

A glass of Port

Pevans reviews *Vinhos*

Vinhos is a really complex game—explaining the rules takes quite a while. It needs 2-3 hours to play, too, but players quickly get to grips with the game's mechanisms and it runs smoothly. The game is about producing wine in the regions of Portugal—an intriguing location for a game about wine. Portugal just means port to me, but here we have eight regions that produce wine and only one of them makes port.

I'll start with the physical components. The substantial board is very busy with different areas for different parts of the game, including a small map of Portugal showing the regions.

The substantial square box also holds wooden playing pieces for each player, cardboard chips for cash and wine (numbered for the value of the wine), thick cardboard tiles for vineyards, wineries, cellars, 'wine experts' and each turn's weather, plus wooden oenologists and 'Renown' cubes. The only annoying element is the size of the counters for the four characteristics of wine (smell, colour, taste and alcohol content). They're rather small and fiddly.

Each player has their own board as well, with room for four estates. At the end of each turn, players produce wine: one chit at each estate. The value of the wine depends on the tiles at the estate. There must be at least one vineyard to give the base value. A second vineyard (which must be from the same region and produce the same colour wine), a winery and a oenologist will all increase the value of the wine. It is also affected by the weather for the turn: from +2 to -2, depending on the tile revealed at the start of the turn.



Once produced, wine must be stored. Each estate can hold two years' production—chits are moved along each turn before new production arrives and are thrown away if there's no room left. Adding a cellar to the estate means up to four years' production can be kept and increases its value, especially once it's three or four years old.

Once you've got some wine (players start with one estate and wine), there are four things you can do with it: sell it, export it, present it at a wine fair or (later on) give it away for an extra action. When selling, players can sell any number of wines, but each chip sold uses one of the player's limited barrel pieces. This goes on a space on the sales track according to the value of the wine, which is added to the player's 'bank account'—another track in one corner of the board.

The game actually has three different types of money. The cardboard chits are cash in hand, which players can use during their turn. Then there are each player's 'investments', which are, in effect, semi-liquid. This is another marker on a track. At any time in their turn, players can move their marker down the track to get cash. At the end of the turn, players gain or pay 'interest' on their investments—to/from their bank account—depending on their marker's position. Funds in players' bank accounts are actually illiquid. The only way to get money out is to take the action of visiting the bank. This allows players to convert their bank account into cash and/or put money into their investments. Managing your money is one of the minor, but important facets of the game.

Back to what to do with your wine. The second option is the 'export market'—a grid in one corner of the board. As with selling wine, players place barrels on the grid spaces, according to the value of the wine they use. They score victory points for the



Did I mention that the board's a bit busy? And this is without any pieces on it ...



The Wine Fair section of the board: Fair points are scored round the outside, bonuses on the left, scores at the bottom and the characteristics in the middle

row they place their barrel on. At the end of the game, the player(s) with the most barrels in each column score(s) additional points. Selling wine is very useful early in the game, generating the cash players will need to buy more vineyards and equipment. The export market really comes into play later in the game. There's often a rush to place barrels as players look to score points.

This brings me to the third use for wine: the wine fairs, which are a sub-game in their own right. There are three wine fairs during the game. Players are ranked according to the number of fair points they have accumulated at the end of each fair. They get victory points according to their ranking and the fairs are worth more through the game. A lot of victory points are available from the fairs, so they are an important part of the game.

To start with, each player must enter a wine into the fair. The value of the wine they use sets a limit on the number of 'wine expert' tiles the player may use when the fair takes place. They select one pair of the four wine characteristics, place a marker and score fair points according to the current value of these two. Fair points are marked on a track running round the tracks for the characteristics. Players also get an immediate bonus, depending on which pair of characteristics they choose.

When the wine fair comes to be resolved, each player can play some wine experts—but only for the two characteristics they chose when entering their wine. Some experts increase the ranking of their particular wine characteristic and all of them

score that ranking for the player. Once all of the fair points have been totted up, players get victory points according to their ranking. The turn order is also changed, to the reverse of the fair positions. This is a point to remember, as player order is significant.

