

Of Dice and Meeples



Issue 3

July 2026

Colophon

Introduction

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Zines should use reasonable page dimensions (if it's not roughly A4 or 8.5"×11" there should be a reason). Maximum zine length is 16 pages/10,000 words. Discussion of contemporary politics is discouraged but permitted with a maximum length for political content set at 2 pages/1,200 words. AI-generated material is not allowed. All artwork must be attributed to its creator, unless it is in the public domain.

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Contributors may submit their PDF zines via email to of-dice-and-meeples@tekeli.li

Submission deadlines and Ignorable Themes for the next several issues are as follows:

Issue #4 — 6 August: Alpha Players

Issue #5 — 6 September: Deck Construction Games

Issue #6 — 6 October: Social Deduction Games

Suggestions for further Ignorable Themes are welcome!

This project is explicitly inspired by [Ever & Anon](#), the digital APA successor to *Alarums & Excursions*.

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This issue's Ignorable Theme is: Cooperative Games

What is This?

A Newbie's Guide to APAs

Q: What is this?

A: An APA.

Q: What's an APA?

A: An Amateur Press Association.

Q: What's that?

A: A collection of zines. It can also refer to the community of people writing the zines.

Q: What's a zine?

A: A fanzine. A small, amateur magazine usually distributed for free or at cost.

Q: So this is a collection of free fanzines written by amateurs?

A: Exactly.

Q: And each one has a separate author?

A: Right.

Q: But I see the same names appearing again and again throughout.

A: Those are comments. We comment on each other's zines. When you see "RogerBW: blah-blah-blah...", if there are no quotes around the blah-blah-blah, that's probably a comment to Roger.

Q: And everyone is doing all this for free?

A: Yes. It's like a cocktail party, but all written out. Come join us, if you like. Amateur Press Associations date back to the late 1800s and started to become popular among fantasy and science fiction enthusiasts during the 1930s.¹

Q: But now there are blogs and various online forums, so why do APAs still exist?

A: Because one type of forum isn't necessarily any better or worse than the others. One advantage of the APA model is longevity. Because they have multiple contributors and don't rely on making money, APAs are more durable than individual blogs or traditional magazines. Also, because websites come and go, whatever is posted online will probably eventually vanish into the electronic ether. But whatever is put into a publication that can be downloaded and archived is more likely to survive due to the sheer fact that multiple copies will exist. And the back issues become an indelible record of what people used to think. They provide insight into a world that used to be.

¹https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amateur_press_association



Send us a zine. Or some cover art. Or comments. Or a blurb.

Or tell us why we're wrong.

Send your thoughts to of-dice-and-meeples@tekeli.li, and provided they aren't laced with powergamer profanity (or maybe even if they are), we'll likely publish them for the enlightenment & edification of the entire APA. Please include your name, collection size, and why *Flash Point: Fire Rescue* is the best game of all time, and be sure to feed your workers.

Abbreviations & Acronyms You May Need to Know:

- APA: Amateur Press Association
- Async: a slow online game where you're called back to take your turn
- BBG: Big Bad Guy/Gal (a major villain)
- BGA: Board Game Arena, a site for playing games online
- BTW: By the way
- XdY: X Y-sided dice added together; omit the X if it's 1.
- Frex: For example
- FWIW: For what it's worth
- IgTheme: Ignorable theme
- IIRC: If I recall correctly
- IM(H)O: In my (humble) opinion
- Monopoly: we don't talk about this "game"
- Nextish/Thish/Lastish: Next, This, Last issue
- (N)PC: (Non-)Player Character
- ODaM: *Of Dice and Meeples*
- PBEM: Play-by-Email
- PBF: Play-by-Forum
- RAE(BNC): Read and enjoyed (but no comment)
- Re: Regarding
- RHCT(M): Regarding his/her comment to (me)
- RYCT(M): Regarding your comment to (me)
- RYQT(M): Regarding your question to (me)
- TTS: TableTop Simulator, a physics engine for playing virtual boardgames
- WRT: With respect to / With regard to
- YMMV: Your mileage may vary
- Zine: A writer's contribution

A Technical Note

Thanks to people who told me about problems with the contents page not rendering, particularly in issue 2. This didn't happen on the PDF viewers I use, xpdf and evince. I managed to find a viewer that did show the problem (the built-in one in Chromium) and have now modified the software to use a different approach to placing text that seems to work better. I've also re-rendered the first two issues of the APA, so their contents should now be visible in the document as well as in the bookmarks. Please let me know if the problem recurs.

“KEPT YOU WAITING, HUH?”

The PlayStation classic that is *Metal Gear Solid* is the greatest video game to have been made in the entire history of the medium.

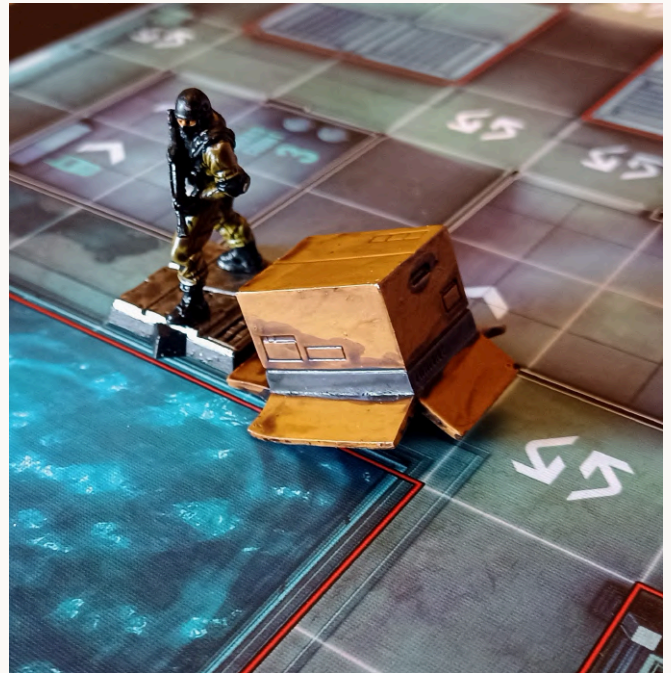
That is not an argument, that is a fact.

I once described it as “an unmissable flawed masterpiece”, much like 1997’s *Con Air*, in that if you come across it on television you can’t help but to stop flicking through the channels and watch it, hoping that you haven’t missed the bit about putting the bunny back in the box.

When IDW announced they were turning *MGS* into a board game, I threw money at it really rather quickly. When I learned that Emerson Matsuuchi of *Spector Ops* fame was behind it, I knew it’d be in good hands. I’d never played it (and still haven’t) but I gathered it was a game he created so that he could play an *MGS*-like game on the tabletop. What could he do with the actual license and a few more years of game design under his belt?

