Open Letter

February 4, 2008

Since the pre-release of TZAAR in Essen, I've had many questions about TZAAR, TAMSK and further plans with Project GIPF. SMART (the new publisher for the games of Project GIPF) has issued a short press release to announce the limited edition of TZAAR at SPIEL '07 in Essen, Germany, but obviously such a text cannot be complete. The speculation and many questions made it clear that there's a demand for more info. Here is an attempt...

First of all: the GIPF site

I'm very sorry that the Project GIPF site hasn't been updated for a long time and that I haven't been able to give proper information about TZAAR and the replacement of TAMSK. In fact, the last news posted on the site date back to October 2006. Already so long ago…
As some may remember, I had become slow with updating the site anyway. The main reason is that I'm not good at it. The more updates I did myself, the more difficult if became to go on with it. I'll say the words: I made a mess of it. Before I can ask somebody to add a new section for TZAAR – something I cannot do myself – I first need a wizard to clean up and reorganise the complete site. That would take weeks – without being sure whether it is worth it to put so much effort in something that has become sheer chaos. Which brings me to the second consideration: rather than putting so much energy and time to redo an existing site, it may be wiser to start from scratch again and set up a structure that will make it easier to maintain the site. This issue lies on the table at SMART, but before giving it a go a lot of preparation work needs to be done first. For example: it makes no sense to build a new site as long as the re-styling of the games of Project GIPF is not finished. Either way, something will be done about this after the Nuremberg Toy Fair. In the meantime, I hope that this open letter will answer some of the FAQs.

Why is Don & Co no longer the publisher of Project GIPF?

To say more about this, I must first repeat the answer that I've given to a question I've had many times in the past: why did I become a publisher? Simple: otherwise there would have been no Project GIPF. Those who know the delicate position in which abstract games for two player find themselves will have no problem understanding that it was not possible to convince one of the existing publishers to get involved with an abstract games project. So I had two options: either doing it myself, or dropping it. It took me more than a year to decide to start as an independent publisher. I never wanted or wished to become one, but the previous years I had been talking to so many people on the game scene, attempting to convince them of the potential of abstract games, that I was bold enough to think that, through Project GIPF, I was going to be able to prove that there was a lot more interest in abstract games than the established publishers were assuming. Now, 10 years later, I must admit that the proof is far from delivered but, nonetheless, I comfort myself with the thought that I got somewhat halfway. I managed to finish the project and, if you'll allow me to say so, Project GIPF contributed to a reality where abstract games are a bit more alive again – or, at least, they did not slip further away into oblivion.
To come back to the matter at hand, I've never considered myself a publisher, but only as somebody who wanted to realize a project. That explains the name: Project GIPF. After having done what I said I was going to do, I did not want to remain in the business. I kept running Don & Co as a one-man company only because I knew it was going to come to an end at some point. The release of PÜNCT was the end of Don & Co for me.

Why SMART?

True, I must confess I hadn't heard of them myself. Which was strange, because it is a Belgian company, located only 25 kilometres from where I lived. The explanation is that SMART had not been active as a publisher of board games yet when I first Met Rolf Vandoren (the main man at SMART). However, they had already earned their stripes as the publisher of another type of games, the so called "multi level logic games". Their games (amongst others Hide & Seek, Camouflage and Airport) are distributed worldwide and are part of many educational programs. It is because of the success of these games that Rolf wanted to widen their activities, and he thought that a natural next step would be abstract strategy games, as in his opinion multi level logic games and strategy games are going to become one category from an educational point of view. That is how we got in touch.

It was no secret on the game scene that I was looking for somebody to take over Project GIPF. However, I had already had a bad experience with Schmidt Spiele (the publisher of Project GIPF from 1998 to 2000), but, to be honest, I must say that it had been a bad experience for Schmidt Spiele, too. So it was clear that it was not going to be easy to find a company that was ready to commit itself to Project GIPF on terms that were acceptable to me. Moreover, I may have had a good story about the reputation of the games of Project GIPF, but when focussing on the commercial aspect of it I had much less to tell. Therefore – thinking back to it – it was a blessing that SMART was looking for new possibilities right at the moment that Project GIPF was completed.

As I said, I did not know SMART, but Rolf did not know Don & Co either. Having been active in another field of the game business, Rolf had a completely different attitude towards board games than what I had experienced with the established publishers. Instead of pointing out the risks, his enthusiasm kept growing as I explained about the lack of interest other publishers had in abstract games. SMART had started publishing multi level logic games more than a decade ago. At that time there was only a rather small market for these games, but since then they have become a category of their own. During the many talks we had that led to an agreement, rather than being scared off by the risks, Rolf pointed out the opportunities, in particular because SMART had build up a solid reputation in the educational sector. So SMART has a good base from where it can start playing a roll of importance in the board game scene, too. There are no guarantees, but the people at SMART have for sure a strong will to put efforts in Project GIPF and the ambition to establish a market for it, just as they did for their logic games.

Of course, not being an independent publisher anymore has consequences. I cannot make decisions on my own anymore. But is this a bad thing? I've had questions about the re-styling of the games. Why not leave the boxes as they are? SMART wants to make it clear that they are now the publisher of the series, that things have changed, and their aim is to widen the group the gamers that enjoys strategy games. It is a fact that I've heard many times in the past that the artwork was "too elitist." SMART will try to do something about that, but – I stress that point – with great respect for what the artwork was. Another consequence is that things are moving slower than I was used to, but that, too, is part of working together with other people. I could focus only on Project GIPF, while SMART has a complete range of items to take care of. If I'm not prepared to accept that, I should have stuck to Don & Co. And thinking of that, I have no idea what would have happened if SMART had not taken Project GIPF into its program. Neither do I know if I would have come up with TZAAR – and, if I did, whether I would have entered it in the project as a replacement for TAMSK or not. Probably not. Most likely – unless another publisher came out of the blue with good arguments – I would have kept the games available a bit longer, but that would have been it. I'm convinced that the odds are now much better!

