil flower. This has slightly more spaces than the standard board and a few extra tiles with a 'wild' stripe that can match any of the standard ones. It's great to see the game back in print, as it is a classic, though this is a limited edition. I'm also

impressed that Peter Burley has found a new twist to make it even more devilish. It gets a definite 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. See [www.burleygames.com](http://www.burleygames.com) for more information.

Catan Studio is the new venture with the US rights to (*Settlers of*) *Catan* – in partnership with Kosmos in Europe. They will be publishing the full range of products in this expanding brand and had some of the latest on display as part of Esdevium's Retailers' Summit, as Esdevium will be handling UK distribution for these. These include a series of paper map-boards for playing *Catan* across specific US states: Georgia, New York and the Carolinas, for example. These geographical scenarios are large, single sheets, providing a set layout along with specific rules for adapting the game. Expect a lot more material for the core game and its various spin-offs. You'll find more information at [www.catanstudio.com](http://www.catanstudio.com)



Did I mention it's bright yellow?

Distributor Coiledspring Games had a large section of the hall and were demonstrating a wide range of games (and toys and puzzles). In line with the ethos of the Expo (and, indeed, Spiel), that's what they were using their space for: getting people playing the games. And it was good to see main man Roger Martin was one of those demonstrating games. Prominent here was *New York 1901*, which has provoked a good response from those who've played it. Unfortunately, I haven't, so I can't comment. Also being demonstrated were *CVlizations* (covered as part of my report from the 2016 Gathering), Amigo's compact edition of *Elfenland*, the new edition of *Nefarious*, and some new titles: *Cornwall* and *Vienna*.

Last year Ergo Sum Games only had prototypes of their game, *New Earth*. This year the finished article was on display and very interesting it looked. Designed by Nick Higgins,



the game's setting is a recovering, post-holocaust world and the action is economic and political. It is played over a set of large, roughly triangular tiles each divided into half a dozen 'zones'. Players start with control of one tile each – their territory.

They also start with workers – mining and energy production – and a manufacturing plant plus an initial stockpile of resources and cash and a few cards. The cards can be used in a number of ways. In particular, players can trade in cards to build cities, doubling





A demo game of *Star Wars: Rebellion* all prepared, Death Stars at the ready...

production in that zone. Production is a crucial part of the game as players' resources let them generate 'luxury goods' to sustain and improve their zones.

Increasing the level of their zones is one way of improving player's score. The other way is to control more territory, which is done through 'elections' at the end of each turn. Players must spend cash to do this, with their chances of success modified by any cards they – or their opponents – play. Yes, this is not just about expanding your own territory, but also diminishing other players'.

On top of this, you have occasional catastrophes to deal with and players' scores will depend on the final catastrophe that is triggered at the end of the game. *New Earth* looks really intriguing and I'm looking forward to playing it properly. I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. Take a look at [www.ergosumgames.com](http://www.ergosumgames.com) to find out more.

Another publisher I saw at Esdevium's summit was Fantasy Flight Games with main man Christian Petersen one of those showing off their latest. The most obvious of these was *Star Wars Rebellion*, which is huge. I saw it being played a lot over the weekend (not least by Christian and Esdevium founder Dan Steel – inducted into the UK Games Expo Hall of Fame this year, but looking none the worse for the experience). The game is hard to miss. The big, deep box contains a large board and a huge number of models: from individuals through spaceships to three Death Stars!

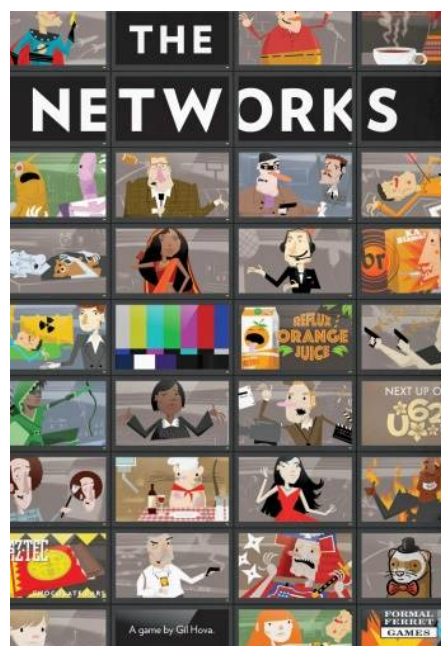
The game is a cat and mouse struggle for two sides (2-4 players) as the mighty Empire tries to crush the puny guerrillas of the Rebellion. If only they can find the rebel base. The longer the rebel leaders survive, the further they can spread Rebellion, increasing their strength even as they diminish the Empire until they are strong enough to defeat it. However, time also lets the Empire narrow down the location of the rebels' HQ and destroy it to win.

