

# BATTLESPACE

**JUNE/JULY 2011**  
**FEATURES**

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Auscon gaming conference

## STEAMPUNK:

LEVIATHANS    WHEN  
DYSTOPIAN    THE NAVY  
WARS    WALKED  
WARMACHINE

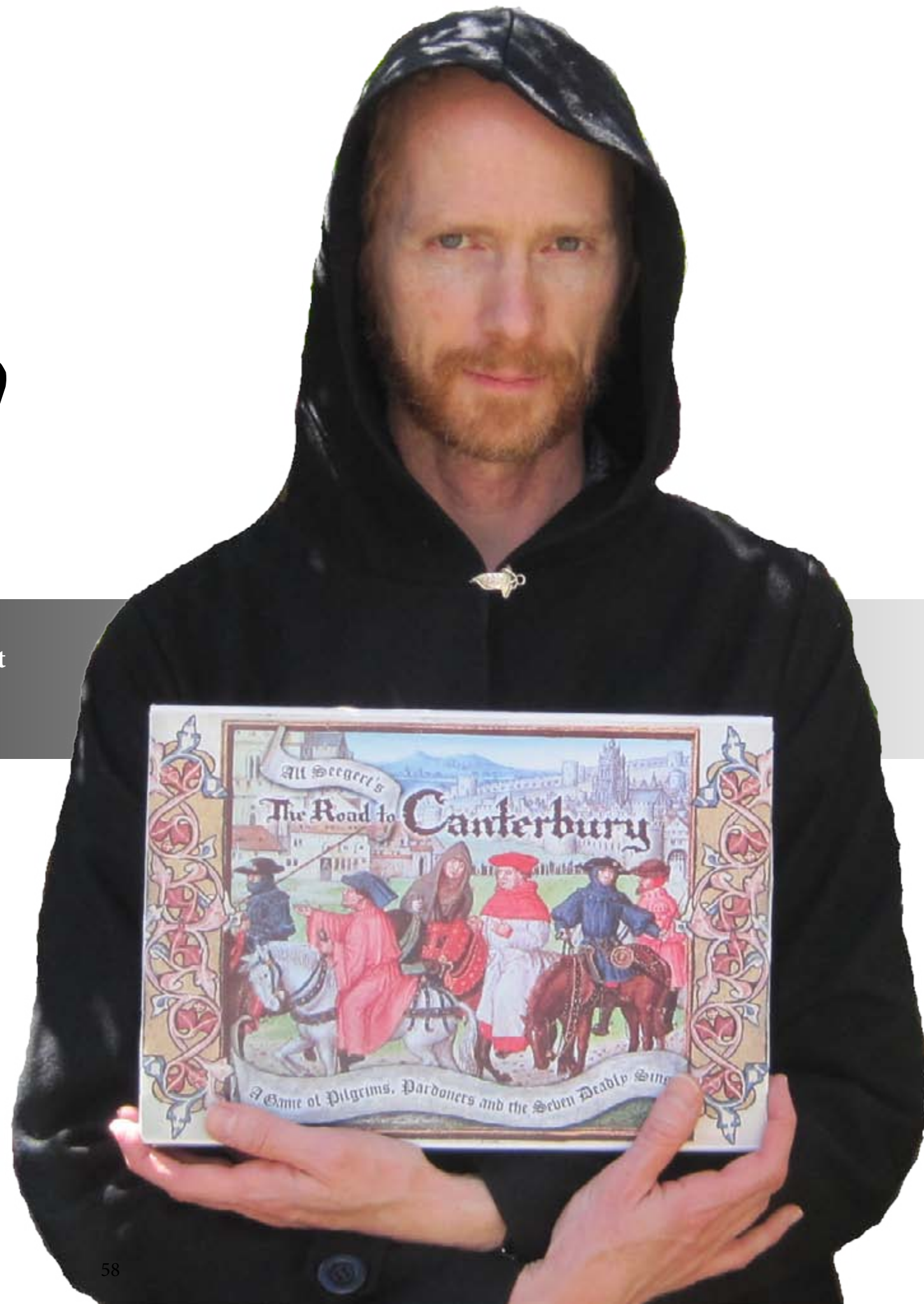




# BLACK humour

Battlespace talks to quirky board game designer, Alf Seegert about finding salvation through *The Road to Canterbury*.

