

Pearls on Tracks

We have a gaudy blanket in front of us, of Indian origin, embellished with trims, little gemstones, and ornaments. The lavish border frames a game area quilted with hexagonal spaces. Our hands touch the shiny satin and ... hang on, this is not a blanket at all, but cardboard. However, it is quite striking how it was possible to design such a gorgeous abstract game board from hexes. And why is the game set in India? Because indigo, the deep-blue colorant for which this game is named, is sourced from indigofera plants, native to the Indian subcontinent.

At the outset, the quilt is stitched with gems in different colors with varying values. The six valuable ones are placed in the center and the other six "cheap" ones are distributed to the gaming area's corners. Our main aim is to collect these gemstones by moving them along paths to the very edges of the board. There, we find imaginary portals, each three hexes wide. All players either have their own or share it with another player.

The paths are found on hexagonal tiles, which show three separate sections of a pathway – straight, gently turning, or sharply bending – that leads from one tile corner to the other. Each tile fits to any other one, no matter how you turn them. They form a network of paths, which in the course of its formation, takes a more or less winding shape.

The rules are extremely simple: Each player picks up a face-down path tile and places it on an empty space. There is no need to connect to anything (even though in practice, this is what most people do). If the tile borders a gemstone, it is moved right to the end of the recently built path. Done.

All players aim to direct the stones towards their own portals, which the other players will try to prevent by diverting the stones. The outcome depends on the path tiles you have currently at your disposal. At the game's end, which comes about as soon as all gemstones have been cleared away, players count up their gemstones' total value. The winner is the one with the highest sum. For a game by Reiner Knizia, this is a surprisingly simple tally. As far as the game's theme, INDIGO could have easily been a railroad game; the gemstones move along the game area as if they were on tracks. However, this would have been implausible since

no real railroader would design rail connections in such a peculiar, winding way.

I Alone or in cooperation

Each player has three sides of the board to use as a portal, removing gemstones from the board and collecting them. As the number of players increase around the hexagonal board, the number of shared portals increases. With two players, each gets one portal. With three, you will need to share one of the exits with another player. Finally, with four, you will not have any portals solely for yourself. Sharing a portal impacts the strategy used to play the game. In the two-player game, each fights to achieve the best result, and with three or four players, you negotiate with allies. In other words, the gemstones do not belong to the person that maneuvers them off the board, but to the player(s) owning the portal they leave. To keep track of two players gaining a gemstone from a shared portal, the publishers treated us to a second set of stones, at the

ready by the side of the board. One player takes the gemstone from the board, and the other gets a corresponding one from the supply.

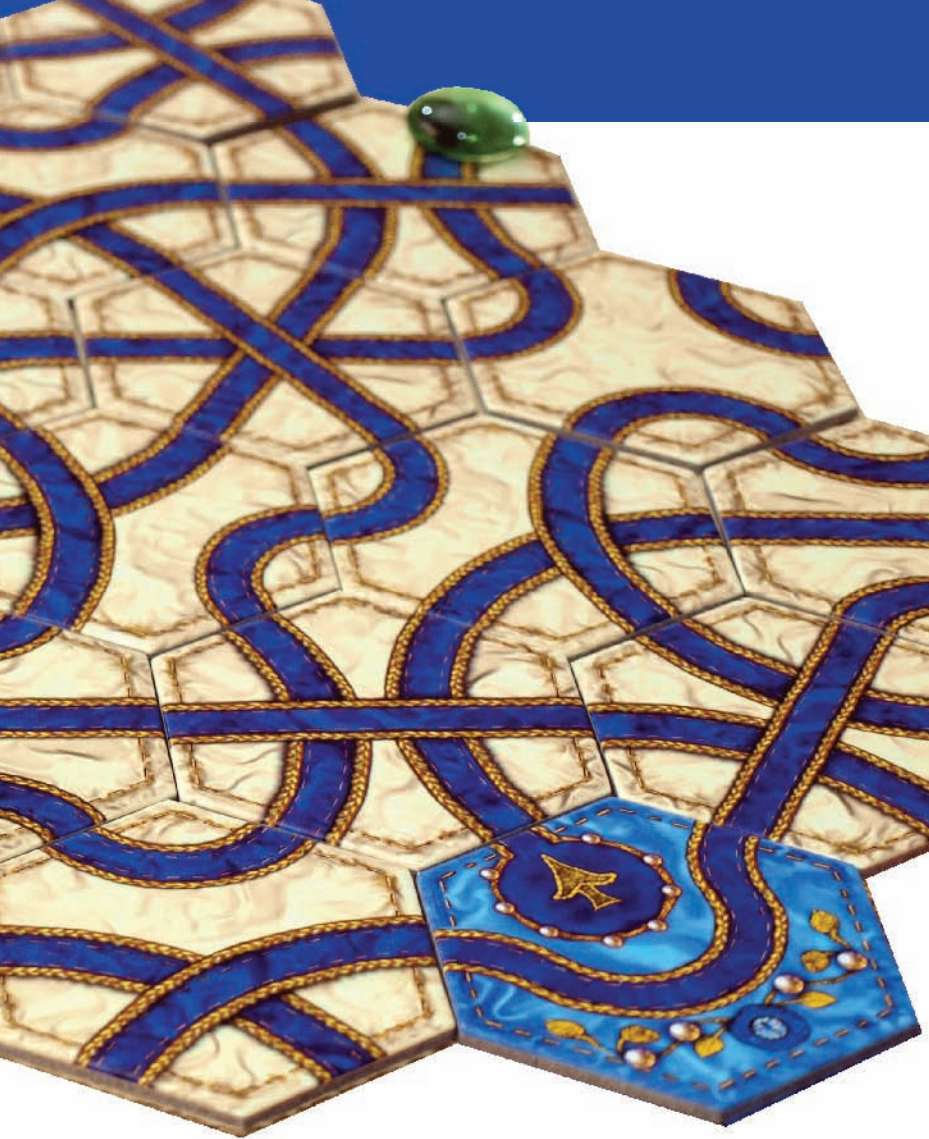
All gemstones are collected behind individual player screens to disguise who is currently in the lead. After all, I help another player gain points by moving a stone through "our" common portal, and that player should not be the one in the lead. Meanwhile, it is possible to hinder other players with whom you do not share a portal. If a gemstone threatens to fall into the hands of the other players, then place a tile that makes two stones collide. Both stones are taken off the board and no one collects them.