We wouldn’t find out, because after a few delays IDW lost the license and the whole thing was effectively cancelled. It was, by all accounts, ready to go, but was ultimately going nowhere until, somehow, years later, CMON picked it up, dusted it off, put it up for pre-order and finally, after what may be a 5 year wait, the board game of my dreams was in front of me.

That the phrase “Kept you waiting, huh?” is a common line of dialogue from these games is not lost on me. I think I ended up paying (a fair bit) for this game on three separate occasions (obviously I got refunded twice, I’m not that daft), but was it worth all that waiting? Is *Metal Gear Solid The Board Game* any good?



In a word, no. But in another word, yes. It’s complicated - in more ways than one, actually. You know what, I had it right first time: flawed masterpiece.

There are two ways to play *MGSTBG*, the right way or the wrong way. Sorry, the Campaign or the VR Missions.

The former sees 1-4 players tackling the events of the Shadow Moses Incident on the tabletop instead of the screen, and the latter is a poor excuse for 1-4 players to use the components found within the box to spend an hour or two in each others company.

I’m not against co-op gaming, but with a partner who doesn’t gravitate towards it unless the stars align, and an IP as dense as *MGS*, I knew that this was very much a purchase for me and me alone, because this is a *tough* sell.

Luckily, our hero Solid Snake (stop giggling, we know it’s a stupid name) prefers to work alone, so the entire game is designed to scale up and down to the player count. In fact, your

Matt Elliott always has been a team player, though a lengthy and no doubt highly successful team-based sporting career was cut short after he decided washing off mud in a cold bath every weekend wasn’t any fun.

first two games of the story are solo affairs, as the campaign book walks you through the basic rules as and when you need them while you begin to infiltrate the facility and get to grips with how it all works mechanically.

At its simplest you have four action points to spend on moving, shooting, interacting etc, before the guards move according to the guard deck, which also acts as a countdown timer to an instant fail, so each turn you'll need to maximise your actions to get through the stage quickly and quietly, all while ticking off any additional objectives along the way.

The louder and more violent you are on your turn, the more likely it is that you'll attract the attention of the guards, changing up their behaviour to hunt you down. It all depends on the luck of the dice. That's right, dice.

You might run for miles and never roll to alert the guards, or you might run two spaces and they'll come investigate, and obviously combat is dice based too. Guards are weak, but every time you spend actions to mitigate poor rolls from previous actions, you're eating into your available turns before the clock runs out. Characters do have abilities to reroll dice and the like, but how do you refresh those abilities after use? That's right, resting as an action.

You *will* fail, and sometimes you will fail because the one die you needed to be a 3 or higher rolled a 2, or a guard moved 5 spaces instead of 4, or a camera looked left. Luckily, failure only costs you the time needed to reset the stage and try again - and boy, did I.

Would things have gone better with another brain besides mine to work it all out? Most definitely, yes, both in terms of thinking up alternate strategies and in deciphering the rules, because despite being printed in two different books they are not the easiest to pick up and ingest into your grey matter.

Remember when I said the game scales up to the player count? Its third stage gives me the option of continuing to play solo or to start

double-handing things with the introduction of Meryl, another soldier but with a few different actions available to her, notably the ability to wear a guards uniform and hide in plain sight, rather than underneath a cardboard box.

Keep on advancing through the story and you're joined by Otacon, a nerd who can hack terminals to unlock doors and mess around with the rules, kinda like a wizard or something, and by Gray Fox, a.k.a. Cyborg Ninja. You'll be doing the other kind of hacking and slashing with him, should you opt for the full player count and all the additional objectives it brings.

And of course, along the way you'll be picking up new weapons and equipment to bring with you into the next stages (though you are limited to how much you can carry), so you can mix up your approach if you find yourself in a bit of a pickle with a certain objective or something. Equipment you've found is even stored in a PS1 Memory Card-styled tuckbox - how very quaint.

There are 14 stages in all, split between Stealth stages and Boss Fights, and those fights are just as mechanical and card driven as the guards are, each reacting to what you do as well as following a pattern, just like a video game boss would be doing. Sometimes they'll go down quick, sometimes it'll be a slog. A stage reset doesn't take too long, at least...

You would think after all this that there are more flaws in this masterpiece than there perhaps should be. Why praise a difficult, seemingly luck dependent game with hard to parse rulebooks?

Because while this game, stripped of its *MGS* skin, is a 6/10 on a good day, as a board game adaptation of *MGS* it is an explicit love letter from a dedicated fan determined to do it justice - and do it justice it does.

Frustratingly, I can't tell you *why* without spoiling anything, suffice it to say that if you are a fan of *Metal Gear Solid*, you owe it to yourself to play the flawed masterpiece that is Emerson Matsuuchi's *Metal Gear Solid The Board Game*.

“I’M GIVING HER ALL SHE’S GOT, CAPTAIN!”

My partner doesn’t like co-op games. If you loosen the definition she’ll play some of them, but we’re straying into party and team-game territory there, like *Codenames*. If you asked her what her favourite is she’d probably say the easily searchable *The Game*, but if she remembers what her actual favourite is, it’s bound to be *Battleships Deluxe*, a.k.a. *Captain Sonar*.

At its best, it is a real-time game for two teams of four submariners desperate to outlast their opponents, for sinking in a submarine is a bad idea.

But don’t ever *start* playing *Captain Sonar* as a real-time game. Learn slowly, gradually, in the turn-by-turn mode to get your bearings, because there is a lot to learn and a lot that can go wrong.

Every Submarine needs a Captain. Their job is to navigate the map and command the rest of their crew to not sink, essentially. It is the Captain who decides the cardinal direction of travel, the Captain who decides when to fire torpedoes or drop mines, and the Captain who decides to surface - and you don’t really want to surface.

They are flanked by the Radio Operator and the First Mate. The Radio Operator has a map too, and all they need to do is sit and listen to the calls of the opposing Captain, plotting out their enemies’ route and trying to match it to the map so that they can hone in on the only possible location they can be in.

The First Mate is in charge of the sub’s systems, powering up the weapons and activating scans that can help the Radio Operator narrow down their search. The First Mate is the Captain’s Personal Assistant, reminding them what is ready for use and what actions can be taken to bring this underwater combat to a swift conclusion.



And finally, there is the Engineer.

The poor, poor Engineer.

Their job is to not f%k up the sub too much, but it is an inevitability that they will f%k up the sub. While the Captain barks orders, the Engineer breaks something. When the First Mate says “Torpedoes armed!”, the Engineer says “Uh, no, sorry, not anymore they aren’t...”

Every time the submarine moves, they cross off something on their spider-web of a tableau. Cross off a weapon and you can’t use that weapon. Cross off a scanner and you can’t use that scanner. Cross off a reactor symbol however and you’re good, but cross off too many and you’re very much not good. Cross off all the icons on a coloured chain and you can rub out whatever is crossed off on that chain and breathe a small sigh of relief - until the Captain shouts an order and you’ve got to cross something off again...

