A Railway Network for Cheese Cubes

It's all Julia's fault! She has a favorite type of cheese called Wensleydale that contains mango and papaya. The best place to get it is the creamery in Hawes. Hawes is located in the Yorkshire Dales, somewhere in the middle of the British Isles. Whenever she went shopping with her husband, he noticed that there were only a few railways in that area. These few, however, traveled a stunning route. Setting a train game here would be a special challenge. Julia's husband is Martin Wallace.

Before dealing with the game in detail, however, we have to cope with the gameboard. It shows a part of the Yorkshire Dales with its lush green lowlands, blood-red hills, and egg liqueur yellow valleys. The attempt to differentiate distinctly between these three terrain types has resulted in a board that is one of the ugliest we've ever seen. But grit your teeth and get into it! In contrast to many other train games, the board is not overlaid with a hexagon grid; instead, lines, seemingly drawn arbitrarily into the landscape, mark the areas.

Flourishing landscape

Before starting the game, you have to "seed" quite a few materials, first of all the freight: cheese (aha!) and stones. Both goods, in the form of little wooden cubes, are put in a bag from which the players then randomly draw two cubes for each hill and lowland area. When all areas have been occupied, some cubes are removed again since the lowland may contain only cheese cubes, hills only stones. It seems crazy first to cover everything and then collect half the pieces again, but it is an efficient method to distribute the goods randomly on the board. Finally, there are either one or two cubes – or none – on the individual areas, unless they contain towns.

People, also drawn blindly from the bag, are placed in the towns. The people come in three different colors: two colors indicate stations to which the passengers wish to travel later; the third color marks landowners who object to having a railway line built through their area.

What you have seeded must last for the entire game; there won't be any more new materials later.

Influence is everything

Each player has to assert his influence in order to act. For this purpose, the gameboard displays several bars (referred to in the original rules as "tracks"). One of the bars symbolizes the influence on the government, whose help is to muzzle intractable landowners who refuse to give in to the track building; in addition, the bar shows in what order everybody may build railroad tracks. Another bar determines in what order trains are chartered and passengers or goods are loaded. The third and fourth bars stand for the influence that players exert on the two railway companies already in existence, North Eastern Railway and Midland Railway. The networks of NER and Midland have so far reached a few towns at the edge of the board. The development of the Yorkshire Dales at first is left to the players – who have only four rounds to successfully establish their small railway lines.

Each round is divided into ten phases. This sounds like more than it actually is, since some phases consist of one small action only. First, we fill our stock of "investment cubes," which we need for purchasing "influence points" at auction. The points have been preprinted on the gameboard in an eight-box display. A token for one additional influence point for each box is drawn from the bag, so the assortment varies from round to round. When the boxes have been auctioned off and it has been determined who has how much influence in what area, we are already done with the first four phases of a round.

Let's talk more about the auction, because this is where the course of further action for the round is set. All eight boxes are auctioned off at the same time, with a minimum bid for each of them. Since each player may purchase only two of them, there are enough for all. The mix of influence points, however, makes some boxes more attractive than others. If you burn yourself out during the bidding, however, you won't have enough means for building railroad tracks. The skirmish around the influence points is exciting and may actually be instrumental in determining who will win or lose.

Nevertheless, the main phase of a round is, of course, the building of railroad tracks. The rules are simple: when you build, you may lay out a continuous line of track as long as you wish – if you are able to pay for it. And that limits the possibilities considerably, because you pay with the remaining investment cubes or with influence points. The costs in the valleys are twice as high as in the lowlands. If a town gets connected in which an intractable landowner resides, you have to chase him away by means of an appropriate influence
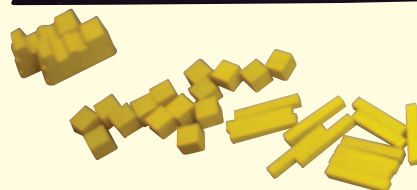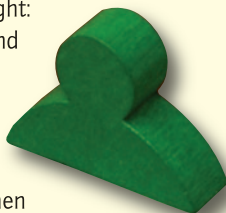
point. If a town in which the railway companies are present is integrated into the network, this costs a corresponding point. And these costs are inevitable, because you can only begin building in these towns.

The track links are small logs that are put on the border between two areas. Since each border can only take a single link, the order is crucial to the building process. The earnings you can expect are important as well: the transport of goods and passengers will make you profit, so the course of the track must be planned accordingly. And you also have to keep an eye on your competitors: if several lines steer for one specific good or station, one player snatches the profit away from the others – something that we are familiar with from AGE OF STEAM. The first player to build won't necessarily be the first one to load, since there are different bars for both phases regarding the turn order.

Before you can load cheese, a stone, or a passenger, you need a train first. Trains are chartered for one round. They have different prices and provide a differing amount of space for passengers and/or goods. The trains have also been pre-printed on the gameboard; and the same principle applies: there is enough for everybody – provided you can afford it. The trains must be paid for with influence points from the train influence bar.

The moving phase actually is nothing more than the loading process – the trains don't go anywhere. The passengers may only enter if the railway line leads to their destination station: a town connected to the appropriate railway company.

Limited profit

After the moving phase, it's time to balance accounts. Each passenger, each cheese, and each stone represents income. In contrast, there are the running costs that depend on the extent of your own railway network. The result is recorded on a profit and loss bar that has a pretty limited range: a profit of more than 5 goes to waste, a loss is recorded up to 13 points. The outcome on this bar determines the future order of play.

