

The Gathering of Friends 2011

Pevans plays games at Niagara Falls

There was a change of venue for the Gathering this year: we moved to Niagara Falls. It didn't make a huge difference for me—I flew from London to Chicago and caught an internal flight to Buffalo. A fair number of other Europeans flew to Toronto, which isn't much further away, but is in a different country! Getting to Niagara from Buffalo was a bit trickier, but I got a lift with some other attendees (the only up side to being nearly a day late, as I related in *TWJO* 115).

The most obvious thing about the hotel is the big casino across the road—on Indian land. The centre of this building is a huge room full of slot machines, Roulette wheels and Blackjack tables. The biggest surprise on walking in was the cigarette smoke! It's not that long since the smoking ban came into force, but I'm so used to it that the smoky atmosphere in the casino was a real shock. Was this really the norm a few years ago?

What attracted us to the casino, though, was the selection of restaurants around that main hall. I ate there twice in the five days I was at the Gathering: a good Chinese meal and an excellent burger. There's no smoking in the eating areas, thank goodness. Apart from the casino, though, Niagara Falls had a really run-down feel to it: lots of empty and boarded up buildings and deserted streets. Though the casino was always packed out!

Having attended the Gathering for quite a few years now, it's as much about meeting up with old friends as playing games. However, there are plenty of games—most people bring some games and those who drive bring a lot! What's more, a fair number of games designers come along and bring prototypes with them. The Gathering is a great place to get lots of knowledgeable gamers trying out your brainchild.

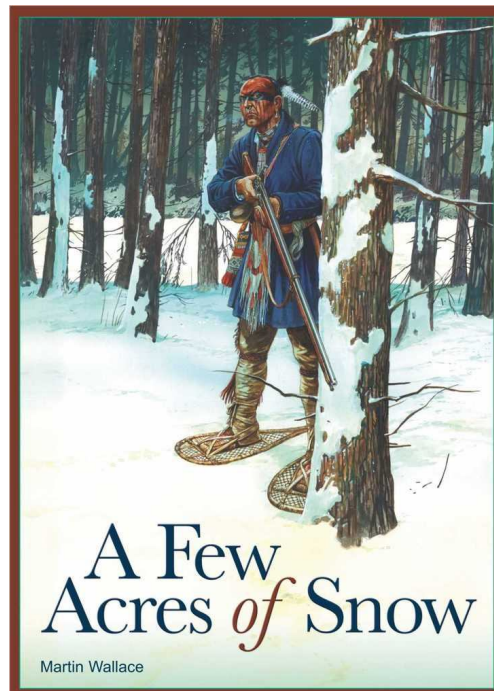
My first game of the week turned out to be *Sun, Sea & Sand* (see my review in *TWJO* 115), as my dinner companions wanted to try it and I was able to teach. Rather jet-lagged, the only thing I could cope with after that was *Q-Jet 21xx*, a re-theming of *Ave Caesar* to the next century where the chariots become hovercars. Although this came out in 2007, I hadn't played it before and was pleasantly surprised that it seems to be a complete clone of the original *Ave Caesar*. Just with little hovercar models instead of chariots.

The other thing about having recently arrived in the US from the UK is that you tend to be awake early in the morning. Well, earlier than I would usually be! This gave me time to deal with my e-mail after breakfast and still be in the function rooms before the gaming got into full swing.

Courtesy of Martin Wallace, I had pre-production copies of his forthcoming games, *A Few Acres of Snow* and *Ankh-Morpork*, and the first expansions for *Age of Industry* and took the opportunity to try them out. Several times, in the case of the first two.

Knowing that Pete Card is something of a wargamer, I roped him in to help me learn *A Few Acres of Snow*. This is Martin's take on the wars between Britain and France over what is now Canada, spanning nearly 100 years. The irony being that, less than twenty years later, Britain lost the territory from which it had conquered Canada as the American colonists revolted against the taxes which had financed those wars.

The game focuses on the settlements and forts that the two nations established in this heavily-wooded, sparsely-populated, rugged land. Initially these are along the coast and the shores of the St Lawrence river. From these, the players found fresh settlements along the inland rivers which were the easiest method of transport across this terrain. This, of course, brings the British and French settlers ever closer together. Though one way of winning is to out-settle your opponent.



