SET in a dystopian future, *The Resistance* is a gloriously sneaky game of deception, deduction, manipulation and bluffing. Players find themselves on one of two teams: a group of rebels fighting to overthrow a totalitarian regime, or a ring of undercover spies working to keep it in power.

The game plays out over a series of rounds, with rebel commanders choosing players to dispatch on missions to destroy imperial bases. But with the spies’ identities kept secret, the revolutionaries have no idea who’s really on their side, or who might stab them in the back. The result is a storm of confusion, betrayal and accusation as the villains attempt to pass themselves off as good guys, shifting suspicion onto innocent players and undermining the rebels’ faith in their teammates.

To win you’ll need a world-class poker face, a razor-sharp ability to spot deception, and the cold, calm nerve to keep a straight face while lying to your friends. And if you’re looking for a similarly underhand game with a little more depth, try *The Resistance: Avalon*, which swaps the original game’s cyberpunk setting for the mists of Arthurian legend, introducing a collection of characters like Merlin, Oberon and Morgana, all with their own special abilities that add new layers of intrigue and confusion to the mix.

THE Alhambra palace in southern Spain is one of the world’s greatest architectural marvels. A stunning blend of Islamic and Christian influences, it attracts visitors from around the world.

This award-winning game puts players in the shoes of the master builders tasked with its construction, creating an assortment of towers, chambers, gardens and pavilions. To do that you’ll need to recruit craftspeople from the surrounding lands. But there’s a problem: each of them wants to be paid in their own currency.

To win in *Alhambra* you’ll have to keep a close eye on the buildings available to you, drawing the right combination of ducats, dirhams, florins and dinar from the bank. You’ll aim to snap up new extensions for your palace while your opponents are still busy sorting out their finances. Getting it right takes a little bit of planning, a touch of opportunism and a dash of luck.

Acquiring buildings is only one half of the equation, though. They all come represented by tiles which you’ll use to build your palace, and you’ll need to carefully piece them together in a coherent design. It adds an evolving spatial puzzle to the game, and it takes time, practice and repeat plays to master.

INSPIRED by the traditional game of dominos, this family-friendly tile-laying game sees players become monarchs vying to expand their domains. On each round you’ll choose from a selection of tiles, all showing different kinds of territory to add to your empire. You’ll lay down a new patch of land on every turn, growing your kingdom and earning points by connecting areas of the same type.

Some tiles net you more points than others, but taking a less valuable one means you’ll get to choose before your opponents on the following round. It means you’ll constantly ask yourself whether you’re better off taking the biggest, shiniest prize on the table, or hanging back and grabbing something even better on a subsequent turn. It’s not always an easy decision, and with new tiles drawn from a randomly shuffled stack, you’ll need to constantly reevaluate your plans as you play.

With three or four players, *Kingdomino* is tight and elegant. There’s also a more challenging two-player variant that sees you and your opponent building bigger kingdoms. And if you’re looking to add a little more complexity to the game, follow-up game *Queendomino* adds knights, towns and an angry dragon to the mix.
**Star Realms**

2014  
Designers: Robert Dougherty, Darwin Kastle  
2 players  
15 – 20 minutes  
Age 12+  
RRP £12.99  MSRP $14.95

**Star Realms** is a head-to-head card game that challenges players to build fleets of mighty starships before throwing them into deadly combat against adversaries in deep space.

A stripped-down, streamlined example of a class of games known as deckbuilders, *Star Realms* sees you and your opponent playing cards in order to attack one another, or to buy a variety of new, more powerful spacecraft. As your fleet grows, you’ll open up new tactical options that can reduce your enemy’s once-proud navy to a sad, floating cluster of space junk.

It’s an easy game to grasp, but it’ll take practice to master the art of spotting synergies between different cards, balancing defence and aggression, and culling ships you no longer need to ensure that your deck remains a hyper-efficient killing machine.

Fast-paced, tactically challenging and massively replayable, *Star Realms* packs a lot of fun into a tiny box.

---

**Hey, That’s My Fish!**

2003  
Designers: Günter Cornett, Alvydas Jakeliunas  
2 – 4 players  
15 – 20 minutes  
Age 8+  
RRP £11.99  MRSP $12.95

**Hey, That’s My Fish!** is a family-friendly but bitterly competitive game of squabbling penguins. It sees players stranded on a floating iceberg, fighting over tasty fish while the ground beneath them crumbles into the sea.

On each round you’ll move your gang of penguins around a board of hexagonal tokens. Each space awards a different number of fish. You’ll aim to finish the game with more than your rivals. But whenever a penguin leaves a patch of ice, it’s removed from the game, melting away into the ocean. It means the board gets smaller as the game goes on, with competition over the remaining food supply intensifying with every turn.

You’ll have to strategically block your opponents’ penguins, stopping them from reaching the spaces they most want to get to. It’s even possible to set rivals adrift, leaving them marooned on a tiny patch of ice floating away from the rest of the board.

With genuine tactical decisions, rules that take less than a minute to explain and toy-like plastic figures, this is an ideal game for parents to play with kids. Be warned, though: things get rough out on the ice, and it’s more than enough to provoke a tantrum, even among grown-ups.

