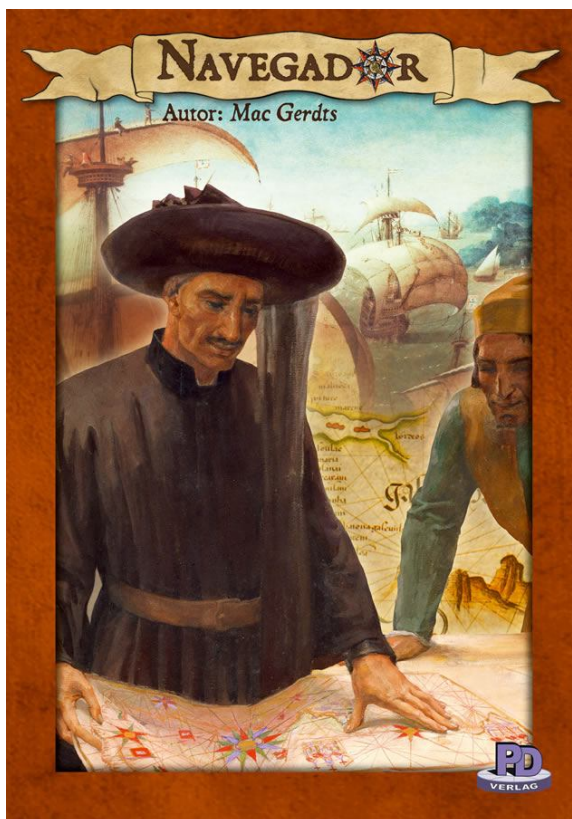


Eastward ho!

Navegador reviewed by Pevans

For some reason there was a slew of Portuguese games at Spiel '10. That is, games about Portugal or with Portuguese themes, rather than games produced in Portugal (though there were some of those, too). *Vinhos* (see *TWJO* 114) is one of these, covering the Portuguese wine industry. Another is *Navegador* (Navigator), the latest from designer Mac Gerdts, using his famous roundel mechanism. [I know I'm fighting a losing battle here as everybody calls this a "rondel". However, in my book, the English word is roundel—a circular decoration (as used by the RAF, amongst others, on their planes). The **German** word is "rondel". I suspect this has been mis-translated since there is a word "rondel" in English. It's a type of poem. I rest my case.] It's published by PD-Verlag, who now produce all of Gerdts's games in Germany (in multi-lingual editions), and Rio Grande.



As the name suggests, *Navegador* is about the Portuguese explorers. Perhaps explorations would be a better term, since none of the actual explorers appear in the game. Instead, we have a board (English on one side, German on the other) that shows the (southern) Atlantic and Indian Oceans and continues to the East Indies and Japan. The oceans are bounded by the various continents, where the players find colonies, and divided into sections. In particular, there are two dividing lines that trigger the second and third 'phases' of the game, when things get more expensive.

Players get a set of wooden ships in their colour, a marker for the roundel, another to mark the number of workers they have and their own board to hold the factory, church and shipyard pieces and victory point counters they collect. They start with one church, one shipyard, a 'wild' factory (it can use any of the three commodities) and some cash. Two of their ships go in the Atlantic off Lisbon and they're good to go.

The roundel is divided into eight segments, each of which is a particular action. Players can start on any action they want. In following turns they must move their marker to another action. They can move up to three segments for free; any further and it costs a ship for each extra segment. In the terms of the game, this is a high cost. Moving more than three spaces is something you won't do unless it's really important.

Going to the market is clearly the most important action as it's on the roundel twice. It's also the main way players generate cash—and you will need plenty of cash. Players can sell what their colonies produce—sugar from South America, gold from Africa and spices from India and the Far East. The price of each is shown on a track on the board and goes down as more are sold. A fourth track alongside these has prices running the opposite way. This is used for the factory price for every commodity, depending on where the marker is on the commodity's track. Thus, as a commodity is sold from colonies, the price for the same commodity from a factory goes up.

For each commodity, players can only use colonies or factories in a single action. There is thus an incentive to buy factories for commodities that you don't produce from your colonies. It's also useful to have the opposite of other players' holdings. If they're selling gold from their colonies, they're pushing up the price for your gold factories. And vice versa. Of course, having both factories and colonies in the same commodity would allow you to get the best price regardless. However, you need to invest a lot of cash and actions to achieve this and then you're only getting income from half your investment.

There are plenty of things to spend money on. One, another action, is buying ships. You get a cheap ship for each shipyard piece you have: the cost of any more depends on the phase of the game. Ships always start at Lisbon, so they need to be moved. Moving ships is another action. You can move all your ships: one space in the first phase, two in the second and three in the third. When ships move into an unexplored area, one of them is lost, but the player takes the 'exploration' disc from that area (and will score victory points for these at the end of the game).