If the Captain is smart they will work with their Engineer to mitigate the problems, but at some point they will just have to go for it and risk taking some damage. If needed they can surface to repair, but doing so will give the opposition three free turns to hunt them down while they sit exposed.

Eventually, be it thanks to a well aimed torpedo or general incompetence, one crew will emerge victorious - and now you know how to play, *do it all again in real-time*.

Where once a Captain said “North”, and the Engineer and First Mate replied “Ok” before passing it over to the other team to state their own intent, now it is a free-for-all.

Captains must get confirmation from their crew that a move was heard and their tasks are complete, ready for the next command, and they must say their move loud enough for the opposing Radio Operator to hear them, but beyond that you’re generally free to go at your own pace. Cue everyone muttering in a huddle, counting down for the start of the game, shouting “North! North! West! North!” far too quickly to be legal, surely, before bursting into laughter when the opposition call for an immediate time-out to address the blatant rule violations of doing such a thing...

I don’t recall a game of *Captain Sonar* ever falling flat. I do tend to get lumped with being the Captain, though, which is a little annoying because despite the name it is the easiest of roles to take. Teaching the game is often a case of skimming through the first three roles and then pulling the Engineers aside for a detailed chat, but once players have a game under their belts they get it. It’s like *Battleships*, but intense. A must play for sure.

BOLDLY GOING NOWHERE

The local library’s weekly board gaming event is rather well attended as far as numbers go, but sadly, those numbers do not include gamers who know what is good for them.

With close to 7 people around the one table my partner and I usually find ourselves at, the same games usually keep coming out. *Just One*. *King of Tokyo*. *Deep Sea Adventure*.



Sometimes I’ll be in the mood to play them, most of the times I’m not, especially when they’ve been played in recent memory. I’d much rather split the table in half and play smaller games or, if we have to accommodate everyone, play *Star Trek Five-Year Mission*.

But nobody is interested. *Nobody*. One look at the box is all it takes and literally anything else gets opened instead.

Five-Year Mission is a co-op dice chucker that scales up to 7 players acting as either the Original Series crew or that of the Next Generation, each with their own ability to help tackle the obstacles the entire crew will face.

On your turn you flip a card from a chosen alert deck (representing Easy, Medium, and Hard) onto the table, revealing a die-based challenge. Some of these cards will grant victory points upon their completion, some give

you the use of abilities like re-rolling, and some impose additional rules upon the game until they're completed, *Fluxx*-style, like no talking allowed or that this challenge must be completed before any other.

Then, you roll some dice and try to match their results to one or more cards. Cards will want certain die values, colours, pairs made in a single roll... you really could come up with this game on your lunchbreak, and flesh it out with any old theme later if you can be bothered.

Along the way you'll pick up damage to both the crew and the ship, which obviously makes life difficult. Injured crew can't roll as many dice, and a damaged ship requires the drawing of harder cards instead. As each crew member has their own ability, hopefully the Doctor and Engineer are paying attention, because while any crew member can help with any problem, some are more useful than others when it comes to these kinds of setbacks.

As soon as the ship suffers too much damage, or too many incomplete cards are splayed on the table, the game is over: total up your score and see how well Starfleet thinks you did. There's nothing much more to it than that.

So why does nobody want to play it?

I haven't even told you the best bit - the player count scales in real-time. Did someone turn up late? Give them the next crew member in the list and when their number gets called (play goes from Captain, to Commander, to the Doctor etc), they act. Does someone need to leave early? Well, admittedly, that's slightly trickier, but who would want to leave *Star Trek Five-Year Mission* early? It only takes half an hour to play!

One day this will get to the table again. I've even added a Tribble to the box as a conversation starter. I just need to find a group of players who were alive during the best periods of *Star Trek*, and who know what a *Tribblestus ventricosus* even is...



JUST FILLING THE SPACE... WITH GUNPOWDER!

Though we no longer have *Hanabi* in the collection, it was there for a long time, serving as a co-op game my partner actually liked to play, presumably because it was nice and quick and didn't really allow for one player to dictate the entire course of play (just most of it).

What we have in its place is what I thought was the most obvious retheme you could make: If 'Hanabi' translates to 'Fireworks', and we here in the UK (for some bizarre reason) use firework displays to celebrate the failed plot to kill the King way back in 1605, then why not play a game of 'Kayaku', or 'Gunpowder', instead?

A few period engravings here, some barrel.pngs there, an old looking font and a bunch of cream card to print it all on, et voila, a co-op card game about working together to pull off a successful regicide. Can't be too many card games with that theme around now, can there? Other than *Regicide*, obviously.

The cards are a touch see-through if you hold them up to a strong light source, and I suspect the colours are not colourblind friendly, but that just means there's room for improvement!



"I always feel like something of a fraud there."

— *Roger BW*

I don't really understand how the BGG guilds and lists even work if I'm being honest.

Mateo Giaccone has a 9 card nanogame called *DKR Rally Raid*, which I was pleased with for what little there is to it, but it's hardly a deep game that'll keep you coming back - more a novelty that a rally raid could fit into so few components.

Mr Bouvier is indeed trying to impress the folks at Synapses Games with *Rallyman Raid*.

The last batch of prototype photos show that it has gone even further away from what we're familiar with, now ditching hexagons as well as gear dice. As you say, they just don't work at this scale or for the challenges of an endurance event through the desert.

But between you and me (and all the new sets of eyes reading this issue of *ODaM*), I think they've lost whatever desire they had for *Rallyman* - though I am a pessimist...



CHURE? THAT'S A BIRD, INNIT?

No, I thinking of Chough, which is of course pronounced 'chuff', as in "I'm chuffed to bits to score 15 points with Chough. What the hell is a Muzjik? Are you making up words again?"

I've only dabbled in *Scrabble*, and unlike Alice's parents mine only sometimes take a set on holiday with them. I was surprised to learn that because it's not something we ever played growing up. There were a couple of elder gents at the library who I've seen scrabbling, but it's more of a *Rummikub* club these days; perfectly acceptable to play week after week, year on year - we even broke down to see what all the fuss was about and have somehow ended up with a Japanese themed set on our shelves. Baffling.

Is a Baffling a bird? It sounds like it should be a bird. "Hey look, a Baffling!" I'm going to find a Baffling one day, maybe in the fat

stacks of cards in the *Wingspan* box. I gave up buying expansions after the first two - nectar was neat, but I don't see the need for anything else added after that, though I made sure to get the booster pack of British birds because I've seen some of them in the garden.