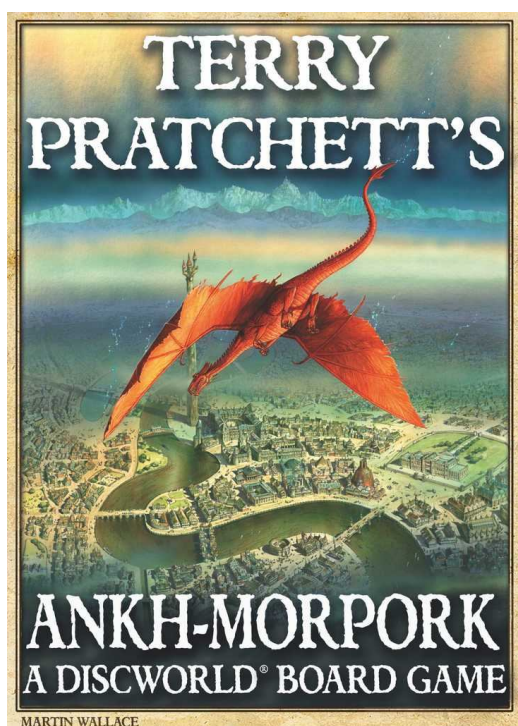
The game is card driven. In *Dominion* style, players have a hand of cards to play each turn. These are drawn from their active deck of cards. One of the actions available to them is to draft other cards from their nation's 'military' (troops, weaponry) and 'empire' (political resources) decks. These go into their discard pile and will thus eventually arrive in their hand as they shuffle and re-use cards. However, the players cannot be sure just when the cards they drafted will arrive—just like the Generals of the time, waiting for London or Paris to respond to their request for extra troops. Possibly with a shipload of boots.

Given the timescale of the game and the historical difficulties of fighting these wars, the main military tactic is laying siege to your opponent's settlements and forts. These can continue for several turns as both sides bring reinforcements into the fray until one or other gets the upper hand. Get it right, of course, and the siege can be over quickly. I particularly enjoyed following the historical example and winning as the British by taking Quebec. Though I also won as the French by out-settling the Brits—which is actually harder for the French to do.

I was very taken with *A Few Acres of Snow*, playing it several times over my five days at the Gathering. As it's a card-based game, I think it's lighter and more accessible than most wargames. It still provides a real challenge for both players. Not only do they have to make their military strategy work, they have to manage

their cards. The two go hand in hand, of course, as you need the cards to make the strategy work. The British and French sets of cards are slightly different, giving the two some different options. I give it 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

A Few Acres of Snow was due to be released at the UK Games Expo at the beginning of June, but I see from the Treefrog website (www.treefroggames.com) that it's been delayed. [It was available from the end of July.]