WRATH  
GREED  
PRIDE  
GLUTTONY  
LUXURY  
ENVY  
IDLENESS



## Q&amp;A

Alf Seegert

*The Road to Canterbury**BLACK HUMOUR*

Sinners and saints meet at the cossroads in Alf Seegert's upcoming board game *The Road to Canterbury*.

Alf Seegert cackles manically as he adds a fresh coin to his coin purse. The pilgrims have sinned again and pardons are selling well. Greed, pride, gluttony, wrath, luxury, idleness, and envy – the infamous Christian 'Seven Deadly Sins' are transformed into game mechanics in the upcoming board game *The Road to Canterbury*. For the faithful, they instill horror. For Alf, a board game designer and history professor, they present a wonderful business opportunity.

In the upcoming medieval board game, participants play the role of a medieval pardoner selling certificates delivering sinners from the eternal penalties brought on by these Seven Deadly Sins. Money is gained by peddling these counterfeit pardons to pilgrims traveling the road to Canterbury. Perhaps you can persuade the knight that his pride must be forgiven? Surely the friar's greed will net you a few coins? The miller's wrath and the monk's gluttony are on full public display and demand pardoning!

For you to succeed as a pardoner, you'll need to do more than just sell forged pardons for quick cash. To keep your services in demand, you will actually need to lead these pilgrims into temptation yourself! Perhaps some phony relics might help? There is also one big catch. The Seven Deadly Sins live up to their name: each sin that a pilgrim commits brings death one step nearer, and a dead pilgrim pays no pardoners.





**BATTLESPACE:** Will players enjoy the role of being a 'puppet master' influencing hapless pilgrims?

**Alf Seegert:** I hope so! Playtests so far suggest that gamers who enjoy combining a strong dose of humour with tactics, strategy, and a little bit of chaos really enjoy it.

**LB:** How have you balanced *Road to Canterbury*'s pardoning mechanism?

The game uses a 'press your luck' mechanic for playing both Sin and Pardon cards. On a player's turn, one of his options is to play a 'Sin' card to tempt one pilgrim to commit a specific deadly sin like envy, wrath, idleness,

etc. Each Sin that you place next to a pilgrim increases the value that it will be worth if pardoned (by placing multiple cards of the same flavor of sin, the pilgrim is committing the sin multiple times and thus needs that much more forgiveness to escape the lengthy torments of Purgatory).

**“Allegedly God granted her wish by making her sprout a moustache and beard, making her hideously unmarriageable...”**

The value of pardoned Sins is exponential (1/4/9/16) so pardoning four sins of Gluttony is 16 times more valuable than pardoning just one,

not just four times greater. Because of these accelerated gains, players have every impetus to wait as long as possible to forgive any sins in play, hoping they can do further tempting and money-gouging. But the catch is that other players might beat you to it by pardoning this pilgrim themselves. Or the pilgrim might actually die

before he can be forgiven (as I explain in detail in the rules, these are 'Deadly Sins' after all—when any pilgrim commits seven sins, they pass away from their corruption and rewards are then allocated.).

**LB:** The concept of 'pressing your luck' as far as possible with pardons can be interpreted in a satirical manner. Does humour play an important role in how the game unfolds?

The gameplay itself is pretty 'Euro': hand management, area control, card drafting and set collection (standard entries in the euro-design toolbox, though all implemented in fairly original ways, I hope). But instead of just letting you push cubes around for some abstracted version of 'influence', the mechanics are used in the game to corrupt and indirectly kill off pilgrims one-by-one by tempting them to commit 'deadly sins'—all the while

letting the players reap benefits by pardoning the very corruptions they themselves introduce along the road, adding the wages of sin to their money purses as they go.