The game manages to combine large-scale political and military struggles with the personal abilities and actions of both sides' heroes. I heard nothing but good things about the game (not least from Dan) and it is gorgeous to look at – though the high quality production does not come cheap (UK RRP is now £93.99 after the recent fall in sterling).

The other item I noticed from FFG was their good-looking new edition of *Fury of Dracula*. This is a hidden movement game with one player, in the role of the Transylvanian Count, sneaking across Europe. The other players try to stop Dracula, tracking his progress by the exsanguinated corpses popping up across the continent. It's something of a classic (it was originally *The Fury of Dracula*, published by Games Workshop in 1987) and it's great to see it available again – especially with such high quality production. See more from Fantasy Flight at [www.fantasyflightgames.com](http://www.fantasyflightgames.com)

Gil Hova is a man I seem to have avoided (not deliberately, you understand) at the Gathering over the years, but he managed to collar me at the Expo. With several published games to his name, Gil has his own imprint: Formal Ferret Games (no, really – check out the logo). His latest is *The Networks*, wherein players compete for shows and stars to fill the schedule of their TV network and earn better ratings than the opposition (also the theme of the venerable *TV Wars*, but there's little similarity between the two).

The game is played over five seasons, so players can't rest on their laurels if they do well in the first season. The first thing players have to do is buy in better shows. Then they can recruit stars for those shows – aiming to get the right people for the show (Matt LeBlanc in a re-make of a British sit com anyone?). Finally, they need to pick up advertisers to bring in the income they'll need to improve further. However, it's viewers that win the game: the objective is to be the most popular network over all five seasons.



The game looks good and I was quite taken with my introduction: players are pushed all the time and will have to make the right decisions at the right times. They are also competing for everything as well, so players need to keep an eye on what their opponents are up to. *The Networks* was funded on Kickstarter last year, was produced earlier this year and should be available now. What I don't know is whether any copies will make it over to this side of the pond. I hope so as I'd certainly like to play it. There's more on Gil's website: [gil.hova.net](http://gil.hova.net)

*Lab Wars* is another game that caught my eye as I toured the aisles of the Expo. Self-published by Caezar Al-Jassar and Kuly Heer, it's a card game of competitive science laboratories. How true to real life it is, I don't know, but I suspect that's what inspired it. The aim is to become the scientist with the highest reputation. This means building up your equipment, conducting experiments, publishing papers (and, perhaps, winning a Nobel prize) and, of course, sabotaging your rivals!

Each round, players choose a particular character from their hand. Then, in turn, they use this character for the actions they choose. Actions produce research points, the game's currency, which are used to buy equipment cards and 'impact' cards which establish the player's reputation. From what I saw, the game plays pretty quickly and is good fun – it was certainly going down well with the people I watched. An entertaining lightweight game, I think: I give it a provisional 7/10 on my highly subjective scale. The



*Lab Wars* being demonstrated

game was successfully funded on Kickstarter at the beginning of July and is planned for delivery early in 2017. It can be ordered from the website: [www.lab-wars.com](http://www.lab-wars.com)

*Western Front* is one that Pete Card found. It's a two-player card game and we gave it a go one evening at the Expo. Published by Little Bighorn Games, it is a clever bluffing game themed around World War One. It's played over five rounds, representing the years of the conflict, 1914-1918. Both players have a set of cards and play one each 'battle' (round). The higher card wins and whoever wins more battles wins the year. First to three years wins the game.

What makes this a contest is that the two players have the same values of cards in their set. Thus, in order to win, you have to out-guess your opponent. First, play your lowest cards, which are bound to lose, against the other guy's highest. Then beat each of your opponent's remaining cards with one of yours that's just higher. Not necessarily in that order. And there's the rub: working out which card your adversary will play next. It may not be an innovative mechanism, but it works well, providing a quick-playing and entertaining game.

On top of this, each player has a set of tactic cards. Depending on how well they did the previous round, they add some of these to their hand at the start of a round. Played with a main card, these increase its value or provide some extra ability. "Aerial Reconnaissance", for example, lets a player look at their opponent's card – and then change their own. This neatly stops the game becoming stale, while providing an extra element to think about.



I have thoroughly enjoyed *Western Front* and it's now the standard two-player game in my bag of games. I give it 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. Find out more at [littlebighorngames.com](http://littlebighorngames.com)

Morning Players (part of the Morning Family group) is a French publisher/distributor with an interesting selection of games – including the Stonemaier catalogue. The Expo was my first opportunity to see *Scythe*, the result of a much-subscribed Kickstarter campaign by Stonemaier. The game's artwork is fascinating: super-imposing steampunk-style mechs on pictures of nineteenth-century rural life. Mechs are not my thing, but they are actually just one component of what is quite an interesting game.



