

Spiel '08

What Pevans saw at the show

I am always energised by the Spiel games fair: the games, the people and everybody's enthusiasm. It is a huge event and, these days, very much an international one. The only problem, from the point of view of writing this report, is that I'm now there on business. Luckily, this involves looking at the new games. Now I just have to find time to write up my report. It's taken a while, but here are my thoughts on Spiel '08 and the new games. I'll be adding to this as I play more of the games.

One of the things I enjoy is being in the halls while things are being set up. It's chaotic, it's noisy, there are cars and vans in the aisles and pallets stacked with games being manoeuvred about the place. Gradually order is imposed, things settle down and the show takes shape. The final tidying up – and laying of carpet – means it's a complete contrast when the fair opens on Thursday morning.

This is, of course, when the spiefreaks hit the show: getting in to grab the new games just as soon as they are available. This Thursday there were queues in three places. The first was at Lookout Games, where *Le Havre* was being launched. Nobody knew much about the game except that it was designed by Uwe Rosenberg. "What I did after *Agricola*" so to speak. The second queue was at Splotter's stand. Production issues meant they were only able to bring 200 copies of their new game to Spiel. And then there was the Warfrog line. Martin Wallace had two new, limited edition games plus the last 200 copies of *Tinners' Trail*. People were queuing up to come away with three games.

After a while things settled down and I was able to get a look at some of the games. As always, there was too much to see. You can spend four full days at Spiel and still not see everything. Hence this report only covers the things I saw and I'm sure there's a lot of good stuff I've missed. As always, if I compare a game to an existing one, this does not imply it is a copy, it's simply a shorthand way of giving readers an idea of the game.

Bambus Spieleverlag is one of the long-time regulars at Spiel. This year main man Günter Cornett had *Down Under* to show us. This is a re-working of his earlier *Schlangennest* with some great Australia-



The attractive buildings from *Master Builder*—see below

themed graphics. The game has long been a favourite of mine, so it's great to see it back in print. Each player has a set of tiles, each of which shows a length of path in the player's colour and a neutral path. Players lay tiles to extend their own path within the limits of a notional grid. They can connect to neutral paths, but not to other players' paths. The result is a network of twisting paths with the winner being the player with the longest. This version adds other scoring opportunities plus 'Billabong' pieces that can get players out of tricky situations. It's an excellent little package and I recommend it.



I told you it was bright! *Kamisado* set out

Peter Burley got the production of his new game, *Kamisado*, just in time for Spiel. This is a clever two-player abstract game played on an 8 x 8 gridded board. The squares are in eight bright colours and each player has pieces in the same colours. When one player moves a piece, the colour of the square it ends on dictates the colour of the piece the next player has to move (straight or diagonally forwards as long as there isn't anything in the way). Simple, eh? Certainly players can look several turns ahead, assuming they can work out just what the best moves are – and their opponent thinks the same. First to get a piece to the far side of the board wins the round and promotes that piece so that it can push opposing pieces. Winning a set number of rounds wins the game. It's a fine game and very nicely produced.

I'm used to Corné van Moorsel's games being intense 'brain-burners', but his new game from Cwali is rather different. *Powerboats* is a neat simulation of powerboat racing. The board comes in several sections, allowing lots of different configurations. Once put together you have a lake dotted with islands onto which you place marker buoys to show the course of the race. The mechanics are quite simple as players decide whether to keep or re-roll their dice from the previous turn, adding or subtracting a die. Their speed is the total of their (special 3-sided) dice. This works very well as players having to decide between out and out speed and being able to manoeuvre around the islands and buoys. An excellent and effective race game.

Crash by Crash is the latest from the Czech Board Games group, this one designed by Ivan Dostál and Monika Dilli. As you'd expect from a game about dodgems (or bumper cars as the Czechs keep calling them), the idea is to push other people's cars



about. You do this not by moving your dodgems, but by placing them on the board. This pushes other dodgems and you get points if they go off the edge of the board. Add in a few wrinkles – like the ride's operator – and there's plenty of fun to be had despite the simplicity of the game.