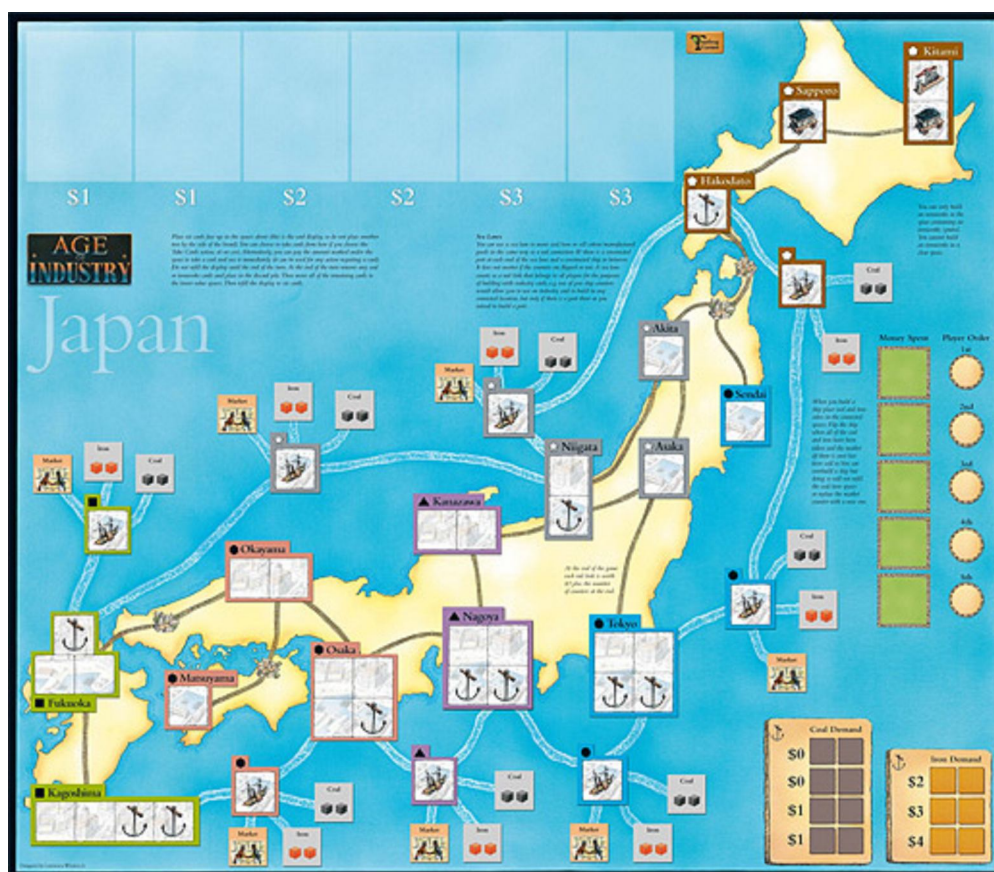
Ankh-Morpork is completely different, though it's also a card-based game. This is a game of chaos for two-four players, re-creating the city that is the setting of many of Terry Pratchett's Discworld stories. The players are competing for control of the city in the absence of its ruler, Lord Vetinari. Depending on which 'Personality' card they draw, they will have one of five different victory conditions. Part of the gameplay is working out what other players' victory conditions are and making sure they don't achieve them. The drawback to this is that one of the personalities is Sam Vimes, Captain of the Watch, and he wins if no-one else has won when the cards run out!

Once again, players have a hand of cards which give them their actions for the turn. They play a card and may carry out the actions shown by the icons and text on the

card. One of these icons can be playing another card, allowing players to get several cards down in a single turn. The actions allow players to get 'minions' on the board, purchase the single building allowed in an area of the city, remove other players' minions or buildings, get money and so on.

On top of this are random events that can trash a player's entire position. Yes, this is not a game that repays careful planning. It is completely bonkers and utterly chaotic. A big part of the appeal is the characters and events of the Discworld books that appear in the game from Cut-Me-Own-Throat Dibbler to Gaspode the Wonder Dog. I had a couple of excellent games at the Gathering when people (notably Discworld fans) threw themselves into the game and enjoyed the chaos. However, I also had a number of negative comments from gamers expecting something more from a Martin Wallace title.

I find *Ankh-Morpork* a lot of fun and recommend it to anyone who likes a bit of madcap entertainment in their games—and particularly if they have any affection for the Discworld. It's due out at this October's Spiel games fair or can be ordered in advance on the Treefrog website (where a Collectors' Edition is also available). Played with the right people, this is at least 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.



The Japan board for *Age of Industry* (Courtesy of Treefrog)

The *Age of Industry* expansion is a double-sided board with Japan on one side and Minnesota on the other. Each has some special rules. The Minnesota board (designed by Kevin Beckley) has lots of rules and is a major change to the basic game—mainly revolving around iron production. I left this and tried the Japan board (designed by Larry Whalen). Given that Japan is a series of mountainous islands, there's much less scope for building railways. Instead, the sea lanes play a bigger part in the game. The rule change I particularly liked, though, is that a number of cards are available to purchase and use instead of playing a card from your hand. This gives players a bit more flexibility—at a cost, of course. If you're a fan of *Age of Industry*, the expansion adds more to the game. If you're not, go get a copy of the game! I give the Japan map a definite 8/10.