Luck is involved in the game whenever a random tile is drawn and placed. If you like a more tactical approach, you may use the variant offered by the rule book:

*** Children as co-op players: absolutely essential!

So, what is INDIGO? A distinctly easy adult game (indicated by the suggested age range "8 and up") or a demanding kids' game (which would normally be marked as "6 and up")? My impression is that Ravensburger aims too high for its age range. At first glance, there are several indicators for a grown-up game: the abstract design, the four large-scale rule pages, and a crib sheet for each player. In practice, it proves to be child's play. In this game, it is almost impossible to make mistakes: The task is easy and the tactical possibilities are limited. You have only one tile (or two with the variant) to choose from, place it on the board, and the stones zoom along the new path. Additionally, ganging up on the lead player is minimized by the screen hiding the exact gemstone count for the players. Some adults lack the spatial skill for the best path, whereas kids sometimes show an astonishing comprehension. INDIGO is an abstract game, but children have enough imagination to fill it with life. Particularly attractive is the element of team playing, when two players share a portal. Most adults will use logic and protect their own interests. However, children negotiate their next move, enter alliances, and leave them again if forced by necessity. Playing INDIGO in a child-like style is so gripping that adults would want to join in. Without this type of play, it is a somewhat banal experience.





Players have two tiles at their disposal at all times, and choose which one to place.

Anything but trivial

Tile placement games that build a network of paths or tracks from square or hexagonal tiles are not a new invention, and are found one way or another in the publishers' product lines. There are even games that employ the exact same pattern of pathways as INDIGO. The earliest was PSYCHE PATH (Funtastic, 1968) that concededly used several colors. Another, TANTRIX from the year 1988, had an entirely different objective and was designed more like a brain teaser.

With INDIGO, Reiner Knizia created a remarkably entertaining family game that you can explain in a few seconds and will be easily understood by others. It is magnificently simple, but not trivial. INDIGO scales well and is equally fun with two, three, or four players. It shows the first-class workmanship of the publishers and the editors. The game's rulebook, design, and presentation are perfect. Well, is there anything wrong with it? No!

KMW/cs



Title: Indigo
 Publisher: Ravensburger
 Designer: Reiner Knizia
 Artist: E. Freytag, W. Pepperle
 Players: 2-4
 Age: about 8 and up
 Duration: about 20-30 minutes
 Price: about 25 €

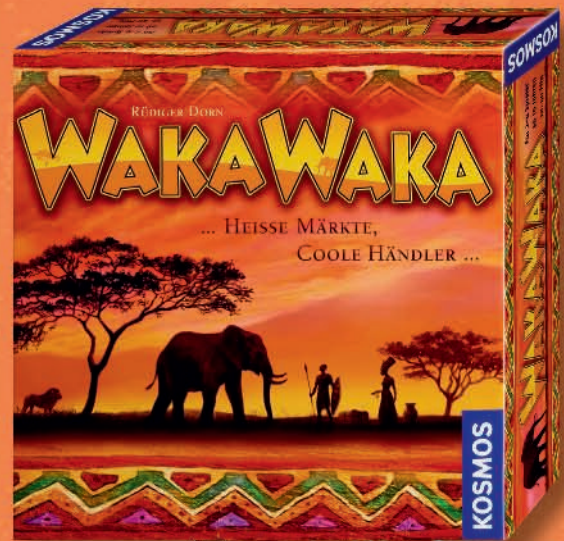
Reviewer	Playing appeal
KMW	9
Udo Bartsch	5
L. U. Dikus*	7
Matthias Hardel**	7
Harald Schrapers***	6

* After all, it should also be a feast for the eye, but should always be played with choosing one of two path tiles for placing.

** Even if it were just basic training for 18xx.

*** see box.

Hot Markets, Cool Traders



Age: 10 years up
 Retail price: € 29,99
 Art. No.: 69139

Waka Waka is Swahili for „Do it!“ All players are African traders trying to acquire as many goods as possible in order to fulfill given tasks. Making a favourable deal helps you to gain a good reputation among the fellow villagers! Goods such as fruit, skins, salt, tea, fabric and jewellery are on offer, but most of them are concealed. If a trader doesn't want to buy a ‚pig in a poke‘, he can send out his chimpanzee to check out the situation beforehand! Other villagers - as well as the shaman - offer their special abilities and support. Be the fastest to fulfil your tasks and you will gain the highest reputation in your village!



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