Why has TAMSK been replaced with TZAAR? Would it not have been easier to add it as a 7th game?

I don't think so. That would have affected the initial concept: one central game – GIPF – with five satellite games and five kinds of potentials. The interesting thing, though, is that the very first idea was to have a series of seven games: GIPF with "six" other games. This idea grew simultaneously with the intention to use only hexagonal boards. A space on a hexagonal board is always encircled surrounded by six other spaces – that is, when it is not located on the edge. But, unfortunately, this did not fit in my plans with the potentials, neither was it compatible with the number of pieces required to play GIPF. GIPF is played with 18 basic pieces. To play ultimate GIPF you add 15 potentials, three of each kind, named after the five other games of the project. If you put these potentials on top of basic pieces you play GIPF with, you have three basic pieces left. In GIPF Set 3 you have three additional basic pieces, which you can put on top of the three remaining basic pieces and, by doing so, you make three GIPF-pieces. As such, you can see basic pieces also as a potentials. Actually, they are the mother-potentials, because you use them to create "GIPF" – symbolizing a players' potential – and you also need them to carry the other potentials. For me this was a closed circle. In adding a 7th game and a 6th potential I would also have to add three more basic GIPF-pieces. In theory there was no problem here: the closed circle would have been a bit larger, but it would have implied that GIPF was going to be played with 21 pieces instead of 18 and that was not possible. 18 pieces was the optimum and that could not be adjusted. So I settled for a project of six games, derived from the six corners – or the sides, if you like – of a hexagon, and considered myself lucky that I had one less game to do.

That was the explanation for the die-hard fans. A more simple answer is that adding a 7th game would have opened the door to adding more and more games – which, by the way, is already a speculation that has been mentioned in a number of blogs. Some seem to think that the replacement of TAMSK is just the start of more replacements that will follow to keep Project GIPF going. That has never been the plan. As stated in SMART's press release, TAMSK was replaced because it did not fit in the series. TAMSK was the second game. It was not possible to know in advance that it was going to become the odd game for the simple reason that I didn't know what the other games were going to be. Now I do. But I also want to stress once more that it was not removed because it was not good enough. I like TAMSK a lot – and also SMART is convinced of its qualities – but I cannot deny that it appeals to another public than most players who like pure abstract strategy games.

When will the new TAMSK be released?

It is in the pipeline, but we must first find a way to have more reliable hourglasses – and that seems to be more difficult that we thought. In the worst case (i.e. if we cannot solve the problem with the hourglasses) there will be no new TAMSK.

Will there be a TZAAR-potential?

No. The TAMSK-potential will remain part of Project GIPF – say, in memory of TAMSK. To link TZAAR to GIPF, you use the TAMSK-potential.

Is TZAAR definitively the last game of Project GIPF?

I don't know. After the release of PÜNCT, I felt very relieved that the project had come to an end. However, not having to add something new to the series anymore does not mean that I do not have the possibility to do so if I want to. The replacement of TAMSK with TZAAR is a good example: it "happened," it was not planned. TZAAR popped into my mind as an almost finished game. And it was so clearly a Project GIPF game that it would have been more difficult not to enter it in the project than to use it to replace TAMSK. I'm only saying that it

is not because it was not planned, that I should have prevented it from happening. I've always looked at Project GIPF as an experiment – I've mentioned this in a couple of interviews from the very beginning – and that is still what it is for me. This has nothing to do with marketing, but everything with content. I do not want to squeeze out Project GIPF but I do not see why I would not add new stuff if it increases the value of the whole.
So here's how I look at Project GIPF for the time being: the six games will remain what they are, but I may come up with something in the periphery of the Project. I have a few ideas that were there from the very beginning and which I have not used yet. For example, while working on the concept of Project GIPF - that was in the summer of '95 - I did tests with a growing board for GIPF. I don't want SMART to publish just a board, but if I would succeed in working out a game that is played on that board – and assuming that it is good enough – I don't see any reason not to make it a Project GIPF game. It will not be possible to link it to GIPF, but apart from being a game in its own right, it will be possible to use it to play GIPF on the expanding board. Another thing that has been on my mind for a long time is to do something with the potentials. For the moment the potentials are of no use if you do not add them to GIPF. I would love to come up with a game that is played with all the potentials, so that they become more than just additional pieces for GIPF. But, to be honest, there is little chance that this will happen.
Another question that I have asked myself is this: what if I found a way to turn one of the games into a 3- or 4-player game? Will this game become part of Project GIPF or not? Again: I don't know yet. The question will be answered if at some point it becomes relevant. Anyway, I think I'll leave it up to SMART.

Is there something wrong with the paint on the TZAAR-pieces?
No, it was a matter of choice. We tried many different colors, and ended up with a silver paint with a "metallic" effect. Some of you may know the paint that is commercialized under the name "Hammerite." Well, this paint is similar. And we'll use the same paint for the "official" version of the game. The only difference is that the white pieces will have a gold paint, for a better contrast. The black Tzaars and Tzarras will keep their silver paint, the same as in the pre-release version.

So far this open letter. I hope things are a bit more clear now.

Take care,

Kris Burm