

The board is simply a scoring track. Four symbols alternate along the serpentine track, interrupted every five spaces by scoring numbers.

A player's turn is quite simple: take a card from the display, play a character card, or play a set of at least three identical cards. The player can take any of the first four cards in the display, but any card passed over must be taken and placed underneath the player's corruption tile. This corruption aspect is lifted from Cathala's Cleopatra and the Society of Architects. In that big-box game, the penalty for having the most corruption was severe: an automatic loss. Here, it is less deadly, as the offending player loses points on the score track. Yes, it is still painful, but at least not fatal.

The goal when collecting cards is to assemble sets of at least three identical commodities. Amulet cards help in this goal, as they act as wild cards and can be used as any commodity. Players want to collect cards with scarabs, as they are more valuable and enhance a set's score. A set is played face-up before the player and can be added to later in the turn, but only with another set of three or more of that commodity. There is a strong temptation to continue taking cards, but players must beware as any cards left in a player's hand at the end of a round that cannot be played will be placed in the player's corruption pile. So, you cannot simply grab as many cards as possible without considerable risk.

At the beginning of each turn, five event tokens are made available by placing them face-down in the play area. When playing a set, a player may examine all five tokens and choose one to implement. These can be beneficial to the player – points, extra turn, enhanced set value, etc. – or detrimental to an opponent – lose points, add to their corruption total, etc. Once an event is selected, the token is discarded. Thus, there are fewer available for the next player to examine when playing a set. The presence of the event tokens provide an incentive to play sets early as opposed to hoarding cards until late in the turn.

A player may play a previously acquired character card, exercising the power it confers. These powers include grabbing extra cards, stealing a card from an opponent, adding cards to a previ-

ously played set, discarding cards from your corruption pile, etc. Character cards are each associated with a specific commodity, so instead of playing them for their special power, they can be played along with a set of the corresponding commodity. Character powers are useful but not overpowering. Still, they are usually worth taking when available.

When all nine cards along the Nile are taken, nine more are revealed. There are a total of sixty-three cards in the deck, but several are handed out at the beginning of the game. As a result, there will be six sets of cards revealed. When the final card is taken, the turn ends. Players may play any sets from their hand, with all remaining cards being placed in the players' corruption piles.

Points are scored by examining the sets played. For each set, add the number of scarabs on the cards and multiply this by the number of cards in the set. For example, if a player has played a set of four marble cards, and those cards have a total of three scarabs, the player scores twelve points for that set ($4 \times 3 = 12$). Playing a set without any scarabs will score – you guessed it – zero points. So, it is particularly important to acquire cards depicting scarabs.

After points are tallied and markers moved along the scoring track, the corruption piles are tallied to determine which player was the most corrupt. Simply add the number of cards in each player's corruption pile. The top offender is penalized by losing points. For every ten points he scored that turn, he must move his marker back to the next space depicting the symbol which matches the space he currently occupies. So, if a player scored 28 points in a turn and his marker currently rests on a space depicting a scorpion, he must move his marker backwards on the track two scorpion spaces. This could result in a loss of as many as ten points.

The game concludes after three turns, or if one player manages to exceed one hundred points. After deducting for corruption, the player with the most points wins. The game usually lasts about 30-45 minutes, which is just about perfect for a game of this caliber.

Sobek is a light, family game that also makes a

nice interlude between deeper, more challenging games. The main challenge is deciding which card to take, and whether it is worth placing cards in your corruption pile in order to acquire an attractive card. It is wise to maintain a rough idea of the number of cards each player has in their corruption pile and try to stay a card or two below the player you perceive has the most. This will help prevent a significant loss of points on the score track.

A turn can end faster than one might expect. If players use several turns to acquire cards, occasionally skipping over a card or two, a turn can speed to a conclusion very quickly. This can leave one or more players with numerous cards in their hands that they cannot play. So, players should carefully assess this potential each turn, collecting only cards they feel they can play before the end of a turn. This time pressure adds welcome tension to the proceedings.

Don't be misled: Sobek isn't filled with deep strategy or clever tactics. It is a rather straightforward, easy-to-learn game that is entertaining and fun. Playing just three turns seems about perfect and doesn't cause the game to feel too repetitive or overstay its welcome. It has been well received in both family and gaming settings, something which is always a big plus. So while the game doesn't really capture the enchantment and mystery of ancient Egypt, it is still a fun trip along the Nile.