---

**King of Tokyo**

2011  
Designer: Richard Garfield  
2 – 6 players  
30 – 40 minutes  
Age 8+  
RRP £33.99  MRSP $39.99

**King of Tokyo** is based on classic *kaiju* monster movies. *King of Tokyo* hands players control of oversized creatures competing to bring chaos to the Japanese capital. You’ll play as a 50-foot lizard, hideously tentacled sea monster or three-eyed alien invader, striving to inflict as much damage as possible on both the city and your rivals.

The game plays similarly to the classic *Yahtzee*. On your turn you’ll roll a handful of chunky dice, earning points or damaging your opponents depending on the results. But while dice-chucking action is at the heart of the game, it’s not the only thing you’ll have to consider.

Monsters begin on the outskirts of Tokyo, and only one can occupy the city at any time. Smash your way into the centre and you’ll be able to rack up bonus points for the destruction you cause. But you’ll also become the target for everyone else’s attacks, meaning you could find yourself beaten to a pulp and unceremoniously dumped out of the game.

There’s also a selection of power-up cards, which give your monster new traits and abilities like armoured skin, wings or fiery breath. If you’re looking for a slightly deeper city-smashing experience, sequel *King of New York* builds on its predecessor’s premise, with multiple city regions for monsters to fight over as well as military units that respond to the unfolding carnage.
This quirky, finger-flicking dexterity game sees players become astronauts on a mission to the red planet. And while you might expect humanity’s envoys to another world to spend their time planting flags and conducting scientific research, it doesn’t mean they don’t have time for a little recreation.

*Mars Open: Tabletop Golf* is a game of interplanetary pitch-and-putt. You’ll attempt to propel your ball across your table and into a square cardboard “hole,” with victory on each round going to the player who manages it in the fewest shots.

In reality, though, that “ball” is a simple square of printed card, and while it looks unassuming at first, something magical happens when you fold it carefully along its corners. It becomes a piece of cunning aerodynamic engineering. Rest it on the table and give it a carefully calculated flick, and it sails through the air in a graceful arc, with the length of your shot depending on the amount of force you use.

You’ll need to develop some skill and finesse, and the game comes with a host of tricks and techniques to master. You can chip your ball by sliding a finger underneath it and flicking upwards. You can pitch it by aiming right at the top of one of its protruding tabs. You can drive, long and low, by flicking towards one of its corners. You can apply draw and fade. In fact you can make a decent attempt at pretty much any real-life golf swing. There’s even an official rule that players must clap politely after each shot. Enforcing it is hilarious.

None of this is easy, though. It takes practice, and it rewards patience, skill and imaginative application. Striving for the perfect shot is powerfully addictive, and where similar games tend to rely on various bells and whistles to keep them interesting, *Mars Open* just has a selection of 3D cardboard obstacles, with cartoon art in a cheerful Martian pink. The entire game consists of working out ways to flick those amazing balls past those static barriers and into the hole.

To inject a bit of variety, the rules booklet comes with an astonishing array of hole layouts. The basic “front nine” sees players learning some simple shots, working their way around various bits of scenery. After that, things get increasingly creative and bizarre. First you’ll add a sand trap, which prevents you from re-orienting your ball after it lands. Then you’ll incorporate the game’s box and lid as obstacles, oriented in various directions. Finally there’s a fiendish sequence of holes using items of furniture placed around your table to add distance and doglegs to the battery of challenges. You can design your own holes too, if the 45 included aren’t enough.

It’s fast, fun and rewarding, if occasionally repetitive. Watching your opponents take their turns can be jaw-droppingly impressive or riotously funny, depending on how well they do. Taking your own shots can be scary, satisfying or both.

There’s little more gratifying in all of gaming than sinking a hole-in-one in *Mars Open*, and its rulebook closes with a series of one-shot challenges which feel utterly impossible — until that magical 400th attempt when you finally get it right.
BGB: What made you want to create a game about golf, and why did you choose to set it on Mars?

Dennis Hoyle: It wasn’t originally my intention to make a golfing game or a Mars game. The story is: I made some square cards for a prototype for a different game I was working on, and placed the deck on my desk. One day, almost without thinking, I somehow folded one of the square cards into the shape that is now the Mars Open golf ball.

At first I didn’t think anything about it. It sat on my desk for six months or more. Eventually I discovered it was fun to flick from place to place, and I began considering some vague ideas about its potential uses in a game.

I chose Mars for the setting because there are many flat plateaus on Mars. Flicking your golf ball accidentally off the table is a major concept in the game. So, just as golfers on Mars might have to keep their ball on the plateau, tabletop golfers must keep theirs on the table. Setting the game on Mars also just seemed goofy and fun.

Some of the holes are very imaginative, using the game’s box and even items of household furniture as obstacles. How did you design them, and what kinds of challenges were you trying to present to players with different setups?