Okay, that's enough about Martin Wallace's games. I did actually play a lot of other things. One of these was GMT's *Dominant Species*, described to me as "a wargame dressed up as a Eurogame". I was also told it needed all six players and I quickly saw why. Players represent different classes of animal—mammal, reptile, insect etc. Each class has its own advantages in relation to each other and you need all six in play to balance these. (Though I'm sure experienced players would compensate for a missing class.)

The game is played across hexagonal tiles of different terrain types with coloured cubes representing the species within a class. Placed on the points of the tiles,

circular 'elements' show what characteristics allow animals to survive on those tiles—and which class is dominant. As you'd expect, different classes survive better with different elements—and can 'evolve' to survive better. However, the main thing the players do each turn is place their available pawns on the possible actions. There are limited positions for each action, so turn order can be important. And changing turn order is one of the actions available to players.

Actions allow players to add species to the board, migrate around the tiles, add to the elements that support their animal, add elements to the board and, crucially, score victory points. Not only do players need to take actions to improve their position, they may have to select some of them to prevent deterioration—such as removing elements from their animal. And animals can attack each other, removing cubes from a tile and potentially changing which animal has dominance on that tile. To add to the pressure on the players, the Ice Age is approaching. Each turn, glaciation spreads across the tiles, turning more of them into tundra.



It's not much, but it was our world. The cones show dominance and note the glaciation across the middle



Those all-important Actions

I must say that I didn't find *Dominant Species* particularly wargame-like, though it did remind me of *Tyranno Ex*. While removing other players' cubes is a part of the game, most of the competition seemed to be for the actions. In particular, picking the right time to score some points seems important. Though I found I was struggling just to keep my animal in play. One nice point about the game is that you are not out even if you have no cubes on the tiles as the 'Speciation' action lets you place some more. This is a big game that I found quite absorbing. I look forward to giving it another go. A provisional 7/10 on my subjective scale.

One of the games that was a particular hit at the Gathering was Hans im Glück's *Pantheon*. This is a semi-abstract game set in the Ancient World. The board shows the Europe, North Africa and the Near East around the Mediterranean Sea. This is overlaid with a hexagonal grid, showing the capital cities of various empires, six of which will be the starting points for the turns. Other symbols on the grid show where players can get rewards and place their columns. As well as wooden columns, each player has wooden 'feet' in their colour.

Key to the game are the cards players hold. They use foot cards to 'move' by placing feet out from the current capital to reach column spaces or collect rewards by connecting to the appropriate space. Money cards let players buy or upgrade a sacrifice tile in one of the four types. Playing sacrifice cards, possibly combined with tiles, allows a player to take a God tile (from this turn's selection) and gain the benefits of the God—either a one-off or a permanent bonus. The final option for a player in their turn is to draw more cards.

The turn ends when the last reward or God is drawn. Players score points at the end of the third and sixth turns for columns on the board (more points per column the more columns they have on the board) and the number of demi-God chips they've collected. Hence, all the other things are means to an end: the key to winning the game is getting columns on the board and collecting demi-Gods. There is a definite



Just about everything that's in *Pantheon* (Courtesy of Hans im Glück)

advantage to picking up rewards and Gods to make it easier to place columns and grab demi-Gods. However, there are only limited places for those columns to go, so you can't afford to wait too long.

I played *Pantheon* several times at the Gathering and my experience is that you need a balance: get some columns down early while building up your resources to get more columns later. And take your opportunities to grab a demi-God or three. It's a neat game with some nice touches and plenty of replay value. I like it, but I don't find it particularly exciting: 6/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Another game that was popular, *Die Burgen von Burgund* (The Castles of Burgundy), is the latest from Stefan Feld and alea—an English language version is to come from Rio Grande. A couple of people had copies and these were much in demand. Each player has their own board, depicting their 'estate' in Burgundy, on which they will place the castles, buildings and other tiles they acquire. First-time players are encouraged to use the basic boards, which show a hexagonal area with a river running across the middle and their initial castle bang in the centre.