The relic cards are especially funny. These are bogus personal items reputed to have belonged to actual saints, like The Knickers of Saint Nicholas, The Snorkel of Saint Jonah or The Scrambled Eggs of Saint Benedict. The relics enable you to perform special strategic actions that can make a big difference in a pardoner's success (even fake relics hold power if the pilgrims believe that they do).

My favourite relic is the Miraculous Moustache of Saint Wilgefortis. This card lets you move one 'Sin' card off a pilgrim—a valuable action if you don't want this pilgrim to die just yet - and the reason why the theme works is because this actual saint herself wielded a strange ability to resist temptation. Saint Wilgefortis was a young woman who had pledged herself to God and resisted the advances of a suitor by praying for deliverance. Allegedly God granted her wish by making her sprout a moustache and beard, making her hideously unmarriageable...

In the game you also collect nifty little 'Last Rites' tokens (which let you take an extra turn) as a reward for being in the presence of a pilgrim when he dies. The other pilgrims think you're



A prototype of *The Road to Canterbury*

saving his soul with a final blessing, when actually you are shuffling that pilgrim out of his mortal coil with a little help from your stash of fatal temptations. This deliciously duplicitous act just screams Edmund Blackadder to me. So I hope these together count as my own individual contribution to Pythonesque or Black Adder-styled humor in Eurogaming. (In fact, I have to confess that if I have one private wish in the world, it would be to sit down at a table and play a three-player game of *The Road to Canterbury* with medievalist/Python Terry Jones and Rowan Atkinson, the devious Black Adder. Ah, I can dream, I suppose...)

**JD: What moral questions have you had to ask yourself during the games' design process?**

What an interesting question! I haven't been asked this before about any of my games and it's a good question to ask. And my two already published designs, *Bridge*

*Troll* and *Trollhalla*, actually do require the player to do some things that—at least from a human standard of ethics—are morally dubious at best. (Dining on bridge-crossing travelers and abducting them in your Viking troll-boat are punishable offenses in 37 states, last I checked!). I was initially a bit concerned that some might take *The Road to Canterbury* too seriously and see it as a mockery of religious belief. That wasn't

**“This deliciously duplicitous act just screams Edmund Blackadder to me.**

my intention. If anything, I was endeavoring to make a game rooted in Chaucer that felt, well, like Chaucer! In other words, I wanted to parody the corruption of religion and those who purport to represent God, when in actuality they seek only their own nefarious

self-interest.

Thankfully, the response I've gotten from all religious circles so far, including Catholics and other Christians, has been laughter and excitement at playing!

I appear to much enjoy making games where you get to play the 'bad guy' (this one is game number three out of three total designs by me that do this). I think that, my having grown up on Monty Python and Woody Allen, it's just part of my life-grammar to find humour in cultural critique. I suspect that a little bit of C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*, where a senior demon instructs his diabolical nephew, is voicing itself in *The Road to Canterbury* also.