I tried to explore as many different hole design concepts as possible with as few variables as possible, adding new elements only when needed to continue to explore new concepts. The first few holes use just the hole plus one obstacle, but later holes introduce new obstacles, which exponentially increase the number of unique arrangements that are possible.

A guiding factor in this process was my observation of how players interacted with the game in playtests. I found that whenever players began to design their own holes they quickly maxed out the number of variables, creating monstrously challenging or ridiculous holes. By comparison, relatively simple holes could seem quite bland next to these crazy ones, so I organised the holes in the rulebook to keep players’ interest longer and ensure they didn’t skip over interesting, yet subtle, concepts.

Furthermore I tried to design each hole with players’ strategic decisions in mind. Most holes involve an “easier but slower” path to the hole and a “better but more challenging” path. I wanted players to have to think about how they were going to approach each hole and attempt to execute a specific strategy.

The game invites players to design their own holes. Have you ever seen anyone create really strange and/or impressive layouts or incorporating elements that you would never have thought of?

Absolutely. I love looking at #marsopen on Twitter or Instagram and seeing what people have designed. @DiscordJack gets a nod here for photographing a complete set of nine unique holes on Twitter, many of which include concepts I hadn’t yet explored.

The ultimate achievement is a hole-in-one, but scoring one takes skill and dedication.

Dennis Hoyle grew up near Chicago, but currently lives in Texas. He has played board games since he was a child, but was introduced to modern games in high school through titles including St. Petersburg, Carcassonne, Caylus, Ticket to Ride and Catan. Today his tastes tend towards heavy European-style strategy games. When he’s not playing games, he enjoys spending time with his wife and daughter, volunteering at his church, hiking, running, travel and cooking.
Railway route-building game Ticket to Ride has sold millions of copies since its release in 2004, and its combination of simple rules and clever tactical gameplay have made it one of the world’s most popular tabletop titles. Along the way it’s spawned an ever-growing collection of new editions, taking players on steam-powered adventures across the globe.

Ticket to Ride: New York is the latest addition to the lineup, and while every game in the series has come with new maps to explore and rules to discover, it makes some surprising changes to the original’s hit formula. The most obvious is that it’s the first Ticket to Ride game to shift its attention entirely away from trains. Rather than carriages and locomotives, it comes with a stash of plastic pieces in the shape of iconic New York taxis.

In other respects, though, there’s a lot about TTR: New York that experienced players will find familiar. The game unfolds across a map of Manhattan, and your mission is to travel around the city visiting famous locations like Wall Street, Central Park and Times Square, racking up points by connecting pairs of secretly assigned destinations. You’ll use sets of coloured cards to claim routes on the board, and on every turn you’ll choose between adding new cards to your hand, or playing them to seize critical connections before your opponents have a chance to.

But what’s really striking is just how effectively this new edition streamlines and condenses everything players have come to expect from the series. Its board is tiny, and the routes between its locations are at most three or four spaces long. It hands players just 15 taxis to mark their path through the city, making for play sessions that end much more quickly than in any previous Ticket to Ride title. It takes what was already a fairly fast-playing game and compresses it into something you can easily bash through in a quarter of an hour - or less once you’ve familiarised yourself with the city’s geography.

The other effect of this distilled approach is that New York is the most savagely competitive Ticket to Ride game to date. In previous entries in the series, a rival snatching a critical route from under your nose meant you’d need to find alternative ways to make your connections. Here there’s almost no opportunity to rescue a plan that’s come off the rails. You’ll need to aggressively carve a path across the city, elbowing opponents out of the way as you go.

This isn’t just a smaller, faster Ticket to Ride, it’s a meaner, more ruthless one where every turn feels consequential. Whether you see that as a positive development is likely to depend on your own personality, and on the people you play with. Ticket to Ride is an established family favourite, and this unforgiving new spin has the potential to spark some discord as players wreck one another’s hopes of victory.

But if you’re a fan of the original game who’s ready to move on to something with more of an antagonistic streak, this is it. It’s Ticket to Ride with an added jolt of adrenaline – slick, quick and totally merciless.

Ticket to Ride: New York

Designer: Alan R. Moon
Artists: Cyrille Daujean, Julien Delval
Category: Light Strategy
Players: 2 - 4
Playing time: 15 minutes
Ages: 8+
RRP (UK): £19.99
MSRP (US): $19.99
Alan R. Moon was born in Southampton, England and moved with his family at an early age, first to Canada and then to the USA. He served as a radio operator in the United States Air Force before working for wargames publisher Avalon Hill. His published games include the bestselling Ticket to Ride series, Airlines, Diamant (with Bruno Faidutti) and Union Pacific. He lives in Syracuse, New York with his wife, Janet, and enjoys singing, watching Nascar racing and building model railways.

BGB: This version of Ticket to Ride is very fast-playing. Why did you want to create a smaller, quicker version of the game?

Alan R. Moon: The intent was for it to be a quick intro to the Ticket to Ride system. Sort of a “gateway to the gateway.” I also wanted it to be a travel version of the game, a “filler” that people could play along with bigger, longer ones on their game night, or something people could play on their lunch break. It also introduces some different pieces to the system, which opens up so many other opportunities.