There is then a rather busy board that goes in the middle and displays the tiles available to players in the current round. Each round, players roll their two dice and then carry out two actions. They can get a tile from the board by taking it from the





'depot' with the number of one of their dice. This goes in the storage area on their board. Alternatively, a player can place a tile from storage onto their estate: it must go onto a space with the same number as an unused die, it must be next to a tile already placed and it must go on a space of its colour. Simple, eh?

Placing a tile on your estate usually brings you an immediate benefit—a castle gets you an extra action, an animal tile scores points and so on. If it completes one of the coloured regions of your estate, you get points according to the size of the region and how early in the game you complete it. This gives an obvious incentive to fill in the smaller regions first. There's also a bonus for being the first (and second) to fill all the regions of a colour on your estate.

Players can buy an additional tile from the central depot on the board each round, using the silver generated by 'Mines' or gained by selling goods (there are other mechanisms for making goods available, taking them and selling them). The usual problem with die rolling games is that you are limited in what you can do by the numbers you rolled. Here, you can modify a die by a point for each 'Worker' you spend—and can spend a die to get more workers.

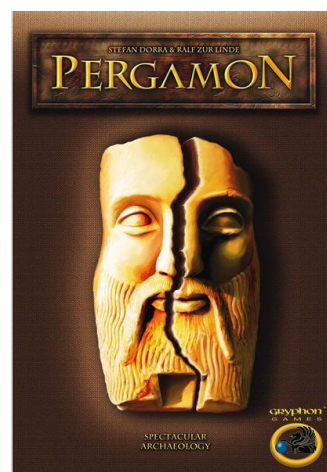
Die Burgen von Burgund ends after five sets of five rounds with some final scoring and the player with the most points wins. My only problem with the game is that it slightly out-stays its welcome. I was ready for the end after 20 rounds. Having said that, it is a clever game with the slightly regimented feel that I find in Feld's games. There's a definite learning curve in getting to grips with the game, but this gives plenty of replay value as well. I give it a provisional 8/10 on my highly subjective scale and this is one I definitely want to play again.



Pawns of the round table...

Also from alea is a little Kiesling and Kramer game, *Artus*. The players position their 'Knights' around the round table. This rotates so that the positive and negative scores for each position are always in the same place relative to the King. Each player has the same set of cards and must play one each turn to move one of their Knights or the King. They score the value of the space the piece leaves. So you are trying to get your Knights into positions to score points, while not giving other players too many. The rotating table makes this rather tricky—and scoring lots of points in one turn tends to leave your Knight in a poor position for the next turn. It's a neat enough game, but not to my taste: 5/10 on my highly subjective scale.

The latest game from Eggertspiele went down well at the Gathering. *Pergamon* was designed by Stefan Dorra and Ralf zur Linde and is a game of collecting archaeological artefacts. These are represented by tiles, each of which shows two halves of different items. In order to get a complete artefact, players need to get two tiles that fit together—a third tile could give them two complete artefacts and so on. A line of tiles like this is a collection, whose value is the total of the complete artefacts.



Tiles start in the five levels of the excavation site on the left side of the board. Tiles are added to each level at the beginning of every turn. Players then bid for research funds and for which levels they will excavate by placing a pawn in the track along the top of the board. The track neatly balances the likelihood of getting your money with the amount of money you ask for. Money is then spent to gain tiles and also to store tiles between turns.