Designed by Jamey Stonemaier, *Scythe* is a game of empire-building with just a bit of warfare. Each player leads a faction aiming to exploit and colonise a valuable territory – as shown on the board. They deploy their leaders and workers to gather the resources that allow them to build and develop more. One of the things to build is the military mechs that will defend their territory – or take it from others.

There are some very clever touches to this game with players having the same actions available, but organised differently. Thus each player needs slightly different combinations to do the same thing and has specific constraints on the actions they take. Add in to this the flavour provided by each faction's abilities and the detailed models and *Scythe* is an interesting challenge. And the Mechs are only a minor part. On first acquaintance, I give it 8/10 on my highly subjective scale and I look forward to playing it properly. You'll find Stonemaier Games at [stonemaiergames.com](http://stonemaiergames.com)



*Scythe* pieces in place on the board

Also with Morning Players was a prototype of their own Kickstarter project, *HOPE*, designed by Olivier Grégoire. This is a science fiction-themed co-operative game of saving the universe through the "Human Organization to Preserve Existence". It's played over hexagonal tiles that represent the Universe and are removed as the Universe shrinks. Players must work together, travelling round to prevent tiles disappearing. Despite the good-looking spaceship models, I didn't find the game appealing. Take a look for yourself at [morning-family.com](http://morning-family.com)



Battle of Britain on a large scale

I discovered PSC Games last year when they launched *The Great War* (bringing together Richard Borg's *Commands & Colors* wargame system with the terrific models produced by The Plastic Soldier Company to make an excellent game of First World War battles). This made their stand a priority for an early visit from me (and Pete) and there was plenty to see. For a start, they were sharing with Ian Brody of Griggling Games, designer and publisher of *Quartermaster General*. The two outfits are working together on *Quartermaster General: 1914*, which applies the QMG mechanisms to the First World War, and *Victory or Death*, which uses them for the wars between the city-states of Ancient Greece. Given the pedigree of the two firms, I'm looking forward to both games – and the models they will no doubt contain.

The main display on the stand was a giant map of Britain and near Europe with model aeroplanes on stands being pushed around by a couple of WAAFs (PSC Games main man, Will Townshend, was also resplendent in an RAF uniform). Yes, the next game from PSC will be a "re-mastered and upgraded version of Richard Borg's much-loved old TSR classic, *The Battle of Britain*." Hmm, it may be a classic, but I'm afraid it passed me by back in the 1990s. It's a two-player game of the air war over Britain in late 1940, pitting the defending fighters against the attacking bomber fleets and their escorting fighters. I look forward to seeing what PSC do with the game, but it will be a completely new experience for me. The Kickstarter campaign completed on 12th August and was hugely over-funded!

There was an extensive display of *The Great War* on the stand, of course, along with the expansions so far. The latest of these is a pack of three Whippet tanks – lightly armoured, fast tanks armed with machine guns as infantry support. These look just as good as the models in the main *Tank* expansion and a few scenarios with Whippets are included in that. The next expansion will be the French Army – I'm hoping for cavalry and some early war scenarios. PSC Games can be found at [www.pscgames.co.uk](http://www.pscgames.co.uk) and Griggling at [www.grigglinggames.com](http://www.grigglinggames.com).

*Push It* is an interesting game. Not least because it's just a set of coloured wooden pucks. All you need is a smooth, flat surface and you can play: flick, shove, push or chop your pucks across the table. The aim, as in bowls, is to be closest to the target piece (jack) when everybody's finished. It's simple, it's fun and it's a game you can just tuck into a pocket or a bag and play when you need something to fill the odd five (or twenty) minutes. There are four colours of pucks in the box, so it can be played by 2-4 and



designer Leeson George recommends playing with partners (croquet style) with four. It's a cracking little game and gets a solid 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. The *Push It* website is at [www.push-it-game.com](http://www.push-it-game.com)



Pete and I hit the Ragnar Brothers' stand on Friday morning to get an introduction to their latest, *Niña and Pinta*. Unfortunately, shipping delays meant the game arrived in the UK just too late for the Expo. However, the guys had several demo copies on display and the game is certainly available now. As you'd expect from the name, the game is about exploring the New World – all three of Columbus's ships are involved. However, everybody remembers the Santa Maria so the game's title celebrates the other two ships. The twist is that each ship goes to a different, parallel version of the Americas.

Each player has their own expedition: three ships on which to send their settlers (nice little wooden meeples) and Captains (slightly larger meeples) to the three versions of the Americas. This costs money, but the main reason for going is to bring back money. Initially, players will explore, revealing the differing terrain in each New World and gaining the occasional bonus. Once established, settlers provide revenue and this is brought back by the ships, along with any plunder.

