

Back to the Roots, and back again

In 1990, Alan R. Moon was still a dark horse as a games designer, and ABA-CUSSPIELE as a publishing house no less. Only one year before they had started operating as a business. AIRLINES was the first game under the new logo still used to this very day. The subtitle "Only flying is better!" was fitting, but not entirely original, since the car manufacturer Opel had already employed it in an advertising campaign in the 70s.

AIRLINES was played on an abstract map of the USA. Anonymous locations were connected by flight routes in differently patterned lines. Only the airline headquarters did have names consisting of their initials. One airline only was allowed to serve all types of patterned lines, whereas the others were limited more or less to a certain selection. Limited was also the traffic on the individual routes: No more than three companies at any time were allowed to fly between two locations, in most cases only two, sometimes even only one.

In your turn, you could bring a new airline into play by laying out its share cards in front of you and then at once put a route into operation. Or you could expand the network of an already established airline, without a need of holding shares of that respective airline yet. Or you could only play share cards from your hand and place them in front of you, and thus ostentatiously increase your part in the same company.

The stock market display came into focus whenever a scoring card was turned over. That was the time when the majority stockholder and the second in line received ... no, not dividend, that only come into play in 2011. They merely got victory points, which were then noted down on a pad. Their amount depended on the number of routes that an airline had started. The aim of the game was on the one hand to become a majority stockholder with as many companies as possi-

ble, and on the other hand to extend the network of these airlines to boost their profits.

I No elaborate planning

In order to expand, you needed to play a flight card with matching line pattern and a sufficiently high card value, which could be gleaned from a number on the



route that represented the costs of expansion. Surely, you were holding a choice of three flight cards in your hand, but in reality you could only draw from the face-down stack, which did not allow for elaborate planning. Of the share cards, however, there were always several openly displayed, and you could replenish your supplies more specifically.

For the sake of completeness, an aggravation factor has to be mentioned, the sabotage. It worked twofold by confining the expansion potential of an airline as well as that of a route.

When AIRLINES was reviewed in *spielbox* 1/91, it received top marks (8, 9, 9,

10). However, when you take the game out of your closet today, it is quite surprising how easy we were to please in those days. The tiniest stickers had to be glued onto 135 small wooden markers before the first game and they were rolling about in a huge compartment in the – lo and behold! – thermoformed insert. By chance (or was it on purpose?) this tray had exactly the right size to incorporate a sorting box from the DIY store.

Back to the roots is the motto of just under 9 nine years later, when UNION PACIFIC was published by Amigo. Thematically, the game had returned to its origins. Alan R. Moon had first developed it under the name "Nine Rail-Roads", but

had been unable to excite a publishing house about the railroad theme at the time. Now, things had changed. Again, the game was played on a map of the USA, this time however with distinct cities. And again, these were interconnected by differently patterned lines, which now represented train tracks. The imprinted numbers were missing, however, as the track building process had been simplified. Although you still had to consider the line pattern when playing

out a card, with costs now becoming insignificant and a smaller selection of different lines, chances were you had only rarely unsuitable cards on your hand. There was another occasion when the luck of cards was thwarted: If the scoring cards in the original game had been shuffled randomly into the share card deck, they were now being distributed in a more controlled fashion, to prevent an all too early scoring.

The number of airlines was increased from nine to eleven, with number eleven, the eponymous Union Pacific, being a peculiarity and the greatest novelty in the game. It did not operate its own network, but was *only* taking part in the game via

its shares. Any player that took a share after the network expansion phase could choose the one from Union Pacific. And in addition, you were also allowed to swap one of the shares in your hand against a UP-share. With the Union Pacific, not only the two major stockholders could enjoy victory points – here called premiums – but up to five players were able to do so.

I Excellent rulebook

Concerning the material, the game did ratchet up another notch. Instead of the plain wooden markers for taking possession of the routes, there were now little plastic engines. The victory points were no longer jotted down, but paid out in the form of banknotes. The jury put the game onto the nomination list for the "Spiel des Jahres", and at the "Deutscher Spielepreis", UNION PACIFIC made it to third place.

Back to the Roots could also be the headline for the third edition of AIRLINES, but that would not do justice to the game. Sure, AIRLINES EUROPE is once more published by ABACUSSPIELE, and the topic is airlines yet again. But there are significant differences to the game play of the earlier version. Alan R. Moon claims to have worked on the revised version since 2007 and in the process worn out three dozen prototypes.



The most striking modification, apart from the setting, which was moved from North America to Europe: There are no different lines and no more flight cards. Each player can freely decide at any time where an airline is starting operations on a route, if it only connects to the present network. This way the tiresome search for matching lines to the cards has been eliminated – in my eyes a considerable improvement!

There has been a return of the route costs in the form of small numbers printed onto the board. These costs are now settled with banknotes. And the costs – whoever "builds" first pays the least amount of money – are now directly affecting the value of the airlines. Whereas before it was the number of routes on which operations were started that decided on the value of an airline – which in a scoring could be quickly calculated by simply counting them up – the sum of the costs is now decisive. For accounting, we need a Kramer track, which was newly introduced to the game. It also shows the premium level (now once more called victory points). This spares us any number crunching when a scoring is imminent. Based on the model of the Union Pacific, not only the majority stockholders and the second in line profit, but also in the end with growing capital funds all of their stockholders. And this holds true for all companies.

When shares are played out, not only are the company shares increased, but there is also a dividend, meaning cash on the hand. This is sorely needed to start operating further routes. And naturally, money is far too tight to mention. Therefore, there is now the added possibility to borrow money,

which is however the only action you can do in your turn. Good games are characterized by the fact that you always want to do more than you may, and AIRLINES EUROPE is no exception to this rule.

I Increased self-esteem

The role of the Union Pacific from the predecessor has now been taken over by Air ABACUS, an airline company only present through its shares, whose acquisition has however been sorted out in another way. Air ABACUS quite adequately reflects the increased self-esteem of the publishing house. It already had its own airline in the game in the first edition of 1990, but then it was the smallest and most insignificant one. Now however Air ABACUS owns the largest amount of shares and pays top premiums.

Numerous improvements are in small details. Thus, airlines with only a small number of planes find it hard to push up their value. But there are bonus and long distance connections compensating for this handicap. Whoever is first to take possession of a route may pay the lower price, but will not increase the company's value by quite so much. It pays to keep an eye on these interactions.

The game has yet again added considerably concerning the games material and design. 112 Junkers 52 airplane miniatures in 10 different colors are flying across the board. (The fact that there is an all too close resemblance of red and orange can be easily amended by a marker). The thermoformed insert – something that has almost gone out of fashion these days – has been thoroughly



The game with 6 players:

Contrasting with its predecessors, AIRLINE EUROPE is only laid out for a maximum of five players. The publishers have however in the meantime handed in rules for six.

The only difference to the game for five persons: The stock market consists of six (instead of five) share cards, and the players get six (instead of eight) share cards on their hand, out of which they consign as usual two to their own share holdings.

designed to ensure the material is stored in a strictly separated way.

Now for the crucial question: Do I need AIRLINES EUROPE when I do already own UNION PACIFIC or AIRLINES? The latter appears rather quite shopworn in comparison to the latest edition. Through the

omission of the flight cards the game has considerably gained, compared to its predecessors. The answer to the question thus needs to be a clear Yes! And if you absolutely need a mark, even though we never judge an evergreen such as this: On my personal scale, AIRLINES EUROPE would

gain mark 9, with the predecessors each scoring one and a half marks lower from a modern day perspective. *KMW/cs*