Emphasis on the past tense there. Ever since the upstairs neighbours got their cats I've seen fewer and fewer of my little feathered friends, though that's unlikely the only reason.

I could do with getting *Wingspan* back to the table. We've played a few games recently on BGA but it's not the same. Well, no, to the developer's credit it's pretty darn good, but to Roger's point, the lack of table talk is really noticeable online, especially when all the tool tips have you so focused on maximising the birds as an engine, rather than remarking on their silly names or goofy appearances.

The Wingsearch database tells me there is no card for the Chough though. Ah well. I guess I'll have to make do without.

ON A ROLL

Roll and move really was the only mechanic in board gaming, wasn't it? No matter what I or Juhis were doing in the games of the 1990s, we were more than likely rolling a die, moving a pawn, and maybe reading a piece of card if we were lucky enough. Games haven't changed!

I've seen *Quoridor* around. It sounds like my partner would be interested, but for how long is another matter entirely...

We've played a couple of the old school *Formula D*-like games, whose no doubt generic names escape me. *Powerboats* springs to mind as another game with the notion of selecting gears to go faster and faster, but at the cost of not being able to turn as tight.

The closest I've come to *Flamme Rouge* is *Um Reifenbreite* but I only played the once and can't remember a whole lot about it. I didn't know *Heat* was from the same designer. Only played it once too, and it didn't give a great first impression, but it was on BGA where we were fumbling our way through it rather than reading and understanding the rules beforehand.

But I have played the likes of *Camel Up* much more often. We don't own it, but it's usually one of the first suggestions of friends who do. Anyone who doesn't bet on the winner as their first action is clearly missing the point - not that I've ever actually won by doing so...

RACE FOR THE GLORY OF THE EMPEROR

It seems CTD and I have another similarity: looking like a right fool next to a chariot.

In *Ave Caesar*, everyone has a hand/deck of numbered cards to move their chariot that many spaces (ideally). You have to carefully time the use of those cards to get you around 3 laps efficiently, with one of those laps requiring you to stop and wave to Caesar.

I am a single space short of the finish line with one card in hand: The 6. Just play it, right?

If you are in the lead, *you cannot play your 6 card at all*. If someone overtakes you, great, you're no longer in the lead, but to overtake me is to cross the finish line and complete the race, leaving me in the lead once more and unable to play the one and only card I possess.

I had to sit and watch four players finish their race at whatever pace they wanted, safe in the knowledge it was essentially impossible for them to finish last.

It is my favourite racing game memory.

ṛushncrûsh"

There are plenty of video games I want to see as board games. Sometimes the best (certainly the quickest) way to make that happen is to retheme something, and I'm no stranger to doing so if I can find a nice pairing.

I've always wanted to retheme something as anti-gravity racer *Wipeout* (or *wipEóút*, if you spend too long recreating the stylised title in Unicode), but haven't found anything that fits. *Mille Bornes*, of all things, looked to be the front runner until now, for I'm now aware that *Rush n' Crush* exists thanks to Roger; a grungier take on combat racing that has jumped onto the list of things I need to look into sometime soon.

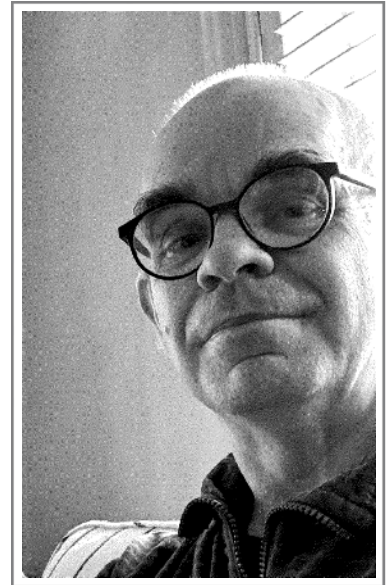
Elsewhere on that list was *Leaving Earth*, which intrigued me but I knew that I wouldn't know anyone else interested in playing it. Judging by its BGG weight, and comparing it with what we own or have sold on in a similar bracket, yeah, made the right choice to not dive into that one too quickly... Though it seems the community says it plays best solo, so there's a chance it gets another look at some point.

I do hope it's only *GT* that you play on BGA, because the *Dirt* implementation is an absolute joke that I refuse to promote the existence of (and neither does Synapse Games).

Let's all be friends

How not to ignore co-operative games

Christopher Taylor-Davies
@ctd@mastodon.social



To co-op or to coop...

The ignorable theme this month is co-operative games, or is that cooperative games? This is a vast sub-genre, and probably extremely well picked apart and pored over in numerous places already. I do actually like some cooperative games though, so I will simply list a few of my favourites.

But let's address the elephant in the room that bedevils cooperative games even more than some types of board games. That is the case where a single dominant player hectors, badgers and coerces the players into doing things the “right way”, a.k.a. “their way”. To be clear this is a people problem and not a game problem per se, and in my experience solved by not playing games with that kind of person. However cooperative games, by their very nature, are more vulnerable to this type of behaviour, and if you have only a small selection of opponents to play games with, and some of them are prone to this, then your experience of cooperative games will be poor.



Doom

Oh, let's also get the other main gripe I have personally with these games out of the way now as well. I particularly don't like the games that layer in traitor or individual victory conditions into what is supposed to be a common goal, something that you are all working towards. I understand why these have been attempted but they are a hard **no** for me. I am happy playing games with traitor or hidden role mechanics, these are great in the right format. But playing several hours to achieve a difficult goal, only to find you didn't make it because one selfish player secretly held onto vital components just to satisfy some hidden personal goal? No thank you.

Enough moaning, time for the good stuff. Our first experience of cooperative games was with the granddaddy of them all, Reiner Knizia's **Lord of the Rings** game. Well, one of Knizia's Lord of the Rings games anyway. Many classic elements of the genre were present in this. Manage meagre resources through an increasingly perilous landscape, trying to avoid the steadily advancing DOOM. There is usually a DOOM to avoid in these games, though in this one you have to literally get to Mount Doom to win. We haven't played this a lot, but it has always been tense and close run when we do. Along with several of the expansions it still lurks in my collection, awaiting a new outing.



Getting the rhythm right



A more recent Knizia co-op game we enjoyed was **The Siege of Runedar**, where you are dwarves attempting to escape a besieged fortress by simultaneously digging a tunnel and fending off marauding orcs and worse. Look, they've got a catapult! The neat wrinkle here is that you have a fixed deck of cards which you can upgrade, but only by destroying one other card. You must take care not to make your deck lop sided. Not all cards in your deck get seen each cycle through so you have a chance to miss your best (and worst) cards depending on the shuffle. It took a while to figure out this one, and also quite possibly, figure out the optimal player count, but figure it out we did.