How do you think the smaller board and shorter routes affect the experience?

What I really enjoy about New York is that I can play a game with two players in less than 10 minutes. After that first game, the loser can then declare it’s the best of three. Heck, I can play six games in the same time it would take to play the base game.

There are so many Ticket to Ride standalone games and expansions. What makes it so adaptable?

People have asked me if I knew the base game could or would be so expandable. The honest answer is no. I certainly knew it would be easy to make alternate maps, but it was only when I got into making the expansions, that I realised the system allowed so many new rules to be added. These rules didn’t make the game more complicated most of the time, they just created a new experience with the familiar components and mechanics of Ticket to Ride.

Ticket to Ride is an introduction to gaming for many people, but it’s also possible to play pretty seriously. Why do you think the series appeals to both newcomers and experienced players?

About a year after Ticket to Ride was released, I received two emails within 24 hours. One was from a nun who said everyone in her convent was hooked on playing Ticket to Ride. The other one was from a man who said that he had taken the game to his grandmother’s house and had played with his grandmother and his kids. The next day, his grandmother called him and told him that the next time he came to visit, he should bring “that train game.”

Ticket to Ride has won quite a few awards and it’s sold tons of copies, but every time I think of those emails, I smile.

As a designer, my goal was and is to design games that have the least amount of rules possible. Back when I worked on wargames, you could put anything into those games and the people who loved playing them wanted more, not less. On the other hand, designing family games is all about the elegance of simplicity. It’s great that really competitive players enjoy Ticket to Ride too, but this was a surprise to me.

What about the theme of railways and travel appeals to you so strongly as a designer?

I’ve just always loved railroads and trains. For people like me, the age of steam is the most interesting travel period.

Most boys who have seen steam engines and the cars they pulled, at one time or another, thought they wanted to be an engineer. Every time I ride Amtrak, I’m still fascinated by the whole mode of transportation.

‘I can play six games in the same time it would take to play the base game.’
In recent years, roll-and-write games have emerged as one of the most interesting trends in tabletop gaming. Quick and thoughtful, they’re often reminiscent of the mainstream favourite Yahtzee, with players rolling a handful of dice then scribbling down the results on a pad, trying to arrange numbers in high-scoring configurations.

Different designers have brought their own spin to the format, and it’s impressive how much variety has sprung from this shared blueprint. But the flood of roll-and-write releases makes it hard for individual games to stand out. Welcome to Your Perfect Home does something bold with the formula, though: it ditches the dice.

A game of house-building in the 1950s, it casts players as architects constructing desirable residential districts. You’ll start the game with a beautifully illustrated scoring sheet showing three neat rows of homes, a kind of picket-fenced utopia of post-war economic optimism. On each round you’ll choose from a selection of three numbered cards, writing its value on one of your houses and aiming to fill all three streets in ascending order over the course of the game.

The clever bit, though, is that all of the cards are double-sided. One face shows a number which you’ll write on your sheet, while the other shows a bonus action, letting you do things like build backyard swimming pools, add leafy parks to your neighbourhood or hire estate agents to ramp up the value of your newly constructed homes.

You’ll choose a linked pair of cards on each round, and it means you’ll simultaneously try to solve two different puzzles. On the one hand, you’ll aim to distribute house numbers as efficiently as you can, keeping your options open and ensuring you’re able to add new ones on future turns. But on the other, you’ll also try to rack up extra points by making clever use of bonus abilities.

Pulling off both simultaneously is tricky, and to make things more interesting, you’ll also randomly draw three objective cards before you play – planning edicts handed down by the mayor’s office. Each shows a different configuration of homes and amenities, with the first player to build each scoring a wad of extra points. It means that as well as relying on careful judgement, you’ll find yourself in a race against your rivals to fulfil each goal.

It’s the only real source of player interaction, though, and there’s no meaningful way to interrupt opponents’ strategies. There’s an inescapable feeling of ‘multiplayer solitaire’ — something of a recurring theme in roll-and-write games — and if you’re the type of player who likes some more direct competition, it might limit your enjoyment.

If you’re content to get absorbed in your own plans, though, Welcome to Your Perfect Home is a fantastic little puzzle. You’ll need to adjust to every randomly drawn card, striking a balance between building up your score and maintaining flexibility for future turns.

It’s also complemented by some fantastic visual touches, with 50s-style fonts and a colour palette that speaks of diners, Cadillacs, bunny-eared TVs and drive-in movies. And best of all, it gleefully subverts the era’s gender dynamic, with female characters reviewing blueprints and overseeing construction projects while the men take care of the shopping and serve up delicious home-cooked dinners.