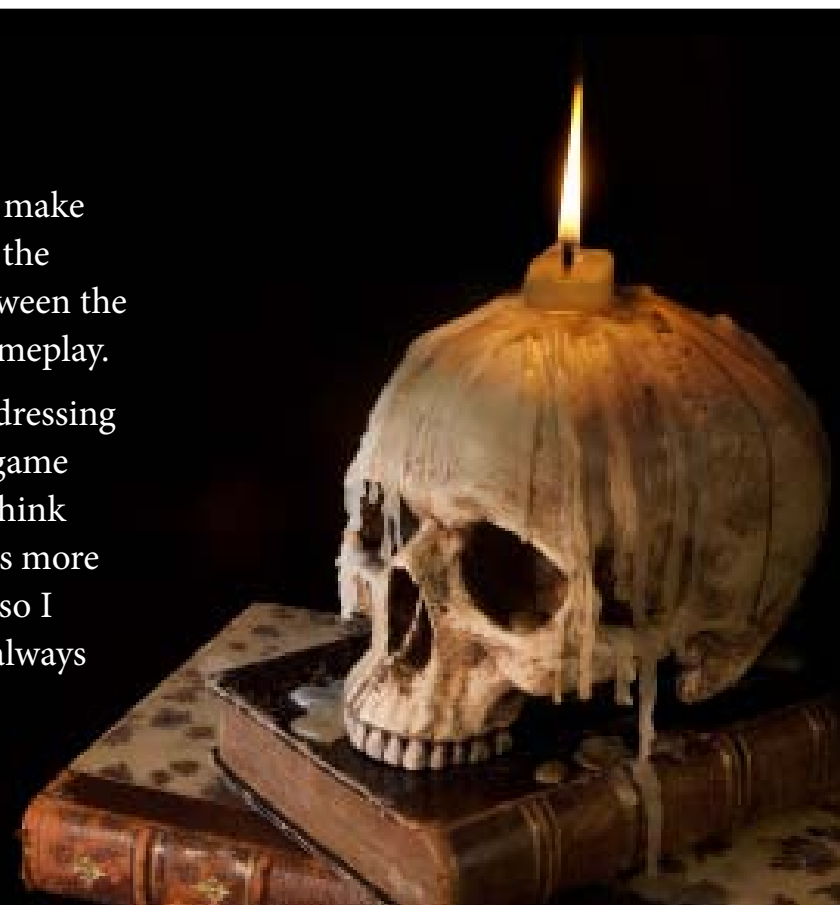
**JD: You have discussed your passion for art history on Board Game Geek. What level of interest is there in this particular period from the wider gaming audience?**

**JD: Do you feel you are a part of a new wave of art-inspired games such as *Pastiche* and *Fresco*?**

I hadn't really thought that way until you brought up the question. There has been a surge in art-related games. Both *Fresco* and *Pastiche* (the latter designed by my colleague Sean MacDonald in the Board Game Designers Guild of Utah, and also by Gryphon Games), are not only occasions for displaying art but for actually making art central to the gameplay. In my own game the art is important - Bosch has a deranged and grotesquely alluring signature style - but art is not the theme itself. Although Bosch's art from *The Seven Deadly Sins* is less surreal than the 'Dr. Seuss on acid' approach that he takes in his glorious triptych *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, it's still very striking.

I do know that having great art for a game does make me feel that much more accountable in making the game 'pay its way' with a strong connection between the theme in the art and the actual mechanics of gameplay.

I would feel bad if the art were merely window dressing - I think it wants to be honoured as part of the game itself rather than a paste-on. Actually, come to think of it, I tend to think this way about game themes more generally. I almost always start with theme first so I work hard to make sure that content and form always infect each other in intriguing ways.





Well, I'm actually a lot keener on the history of literature, philosophy and theology than art history. But you are right—I was drawn to design this game in part because of a particular work of art I really liked. A few years ago I stumbled upon Hieronymus Bosch's tabletop *The Seven Deadly Sins and the Four Last Things*, which depicts all seven "Deadly Sins" in the center circle, surrounded by four images showing death, the final judgment, and the respective destinies of heaven and a creepily (and very Boschian) diabolic Hell. I thought to myself, there should be a game for this! So I made one.

*"The Road to Canterbury is not 'yet another' medieval game because, like Bridge Troll, it lets you play someone unusual."*

It's probably too obvious to mention, but the late medieval/Renaissance period is pretty standard fare in Eurogames. I've heard critics bemoan certain new titles as "yet another Renaissance economics game" or "yet another medievally themed fantasy game". But I don't think that the overuse of these periods has exhausted them. How you use a period or genre is as important as your use of one in the first place.

When I submitted my game *Bridge Troll* to Z-Man Games a few years ago, for instance, he had a disclaimer note on his submissions page to the effect that, 'If it's a fantasy game, it better be a distinctive one.'

Thankfully, a game where you get to play the hideous troll who lives below the bridge, having to decide whether to eat or extort those who want to cross, was unique enough to qualify. Likewise, *The Road*

*to Canterbury* is not 'yet another' medieval game because, like *Bridge Troll*, it lets you play someone unusual. Instead of gamers playing yet another generic ruler out to obtain mastery of the medieval countryside, you get to play pardoner who cackles greedily at the prospect of guilting pilgrims into buying the indulgences he offers.