Now each player decides whether their railway lines are still profitable or whether they would rather sell them to one of the railway companies. To do so, you have to meet certain requirements. Primarily, you need some influence on the company that will take over the line. You don't get money for this, but you save costs in later rounds. You also need to consider that as soon as a company has taken over a line, no goods can be transported on it any more. It is lost and no longer gives any profit to anybody.

In the fourth and final round (in a three-player game, you play five rounds), the gameboard may already be pretty much emptied out. This depends on the distribution of the materials prior to the beginning of the game rather than on the course of the game itself. In extreme situations (for instance, if only intractable landowners are standing in several neighboring towns), it is legitimate to make some adjustments.

At the end of the game, it's not only the position on the profit and loss bar that is crucial to the win. The goods and passengers that have been transported during the past four rounds are also considered. In addition, you get bonus points for complete sets (one of each type of good and passenger).

Whoever thinks everything on the subject of train games has already been said, invented, and developed hasn't reckoned with Martin Wallace. This man is currently having a creative phase, and he's coming up with new things even regarding this pretty much done-to-death type of game. Respect it! In this game, different possibilities for gaining influence are essential for the building of railways. All four bars are linked to a primary purpose – but can also be used for other tasks. Two of them have a double function and determine the order of play, but only for a part of the playing turn. All areas of influence are important in some way, and the allocation of the applicable points, offered in packets, is cleverly arranged. However, you have to accept that marking the different values on the gameboard is a bit tight, if (for example) the yellow token, lying on the brown track underneath the blue token, is moved two spaces up and put on the purple token, because the yellow player has bought the box with the two brown influence points at auction. But in Martin Wallace's games we've been used to some occasional mechanical handling on the gameboard.

Another well-done detail is the aspect of costs and their avoidance. You have to offload your own railway network as quickly as possible if it no longer gets you any income. The connections on the gameboard don't get lost because of this, but they go into another company's possession (the railway links are exchanged). This way, the red and the green railway companies expand their area of influence and this makes it possible that passengers that couldn't be brought to their destination before can now be transported.

Perfect? Almost!

All components are optimally well-coordinated with one another. Although you have to pay attention to many details during the game, it is not complicated – that doesn't mean, however, that it's easy
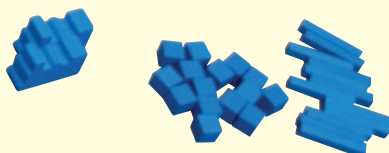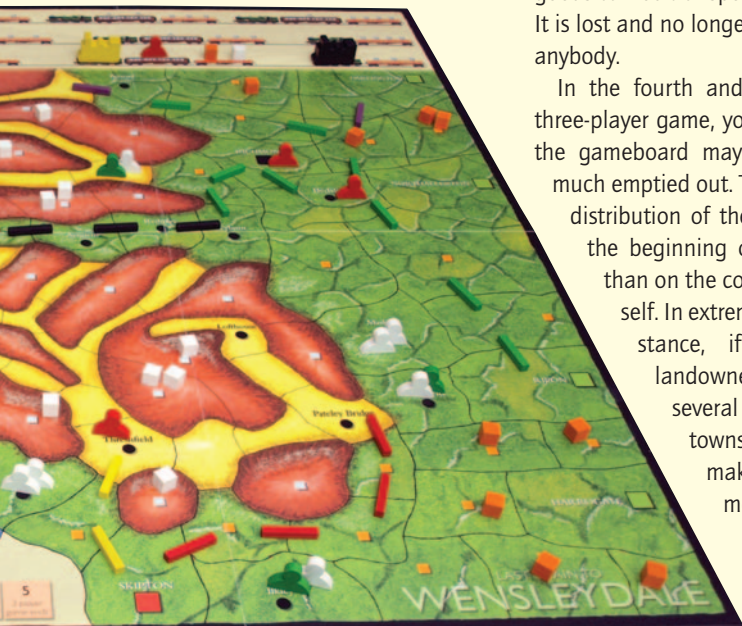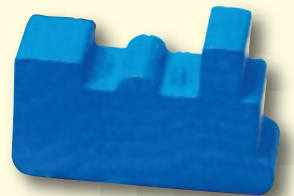
to master. Luck plays an – important! – role only in the initial set-up; the course of the game is determined solely by the players. LAST TRAIN TO WENSLEYDALE is almost a perfect game. The reason why I don't give the maximum rating is the gameboard – not because it looks so ugly but because, in my opinion, it's not well-balanced.

In the beginning, Midland Railway is only represented in two towns in the Southwest. If you start your railway network in "The South" and build toward Hellifield first and from there to Settle, you make the entire West unreachable, at that point, to the other players. In the first two rounds, you can transport stones and cheese, relatively undisturbed; maybe also passengers if they have the right color. Anyway, "The South" looks as if it were provisionally patched to the board. In order to be allowed to design the Southwest more lavishly and maybe also give Midland Railway a third station, it would have been better not to be concerned about geographic and historic correctness. Maybe this will happen in a new edition. The current edition from the company is completely sold out. Treefrog won't publish a new edition. At the editorial deadline of this issue, other publishers hadn't asked Martin Wallace for a license yet – but that might change after this review ...   *KMW*

Title:	**Last Train to Wensleydale**
Publisher:	**Warfrog Games**
Designer:	**Martin Wallace**
Artist:	**Mike Atkinson**
Players:	**3-4**
Age:	**about 13 and up**
Duration:	**about 120 minutes**
Price:	**about 45 €**

Reviewer	Playing appeal
KMW	9
Matthias Hardel	8
Christian Klein	7