Welcome to Your Perfect Home

Designer: Benoit Turpin
Artist: Anne Heidsieck
Category: Light Strategy
Players: 1 - 100

Time: 25 - 30 minutes
Ages: 10+
RRP (UK): £23.99
MSRP (US): $17.99

Pictured above: Welcome to Your Perfect Home casts players as town planners building a suburban neighbourhood in 1950s America. Publisher: Blue Cocker Games
Benoit Turpin is a history and geography teacher and has been playing board games for more than 30 years. After graduating from mass-market family games, he discovered the roleplaying games Call of Cthulhu and Middle Earth Roleplaying. He moved on to miniatures games including Heroquest, Warhammer and Blood Bowl, and nowadays his favourite games include Decrypto, Agricola, Pandemic Legacy and the Unlock series of escape room games. Outside of gaming, he enjoys reading French graphic novels.

BGB: Welcome To Your Perfect Home feels a lot like a roll-and-write game, even though it doesn’t use dice. Why do you think these games have become so popular in the past couple of years?

Benoit Turpin: I believe roll-and-writes are popular in part because they have that nostalgic feeling of playing Yahtzee as a child. And there’s an important tactile element. When you write on your sheet, it’s a permanent choice, and it creates a much stronger psychological tension than placing a tile on a board. The feeling that there’s no turning back is a very important part of the appeal, and I believe it is just the beginning. We will see a much wider range of roll-and-writes in the years to come.

How did you come up with the central mechanism with pairs of double-sided cards? What kinds of decisions do you think it creates for players?

The double-sided cards were not part of the early design. My goal was to make a deeper roll-and-write with only three dice, and where all rolls were potentially interesting. I loved the simplicity of it, but the mathematical calculations people had to do created a sour taste, so my publisher told me to get rid of the dice, much to my distress. After many failed iterations, we came up with a card-based system that replicated the dice mechanisms without the maths. And the cherry on top was that it allowed for more immersion through graphic design; a greater sense of control for the players and the ability to give them more information to plan ahead. Every turn, you make a quick but meaningful decision that will impact how you play for the rest of the game.

The game does a great job with its theme of 1950s America. What attracted you to this period as a setting?

The early versions of the game were more abstract. It was based on an old design with a computer hacking theme, but that was dropped. Blue Cocker [the game’s publisher] were the ones pushing for a theme, and they were right. So as soon as the development process began, we looked for a theme: trains, skyscrapers, even cocktails. But very quickly the city-building theme attracted us for its ability to explain the main rule of the game – putting numbers in ascending order. And the 50s setting came immediately. Classic Americana has broad appeal. Brutalist Soviet housing developments or 80s urban sprawl were not as endearing.

The art style is fantastic, particularly the way it flips traditional 50s gender roles on their head. Did you have a particular look in mind while developing the game, or did that come together during the publishing process?

The look was in our mind early on, but Anne brought it to life much better than we could ever have hoped for. She was the one to suggest flipping the gender roles on its cover and it immediately thrilled us. When we added illustrations to the player aids, I jumped at the chance to flip the famous Battleship ad of the 50s with the wife and the daughter in the kitchen while the boys are playing.

Are there any other roll-and-write games that you enjoy?

I am a huge fan of roll-and-writes, so I try to play all of them. I love the way they create tension in such a small format with excruciating decisions condensed into a few minutes. My favourite by far is Qwinto which is quick, tense and mean, with lots of highs and lows.
DESIGNER Matt Leacock is best known as the creator of Pandemic, a hit cooperative game released in 2008 which throws players into the role of medics battling deadly diseases. But while it may be Leacock’s greatest hit, it’s not his only foray into co-op gaming. His follow-up release, Forbidden Island, sees players working together as a team of treasure hunters on a stretch of land sinking rapidly into the sea. Quicker and simpler than Pandemic, it offered an easier introduction for inexperienced gamers.

Its sequel, Forbidden Desert, kept core elements of its predecessor’s gameplay but added a touch of complexity. Players found themselves stranded in a desolate landscape and had to build a steampunk-style airship while navigating around shifting sand dunes. Now its designer has returned to the series with Forbidden Sky, and once more he’s created a new set of problems to overcome.

The latest release sees players stuck on a floating platform thousands of metres above the ground. Designed to harvest electricity from lightning, it’s an airborne launchpad for rockets blasting into space. Unfortunately, it’s also caught in the heart of a raging hurricane, making it not the safest place to find shelter.

To escape with your lives, you and your teammates will need to explore the platform and repair its faulty electrical system, allowing you to take off in a plastic rocket that looks like something from a Jules Verne story. Before the game begins you’ll lay down a tile representing a section of floor, and as you play you’ll expand it by laying down new ones from a randomly shuffled stack, creating a new environment for every game session. Along the way you’ll connect cables and capacitors as you fight to restore power.

If messing around with electrical equipment in the middle of a storm sounds dangerous, that’s because it is. The platform will be struck by lightning repeatedly during the game. Any characters caught too close to a lightning rod will be zapped, dying if they suffer too much damage and resulting in an instant loss for the entire team. The current also travels through the wires you’ve laid, though, and it means the game’s environment becomes increasingly deadly as you get closer to completing your goals. It makes for some heart-pounding moments as you try to reach safe areas of the board and avoid a fatal shock.

As fans of the Forbidden series will expect, you and your companions each play as different characters with a selection of special abilities to help in your fight for survival – laying down extra lengths of wiring, healing injured comrades and leaping over gaps in the platform’s walkways. As in Forbidden Island and Forbidden Desert, carefully coordinating individual powers is the key to victory.

