

Spiel 2003 Report

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Here's our report on the 2003 Spiel Game Fair. This massive event is held in Essen, Germany, in late October every year. For a bit more of the basics behind this fair, check out our 2002 Report from the first time we went.

And oh, if you tell anyone that you're heading to Germany in October, they will immediately assume you mean Oktoberfest. It turns out that Oktoberfest is a Munich-only festival, and I hear it is held in late-September/early-October. (Sadly.)

Before The Show

I flew in Germany 2 days before the fair started, and Jim "I fear no jetlag" Burns flew in a mere one day before it. There we met the head of Eight Foot Llama Europe, Nic Kraus, and settled into the Hotel Arosa in Essen, about a 10-minute walk from the event site.

There was only one thing different about booth-prep this year: no wallpapering! Spiel now has shiny new white walls made out of plastic that need no covering. I can tell you that they rattle quite loudly, since the booth right behind us was apparently crammed full of jugglers who were somewhat new at it. We got used to the periodic crashing noises, rented the exact same furniture as last year, and all was well.

We were in booth 9-26 again, and we had our suspicions that this was a coincidence. In fact, virtually every company of every size from last year was in the exact same place, which made finding them (and us) very easy. It seems that Origins and Gencon in the USA do a lot more shuffling from year to year, though they of course are infinitely smaller.

Setting up the booth was easy, and on the way back to the hotel, we found a very good restaurant. So good that we ate there for five consecutive nights. I think that on the last night, the owner would have let us hang up our big "Eight Foot Llama" banner, but we didn't ask. And naturally, I never found out what the name of the place is. This is the truth.

Jim and I hadn't seen Nic since last year's fair. Nic Kraus is a native German-speaker who now lives in Finland. At our first lunch together, Nic told us a great deal about his new homeland. Jim and I knew that it had 21+ hours of darkness per day for months at a time, and also that exactly 7 non-Finns had mastered its unusual language, but little else. We were eager to learn, so Nic regaled us with many facts about Finland, including the following snippets which are true. The Finnish words for **October** and **November** translate to **Mud-Month** and **The Month of Death**. Nic said with a straight face that there is a "very perceptible difference" between outdoor temperatures of -20F and -30F. He also informed us that he had to give up jogging on the trails around his house because they had become elk breeding grounds and the elk moms were giving him very intimidating looks.

Nic, it should be noted, is not employed by the Finland Tourist Bureau.

During the Days

Things followed the same pattern as last year – the first hour of each day was pretty slow as people filtered through the gargantuan halls from the entry gates. Then, our booth was in complete chaos for the remaining 8 hours. I do think that Sunday was slower than last year, which prompted some discussion among game vendors; the theory is that gamers come for all 4 days and do most of their shopping Thursday and Friday, and perhaps even leave early Sunday. The weekend is more crowded and family-dominated, as locals come in with their kids and spend most of their time at the toy places. There definitely were more kids on the weekend, and they really jammed up the concourses. I think there were fewer English-speakers on the weekend, too.

We had only 2 tables on which to show off our 3 games. For Thursday and Friday, *Monkeys on the Moon* and *The Penguin Ultimatum* were the games we put out for play. They were played essentially non-stop on both days, and by Saturday morning, we had sold right out of *Penguins* [110 copies]. This included the demo copy and (later on) the display copy with the obligatory missing piece. After all the *Penguins* swam away, *Who Stole Ed's Pants?* made its appearance to fill the void on table number two.

Just as last year, the “sale rate” was at least 90% -- nearly everyone who played a game bought one. We also had the added pleasure of repeat customers from last year walking up and saying “I enjoyed *Pants* and *Monkeys* very much last year – give me those *Penguins*” without asking a thing about it. Also helping matters were good reviews in the German magazines *Spielbox* and *Fairplay*, which were published to coincide with the start of the fair, and some very kind online commentary from the respected Greg Schloesser. Hard as it is to believe, we are probably better-known in Germany than in the USA.