Players can also attack each other – within limits that require planning – and convert settlers to towns and then cities (again, this requires a bit of planning to achieve). One



Playing *Niña & Pinta*

advantage of these is that they can't be attacked. A second is that they score more points at the end of the game. However, a lot of players' points will come from the 'bonus' tiles they buy each round. Some of these provide immediate advantages (such as a free town or larger ships). The others score points according to the number of cities in the appropriate New World (depending on how the players designate each of the worlds during play – something else for players to think about).

*Niña and Pinta* plays over six 'Eras', giving players six opportunities to send ships to the New Worlds (and back) and six occasions to buy bonuses. The winner is, of course, the player with the most points and this won't be clear until you tot them all up. The Ragnars have come up with another intriguing, deep game that I look forward to playing. For the time being it gets 8/10 on my highly subjective scale. Find out more on the Ragnars' website at [ragnarbrothers.co.uk](http://ragnarbrothers.co.uk)

Stuff by Bez is an interesting name for an exhibitor, but it does describe what's on offer: stuff designed by artist Behrooz "Bez" Shahriari. As you'd expect, this includes some games. Bez's first game, *In a Bind*, is being published by abstract games specialist Gigamic. It's a neat forfeit style game with something of a *Twister* vibe to it. Each card describes where the player must place it: behind their left ear, say, or between thumb and forefinger. This gets trickier as they draw more cards... I can see this being great fun with the right group of people! We can expect *In a Bind junior* later this year. And next will be a set of card games, from Bez and other designers, called *Wibbell++*. We can

expect to see more of this at Spiel in October. You can find more at @StuffByBez



Playing *Guilds of London*

Another game Pete and I had a go at during the Expo was *Guilds of London*, the latest from Tony Boydell and Surprised Stare Games. The theme of the game is pretty obvious from the title. It's played over a set number of rounds, according to the number of players, with players scoring points for the different guilds they control – and a few other things. The game is played across the City of London, starting with the Guildhall and a random selection of Guilds – all cardboard tiles – and a few other notable landmarks.

Players have pawns ("liverymen") in their colour, a few of which start in the Guildhall, and a secret objective that may bring them bonus points at the end of the game. At the heart of the gameplay are the action cards. Each card has a suit (colour and symbol) that ties in to the Guild tiles and a special ability, with a cost. They are used either to add or move liveryman pawns to the tiles or for the



special ability. Once everybody's taken their turn, control of the different Guilds is resolved – there are some neat tactical opportunities for players within this.

There are rewards for winning and coming second for control of a tile. It is then flipped over, the winning player leaving a pawn on it to show their continuing control (a neat bit of handicapping, this). New tiles are added periodically, giving players more to do, and they can also send liverymen to the “plantations” for specific rewards. All in all, there's quite a bit going on here and players have a lot to think about – starting with the best way to use each card. It is a clever game, but I have to say that it didn't grab me and rather outstayed its welcome. I'll be happy to play it again, but I won't be bringing it to the table. I give it 6/10 on my highly subjective scale.

*V Commandos* is a card-based co-operative game of WW2 commando operations from Canadians, Triton Noir, who were busy demonstrating a prototype. The players form a team of WW2 commandos with the appropriate skills and equipment. Their objectives are sabotaging factories, destroying military installations and collecting intelligence. In order to win, the team must successfully complete a series of missions. The designers told me that stealth is the most important factor and they have minimised the luck element in the game. It certainly looks atmospheric and I look forward to giving it a go.

For me, Warm Acre are the publishers of the highly entertaining *Jane Austen's Matchmaker* card game. Their next venture, being demonstrated at the Expo in prototype form, is another card game, *Game of Blame*. Themed around a mediæval court, this is a fast-playing card game of making sure your opponents carry the can when things go wrong. It's a terrific idea and my brief introduction to the game was good fun.



Each player is an advisor to the Queen and must make sure the other advisors get blamed for the incidents shown on the cards. The problem is that each card has coloured seals (wax not wildlife) and, if your role matches, the finger's pointing at you. Hence, the main mechanism is to get cards out of your hand, burying bad news in the discard pile. The other option is to change job, suddenly making bad cards very useful. I'm looking forward to this one and give it a provisional 9/10 on my highly subjective scale. [www.warmacre.com](http://www.warmacre.com) is the company's main website and there's a separate site for the game: [www.gameofblame.com](http://www.gameofblame.com).

All in all, I had a terrific three days at this year's UK Games Expo. Many thanks to Richard Denning and his team (and all the volunteers) for a job well done. I look forward to next year's event, scheduled for 2nd-4th June 2017 and you can keep up to date on the website: [www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk](http://www.ukgamesexpo.co.uk)

© Copyright Paul Evans 2016. All trademarks acknowledged. A shorter version of this report was first published in *To Win Just Once* issues 166 and 167 (July-September 2016). Game artwork is courtesy of the publishers. Pevans took the photos and played with Photoshop.