What’s arguably most impressive, though, is how literally the game takes its concept of circuit building. The components you lay down as you play actually carry a current from a battery. When you finally connect them, the game’s rocket flares with glowing LEDs and roars as its engines come to life. It’s a very fun gimmick, and it adds a visual high note that feels like a fitting reward for a hard-won victory.

Forbidden Sky
Designer: Matt Leacock
Artist: C.B. Canga
Category: Medium Strategy
Players: 2 - 5
Time: 50 - 60 minutes
Ages: 10+
RRP (UK): £39.99
MSRP (US): $39.99

Pictured above: Forbidden Sky’s setup is the most impressive in the series to date, it features a functioning electric circuit connected to a model rocket. Publisher: Gamewright
Matt Leacock grew up in the midwestern United States. He developed an interest in game design after being introduced to *Acquire* and *Civilization* by his father and his uncle, and he enjoyed breakout success with the cooperative disease-fighting game *Pandemic*. His other releases include *Forbidden Island*, *Forbidden Desert* and the *Pandemic Legacy* series with Rob Daviau.

**BGB:** A lot of people see *Forbidden Island* as an accessible cooperative game for players looking for something a touch simpler than *Pandemic*, but the subsequent games in the series have become a little more complex. Were you trying to create a path for players to follow as they gained experience?

**Matt Leacock:** The goal with *Forbidden Desert* was to increase the challenge and depth for players who had mastered *Forbidden Island*. This also made it more appealing to hobby players who might have found *Forbidden Island* too easy.

Come up with the unique differentiator for the third game and had a few false starts before *Forbidden Sky* took shape. I feel more confident when it comes to keeping complexity under control, so that part comes more naturally.

It’s also been fun linking the games together through their storyline. The players’ helicopter takes off from *Forbidden Island* and then crashes at the beginning of *Forbidden Desert*. If players win in Desert, they take off in the airship that they repaired—which then lands in *Forbidden Sky*. And if the players win at Sky, they take off in the rocket. Who knows where that will take them?

The settings for the series have become increasingly imaginative and dramatic over the years, incorporating more exotic science-fiction elements. Where did the idea for the floating rocket port come from?

I brainstormed different locations for the airship to take the players at the beginning of the game, and was inspired by Hayao Miyazaki’s animated film *Castle in the Sky*.

Players have to lay wires to complete circuits and win the game, but the elements they need to place can also electrocute them if lightning strikes. What was your thinking behind making this key requirement for victory actively harmful to the players?

*Storm cards provide increasing danger throughout the game, threatening to electrocute characters or throw them over the edge of the aerial platform.*
It’s more than 20 years since Danish
designer Christian T. Petersen released
the first edition of *Twilight Imperium*, a
sprawling game of spacefaring civilisations
engaged in warfare, trade and diplomacy.
In that time it’s gained an almost mythical
status in the hobby. Players speak in hushed,
reverent tones about its deep and varied strat-
egies, its complex set of mechanical subsys-
tems and its legendary eight-hour play ses-
sions.

Over the years, it’s been updated in a suc-
cession of revised editions, each tweaking
and refining the game’s setup while retain-
ing its core feeling of galaxy-spanning space
opera. Now it’s returned in its fourth incar-
nation, and while it’s still a truly epic propo-
sition, it’s also the slickest and most elegant
version of the game that’s ever been released.

Space, as the author Douglas Adams once
observed, is big. So it’s appropriate enough
that *Twilight Imperium* comes in a big box.
Open it up and you’ll discover a bewildering
collection of tiles, chips, tokens, cards, dice
and plastic spaceships – hundreds upon hun-
dreds of pieces. Set it up for your first play-
through and you’ll also find that it’s incred-
ibly hungry for tabletop real estate, with its
hex-grid galaxy surrounded by player mats
and rules references. It’s positively intimi-
dating, and that’s before you get to grips with
its 32-page rulebook.

But while *Twilight Imperium* is a gargan-
tuan beast, fetishising its sheer size does it a
disservice. Its scale is undoubtedly the first
thing that strikes you, but you’ll need to dig
deep to uncover its true appeal – the subtle
and nuanced story of war, peace, power and
betrayal that it weaves as you play.

Each game begins with the collapse of
an empire. The Lazax, rulers of the galaxy,
have fallen. The world of Mecatol Rex, from
which they ruled their star-spanning domain,
has been reduced to a war-torn shell. With
the throne empty, the galaxy’s other factions
vie to fill the power vacuum and establish
themselves as the sector’s dominant species.

There are the expansionist humans of the
Federation of Sol, the advanced engineers
and scientists of the Jol-Nar, the pirates of
the Mentak Coalition and the nomadic mer-
chants of the Hacan – a species of humanoid
lions whose trading network stretches across
inhabited space. In all, there are 17 differ-
ent factions for players to control, each with
their own strengths, special abilities and stra-
tegic approaches: battle-hardened fighters,
cunning negotiators and advanced cosmic
 navigators who bend the laws of physics to
outmanoeuvre their rivals.