Speaking of figuring things out, there is a certain rhythm to these games that you have to understand before you can get ahead of the curve. What is the velocity of bad stuff happening? Where do you need to concentrate your attention? How do you distribute your players and resources? No matter the game the underlying mechanics are important to grasp, or you won't make it. Despite the range of themes on show most co-op games are somewhat abstract, and the success of the theme is really about how happy you are being in that universe, because your choices are mainly about which cube, card or counter to collect in order to pay off in a future turn. This isn't to say that they aren't thematic, just that the mechanics are always visible.

How to have fun while
starving and freezing to
death

An exception to this, perhaps, is a thoroughly evil game that enjoys making life really unpleasant and difficult for the players. **Robinson Crusoe** is extremely thematic, punishingly difficult and has a number of very cute mechanisms to really spice up your choices. You are often faced with a decision to either take a quick lightweight advantage, with no consequences, or something better, but then something unpleasant gets shuffled into the deck that may come back to bite you, often literally. It also has a very crunchy daily choice for you, do you spend the whole day working on a task to have the best chance of success or do you attempt two different tasks with each having a reduced chance of success? You are always struggling to stay dry and find enough to eat. The rich theme comes at the cost, however, of a dense, famously opaque, rulebook, that can make learning the game almost as much of a challenge as the game itself. Success, when it comes, feels particularly rewarding.



One game designer, Matt Leacock, has become known for his dozens of co-op titles, many riffing on his seminal **Pandemic** game, which has spawned numerous variants, including several Legacy games. Even when not directly related to the original Pandemic, or Forbidden Island games, there are

Thunderbirds are Go

several signature mechanics. There will be a deck of cards with stuff in for players to collect, and a deck of cards that trigger events on the board, usually bad, which the players have to contend with. Buried at regular intervals in this event deck will be momentum shifts, one time cards that cause time to hurry on and previous event cards to be shuffled back onto the top of the deck.



In the direct Pandemic family we have enjoyed the **Iberia** and **Fall of Rome** versions, both of which introduce clever new mechanics without greatly mutating the basic formula. Then there is his **Thunderbirds** game, which was always going to be an insta-buy for me, growing up with Thunderbirds as a distant exciting treat. We didn't have a TV and it wasn't on very often in New Zealand, but I occasionally got to see an episode and so its mystique continued to grow. I have also been described as looking like Brains from that show so maybe there was some element of err, whatever nominative determinism is, if it related to appearance. Recently he produced a variant on the Thunderbirds variant called **Animal Rescue**, which is an equally appealing, and non-violent, introduction to co-op games now that we have been through a real Pandemic and perhaps decided it wasn't a lot of fun.



The legacy of Pandemic

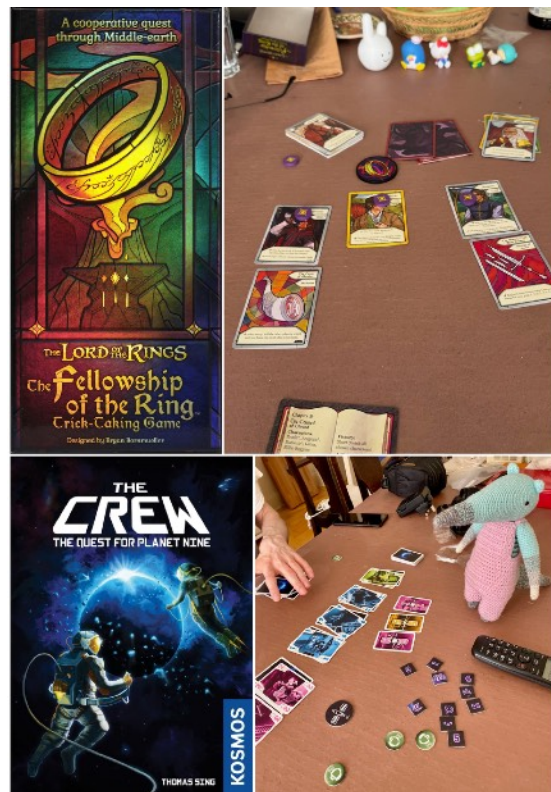
It seems right to mention one of the most intense gaming sessions I took part in. At the Gathering of Friends one year, about when **Pandemic Legacy** had just appeared, 4 of us decided that we should play the whole campaign if we could. The reasoning was that you needed to play this kind of game with the same people for continuity, and the chances of organising that outside of a convention were slim. So we hunkered down, ripped open a new copy of the game and set forth. We were quite fortunate that someone wandering by in the first session, asked if we had done something yet? Actually we hadn't, we had got a crucial rule wrong. I forget what it was, but it was fundamental to the way the game worked and we would have messed everything up badly if we had continued. So that was lucky. After that fortunate save, we mostly sailed on serenely, rules-wise, occasionally helped by being able to ask either of the designers when confused. Of course nothing is smooth in a Pandemic game where any one game will go through the "this is easy", "oh no, everything is broken", "ah, but we have got this fixed now" and the "oh dear, we are totally screwed" phases. After more or less two days we finished the campaign, and it was a great thing to do. Once.



In recent years there have been several co-op trick taking games which to some extent solves the problem of armchair quarterbacking, as communication is limited, so long as people obey the rules about table-talk. We had a lot of fun with both iterations of "**The Crew**", enjoying the way each new scenario messed with the parameters to make it even more tricky (see what I did there) and hard to solve. Something of a genius move to ally trick taking to a shared goal, because

It's a TRICK

partnership trick taking is already well established and has that guaranteed satisfaction when you combine with your partner to pull off some improbable bid. Recently the **Fellowship of the Ring Trick Taking** game added an excellent narrative flow to this type of game and has seen several intense and enjoyable sessions. Hopefully we get to finish the first set and can start on the Two Towers, but getting the crew™ together can be difficult.



Another personal favourite to close with is the board game adaptation of **Stardew Valley**. It had a rough introduction, bedevilled with some build quality issues and also being biffed by some folk for not being exactly like the video game, and boffed by others for being too difficult for board game newbies who were attracted to it because of the franchise. For us though it was just right. We got a 3rd, or maybe 4th, printing and the components were fine. We played it maybe a dozen times over a few weeks, experimenting with the variable goals, some of which were considerably more challenging than others. Mostly we were successful, and it was always fun working out the best way to organise your people. Recently we

Let's just chat instead

played it while a non-playing friend was in the same room, and the look of mystification and amusement on his face as we decided who would go and make friends, who would water the crops, who would go fishing or mining, and other detailed planning discussions, added to the atmosphere.



An honourable mention to Ghost Story which I also played several times at a convention, without success. I don't remember much of the mechanics but I remember we all had a good time, despite being thwarted at all turns. A further HM to Spirit Island which has a good theme, and great variability, but which I personally found to be just a bit too intense. We did beat it once though before it sunk further and further back on the shelves without being played again. And a final HM to Dorfromantik which I greatly enjoyed as a video game, even bought a Steam Deck to play it on, and which spawned a board game version. I gave a copy to my daughter but haven't yet managed to play it more than once.