Czech Games Edition's new game is *Space Alert*, a cooperative game designed by Vlaada Chvatil. Players are the crew of an exploration spaceship and their job is to respond to the threats of their current mission, determined by playing a CD (scenario cards can substitute for this). It looks very interesting, but the English language version was not ready in time for Spiel (it is available now). What were available were the expansions for *Galaxy Trucker* and *League of Six*. *Loyal Retinue* is the *League of Six* expansion. It provides additional pieces, allowing a sixth player to be added to the game. It also contains a replacement set of hexagonal tiles for the towns. On these, the central item is one of the 'retinue'. Each of these provides the player who owns it with some special ability, changing the balance of the game and providing players with additional options.

Designed by Peter Hawes, *Heads of State* is one of the new games from Eggertspiele. Players draw cards to build up sets that allow them to establish nobles of different ranks on the positions available on the board to gain control of western European countries. They can also use cards to dispose of other players' nobles. At the end of each 'century', players score points for their nobles and what they control. Most points after three centuries (16th, 17th and 18th) wins. There's nothing hugely innovative about the game's mechanics, but they all work well together to provide an intriguing challenge. I was quite taken with it.

HaJo Peters was showing off his political/wargame set in the Middle East in the time of the Crusades, *Saladin*. This is a five-player, 15 hour game. Ah, that takes me back. The game looks quite interesting. I was particularly taken with the idea that events and objectives are worth different numbers of points depending on the sort of ruler who gains them. Set out to rule benevolently and you won't get many points for massacring people. The designer described this as a 'beta' version of the game and had 60 copies made up for those prepared to take it on.



Herrscher der Welt displayed

The game of the moment is clearly *Dominion*, published by Hans im Glück (in German) and Rio Grande (in English). Despite the large box, this is a card game. The box inlay holds the different sets of cards separately. Players start with the same set of cards. Each turn, players play a hand of cards, discarding those they don't use and drawing a fresh hand for the next turn. They use the cards to buy others (amongst other actions), which get added to their set of cards. Each turn is quick and players cycle through their cards rapidly, bringing their new acquisitions into play. The aim is to upgrade your set of cards to contain the most victory points when the game ends.

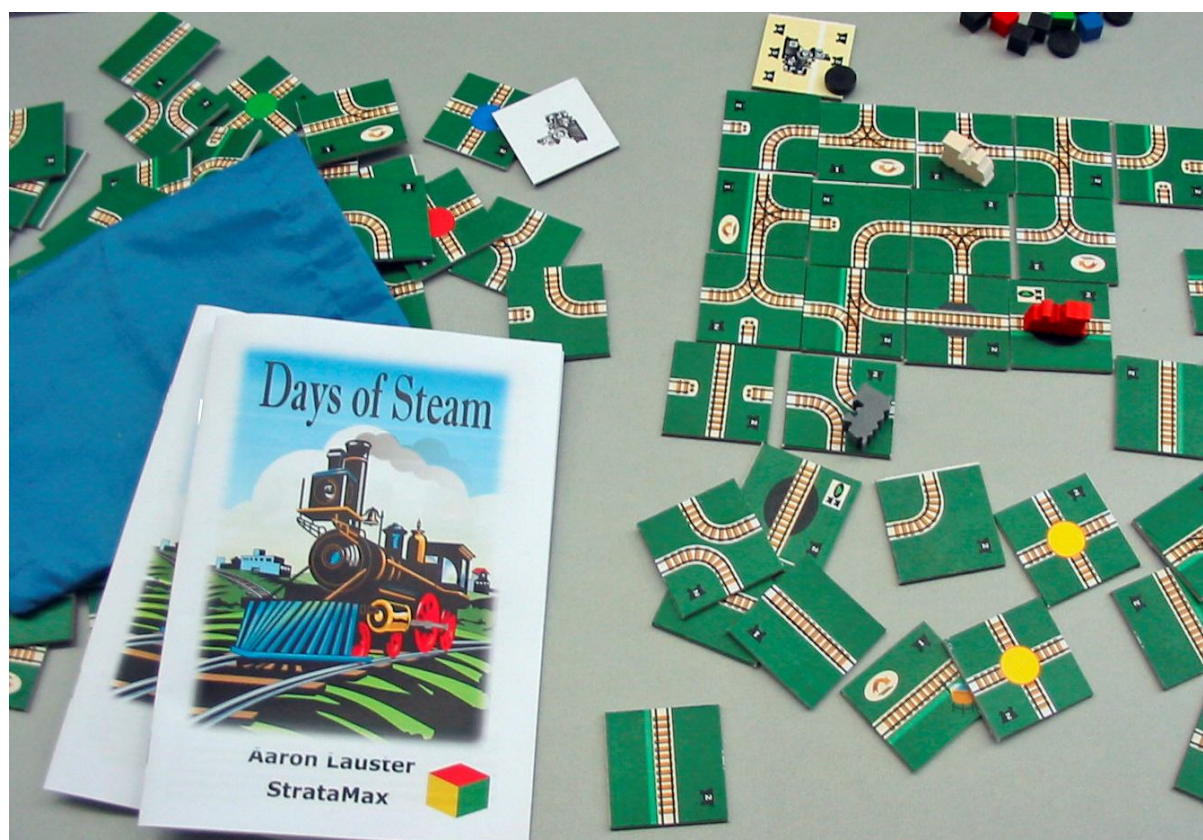
Each game uses a selection of the types of cards available – though a standard mix is recommended when learning the game. Simply using a few different cards changes the game and the number of different cards provided give plenty of variety. Playing the game for the first time, I didn't think there was much to it, but I'm assured there is a lot of subtlety in the game once you get into it. Certainly it has proved very popular with gamers, both at and since Spiel.