A Pergamon tile

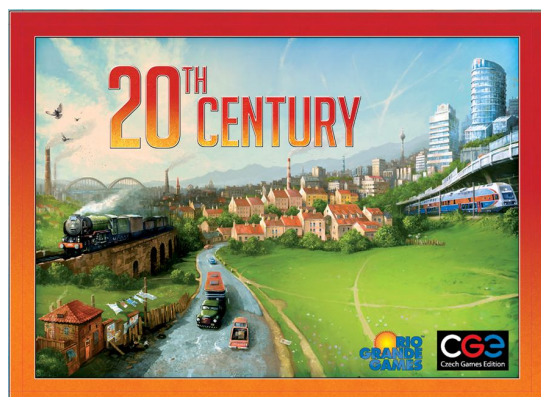
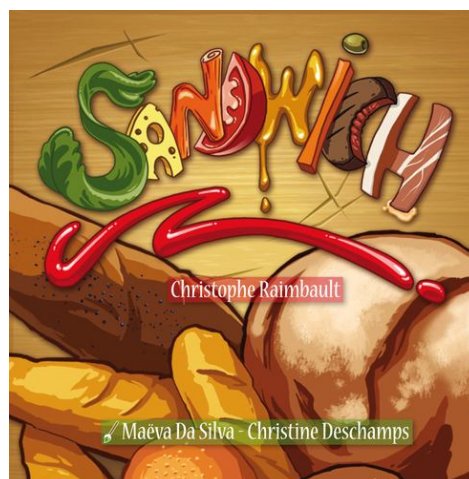
Once you have a collection, you can exhibit it in the Pergamon Museum on the right side of the board, according to the value of the collection. At the end of specific turns, players score points for the value of their current exhibition(s). After twelve turns, the game ends. A few bonus points are available and the player with the most points wins.

Pergamon is a clever game whose several mechanisms fit together very nicely. There is a definite luck element in the amount of money available each turn and which tiles appear when. The challenge for the players is to get the best out of the partial information they have each turn. To win they need to do this best across the game's twelve turns. It is excellent stuff and well worth 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

I was introduced to another new game by Kris Gould (of Wattsalpoag) when we went for a burger one evening. The game is *Sandwich*, a little card game from

French publisher Le Joueur and is great fun. The cards all represent something that could go into a sandwich. Players are dealt nine each, but don't play with these. Instead, they all flip over their top card and grab a card from another player. Thus players have some (!) control over the nine cards they end up with.

Then everybody makes three sandwiches, each with three ingredients, and gives them to the three players on their left. Once everybody's got their sandwiches, they evaluate them, ranking them top to bottom. The donor of each sandwich earns points according to how high up the ranking it is. After a few rounds, the player with the most points wins! What I really like about this game is that the crucial thing is giving the right sandwich to the right person. *Sandwich* is an excellent filler (ho, ho) and just right for when you're waiting for your burger to arrive. I give it 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

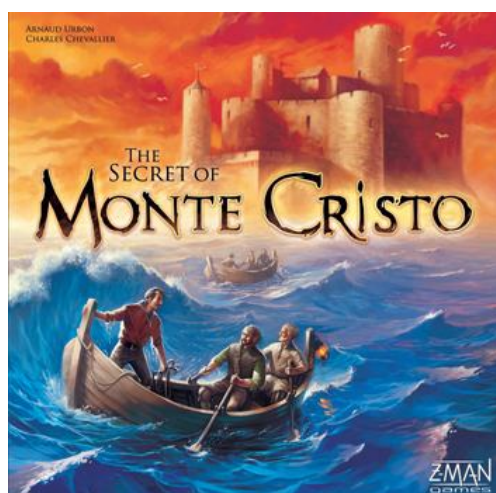


Vladimir Suchy's *20th Century* appeared from Czech Games Edition at Spiel last year. I hadn't played it, so I jumped at the chance to give it a go. The aim of the game is to develop your 'country' while minimising the amount of garbage and pollution you create. This is how players score points in the final, sixth turn of the game, but they get points along the way as well, and bonuses for other things. They build up their country by buying land and technology tiles each turn.

Land tiles add to the player's production, but also to their garbage and pollution levels. Technology tiles give players some bonus or special action and also increase or decrease the owner's pollution—marked on a track.

Land tiles are bought with the money players produce each turn, while their science production is used for technologies and to avert 'catastrophes'—more garbage and pollution. This is done in two different auctions before players get their production and recycle garbage. Players may score points each turn from the cities on their tiles and there are bonuses to be had at the end of the second and fourth turns. Plus, of course, the final scoring, which is the most significant.

I really enjoyed *20th Century*, though I didn't get the hang of the game to start with. There are a lot of things to think about and you need to understand the game to know just how important everything is. This is a clever, intricate game, where players have to consider the implications of what they do on all the different parts of the game. An excellent game that I am looking forward to playing again. 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.