So there we have a brief personal hall of fame for a fun thing you can do with friends without confrontation and a lot of conversation. Co-op games encourage conversation, and this is maybe the best feature in the end. You get to have lively conversation, solving puzzles with your friends, instead of glowering over the top of your cards or counters at your adversaries. Always a refreshing change.

Little Wooden People

Number 3: by Roger BW

- Blog: <https://blog.firedrake.org/>
- Gaming stuff: <https://tekeli.li/>
- Rulebooks: <https://tekeli.li/rogers-rules/>
- Mastodon: <https://discordian.social/@RogerBW>
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URL content is now in footnotes, because PDF viewers vary substantially in how easy they make it to get a URL out of the viewer and into the browser.

Recent Games

I've been to Summer Stabcon, but since that ended on 5 July the writeup will have to wait for next time. But I did do a new thing with *Flash Point*...

Since last time, I've played (leaving out games I've talked about before):

[Spirit Island](#)¹ and [Horizons of Spirit Island](#)² which since they're cooperative I'll go into later.

[River Valley Glassworks](#)³ on BGA, which is of course much less pretty than in the real thing (even the non-premium bits are rather lovely, judging by BGG photos). I think it's probably well designed in that it achieves what the designer set out to achieve, but shorn of its sparkly visual appeal (don't knock it, I'm shallow) it doesn't really have anything to say to me.

[Flip 7](#)⁴ and [Flip 7: With a Vengeance](#)⁵ and I've been thinking about how different they are with only a few rule changes. *Vengeance* is much more confrontational, where the original for me

has the atmosphere of "you take a chance, you fail, the whole table laughs because it could have been them" that I also get from *The Quacks of Quedlinburg*.

[Road Master](#)⁶ alpha tested on BGA. This is JC Bouvier's (*Rallyman* and *Winning Ticket*) latest, a pick up and deliver game on a surprisingly small board. I've played twice so far and I've enjoyed both games even through the restricted lens of BGA.



[dnup](#)⁷ has entirely supplanted *SCOUT* for me, and I've put my copy of the latter up for sale. There are simply more things one can do, rather than just playing a better set or taking a card from the existing set. I know it's giving money to Asmodée, which I try not to do, but...

[Nokosu Dice](#)⁸ is my favourite trick-taking game. Not only do you have dice as well as

¹<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/162886>

²<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/367498>

³<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/407297>

⁴<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/420087>

⁵<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/463441>

⁶<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/451982>

⁷<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/432456>

⁸<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/294693>

cards (they work the same way, but everyone can see what the dice are), your last unplayed die becomes your bid for the number of tricks you'll win this round. Even though, under the standard must-follow rules, you may be forced to play the one you wanted to keep... It's quite hard to get hold of outside Japan, but there were copies at UK Games Expo this year, and easy enough to put something together with e.g. a *Rage* deck and some dice.

[Apequest: The Search for Geoffrey](#)⁹ feels intended primarily for fans of Professor Elemental (whom I gather is not a person one should allow oneself to be alone with). I played it with several mildly experienced gamers, and after we'd worked out what the rules actually meant, we had no difficulty at all in beating the sequence of challenges to win the game; I'm not sure we even took any damage. It's very pretty, and there are some interesting ideas, but the designer Mark Powell has only worked on one other game (on which he's also sole designer, and the publisher Trademark52 has only published these two games), nobody is credited with development, and it really shows. My guess is that he playtested it with his friends rather than sending it out to a diversity of players.

[Rhino Hero](#)¹⁰ is a dexterity game that I still enjoy. I'm terrible at traditional houses of cards, but putting together a tower is within my grasp. (Do not grasp, it doesn't help.)

[A Fake Artist Goes to New York](#)¹¹ is probably very good, but it's one of those games like *Spycraft*, *Green Team Wins* and *Dead Last* which I jokingly say speak to my trauma: it's not really that bad, but the sensation of everyone else knowing something which I don't definitely reminds me of childhood in a way that I find hard to enjoy.

[Automobiles](#)¹² still doesn't feel all that much like a car race, but is great fun even if I'm usually quite bad at it.



[Hot Streak](#)¹³ has had a lot of enthusiasm recently, and... yeah, it's OK, I guess? I like the betting game (in that same family of "meta racing games" I'll talk about later), but my goodness the race itself is a lot of work to generate the result, with no player input—like everything after the decision of what to fire at whom when attacking someone in *BattleTech*. I can see this being fun with a large group, especially if there's beer being drunk, but I think I'd rather play *Winning Ticket* again.



I was taught [Faraway](#)¹⁴ by a 1 Player Guild¹⁵ member who very wisely ignored the theme completely and just showed off how the forward play and backward scoring worked. It's easy to

⁹<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/369802>

¹⁰<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/91514>

¹¹<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/135779>

¹²<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/180680>

¹³<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/446497>

¹⁴<https://boardgamegeek.com/boardgame/385761>

¹⁵Solo boardgamers, on BGG, generally lovely people.

go astray with this if you follow the official rulebook (use mine instead!) but once over that conceptual hurdle there's a really enjoyable game here, ringing a pleasing change on a standard "gamble on what cards will come up later" pattern.

Cooperative Games

I like cooperative games. As I get older and more dissatisfied with the state of the world, I become less inclined to introduce conflict and more inclined to try to work with people. (While at the same time I still play wargames when I'm in the mood, so, shrug.)

There's scope for a stronger player to help carry a weaker one, too. In its pathological form this can produce the "alpha player" who tells everyone what to do, but I'm inclined to regard this as a social problem within the group rather than something that needs to be solved by rules.

I think the first cooperative game I played was probably *Pandemic*, which still impresses me with the tightness of its design: if we lost, often one more action would have led to a win, and if we won it was because we had that one last action before the next card draw would have ended the game. (I also had the original *On the Brink* expansion, of which my abiding memory is that the roles in it were much less effective than the ones in the original game—or that may have been me and the people I played with.)

But the game that displaced it for me, which I've raved about before, was *Flash Point Fire Rescue*. And the contrast between them may have been what started me thinking critically about board games, because on the face of it they have many similarities: in both games, on your turn you have a limited number of actions to move around the map and do things, at the end of your turn the automation kicks in and things get worse, and there are various ways to lose and one way to win.

