

Size Does Matter – so Does Color

Three games are not enough to call a trend. But it strikes me that there are currently several games out that deal with tower building. In *JERUSALEM*, their function is limited to counting up points. In *FIRENZE*, they grow upward in three dimensions. In *ASARA*, the buildings are only two-dimensional but look most beautiful. The towers were designed by Franz Vohwinkel, and if you take a look at the *ASARA* cover, you will recognize that the architect was probably the same one who built *BLUE MOON CITY*. But enough of outward appearances.

We are still far away from what the *ASARA* subtitle (Land of a Thousand Towers), promises. In the beginning, not a single one is standing. Instead they are sitting on a kind of market place on

be built in. Aesthetic considerations (and the rules) demand, however, that only sections of the same color are used.

In order to be able to purchase segments, we need money and buyers. The latter

really a problem – the purchase just becomes a bit more expensive: In this case, he has to discard two buyer cards, face down; this means, though, that he will run out of cards sooner. Since the hand cards are not replenished, he can't buy as much as somebody who always plays the appropriate color.

At the market stalls, there are enough tower segments laid out for everybody, but the number of spaces for buyers is limited. Even if you find a space, you are not free from worry, because your financial means are also limited, of course; your funds are just sufficient for two of the most expensive tower sections or for six of the cheapest. Naturally, the most expensive ones give you the greatest prestige and thus the most points. Life is hard.

Everybody collects the tower sections he has purchased and places them behind his screen. Why? Players should not see who buys which colors. And from a certain age on, you can't memorize this in a four-player game.

In order to develop individual segments into towers at some point, there is a separate area, the building circle, in the center of the gameboard. Whoever wants to take action there puts one of his buyers on a numbered plot in the building circle, pays into the kitty accordingly and uses the corresponding number of segments to build his tower; in doing so, he presents it to the public, i.e., he brings it out from behind his screen. Building such a tower gives you victory points for the first time.

! "Follow suit" rules

Do I still have to mention that the follow suit rule also applies to the building circle? And of course, half-finished towers are not permitted, and base and turret are stringently required, but at least you may heighten the tower later by adding any number of middle sections.

At some point, every player will run out of cards. When this happens, a year ends and it's time for an interim scoring and for cleaning up. Now, among other things, you earn one prestige point for each tower, no matter how high it is; the



the gameboard, fragmented into their individual segments and neatly sorted. Each market stall offers one kind of segment: base, turret or two different middle sections. The price depends on the color, not on the type of segment.

Base and turret suffice to make a tower. This is good news for all minimalists. On the other hand there is no upper limit; any number of middle sections may

exist, in the form of a set of cards, in five different colors. Each player gets a random mixture. If he wants to make a purchase, he puts down one of his buyers at the corresponding market stall, takes one of the displayed face-up sections of his choice and pays the costs into the kitty. So far, so simple. But the next buyer who comes to this market stall has to pay with the same color as the first buyer. If a player can't meet this condition, it isn't



cleared market stalls are refilled, each player is equipped with money again, and the buyers that have been played are collected, shuffled and dealt out anew.

Over the long haul, this could become somewhat monotonous if that were it. For this reason there are more alternatives for the buyers. A bank helps to meet the chronic shortage of money. This bank also has ASARA-typical features: Whoever comes first gets the highest amount; whoever comes later gets less and, again, has to abide by the follow suit rule. It's here (among other places) that you realize it's advantageous to go first. Therefore, a buyer can secure this privilege as well. In other areas, you have the opportunity to pick out a tower segment from a face-down stack for money, to purchase lighted tower windows that give you more points, or to recruit additional buyers. The latter two options are hidden in the "Professional Variant" of the game instructions.

The great final scoring

After four game years, it's time for the final scoring, which comes along in a pretty bookkeeping-like fashion. The players determine who has built the highest tower and who has built the second-highest tower, for each color. It depends on the respective color how many prestige points you get. You are rewarded also if you own the highest and second-highest tower overall; and finally, if you have the most and the second-most towers.



The impact of this cornucopia of points on the outcome of the game is calculated according to the cushion that the players were able to build up during the yearly scorings. A tower built early scores in each yearly scoring, all the more so if it contains special building sections.

The gameboard consists of nine elements. The market stalls for the four different building segments are arranged in a group, in the form of the blades of a windmill around the central building circle. The corners are filled with triangular sections printed on both sides. Ravensburger has used this possibility to gently introduce the inexperienced player to the game. The basic game uses the backs of two of the four triangular sections serving only as storage space. Only in the professional variant are they turned over, and their real function takes effect.

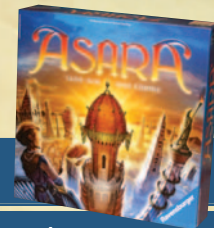
The first game – getting familiar with it with three players and without the professional variant – was rather unspectacular. In this configuration, the pressure of competition for the purchasing is not particularly high. If you are content with the sections on display, you can almost always acquire "your" tower segments in order to buy something reasonable later on. Quite different with four players and at the highest expansion level. In this case, your plans do not always come to fruition because there is more happening before it's your turn again. Two things are especially important:

the right timing for your tower-building and your timely occupation of the building circle. If you come too late, you'll pay more than necessary or will be stuck with unused sections behind your screen.

The equipment deserves a plus point, not only because of the illustrations by Franz Vohwinkel. The buyers could also have been brought to the game in the form of wooden cubes, drawn from a bag; this way, they would have needed considerably less space on the gameboard. But in that case, ASARA would hardly have stood out among the mass of countless worker placement games. Worthy of mention is also the design of the buyers; these cards show individual symbols in the corners for better differentiation.

Nice to look at, nice to play; no brain twister, but entertaining and dynamic. This applies at least to the four-player game. With two players, suspense and competition are a bit lacking.

KMW/sbw



Title: Asara
 Publisher: Ravensburger
 Designer: W. Kramer, M. Kiesling
 Artist: Franz Vohwinkel
 Players: 2-4 (for two: ~)
 Age: about 9 and up
 Duration: about 45-60 minutes
 Price: about 30 €

Reviewer	Playing appeal
KMW	8
Nicola Balkenhol	8
Udo Bartsch	7
Christwart Conrad	8
L. U. Dikus	8
Matthias Hardel	7
Wieland Herold	7
Roman Pelek*	6
Edwin Ruschitzka	8
Harald Schrapers	8
Joseph Weigand	7

* Turning master-building into a process of discarding cards of the same color or suit is a really original idea. Besides this, the course of the game is too monotonous for me; too few possibilities to accent anything, because most of it levels itself out. "Nice" and "suitable for families" in the positive as well as negative sense.