**Q: What perspective does your job as a literature professor bring to the game design process?**

I'm delighted, actually, to have one of my games interlace so well with my teaching. I teach parts of *The Canterbury Tales* for an Honors Intellectual Traditions course and I found myself having way more fun than I expected when I got to the Pardoner's Tale and Pardoner's Prologue. In fact, being forced to closely re-read Chaucer for teaching had its own influence on the game: the parson (not pardoner) in the centre of the board wanders around denouncing sins.

The narrator's emphasis on the pardoner's ambiguous sexuality ("I trowe he were a gelding or a mare") and his compensatory showing off of his bulging bag of coins as a surrogate 'purse' made me think that having actual coin purses in the game might be fun. I was surprised and delighted when the publisher gave me a 'thumbs up' when I gave this suggestion - and hiding your ill-gotten gains in your cloth coins purse is not only thematically appropriate, but also a way to keep your score hidden (and it's oddly fun - I'm inspired to cackle deviously every time I unlace my coin purse and add more coins to it...).





**LD:** Is there more ground to be covered with future literature-based games?

I think so. The tension in making a literature game is finding a way to distill vibrant elements from a story without making the gameplay into a rote script. My own game attempts to avoid this problem by detouring around it - in my game *The Canterbury Tales* figures in more as medium than content. I'm not out to

'retell' these tales, but to instead take one major character and let the players play out his role in relation to the other Canterbury pilgrims. I have certainly enjoyed designing a 'literary' game and hope to publish more soon. (I have at least one more currently in the works. All I can say about it for now is that it isn't based on a medieval text. And there are no trolls in it!)



**LD:** How much is there to learn from history through your game?

It's not an educational game—by which I mean it's a “true game” rather than a cloaked teaching tool. That being said, the game is historically/literarily grounded, so it includes a sheet I drafted up with historical context about *The Canterbury Tales*, notes about the Pardoner, and some information on Bosch's artwork. If playing this game inspires anyone to really dig in to *The Canterbury Tales* or makes them want to investigate more of Bosch's artwork, I would be very pleased. I'm happy that the emblem “Knowledge in a Box” has gotten placed on the back of the game box, which indicates a strong tie in with learning.

**LD:** How is Kickstarter helping to make your game a reality?

Gryphon Games recently launched Joli Quentin Kansil's classic game *Montage* on Kickstarter and shortly afterward, launched my own game. Their purpose was in part to determine how much interest there might be in these games, which they liked very much—but they were not sure how many to print. In addition, Kickstarter of course helps raise funds and raises interest in a quirky title like my own. Also, by having different levels of support on Kickstarter, interested gamers can save money (all levels include free shipping and a hefty discount off the retail price). Also, Brian Kohrman created some hilarious frame-ready 5”x7” artwork versions of several

relics in the game (you really need to see these if you haven't). Even though both *Montage* and *The Road to Canterbury* have already reached their funding goals, it's still a bargain for gamers to purchase these games through Kickstarter while the promotion continues—and I'm happy that Gryphon Games is offering that opportunity.

**LD:** Is online distribution the only viable means for 'quirky' independent titles?

It certainly seems like a promising one for many people. *Alien Frontiers* and other titles like *Rolling Freight* certainly seem to have benefited by using Kickstarter this way. A fellow Guild member is doing the same with his intriguing game *Force of Fiction*. *Purple Pawn* recently presented an article on what works and what doesn't when attempting to raise funding for a game on Kickstarter. I don't think that online distribution is the only place we'll see quirky titles, though. There are still publishers interested in quirky designs—a good example would be Tim Fowers (yet another BGDG member) and his hilarious co-op dice game *Wok Star*. He self-produced a few hundred copies which generated so much buzz that Z-Man has since picked it up for publication.

**LD:** When can we expect to see *The Road to Canterbury*?

It should be released late US summer or early fall. Thanks for these great questions! I hope players enjoy *The Road to Canterbury*! LD