They also get the cash value of the cheapest colony in the area, thus ensuring they can afford to buy the colony in their next action. The 'buying colonies' action allows a player to buy as many colonies as they can afford. But only in areas where they have at least one ship per colony. They must also have at least two workers per colony. Workers are shown by a track on the board and players can buy more—one more action on the roundel. They get a cheap worker for each church they have; the cost of further workers depends on the phase of the game.

Churches, shipyards and factories (for a specific commodity) can all be bought using the 'Buildings' action. The wooden pieces are set out in rows at the beginning of the game. There's a price shown against each space, increasing as pieces are bought. Players also have to have enough workers for what they're

buying, so even if they have the cash, they may not be able to buy all that they want.

This leaves just one action: gaining 'privileges'. At the end of the game, players will get points for their colonies, factories, exploration discs, shipyards and churches. The basic score for each of these is shown on players' boards. The privileges are cardboard chips in these categories and increase the player's score for that category. Playing a privilege also brings a cash bonus, depending on how many items of the category they already have. Only a few privileges are available (depending on the number of players) and players can only take one in each action. They cost a worker. Since players need a minimum number of workers for buying buildings and colonies, getting rid of a worker needs careful consideration. They can be expensive to buy, too, and buying them uses up another action. However, taking privileges is really important as it's a key way to improve your score.

I've missed out one wrinkle and this is Henry the Navigator—the fifteenth century Portuguese king who sponsored many expeditions. In the game he is represented by a tile that provides an additional 'move ships' action. When a player gets the tile, they have one circuit of the roundel to use it or lose it. It can be a significant tactical advantage, allowing a player to move their ships twice in a turn or move and then colonise. In particular, on the first turn, it allows one player to move into an area just explored and buy a colony before the person who explored it gets the chance. Whether used or lost, Henry passes to the right and it's worth keeping an eye on just when you're likely to have this useful tactical option.

The game continues until ships reach Nagasaki, at the opposite end of the board from Lisbon, or all the buildings have been bought. Players get another action apiece and then it's time to tot up the scores. As already mentioned, players get points for colonies, factories, exploration discs, shipyards and churches. Their score for each depends on what privileges they've picked up (but will always be worth something). In addition, ships on the board, workers and money are all worth points. And the player with the most points is the winner.

As you can see, there's a lot to think about. As with all the roundel games, the first question is where to start. Once you've got your marker on the roundel, you've got the tactical options of which actions you can reach easily and the strategic question of how these fit with your long-term plan. In this case, *Navegador* has obvious moves for the first players. The first two can each explore a different area, setting themselves up for their first colony. The last player has Henry and can sneak in and grab a colony first. In a four-player game, this leaves player number three looking for something different to do. I've tried several options, but haven't found one that's clearly best.

A more open question is what the best overall strategy is. The obvious thing is to go exploring. However, this will use up ships, so you will need to buy more as the

game goes on. In turn, this means some turns spent visiting the market to raise cash. And this will go better if you've got colonies to fuel this, so buying colonies is another necessary action. (It suddenly occurs to me that an alternative would be to buy factories rather than colonies—definitely worth doing if other people are buying the colonies.) A shipyard or two would be useful, too, so that these new ships are cheaper.

However, what you're not doing is buying privileges. You will score some points, but maybe not enough. Boosting your score in exploration discs and/or colonies will make a difference. Taking the privileges will cost workers, though, so you need to buy more workers as well—especially if you're going for factories rather than colonies. Phew! There's a lot of work involved in following a strategy in this game. On top of this, you will get tactical opportunities through the game and have decide whether to take them or stick to the plan. (I tend to take 'em and then re-jig the plan!)

There are plenty of other ways to go. I've seen buying churches be very effective. Take the privileges for churches and you can pull in a big pile of points—and you get cheap workers to buy the privileges with. The other point about this approach is that you're not likely to have much competition. Which illustrates another point: like many games, the best strategy in *Navegador* is to do something other players aren't. If they're taking gold-producing colonies, grab the sugar ones or build gold factories. And I've already mentioned the churches.

I am very impressed with *Navegador*. It marries the roundel mechanism very nicely with the flavour of the game. The game's twin driving forces of exploration (and colonisation) and development—building those factories, shipyards and churches—give plenty of scope for different strategies. The roundel itself and the actions of the other players provide lots of tactical opportunities—it's certainly playable purely tactically. Altogether an excellent game that provides a lot of entertainment and replay value: 8/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Navegador is a strategy board game for 2-5 players, aged 12+, and takes 60-90 minutes to play (and I think that's a realistic time once players have got to grips with the rules). It was designed by Mac Gerdts and is published by PD-Verlag (in Germany - www.pd-verlag.de) and Rio Grande (in the USA - www.riograndegames.com). Retail price is around €40/£45/\$60 (check www.boardgameprices.com for price comparisons).

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