TOTEMO

Surprised Stare Games

2-4 players, 30 minutes

designed by Tony Boydell

reviewed by Ben Baldanza

Tony Boydell is a designer of generally quirky but pleasant games, and there is no discernable pattern to his designs. Totemo is his best yet, and it is easy to play while still demanding good decisions and is approachable for a wide range of gamers. It also looks great, and those looks come at a cost as the game is a tad expensive but the big bag of colorful totem pole blocks makes you understand why instantly.

Players score points by placing and stacking colored and numbered blocks. Each of the six colors matches two other colors; for example, green matches with yellow and blue in addition to itself. When a green block is placed, it scores its own number, plus the number of any green, yellow, or blue block it directly faces.

The totem poles (block stacks) are built up from a wooden grid with 25 holes in a five by five pattern. This grid is seeded with a "rainbow block", meaning that it matches any color, in the center, so building tends to grow from the middle outwards though this is not required. The blocks have a post at the bottom that plug into the board or another block, and a hole at their top. Most of the blocks have a hole that can accommodate the post of another block, but some have a shallow hole and these are known as "toppers". Toppers are placed like other blocks but once placed, the stack is finished.

Each player starts with three randomly chosen blocks, and on their turn they will either place a block to score or flush their hand. Blocks can be placed to expand an existing stack or to start a new one, but in either case both color and stacking rules must be adhered. The color rule is based on the description above; that is, a block can only be placed if every face it touches (including the one below it) has one of the three matching colors. The stacking rule is also simple: no stack can be taller than five blocks and nothing can be placed onto a topper block. When a block is placed, it is scored immediately on a scoring track. This track is only 30 spaces long, but a separate track records laps as the scoring can get quite high.

The short scoring track has a nice strategic touch as well. Before the game begins, bonus tiles are placed on variable spaces along the track. If a block score results in a player landing on a bonus tile, they can immediately place another block on that same turn. In this manner, it is conceivable to place and score all three of a player's blocks on a single turn. One of these bonus tiles is only effective once a player has circled the full track at least once.

The blocks are numbered one through four, and as the game is played scoring opportunities multiply

since more faces of the newly added block can touch previously placed blocks. Placing a block into the base to start a new stack is often necessary, but it best to do this when you can match at least two faces to it since you won't score for anything underneath. With only three blocks to place, the decisions are not time consuming but they are important. This is one reason that the game works so well. The game ends at the end of a round in which any one player cannot refill their hand to three at the end of their turn, or when a fixed number of turns has taken place. This latter method is monitored on another track, where a "chief" marker is advanced each round until he reaches his tepee.

The blocks are very nicely made and look great, and the wooden base is solid. The "board", which contains the scoring tracks and the "chief" track, is printed cloth and folds up easily into the storage bag. The one obvious production issue is the fact that the color wheel, which shows all the color matches, is not printed on the board. Instead, it is printed on the back of the instruction manual and so this needs to also be available during the game play at least until all players learn it.

Totemo is fun and fast. It's more of an abstract puzzle than a game, but that doesn't take away from its enjoyment, especially as an end of evening closer, or a quick game through lunch. The game is packaged in a bag, and this bag is used during the game to hold the blocks. This means that you need to have a place to store it since, interestingly, the game based on stacking will not stack with anything else!

TROYES

Pearl Games

2-4 players, 90 minutes

designed by Sébastien Dujardin,
Xavier Georges & Alain Orban,
reviewed by Stuart Dagger

Three more candidates for your list of famous Belgians: Xavier Georges first came to our attention two years ago with *Royal Palace* (Hans im Glück) and followed that up a year later with *Carson City*. His is the most recognisable name

of this triumvirate, but Alain Orban was actually the first into print with the card-based party game *Santy Anno* (2006). For Sébastien Dujardin *Troyes* seems to be a first, but he makes up for that by being the driving force behind Pearl Games, whose first publication this is.

And yes, it is a little confusing that three Belgians should give an English name to the company they set up in order to publish a game about a French city.

In medieval *Troyes* there are three areas of influence: ecclesiastical, military and civic. Players gain victory points from all three, but what makes this game different from all the other games set in medieval Europe is that they do not do so either by placing pieces or by playing cards. Instead they roll dice and use these to take actions. Stated as baldly as that, this does not at first sound like an improvement, but this is a sophisticated dice system, for when it comes to using the dice, you are not restricted to those you rolled yourself. Other people's dice can be bought, and they may not refuse to sell. The consequences of this are firstly that the luck element is reduced to an acceptable level and secondly that the competition introduced forces players to make hard choices.