Vinhos is played over just six turns, with the wine fairs at the end of turns three, five and six. You can see that the game accelerates. As players build up their estates and produce more and more valuable wine, they need less time to set themselves up for the next wine fair. However, they don't have very many actions to do this in: each player gets just two actions a turn. Though there are a few other things (such as cashing in investments) that players can do at the same time as an action.

There is another whole sub-game in which action a player takes. There are nine actions in all: buy vineyards, buy wineries, buy a cellar, hire œnologists, buy wine experts, sell wine, export wine, visit the bank and enter a wine for the next wine fair (which can also be a pass). These are laid out in a 3x3 grid and players move a pawn to the action they want to take. Moving to an adjacent (including diagonal) space is free, but players have to pay to move further. If another player's pawn is on the space, players must also pay them.

What's more, six of the spaces, one for each turn of the game, have a track for the parts of a turn. A neutral pawn is used to mark the current turn, and part thereof. However, this is also the taxman. Moving your pawn to the same space as the taxman means an extra charge! So it's not just a question of which action you want to take. You have to think about the whole sequence of actions and how much they may cost. It's also where turn order can be significant: you know where other players' pawns are now, but where will they move next?

There's still one major part of the game to cover—and the fourth use for wine. On



each turn's weather tile is a set of three criteria. When players enter their wine for a fair, they check it against the criteria. If the wine meets any of these, they can place one of their barrels on the corresponding 'manager', each of whom has a row of bonuses next to them. Once you've got barrels on these rows, you can give away a wine as part of an action to move a barrel to a different space on the same row.



Yes, eight wine-growing regions

The managers provide two sorts of bonuses. The first sort provides additional actions, allowing players to take a second action (at the cost of a wine). Given that players only have twelve standard actions in the whole game, this is really powerful. It's also a big incentive to get barrels on the tracks quickly and to make sure you have wine to give away. The second set of spaces give bonus victory points, generally for items players have acquired. For example, four points for each cellar. The difference with these spaces is that barrels cannot be moved on once they've been placed. At the end of the game, after the final wine fair, players can use any wine they have left to move barrels. Again, turn order can be important!

Right, I think I've covered everything. There is an awful lot going on in *Vinhos*. You may only have a couple of actions each turn, but a lot of thought goes into choosing these actions. It's not simply a question of which action to take. You have to consider the sequence of movements around the grid to take actions, how much this might cost, whether you have enough barrels and many other factors. Later on in the game, the option of having some additional actions gives players more to think about.

Having played the game half a dozen times, I'm still getting to grips with the strategy. It's clear that the extra actions provided by the managers are very valuable. This makes it worth entering a wine for the wine fair early on if this gives you the opportunity to place barrels on managers—and gets you first choice of the bonuses. Against this, entering your wine takes up one of your scarce actions (anybody who hasn't already put up a wine can do so as a free action before the wine fair is resolved), so you have to weigh up the costs.

Apart from this, my strategy at the moment is to sell wine quickly to generate cash, visit the bank to withdraw cash and then buy several vineyards in one action (players may buy as many vineyards as they like in one action, but no more than one from each region). This also avoids the taxman, who's on the 'buy vineyards'



A player board with two working estates: white wine on the left with two vineyards and a cellar, red wine on the right with a vineyard and a winery

action in the first turn. Having several estates gives me quantity and I then invest in other equipment to provide quality at one or two of my estates.

What I haven't managed to do yet is score any significant points from the export market. A lot of points are available here, but you need high quality wines to get them. There is clearly a balance to be found between quantity and quality and so far I'm erring towards quantity. You also have to take note of what other players are doing. As always, you are likely to do best by doing what other players aren't.

All in all, *Vinhos* is a fascinating game. The mechanisms of the game are sufficiently complex that it's not clear quite what effect any single action will have. This makes it something of a challenge to work your way through to win the game. Given the complexity, there is a steep learning curve to begin with. However, the game is surprisingly straightforward once you've done this. It gets 7/10 on my highly subjective scale.

Vinhos was designed by Vital Lacerda and is published by What's Your Game? in Italy. It is a strategy board game for 2-4 players, aged 12 or more, and takes 90-180 minutes to play.

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This review was first published in *To Win Just Once* 114 April 2011