And of course much of our reputation in Germany can be accredited to Nic Kraus, who provides us with German rules translations and invaluable language-barrier assistance at the booth. In fact, invaluable is far too mild a word to describe his service to EFL Europe.

We've been expanding to other continents as well. We recently picked up distribution into New Zealand and South Korea, and it was very fun to meet interested parties from Japan, South Africa, and Israel at Spiel '03. We expect to be doing business with most or all of these resellers.

Speaking of resellers, it turns out we have more German retailers than we knew about. I was turned away from several retail stands as I tried to show them our games... because they already had them. Definitely one of the nicest ways to get rejected.

The other ongoing project is to see if any German publishers are interested in releasing German-language versions of our games on a royalty basis. I expect this process to be “ongoing” for a very long time, as there is an enormous queue associated with all of these publishers, and the competition is beyond intense. Nonetheless, the publishers are starting to know who we are, our reputation is quite good, and we are in no hurry. All of our games are essentially language-neutral – *Penguins* very much so – and we seem to have no problem selling the English versions abroad directly.

In any event, the days were quite a blur and mildly exhausting. I think by the end that Nic was actually making up German words, but I can't be sure.

In The Evenings

As previously mentioned, the three of us headed to our favorite restaurant after the show closed each day. It was always astounding how little we had been able to talk to each other during the day, despite being about 7 feet from each other. So the evening meal was a chance to inform each other on what we had missed, and of course, play (other people's) games.

In order, we played:

- Traumfabrik – well known among Spielfrieks, and I finally got my own copy. I think it's easily the best bidding game ever, and probably the best-themed Knizia game ever. A masterpiece. I'm already planning my English-language labeling endeavor. And Alan Moon told us his "Extra Special Variant" so we'll be using that from now on, too.
- Puerto Rico – I'm guessing you know this one.
- Alhambra – 2003 Spiel des Jahres winner, and fell flat for me. I've been known to remark that I will enthusiastically play any game in which you get to draw tiles from a bag, but I think that run is over. Planning seems very difficult, and it's too abstract and humorless for a chaotic game. But it's still ok, and I'm hoping it might get better with only 2 players.
- Clans – Finally got a first play of this one. Light, fast, thought-provoking and highly original. A keeper.
- Crazy Rally – We got this in trade. It's a race-car game with cards, where the primary goal is to memorize the course. That's right – you flip 12 course cards over, one at a time, and try to memorize them. Has nice production value, but I'm not sure "racing game" and "memory game" really go together. Also requires a fair amount of pen-and-paper bookkeeping.
- Spank the Monkey – Got this in trade too. An "American-style" game where you try to build a tower and every card has a paragraph of text allowing you to break the rules in some unforeseeable way. You're trying to catch a monkey who's on his own tower. Some good laughs, but a bit random and not really my thing.

And this is embarrassing, but I was in haste at a retailer booth, and I asked for and received Rette Sich Wer Kann... only to find out later it wasn't *that* Rette Sich Wer Kann. Kosmos came out with a game in 2003 with the same title as the old "lifeboat game." I now own it and am seeking an English rules translation. Doh!

Nic picked up Verräter, which is a nice game if you have 4 players.

In Summation

Very successful show – sold every game we had, most of them to attendees and the rest to German distributors. It was also very fun. I think we were a bit more relaxed, knowing what to expect, and no one came down with any hallucinogenic fevers.

Great to see old friends and new! I'm sure I'm going to leave people out, but a hearty hello to Holger Hermann, Henning Pöhl, Uwe Moelter, Harald Bilz, Greg Schloesser, Rick Thornquist, Ward Batty, Pitt Crandlemire, Johan Francois, Angela Gaalema, Alan Moon, Paul Evans, Ralf Sandfuchs, the Coppertwaddle folks, and Warfrogs Number Two and Number Six.