

Waxing Lyrical About Swarms

What is the best way to deal with hornets and their nests? Keep your distance! Everybody knows that as a fact. But should this be the only reason why the gaming community as well as its reviewers has so far given **HORNET** a wide berth? If that is the case, then it is completely unjustified.

Granted, the title and theme do not possess an overly strong appeal, and at first glance the cover design leads us to expect a nice children's game. However, on closer inspection, the clenched fists and extracted sting of the one insect and the black eye plus demolished sting of the other signal a feisty approach. The attractive manner in which this happens quickly becomes apparent, and we may generously overlook the fact that hornets are not into collecting nectar to produce honey. Instead, they feed their brood with insects and spiders and themselves with tree juices and windfall fruit.

I Adaptable board

HORNET is designed for two to five players. The aim of the game with any number of players is to conquer three of the available nests by placing a honey piece there. If nobody is able to fulfill this goal, then the overall amount of honey that each player has used determines the winner. The modular layout of the game board not only adapts it to player numbers; the communal laying out of tiles also enables the design of a more difficult terrain. A similar concept is followed by the turn board, which serves to ensure a variable distribution of action and scoring fields. Both of these mechanisms combined guarantees a new challenge in every single game.

Each player is the master of two hor-

nets, and their deployment is managed by six action cards. The cards allow for flying to up to three fields and collecting nectar or producing/destroying honey. All actions come in both a safe and an aggressive variant. The latter delivers a considerably higher yield, but also comes with a significantly greater risk of loss. This becomes a reality when, depending on the number of players, one or two cards of the same kind, irrespective of the variant, are brought into play.

Now, it is possible to assess what the competitors will sensibly do in their turn, judging by the current distribution of nectar and honey, the position of their hornets, and any imminent scorings. But, as players always have a full hand of cards at their disposal and cards are played out simultaneously, there will always be nasty surprises. This is an immensely exciting element of the game, and it is served up in its purest form by Alex Randolph in his card game **RAJ** (Winning Moves, 1988). Here, however, it is masterfully blended with other game elements by Finnish brothers Jani and Tero Moliis.

The fact that the danger of an unsuccessful attempt changes with varying player numbers is of no further consequence. With three or five players, it is sufficient if 50 percent of them choose the same card type in order to stop an aggressively acting player. However in a round of four a two-thirds majority is needed. In a game of two the situation is fundamentally different, because all hornets are activated and both players play two cards of a varying nature, with one of them being

safe and the aggressive. Coordinating this in an optimal way while at the same time anticipating the opponent's action takes a significantly longer time to mull over, but will in the case of success, give far greater satisfaction. A scoring is won by the player who

holds the current relative majority of honey pieces in a respective nest. The capacity fluctuates, depending on the nest, and will be at least six and at most twelve honeycombs. When there is ample space, it is possible to somewhat limit the actions, and to process the previously collected nectar dutifully into honey. If, however, another player has already spread out his troops in a small nest, the aggressive variant is often the only option that will do for replacing the other's honey pieces with one's own.

During all these goings-on, keep in mind that all the different actions are dealt with in a set order. With a continually changing start player, the playing order is only decided with identical cards. So it is usual for the nectar to be collected in the safe way first, and only then in the aggressive manner. However, the aggressive honey action may happen before the safe one, as is also the case with the ultimate flying action.

The Helsinki publishing house of Lautapelit has seamlessly built a certain ele-



ment of luck into the gameplay. It prevents every constellation from being exactly calculable. For example, if you want to create a change

in the safe honey action that is greater than the limit of eight nectar pieces allows (as a price for the four honey pieces), you may buy luck chips for half the price and then hope to profit from a statistically possible upward deviation when throwing the chips. The same backup solution may be employed if you haven't currently hoarded enough nectar to exhaust the limit. This may be used, for example, to pay only two honey pieces with five nectar stones, while



all players assembled there go back to the honey supply on the turn board. Pieces that are outbidden will thus not be lost, but can be decisive if there is a tie in the conquered nests. Contrary to many games, you don't have to trounce your opponents. It can be a strategic option to simply target a tie in nests while at the same time churning out as much honey as possible.

hand, the nectar that is on the field will be distributed equally among all players, which will avoid a looming imbalance of liquidity. In this case, the turn order may lead to the last player of the final round finding himself in the role of the kingmaker, or, better yet, "hornet queenmaker". Apart from the fact that there is always the option to play fair and simply aim for an improvement in results, this is a rare exceptional case.

HORNET is a very well balanced game; it works with all player numbers and plays fast without any waiting times. Interaction is of major importance here. The game's profile makes it highly suitable for families, while at the same time it doesn't leave the hobby gamer cold. However, a certain familiarity with the possibilities and risks of the different actions will only occur after a while, as the different alternatives are not intuitively accessible. Here, small crib sheets would be helpful in supplementing the symbols on the action cards. To ensure a better overview, it would also be useful to depict the numbers of the honeycombs in the nests next to these, as the combs are often concealed by the honey pieces placed there.

To sum up: HORNET creates a playful melody, which one is happy to hum along to. Who would not feel like waxing lyrical about it?
L.U. Dikus/cs



there is a 50 percent probability of gaining three honey pieces by investing one luck chip.

Sharp thwarting unnecessary

The player who gains a majority during scoring puts a conquest marker into the respective nest and wins all the nectar pieces in that field. The honey pieces of

When there are signs that there might not be enough resources for you to gain a majority, it is worth trying to at least prevent one of the others from getting one. On the one hand, the respective player will not get any closer to fulfilling the primary condition for victory in this way. On the other

Title:	Hornet
Publisher:	Lautapelit
Designer:	Jani Mollis, Tero Mollis
Artist:	Ossi Hiekkala, Paul Laane
Players:	2-5 (for two: →)
Age:	about 10 and up
Duration:	about 30-60 minutes
Price:	about 39 €