The resource dice come in three colours and there are six of each. At the start of the game, each player will allocate a number of their citizens to the three areas of influence. This will determine the dice they are allocated in round one. Each of the areas has six positions in it – one for each die – and these are numbered. Only one citizen can be put in each position, so players take turns to place. In a 4-player game each player will place a total of four citizens, in a 3-player five and in a 2-player six. In all cases, there will be a few vacant spots at the end of the process and these are filled with "neutral citizens". Everyone is then given an appropriately coloured die for each of the citizens they have placed. This rule of one die for each citizen in each area will be repeated in subsequent rounds, but without the placement routine. One of the things you can do with a die when you come to use it is displace another citizen from their spot, and that is how the picture will change as the game proceeds – with players bumping each other out of "workforce" produc-

ing locations.

Phase 1 of each round sees the players receiving income and immediately using part of it to pay their citizens. It is a fixed income of 10 and the maintenance costs are 2 for each citizen in the red (military) area and 1 for each one in the white (church) area. Citizens in the yellow (civic) area cost nothing, since these represent the tradesmen and peasants who, in contrast to the nobility and the clerics, generate wealth rather than just spend it on grand projects! The numbers have been carefully chosen here to keep money tight, to reflect the differing VP-generating potential of the different coloured dice and to compensate those players who find themselves in possession of fewer places in the workforce producing areas.

The players now roll their dice and place them in their designated area of the board. The dice belonging to the neutral citizens are also rolled and placed. The neutral citizens don't take any actions, but their dice are available for purchase.

Phase 3 brings in events. There is an ever-present threat to the city from marauders and this is represented by a pre-printed "card" on the board. Two new cards join this and any cards left over from previous rounds. One of the two new ones will, like the marauders, represent a military threat. The non-military events cover such things as drought and civil war – which cost players money – and "migrant workers" – which results in neutral citizens being brought into the dice-generating areas at the expense of citizens already there. Not all the events are bad, just the majority, but the level is that of minor nuisance rather than catastrophe. The military threats generate black dice (nearly always one per card) and these are now rolled. They represent an immediate threat that the players must deal with before they can get on to the next and main phase of the round.

The initial responsibility for overcoming the black dice rests with the current start player. Their job is to "defeat" the highest number rolled, which they will do using dice from their sector, i.e. dice they rolled in Phase 2. This is a matter of using numbers from your dice to at least match that on

the black one. The numbers on red dice count double when you are doing this, and you have the option of taking out more than one of the black dice if you wish. So, for example, if you have a red 5 and are looking at two black dice, one a 6 and one a 3, you might as well deal with both. Each black die removed gains you an "influence point". Influence points are a second form of currency which, among other things, can be used to improve die rolls either by re-rolling or by inverting them. If there are any black dice left after the start player has done their job, responsibility for dealing with the next one goes to the next player in clockwise order.

The effect of all this is to give the players who are early in the turn order some useful influence points, but at a cost of some of their dice. It also adds to the game's narrative.

Phase 4 is the meat of the turn. This is where players use dice they rolled and/or bought to take actions, each of which will require a group of 1-3 dice all of the same colour. The cost of buying a die from another player or from the neutrals depends on the number of dice in the group you are going to use. If the die is to be used on its own, it costs 2; if it is to be part of a group of two, it costs 4; and if it is to be part of a group of 3, it costs 6. So a group of three involving two bought dice will require a call to your bank manager. Your own dice, of course, cost nothing. These actions continue, with players taking turns, until everyone either chooses or is forced to pass. On each of your turns in this phase you do one of six things.

1. Activate an Activity Card

At the start of each of the first three rounds an "Activity Card" will be placed in each of the military, ecclesiastical and civic parts of the board. These cards remain in place until the end of the game and give the players an opportunity to use dice to gain benefits. Some of them are people such as a merchant or a blacksmith, others are happenings such as a joust or a religious procession, but that's all decoration. What matters is the benefits, and these are such things as money, victory points, influence points and improvements to the dice you are using.

The way that all the cards work is that you must first pay to place a citizen on the card. The cost