It's getting increasingly difficult to identify which publisher a game originates from. Take *The Secret of Monte Cristo* as an example. Eggertspiele publish it in Germany, Filosofia in France, Lautapelit in Finland and Z-Man in the USA (that's Z-Man's cover on the left). The only thing that suggests which publisher was first is that the designers, Charles Chevallier and Arnaud Urban, sound very French. I like to give credit where it's due and identifying the original publisher (presumably Filosofia) is part of this.

However, as I'm writing for an English-speaking audience, the counter argument is that the English language edition (Z-Man in this case) is the one that matters. However, I'm in the UK—as are most of *TWJO*'s readers—so a European edition can be with us before the US edition makes its way across the Atlantic (even if it was physically produced in Europe). The European edition will often be cheaper, too. All it needs is English rules, and many European publishers produce their games in several languages, to make the US edition superfluous.

Be that as it may, what about the game? Well, *The Secret of Monte Cristo* has a wonderfully illustrated board showing the Chateau d'If set in a seascape. Areas of the castle are identified in a faint overprint and the idea is that the players are searching these for treasures left behind by the hero of Dumas's book. The game has several interlocking mechanisms that constrain the player's options and control how they get these treasures.

The first of these is the slide, which contains a row of the player's marbles for each action of the round. The player whose marble is at the bottom gets to take the action and then places his marble at the top of another row. Apart from being a clever way of getting players to plan, this is a lovely tactile element to the game. Players place their pawns on the areas of the Chateau (or on the bonus actions at the top of the board) and then add treasures. Once there are four treasures in an area, it is scored. The player with the most pawns gets first choice, but can only take treasures which they can carry, using cards of the appropriate colour and capacity. This gives players plenty of scope to make mistakes! In addition, the value of treasures is variable and players can change this.



The slide

I'm afraid I was not impressed with *The Secret of Monte Cristo*, despite enjoying the marbles. The game is decent enough, but doesn't excite me. There is certainly plenty to do and decisions to make, but I found I didn't really care. The game is attractively produced and worth trying, but it only gets 5/10 on my highly subjective scale.

There is a little sub-genre of board games where one player uses hidden movement to try to evade the others. *Scotland Yard* is probably the classic, but there's *The Fury of Dracula* (only a few years younger) as well. And now we have *Letters from Whitechapel*, designed by Gabriele Mari and Gianluca Santopietro and published by Nexus Games (amongst others). As you may have guessed from the location, it's Jack the Ripper who's being hunted in this game. As his pursuers are London bobbies, my money's on Jack!

The game is played over five 'nights' each starting with one of the Ripper's murders. The player taking the role of Jack has a limited number of locations to choose from and must then get back to his lair. The several policemen scamper round, trying to pick up the Ripper's trail and, hopefully, corral him in the narrow backstreets of Whitechapel. The night ends when Jack announces that he's home (giving the police some idea of how far he's had to travel). The policemen then confer and a different one takes command (though trying to organise a bunch of gamers is very much herding cats) for the following night.



Day one ... and the bobbies are baffled...

Jack won the game I played, but the big surprise was the location of his lair. We had been completely hoodwinked and were looking for him in the wrong part of London! This is an elegant game with lots of clever touches—there are some dummy police pawns so Jack can't be completely sure where the coppers are, for example. I also enjoyed working out where on the board were the offices where I worked in the 1990s—only a hundred years later. *Letters from Whitechapel* is a challenging game and a fine addition to the genre. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

