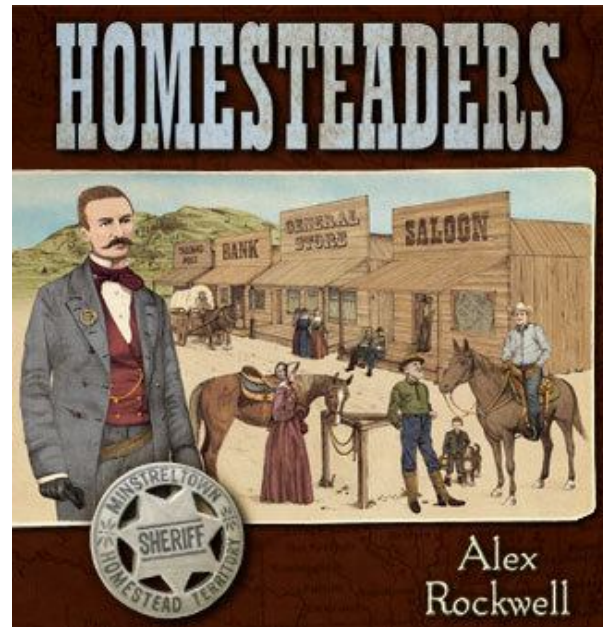


Games Round-up—Spring 2010

New games played by Pevans

One new game I have played is *Homesteaders*, from new publisher Tasty Minstrel Games in the US. I actually played a pre-production version of this at last year's Gathering and the final version is excellent. The production is a bit variable—some pieces are rather thick, while others, like the small board, are much too flimsy. It seems the Chinese manufacturer mixed up the cardboard thicknesses. However, this certainly does not detract from the game play—and does fit with the weathered sepia style of the artwork.



Homesteaders is a development game with the players building up a Wild West town. It's played over a set number of turns and the winner is the player with the most victory points at the end. The first thing each turn is that players bid—*Evo*-style—for a building permit. Not everybody will get one—passing gets you a bonus piece of some sort—but those who do can immediately build one building of the type(s) on the card from those available.

Buildings generate goods, money, victory points and trade tokens—sometimes automatically, sometimes with a deployed worker (who has to be paid each turn). A notional market allows players to trade goods, if they have the trade tokens, providing a lot of flexibility. Victory points accumulate through the game, but the big points are scored at the end, when the most valuable buildings are available.

On the basis of a couple of plays, I am very taken with *Homesteaders*. I'm sure more familiarity will identify combinations of buildings that are particularly useful—and possibly some that are very powerful. At the moment, though, I'm just having fun exploring the game. If you get a chance, do the same.

Apart from that, I seem to have been playing old favourites: *Agricola*, *Brass*, *Confucius*, *Phoenicia*, *Puerto Rico* and *Tribune*. Okay, they're not that old. One game that has struck a chord is *Through the Ages*. This was published in 2006—it's just taken me a while to catch up with it. It's a lengthy, complex civilization development game. Just the kind of thing I like and I have wanted to give it a go since it appeared. Designed by Vlaada Chvatil, it was one of the first crop of games from the Czech Board Games group—since produced in a new edition by Eagle Games in the US.

The Czech edition, which is what I've played, looks terrific with little glass beads for various counters, though they are a bit fiddly to pick up and move. This is essentially a card game, with the two boards used to keep track of various things. In particular, each player's victory points to date and the number they score each turn. Similar tracks



show their Science points (needed to 'discover' new technologies), the number of these they get each turn and their current military strength. Each player has their own board, with their stock of resource and population counters. These are finite, so managing them is an important part of the game. Not least because using too many of them gives players extra costs.

The cards are the heart of the game as players will spend a lot of their actions acquiring, playing and using these. Some cards produce resources (needed to build things) or food (needed to feed your population and increase it). Some produce science or victory points. Some are military units that increase the player's strength. Some are forms of government, giving players different numbers of actions each turn. And some are 'Wonders'. These need lots of resources and several actions to build, but provide your civilization with something useful—often a special ability. A Leader card also provides a special ability for a civilization, but they are more transitory than Wonders.

It is quickly clear that you need to increase and improve your food production to support and increase your population—and you need to keep them happy. You need to increase and improve your resource production to be able to build more things. You need to increase your science points to be able to invent new things. You need to increase and improve your military strength—the weakest player is likely to be prey to aggression from the others, not to mention the victim of event cards. And, of course, you need to generate victory points!

So many things to do, so little time. This is not a short game, but even so players do not have the time to do everything they want to. So it's a matter of priorities—which will change during the game. For example, military power may not be a priority to start with, but you can't afford to fall behind and an arms race will start at some point. Similarly, the initial emphasis has to be expanding your civilization with a view to scoring points later, rather than maximising your points score from the start.

There are also three flavours to the game. The Basic game is intended as an introduction and plays through just the first Age. This works really well and, the first time I played it, the players immediately re-set the game and played the Advanced version. This plays over two Ages and includes just about all the rules. The one missing thing, brought in with the Full game, along with the third age, is warfare, allowing full-blooded attacks between players.

I must also mention the clever Event mechanics in the Advanced and Full games. Players draw event cards (part of the Military cards deck), but don't have to play them. If they do play an event card, they gain some victory points for doing so and the card goes into the 'Future Events' pile. A card from the 'Current Events' pile is turned over and takes effect. When the current events run out, the stack of future events is shuffled and becomes the new set of current events. Hence, players get a small reward for playing Events, but trigger an unknown event that could be good or bad for them. They also have some choice over which cards they play—and will clearly play cards they think will favour them. However, it may be some time before the card takes effect, so they can't be certain.

I've only played the game a few times so far, but I have found it enthralling every time. There is just so much scope for how and when to develop your civilization. Okay, direct interaction with the other players is limited, but I have no problem with that. At the same time, players still need to keep an eye on what their opponents are up to, especially when it comes to the military. Absolutely terrific stuff and I'm only sorry it's taken me so long to play it: 10/10 on my highly subjective scale.

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