But in *Flash Point* those actions seem to make more thematic sense. You run from place to place, you put out fires, you check to see whether a possible victim is real or not and you carry them out to the ambulance, you take a breather right now to be able to do a whole lot of things at once later. What does a city card in *Pandemic* actually represent? It's a way to get to or from the city quickly; it's also information about a disease commonly found in that city, but you randomly get that information usually when you're somewhere else in the world, and yet somehow you can only share it if you go to the city. From a gameplay¹⁶ perspective that works well, creating a tension about what you do with your cards. From a thematic perspective, I'm lost. And that's why I have all of *Flash Point* (blinged out with 3d-printed fire and smoke markers and a die-cast ambulance and fire engine) and no longer have a copy of any *Pandemic*.



I did go back some years after it had been a Big Thing and play *Pandemic Legacy Season One* with a friend, on Tabletop Simulator so that we didn't have to destroy physical components.¹⁷ Since we were both quite experienced at the base game, we found that we could usually

¹⁶If I were being pretentious, I'd say "ludic" here.

¹⁷To me a game should be something I can put on a shelf and play again ten years later, or sell to someone else who'll do the same thing. So I don't do legacy games, and I don't do app-required games unless the app is open so that I can write and host my own version.

predict whether or not we'd win based purely on the pre-game random infection draws. Also, I think the people who were praising the story maybe don't read many books; I always assumed that the thing that happened next would be the most obvious version of the clichés that happen in this sort of story, and I was generally right.

But being fair to *Pandemic*, which I rather burned out on especially with *Reign of Cthulhu*, I played *Fall of Rome* not so long ago and that worked rather better for me.



V-Commandos (now renamed *V-Sabotage* after a threatened lawsuit) was described by a friend as “*Flash Point*, but with Nazis instead of fire” and I have to admit he’s basically right; the gameplay is quite similar, in that it’s on a detailed room to room map where you spend your actions and then things get worse in an automated way. The thing that keeps me enthusiastic about it, though, is the emphasis on stealth: being spotted or using a noisy weapon will increase the rate at which the enemy turns up, and the best operation (as in the real world) is the one in which the enemy never knows you were there except, hmm, has anyone seen Fritz lately?

Of course there are also semi-cooperative games, which usually seem to veer into social deduction: for example *Shadows Over Camelot*,

*Battlestar Galactica*¹⁸ and *Dead of Winter*. But unlike a pure social deduction game, you don’t *know* that one of the players is a villain: you all have to cooperate to do something quite challenging, and maybe all the players who seem to be sabotaging it just happened to have bad cards. I tend to think of these as more in the social deduction than in the cooperative basket.

But the game that I’ve played that does this best¹⁹ is *Homeland* (from the same team of Aaron Dill, Sean Sweigart and John Kovalski who designed many TV show adaptations for Gale Force 9 including *Firefly* and *Star Trek: Ascendancy*). I can’t say how well it does in recreating the feeling of the series,²⁰ but it cunningly has *three* sorts of player role rather than just the usual “good” and “bad”. The Loyal Agent simply wants to stop the terrorist plots. The Political Opportunist wants some but not all plots to succeed, overall a marginal “good guys” victory, so that they can demand more power and resources to fight them. And the Terrorist of course wants all the plots to succeed, but even if they do, will lose the game if they are identified *as* the Terrorist. And while there may be no Terrorist or no Political Opportunist in any given game, there will always be at least one or the other.

Jason C. Hill’s *A Touch of Evil* is another favourite: while the pulp inter-war Nazi-punching setting of the same designer’s *Fortune and Glory* is more to my usual taste, I find this game of vaguely-revolutionary-era gothic America more fun. There are two modes of play: in both of them, there’s a big villain (vampire, headless horseman, etc.) with an array of minions and your heroes are trying to power up and bring it down, but in the standard mode you’re also competing to be the one who *does*

¹⁸and its less licence-bound adaptations *Dark Moon* and *Unfathomable*.

¹⁹Well, most to my taste.

²⁰Which I’ve never seen.

bring it down, so you end up trying to sabotage each other but not too much. In the cooperative mode, there's none of that, but the villain is a bit tougher. The included rulebook treats cooperative mode as a set of changes to the default competitive game, which was the spur for my writing out the full coop-mode game rules in their own document. (I'm still trying to find a copy of the *Something Wicked* expansion at an affordable price, though.)



On the party game side, *Just One* and *Letter Jam* are both games of everyone winning or losing together. I've played a single perfect game of *Just One*, with a BGA group including Alice, none of whom I think have ever met each other in person; meanwhile *Letter Jam* gets much harder if one player has a smaller or larger vocabulary than the others, because they have different ideas about how much information a clue will give.

Mysterium feels to me like a better version of *Cluedo*,²¹ much as *Captain Sonar* feels like a better version of *Battleship*. It does rely very heavily on the ghost doing a good job, though, because it's largely a game of the other players working out how the ghost thinks. I usually try to match really simple obvious things, like a predominant colour, but it doesn't always work.

²¹Clue for Americans, because when it was published *Ludo* was big in the UK but that name wasn't known in the USA.

I think my favourite “light” coop, though, is *Landmarks*, which I picked up at Essen 2024. It feels designed to be a *Codenames* killer, though it isn't released by a huge company with lots of marketing muscle and I haven't seen any copies except my own. The theme doesn't make much sense, but in the standard cooperative game one player is giving clues for the others to follow, essentially trying to identify a single hex on the board by the words that are adjacent to it. So if you wanted to clue the space adjacent to “Texas” and “fort” you might say “Alamo”. But, correct or not, that tile goes down on the space the players pick, so you might later find yourself needing to clue “Alamo” but not “fort”...



Of course if you were looking at my game shelves you'd have to comment on *Aeon's End*, of which I have basically everything up to *Past & Future*. I'm a great fan of the infinitely combineable game, but later core boxes have tended to have a specific sort of mechanic involving the player cards, market cards and monsters, so that they interact in interesting ways, and a fully random game is less likely to produce that as it combines cards from different core box wave; so probably those are best played with the content from their individual boxes.

And the last game I'll mention is *Spirit Island*, because this gets into the question of difficulty. In a competitive game that's the skill of the other players, but in an “all players versus the system” game it comes purely from the game

constructs. And at least for me, if I always win (or win easily on a first play), or always lose (or lose comprehensively on a first play), I don't feel enthusiastic about playing the game again.

And the first few games of *Spirit Island* I played were victories, though not easy ones; but they were also with experienced players who presumably had enough surplus resources to help me out. When I've been the most experienced player at the table, I've more often lost, and that's become quite dispiriting. Recently I picked up *Horizons of Spirit Island*, which is pretty much the same rules but most critically with different spirits; we won that, but not easily, and I now feel more enthusiastic about continuing to try to get better.