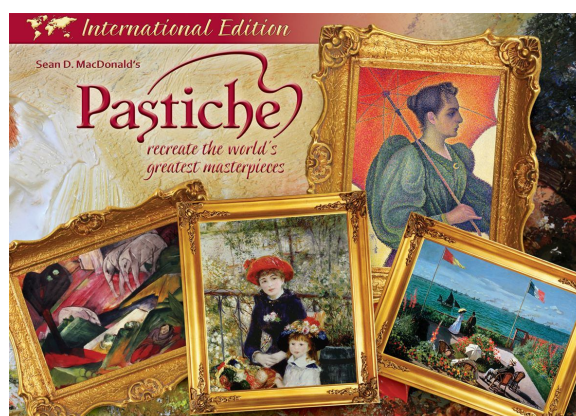


Pastiche in play—the large board (at the back) is just to organise the cards

At the urging of Greg Schloesser, who is a fan, my last game of the Gathering was *Pastiche*. The immediate thought on seeing the big box and the cards that reproduce Old Master paintings was *Masterpiece*. However, this is a very different game. It's also a departure for publisher Gryphon Games as everything I've seen from this imprint until now has been in a small box. At its heart are the large tiles showing the works of art—two from each artist. Alongside the picture are the various colours required for this painting and the points it's worth. The colours range from the simple primaries (red/yellow/blue) through secondaries (orange/purple/green) and tertiaries to the elusive Bisque. In addition, black, white or grey may be needed.

To complete a painting, players need the right combination of colours, represented by cards. To get cards, players lay a 'palette' tile each turn. This has splodges of the three primary colours and, depending on its placement adjacent to the tiles already on the table, players get some cards. These will be primary or secondary colours. Players can trade between themselves and the bank and mix cards to get more complex colours. And when they have the right combination, they can claim the painting that needs those colours.

The layers of game play (place tiles to get colours to make other colours to get the victory points) make *Pastiche* a decent challenge. The initial tile-laying is almost a game in its own right as players look for opportunities to gain colour cards. On top of this, they need to work towards the colours they need for the paintings they have in hand (there are also some on the table that any player can take). However,



my experience was that it didn't really seem to matter which colours I had, as long as I had plenty. The options for trading and mixing colours meant that, if one painting had gone, I'd be able to use the cards for a different one. Rather less of a challenge than I expected. Despite Greg's enthusiasm and the lovely components, *Pastiche* gets 6/10 on my highly subjective scale.

I must mention one other game in this report and that's *Airlines Europe*, Alan Moon's latest game, published by Abacus (in Germany), Rio Grande (in the US) and others. There were just two copies available at the Gathering and they were constantly in play, so it wasn't until later that I got to play it. This is, of course, the latest development of Alan's original *Airlines*, published (by Abacus) twenty years ago and the game that made Alan Moon a name to watch. Its intermediate incarnation was as railway game *Union Pacific*, but the theme has returned to airlines in this one.

The board shows European cities connected in a network of air routes, each with spaces for players to buy. There are some nice tri-motor aeroplane pieces (the game is nominally set in the 1930s) to mark which airline's bought which routes, but at the heart of the game are the cards. These are shares in the various airlines in the game. Essentially, players have two options each turn. Either buy a route for an airline, increasing the value of the airline, and pick up a card. Or play a couple of cards, establishing a shareholding and picking up some cash.



At several points, players will score points for their revealed shareholdings with the number of points depending on the current value of the airlines. Scoring happens when a scoring card is drawn from the deck. These are shuffled in at certain points, so players have a rough idea where they are, but can't predict exactly when they will appear. As with the previous incarnations of the game, it's important to judge correctly when the scoring cards are going to arrive so that you can get your shares onto the table in time. However, the game is a lot more complex than that!

The original *Airlines* was one of the seminal games in the Nineties and one I hugely enjoyed. I think *Union Pacific* was an improvement on that. It is one of those games that I will always play if someone suggests it. *Airlines Europe* retains the innovation of *UP*: an additional set of shares that can only be acquired by trading in other shares. However, it drops a central part of both earlier games: the second deck of cards which limit which type of route you can buy each turn (money is used to limit players' options instead).



On first acquaintance, *Airlines Europe* doesn't feel significantly different from *Union Pacific*, despite the changes, major and minor. The central idea of the game remains the same and it is just as much of a challenge. If you've not come across the earlier games, then this is one you definitely need to try. And if you have, try this to see what you think of the different approach. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Compared to getting there, my journey home from Niagara was thoroughly uneventful. Just the usual hurry-up-and-wait of flying anywhere. Just the thing to round off a highly enjoyable five days of games-playing.

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