With so many different races to choose
from, there’s massive variety in each game’s
potential setup, and the mix of factions
around the table has a profound effect on the
feel of the game. That’s compounded by the
fact that you’ll build its board from a collec-
tion of tiles showing planets and regions of
open space every time you play. It means that
no two games of *Twilight Imperium* will ever
present the same strategic challenge.

At first, your goals seem simple enough.
From a small, isolated corner of the board

---

**Twilight Imperium Fourth Edition**

**Designers:** Christian T. Petersen, Dane Beltrami, Corey Konieczka  
**Artist:** Scott Schomburg  
**Category:** Complex Strategy  
**Players:** 3 - 6  
**Time:** 240 - 480 minutes  
**Ages:** 14+  
**RRP (UK): £134.99**  
**MSRP (US): $127.49**
you’ll aim to expand your borders, building fleets of spaceships then sending them to colonise worlds and reap their resources. But it won’t take long before your expanding territory starts to rub up against your neighbours’, and when that happens there’s potential for trade, political wrangling or straightforward violence.

Exactly which you choose will depend on a host of factors. If you’re controlling a particularly aggressive faction, and your opponent has some vulnerable-looking planets, you might want to swoop in and attack. If you’re more concerned with building your economy, you might seek to establish a mutually beneficial trading partnership. Or if you’re more interested in what’s happening in other areas of the board, you might agree to ignore one another for the time being – each hoping that your neighbour will remain friendly, but always worrying that they might stab you in the back.

What complicates your decisions, though, is the game’s system of objectives. As you play you’ll race against your opponents to fulfil goals on a randomly drawn set of cards. You might have to seize control of certain types of planets, research particular technologies or build your political power. It means you’ll constantly need to analyse the objectives on offer, working out the ones you can most effectively pursue and denying your opponents the chance to complete others.

But what truly defines the experience of *Twilight Imperium* is its multi-layered process of bargaining and negotiation. On each round players collectively take part in a galactic council to vote on laws – effectively temporary new rules for the game – which incentivise certain actions or dissuade others. You might enact arms reduction measures which force players to destroy some of their planetary defences, or establish a research network that grants new powers to everyone around the table. You might even vote for the public execution of one faction’s representative, destroying their political influence for the remainder of the round.

It leads to heated discussions full of pleading, promises and threats, and the game complicates things further by letting players agree treaties between their own specific factions. You’ll sign peace accords, military support agreements and pledges of technological assistance, adding yet another element to the game’s twisting diplomacy, like a nesting Russian doll of intrigue and opportunism.

And it’s here that *Twilight Imperium* reveals the paradox that lies right at its heart. Because in spite of its mammoth size, its evening-consuming play time and the incredible quantity of stuff it packs into its oversized box, ultimately none of it matters as much as the evolving relationships between its players. It expertly provokes rivalries, shaky alliances, cynically motivated partnerships and moments of utter black-hearted betrayal. It painstakingly engineers situations rife with the potential for conflict, then challenges players to pick the right fights at the right moments. Often, you’ll get that decision wrong. Occasionally, the consequences will be disastrous.

At a fundamental level, *Twilight Imperium* understands the appeal of its brand of space-opera storytelling. It builds a detailed universe complete with wars, catastrophes, religious schisms, centuries-long rivalries and unfathomable scientific advances. But ultimately it’s all a backdrop to the complex social and political interaction playing out around the table. What makes the game so memorable, and what utterly justifies its demands on your time and your wallet, is the way it makes such a vast theme feel so intensely personal, to the point where small victories become genuinely exhilarating and setbacks come like crushing blows.

More than any other empire-building game, it leaves you feeling that you’re in command of a mighty civilisation with its own culture and history, and in spite of its multitude of mechanical moving parts, it makes it incredibly easy to step out of your own head and start thinking from the perspective of your adopted starfaring species.
FOR decades, board games have attempted to emulate the experience of tabletop roleplaying. Fantasy adventures like *Descent* and *Heroquest* have long tried to capture the essence of a night spent rolling polyhedral dice and battling monstrous foes. But while many RPG-inspired games are perfectly decent ways to kill a couple of hours, they tend to be more concerned with combat and treasure than with character development and emotional impact.

*Legacy of Dragonholt* does things differently. Set in the realm of Terrinoth – the same sword-and-sorcery setting as games like *Descent* and *Runewars* – it casts players as adventurers working to foil a nefarious plot against a noble family. And while it packs plenty of action and adrenaline, it also finds time for brilliant world-building, captivating dramatic hooks and a cast of engaging characters.

Before you play, you’ll create a hero with a name, a short biography and a set of skills to aid you in your quest. From there, you’ll play through an episodic story contained in a set of interactive game books similar to *Fighting Fantasy* or *Choose Your Own Adventure* novels. Over multiple sessions you’ll encounter enemies, explore a bustling village and investigate the shadowy conspiracy targeting its rulers.