We Also Heard From

Comments on OdaM number 2

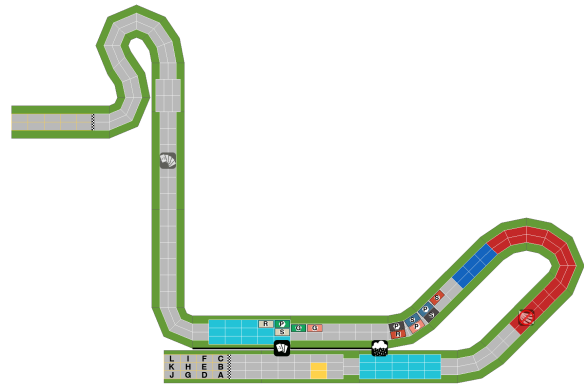
Alice Violett: aw, you're cool. (Or whatever it is the young people say these days.)

I've played a little Scrabble against my wife, who is terrifyingly good at it so it always feels as though I'm doing badly. However, that experience of looking for anagrams may have been why I was vaguely competent at *Letter Tycoon*, as I mentioned in issue #1. That's a thing I've noticed elsewhere too: I learned to play both *Lemminge* and *VOLT* on yucata.de, where most of the people playing them are enthusiasts who have spent a lot of time getting good. So when I play there I lose a lot. But when I play my own copies with normal people, suddenly what I think of as a losing play style can turn out to be actually quite effective.

I still remember the reaction of the 1 Player Guild in March 2020. "Stay in the house, you say? No physical contact with other people? We got this covered!" But while I do play the occasional solo game I miss the chat.

Juhis: The 20th century history of board games fascinates me—the way they shift from moral instruction for children into lightweight occupiers of idle time into an actual hobby. I've seen it argued that *Snakes & Ladders*, while it has no actual decisions, is good for teaching children about taking turns and winning or losing gracefully, but looking at *Nestori* I should add to that that even a very light theme can make a game enjoyable if it can spark imagination.

Quoridor looks as though it could be fun, but I have a negative reaction to "chess-like" games—by which I mean two player, zero luck. Because, as in chess, the superior player will almost always win, you need all the structure of ratings and handicaps and so on in order to have an enjoyable game between players of different skill levels. If there's luck involved, even a little bit, or the complexity that goes with adding a third player, I at least can blame losing on that rather than on my own lower skill.



I haven't played *Flamme Rouge* since I picked up the *Grand Tour* expansion at Essen in 2024. Not sure why not! I did write [some software for play by email and forum games](#)²² though it'll need a major rewrite to work with the published Grand Tour rules,²³ and I haven't started to tackle that.

²²<https://codeberg.org/Firedrake/flammes-rouge>

²³I made the assumption, justifiable at the time, that the length of route from one space to another would always be the same, but the roundabout tile makes that not true any more.

Why *Heat* doesn't grab me the same way I really don't know.

I think *Camel Up* fits into a sub-category (which I've just invented), the "meta race game". Like the progression of Wolfgang Kramer games from *Tempo* to *Downforce*, and like J. C. Bouvier's *Winning Ticket*, how you bet on the race is rather more important than how you actually race, and maybe you don't have any influence over the race at all. (And in *Camel Up* you don't even have the limited information those other games give you about what might happen.) And yet, I agree, it's good fun.

VOLT (which is not at all a racing game, but is a robot programming and battle game) has largely replaced *Robo Rally* for me, but when I do play *RR* I try to make it a version that doesn't lock up players: a thing even worse than player elimination, for me, is requiring a player still to be present but not giving them anything to do. I quite liked the 2016 edition that Richard Garfield tried to disown.

I still noodle around with the idea of a rallying game (or it might be an orienteering game?) in which choosing a route is an important part of it. I haven't played one. It's almost tempting to make it an add-on module to *Outdoor Survival*²⁴ except that having a foot race in which you're quite likely to die before the finish would seem to limit its appeal. Still, the idea of starting with a necessarily imperfect map, and choosing one's level of risk based on limited knowledge of the terrain... there might be something to that. (Following the stream makes you less likely to get lost,²⁵ but more likely to face a steep climb/descent, say.) Perhaps one might also spread skill points among abilities like map reading, navigation on the ground, and simple physical stamina.

²⁴A famously punishing 1972 Jim Dunnigan design, now known mostly because an early edition of *Dungeons & Dragons* recommended that one buy it for the maps.

²⁵Unless you're playing in *Blair Witch Project* mode, of course.

Christopher Taylor-Davies: A unified rule book for *Quest for El Dorado*, you say? I might well take that on. (I've only played it once, mind.)

I'm not sure why *Cubitos* didn't grab me, but I seem to remember I felt as though it was riffing hard on *Automobiles*, something that the very positive SU&SD²⁶ review didn't mention. Which is more a strike against them than against the game, of course.

I think I can identify that chariot game from the photo: *Circus Imperium*, a FASA boardgame set in their *Renegade Legion* universe (other games in the series were notable for their early use of box miniatures, template-based armour damage, and remarkably complex damage flowcharts). Specifically in that game, and the photo, your chariots are pulled by carnivorous Beasts, and they are gravitic rather than wheeled. I've had fun with it back in the day, but oh yeah, there really shouldn't be failure states like that, even in a beer-and-pretzels game from 1988.

Matt Elliott: I've owned *Space Race* but sold it on in the end. Nice ideas, but to my mind the thematic feel was never quite there. (As I've said before, I can get quite demanding of thematic games.)

1 CAR D looks really interesting! How to fit the *consequential choices*, thanks CTD for that phrase, into the smallest possible space...

I've played *Jamaica* a couple of times but it doesn't work for me, perhaps because I can't see my way past the randomness. A bad thing may be going to happen. Can I prepare to mitigate it? No, because I can only mitigate one sort of

²⁶I should remember that not everyone reading this will necessarily know of *Shut Up & Sit Down*, the boardgame review channel. I was a great fan in their early days, particularly with the original lineup of Paul and Quinns, and the forum I run was inspired by theirs and then became the "officially unofficial" forum when they decided to shut theirs down.

bad thing at most, and there are lots of different ones, and the choice of which will hit me is random. Quite possibly I'm missing something important.

I've met very few video game adaptations that kept any of the feel of the original game. (But I'm old enough to remember when "licensed video game of the film" meant "it's going to be rubbish, because we spent all our money on getting the licence rather than on making a good game", and while this is less true of board games a Big Name still makes me wary.)

I got into *Rallyman* originally via Kyuss of the 1 Player Guild; it was one of those games that instantly clicked for me, and then when *Rallyman: GT* was announced a little while later

I fell on it with glad cries ("tiles rather than modular boards!"). Still haven't found a copy of the old *Dirt* expansion at a reasonable price though; it's the boards I'm really after.

I know a very competitive 1 Player Guild member (also, I should say, a very pleasant person to game with) who managed to turn *Flash Point* into a competition: while the rest of us were fighting the fire, they ran in and out as the Rescue Dog and did all the actual rescuing of victims. They immediately became known as the "Glory Hound".

