

On the Underground

Reviewed by Pevans

On the Underground is the first published game from Sebastian Bleasdale, who's a regular at the Swiggers games club – and part of the TWJO team for SpielChamps and EuropeMasters. We've played quite a few of Sebastian's designs in recent years and enjoyed them all. It's good to see one of them making it into print, courtesy of JKLM Games.



The game comes in JKLM's usual, compact 12" x 8½" x 1½" box and has quite some heft. The main reason for this is the substantial board: it's solid and folded down into 8 segments. Once it's unfolded, you have a partial map of the London Underground – in the iconic style of Harry Beck – with scraps of street map faded into the spaces. Stations are mostly in silver or gold, apart from the termini, railway interchanges and a few others. The stations are joined by lines, divided into spaces, waiting to be built by players placing tracks. The tracks are wooden 'matchsticks' (think *Settlers*' roads), which come in 11 different colours. There are also wooden scoring markers, branch markers, a 'passenger' pawn and other markers. The final component is a deck of cards, one for each of the silver and gold stations. And there are just four pages of rules (four in English and four in German, to be accurate).

To start the game, players divvy up the colours of track. When four or five people are playing, they each take two different colours (one of 15 pieces, one of 20) and the matching scoring marker. Three players get three colours each (two of fifteen and one 20) and two players have four (two of each) – and matching score markers. This is a neat touch and means the game is much the same length however many people are playing.

In their turn, each player can place up to four lengths of track in any of their colours. The first one of a colour can go anywhere, but all others must extend one end or other of the existing track in that colour. This gives players some limitations, particularly if they reach the end of a line, and means that tracks can be left with nowhere to go. Players can add a branch to a track by playing two branch markers. And they get a branch marker by not placing a track piece – so they can get up to four branch markers in a turn. The other limitation is the number of pieces: believe me, you'll want more!

Players score points when a track connects to the end of a line or to an interchange with National Rail (which earns the player a branch marker as well). There are also four pairs of markers spread randomly around specific central stations and players

get points for connecting each pair. Finally, they score points by completing a loop that encloses other stations. This can only be done in the central part of the board, of course, and making a big loop is quite difficult – though very tempting to try.

However, the main way players score points is by moving the 'Passenger'. This pawn moves to one or two stations after each player has finished building their track. This is where the cards come in. Four are laid out at the start (and markers placed on the stations shown so that they're clear to the players). The Passenger moves to the closest gold station (if there's a card for one) and from there to a silver station (if there's a card for one). The pawn 'walks' between stations if no line has been built and will take the route that offers the shortest walk and, then, the fewest different colours of line. There are several examples to make clear how this works.

Players score a point every time the Passenger uses one of their lines (colours). So the first thing you do when it's your turn is check what the destinations are. Then it's a question of whether you can build something for the Passenger to use. This is particularly true at the start of the game when there are few tracks on the board. Simply laying some track makes it likely the Passenger will use it (anything to avoid walking!). Later on, as the network gets fuller and the Passenger has more choice, it's harder to make a difference with a single turn.

The game finishes when the deck of cards runs out. The number of turns is thus much the same each time, though it will vary a bit as some turns the Passenger will only have one station to visit. Play continues round to the start player so everybody gets the same number of turns. There are no more Passenger moves, of course, but players can still score points from connecting stations. It's worth keeping an eye on the deck to gauge when the game is likely to end – not that anyone's likely to run out of all their colours.

As you can see, this is a highly tactical game. It's mostly about your opportunities to score points in the current turn. It's worth keeping an eye on what you can do with each of your colours – particularly if you have the chance to complete a loop. It's tempting to go for a big loop from the beginning, but it's very easy for other players to block this (intentionally or by accident), so it's not something you should count on. Playing to link some of the pairs of markers is well worth doing, though.

The result is usually a hard-fought game and a close result. Victory will go to the player who can make the most of their opportunities. *On the Underground* is an excellent game that plays very smoothly and involves all the players all the time. It runs quickly and certainly doesn't outstay its welcome. I give it 9/10 on my highly subjective scale.

On the Underground was designed by Sebastian Bleasdale and published by JKLM Games (in the UK) and Rio Grande Games (in the USA). It is a strategy board game for 2-5 players, aged 7+, and takes about 60 minutes to play.

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