Playing on the confusion over the pronunciation of 'Agricola', Lookout had crates of a specially commissioned drink, Agri-cola, available on their stand. Not being a cola fan, I didn't try it, but the Lookout team reckoned the caffeine was very useful! On to the game: *Le Havre* immediately has some touches that will be familiar to *Agricola* players. For a start, players need to have a minimum amount of food at the end of each round. This is set for each round (depending on the version of the game you're playing), so players can plan ahead for this. Each round has seven actions, so the number of actions each player gets in a round varies according to the number in the game. An action is either picking up raw materials (which build up with each action) or using an unoccupied building.

The first thing to use buildings for is to build more buildings! There is a clever mechanism that means the precise order of the buildings is different each game, yet still follows the same general sequence. Buildings offer all sorts of ways of using raw materials to provide better materials (iron to steel, for example) and to generate money. Some materials count as food, others as energy (which players need when using some buildings). At the end of the set number of rounds, the player with the most money wins. This is another clever development game from Uwe Rosenberg.

Red Glove is a new name to me, but this Italian publisher already has a few games under its belt. This year's offering is *Lungarno*, set along the banks of the river Arno in Pisa. Players fill in the districts of the area with buildings, placing merchants to 'trade' with one of the great families. The value of this depends on how many buildings each family has when the district is complete. The game ends when all the districts are full: there are some final bonuses and the player with the most cash wins. It sounds an interesting game and I look forward to trying it in practice.

Stratamax's new game, *Days of Steam*, was another victim of production problems. However, Max Michael and Aaron Lauster had demonstration copies of the game available for people to try. It's a neat tile-laying game. Players lay tiles to build up a network of railway lines linking towns. Placing a tile also gets a player the coal they need to move their train around the network. They get points for delivering coloured cubes to the appropriate town. It's not a deep game, but it is more subtle and challenging than at first appears. It should be available soon.



Valley Games had no beauty queen with them this year, but did have a slew of new games. The one I've tried is *Master Builder* by Hartmut Witt and Wolfgang Kramer. The neat thing here is that players do actually build buildings! Or at least assemble them from the cardboard sections in the game. To do this they need the appropriate workers – but have to pay their salaries at the end of each turn. At the start of the turn, players hire and fire workers. A random event may reduce or restrict workers for the turn and then players can build. After a set number of turns, the player who has constructed the most valuable buildings wins. This is a nice little game: an entertaining tussle, but not too challenging.

Kris Gould's new game from Wattsalpoag is *Jet Set*, which I've mentioned before. It's definitely my kind of game. Players spend their cash to gain control of air connections between pairs of European cities and place model planes on them. They take the planes off again to claim contracts for routes. These bring in victory points (the longer the route, the more points) and income. Each turn is usually pretty quick: you buy a route, place plane(s) on existing connections or take income. The key thing is to be ready to complete your 'final flight' – the secret route each player has from the start. It's clever, plays quickly and provides a bit of a challenge.



Jet Set on display

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Pevans took the photos.