What really stands out about *Legacy of Dragonholt*, though, is how it creates a living, breathing world for players to explore. Its hundreds of pages of text are pacy, punchy and engaging. Its locations have palpably different atmospheres, from tranquil woods to rowdy taverns. And its characters are rounded, distinctive and believable.

It leaves the impression that *Dragonholt* village is more than just a handy backdrop for your heroes to be heroic in. It’s a web of relationships: star-crossed love, simmering resentment, burning ambition, and it makes for a far more interesting time than any of the generic “I-swing-my-sword” dungeon-crawlers on the market.

What it isn’t, though, is a replacement for traditional RPGs. It may look like a kind of *D&D* campaign in a box, with its story books taking the place of a human game master, but if you come into *Dragonholt* with that expectation, you’ll be disappointed. In truth, it feels more like old adventure video games like *Broken Sword* or *Monkey Island*. And while it comes with plenty of villains and dangers, it makes no attempt to emulate the dice-chucking combat of any of the roleplaying games that have inspired it. Instead, it revolves almost entirely around the choices you make as you move through its branching storyline. If you’re drawn to the tactical, pseudo-wargame side of games like *D&D* and *Pathfinder*, there isn’t much here to scratch that itch.

It also shines brightest in an intimate setting. With higher player counts, the opportunities for each player to make important decisions become thinly spread. Two heroes seems to be its sweet spot.

But this is a bold and innovative game with the can’t-put-it-down appeal of a captivating adventure novel. It also treats its female and LGBT characters with total respect – something that can’t always be said of gaming, or of the fantasy genre in general. It’s a real achievement, and hopefully the first of many similar story-driven releases.

**Legacy of Dragonholt**

**Designer:** Nikki Valens  
**Artist:** Anna Christenson  
**Category:** Storytelling  
**Players:** 1 - 6  
**Playing time:** 60+ minutes  
**Ages:** 14+  
**RRP (UK):** £54.99  
**MSRP (US):** $59.95

Pictured above: *Legacy of Dragonholt* uses a *Choose Your Own Adventure*-style narrative, with a captivating tangle of sub-plots and side-quests. Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games.
BGB: How did you come up with the idea for Legacy of Dragonholt? What made you want to design a game with such a pronounced narrative focus?

Nikki Valens: Legacy of Dragonholt came from my desire for storytelling. I’ve been emotionally invested in roleplaying games for many years. I love telling stories with my friends, I love roleplaying, and I love GMing for roleplaying games. In a way, Legacy of Dragonholt is me running a roleplaying campaign for anyone who picks it up and plays it. It’s a way for players to get a storytelling experience, without needing to learn a roleplaying system or find a GM to run things for them. There are many games with narrative elements, but I wanted to create something where the narrative itself was the sole focus.

One impressive thing about the game is the way it builds its world and its cast of non-player characters. How did you try to create a responsive environment for players to explore?

In storytelling and roleplaying, it’s easy for the author to write the non-player characters as side characters to the player’s main story. Instead, I just treated each of the characters in Dragonholt as the protagonist of their own story. Their stories might not be about grand adventure and fighting hordes of goblins like yours, but they all have their own lives and cares and worries. Each of the characters has a daily schedule, and special events, and locations and other characters that are important to them, and when you see those characters in your story, you’re just catching glimpses of their lives.

The game does a really good job of presenting strong female and LGBT characters. How important was this for you?

I’m queer and non-binary. I’ve grown used to not seeing people like me in games. So when those characters do show up, it’s incredibly eye-opening and moving. Without that representation it’s sometimes easy to forget that there are other people in this world who are like me, who feel what I feel. Representation in games shows marginalized groups that the creators acknowledge us as players. It shows us that we are seen in the sea of cishet white men who play these games, many of whom would push us out of the hobby. Representation has certainly improved over the last few years, but this hobby and this industry still has a long way to go before it will feel truly inclusive. Even Legacy of Dragonholt could have done better, done more.

Are there any other story-focused games you enjoy? And if so, what do you like about them?

I enjoy many roleplaying systems since they allow me to tell stories with my friends, though many systems are overly rules-heavy, in my opinion. As for board games, Fog of Love allows for very deep personal stories to be told. I like how it encourages players to roleplay and tell their own stories but within a structure and a set of pop culture tropes that make it highly accessible to players who are less familiar with interactive storytelling. It also boldly strides into the romance genre in a way that other games seem to be afraid to try. As someone who prefers stories of love over violence, it’s great to see a designer willing to break the mould.

Nikki Valens is the designer of games including Eldritch Horror, Mansions of Madness Second Edition, Legacy of Dragonholt and Arkham Horror Third Edition. She is an advocate for inclusivity in gaming who believes that games should bring joy and love into the world and unite all those who play them. Growing up in Minnesota, Nikki passed the long cold winters by playing board games and card games with family and friends. Her love of social gaming grew into a successful career as a designer. Aside from cooperative, roleplaying, and trick-taking games, Nikki has a passion for reading, animals, and terrible puns.

With a living environment to explore and a cast of characters to encounter, Legacy of Dragonholt often feels like a traditional roleplaying game campaign.