

REVIEWS

ALEA IACTA EST

Alea

2-5 players, 30-60 minutes

designed by Jeffrey Allers
& Bernd Eisenstein

reviewed by Stuart Dagger

The speed with which the career of Jeff Allers as a published game designer has gone from wannabe to established must have set some sort of record. A year ago he was looking forward to Essen and the appearance of his first game; now he is a man with a catalogue. What is more it is a catalogue containing a tick next to the prestige label of Alea.

Alea iacta est – The die is cast: the words spoken by Caesar when he launched a civil war in pursuit of personal ambition – is as good a name for a dice game as one could come up with, especially when, as here, it has been given a Roman theme.

The game lasts five or six rounds and in each round you will have about four turns. You begin the round with eight dice and on your turn you throw all those you have left and then assign one or more to one of the buildings in the centre of the table. The end of the round is triggered when one player runs out of dice and the number of turns is then equalised. That done, the “offerings” the players have made at the various buildings are inspected and various points-carrying goodies are handed out. The aim is to collect stuff that fits together well.

There are five buildings, or more accurately four and an annexe.

The Castrum: This is where you collect Province Tiles, of which there are 25 in all. At the start of the round as many tiles are placed here as there are players. Apart from a low-scoring joker, which is there mainly to make the numbers work in a 5-player game, each tile is in one of six colours (representing Gallia, Britannia, Germania, etc) and has a value between 1 and 4. To put in a claim you have to place a set of dice showing the same number (three 5s, one 6, two 4s, etc) and at the end of the round these will be ranked. Larger sets outrank smaller ones and

among sets of the same size, precedence goes to the set displaying the largest number. So four 2s beats three 6s and three 6s beats three 4s. When placing dice you aren't allowed to duplicate a set that is already there, but you can, again subject to the no duplication rule, increase the size of sets you placed earlier. You can only place one set per turn but can place further sets in later turns. At the end of the round the ranking determines who gets first choice, second choice and so on.

The Forum: This contains Patrician Tiles, two more than there are players. Each has a value between 1 and 3, shows either a man or a woman and is colour coded to match one of the sets of Province Tiles. At the end of the game you will try to match your people to your places, as only then can you get their full value. A Province can contain one or two Patricians, but if two they must be of opposite sex. Also the Patricians and the Province must be of the same colour. A Province with no Patricians is worth 1 point less than its face value and a Patrician without a Province is worth zero. Properly matched up the score is the sum of the values. As you can see from this, getting the right people to go in your provinces is important, and the procedure for acquiring them is characterised by a great deal of jostling for position. The rule is that you may place *either* one die showing any number *or* two dice whose values add up to five. The ranking this time is that lower numbers outrank higher and that among dice showing the same number the last to be placed has precedence.

The Senate: This starts the round containing three face-down “S.P.Q.R.” tiles. Some of these are special provinces (which typically call for two Patricians of two specified, different colours) and others offer end of game bonuses for certain holdings – for example, 1 point for each differently coloured province or 1 point for each female Patrician. All three tiles will be given out in a 5-player game, only one in a 2-player one, and otherwise just two. The dice requirement here is runs.

The Temple: This is only used in games with at least four players, when it serves to create the needed extra breathing space. On offer are “Fortuna” tokens worth between 1 and 3 points each.

The first placement is a single die of any value. The next is two dice whose total value exceeds that of the first placement. Then three dice, and so on. Each die placed gives you a token, but as yet only on a temporary basis. At the end of the round, the player at the head of the rankings gets to keep two of the tokens they drew; the others get to keep just one.

The Latrine: Dice which have not been allocated by the end of the round go here, as do dice which were allocated but failed to secure a reward. Each gives its owner a “re-roll” token. In subsequent rounds each of these may be used to give you either a complete or a partial re-roll. Any you have left at the end of the game are worth half a VP each.

In archetypal dice games such as Can't Stop and Bluff play revolves around judgement of risk and reward. They are good fun, not least because of the whoops and groans when the dice disobey the odds, but there isn't a lot there in the way of strategy. They are pretty much one-dimensional. None of this is true of Alea Iacta Est. Here, though it is undoubtedly possible to be lucky or unlucky with the dice rolls, the main emphasis is on resource management. There is something useful that can be done with almost every roll and the skill lies in making the best use of your dice and in accurate judgement as to which items your rivals have their eye on. To take a simple instance, suppose your initial roll contains all 6 numbers. You could put down a run of 1 to 6 and guarantee first choice of the S.P.Q.R. tiles, but you'd then only have two dice left and that isn't likely to yield much in the way of Provinces and Patricians. Then there are the Fortuna tokens: grabbing one with a single die is usually a good idea; likewise two with a pair of dice, but whether or not you should go beyond that is a much harder call, because again you are leaving yourself a shortage of dice for elsewhere. It will depend on other circumstances, such as how close the round is to its end and what your other options are.

What pushes Alea Iacta Est in the direction of being a strategy game is the amount of knowledge you have. Province and Patrician tiles are kept face-up, both when they are still on offer and af-

ter they have been taken. You also know how many dice each player has remaining and therefore how many more turns you are likely to have this round. That, and the S.P.Q.R. tiles you have collected, is enough to enable you to formulate plans. Because this is a dice game, the plans are not matters of precise calculation, but you know enough to be able to look at what is on offer in the way of Provinces and Patricians, decide which of the tiles you'd really like to win and assess how much competition you are likely to have for them.

This game has proved popular with everyone in my group and we have played it with 3, 4 and 5 players. Four is possibly the optimum, but it works well with all three numbers. Recommended.

EARLY REACTION

Alan How

This dice fest is one that works, as there are plenty of options for each player to consider, some limited interaction and plenty of laughs as an extraordinary roll is made. I have played it several times now and thoroughly enjoyed the experience. Somehow the dice rolling is part of the fun, rather than part of the annoyance and this subtle difference has made it a game that will see plenty of times of the table because everyone that I have played with has liked it and the range of decisions that accompany it.

CUBIKO

self published

2-4 players, 10 minutes

designed by **Gavin Brinbaum**

reviewed by **Kendall Johns**

I am not normally a fan of dexterity games – preferring to use my brains rather than my brawn. Perhaps that is why I keep losing! This is one game where I am happy to make an exception. It is obviously a Noughts and Crosses / Nine Men's Morris variant, but with a secret ingredient – a Bouncing Ball!

So what's in the box? Well the rules and

1. A metal frame showing the 3×3 grid with 7cm squares and a leg in each corner which raises it