A Visit to Author & Designer
Harm van Veen

by Fred Horn

Back in 2011, during one of my regular visits to “Haags kringloopwinkels” (Recycle shops in the Hague) looking for games, I chanced upon a small box, wrapped in plastic and filled with wooden blocks, which to me, looked like game pieces. I was curious enough to pick up and examine the box, and to my great surprise on its backside a sheet of paper revealed rules to a game, unknown to me, called TRANSET. For nearly nothing (less than 1 euro) I became its new owner. When I arrived back at home I was really curious about what I had just bought!

There was some surprise and a little bit of disappointment. A quick inventory showed me that all of the game pieces were there but the board to play the game on was missing. There were ten—obvious homemade—wooden game pieces which revealed the hand of an experienced craftsman, one, who seemed to me, to have a special ‘design’ in mind. Also, a small booklet with game rules and some leaflets with additional information were part of my findings. But the most important thing for me was what was typed on the backside of the rule’s booklet beneath a wonderful stylized representation of the game:

TRANSET-SYSTEEM
H.M. van Veen
Jul. Röntgenstr. 2
2551 KT Den Haag
tel/fax 070 3685539

“That will be smooth sailing” (I thought) to find out more about the game and its inventor. One simple phone call should do it, but that turned out not to be the case—no connection, phone out of order!

Living in The Hague myself, visiting the Röntgenstraat 2 was not so difficult. Again, ‘alas’, another name on the address plate and none of the neighbors could give me any information on Mr. H.M. van Veen or his recent address. My next, and last option, was to surf the Internet. Fortunately this gave me a “hit” on BoardGameGeek.

A photo of the game showed different colored pieces than mine and it also included the board, but unfortunately, no further information was given as to the whereabouts of the author. What a pity for my attempts to do research on Dutch game authors.

Thus, my search for information on TRANSET ended there. To comfort myself, I constructed a nice board to play the game with the pieces I found.

Follow up...

In the Spring of 2012 there was a gathering of some game buffs, and out of curiosity I showed them the TRANSET game I had come across. Apparently one individual was not satisfied with my research methods and took a look in the telephone guide of The Hague. Listed was a H.M. van Veen; he picked up my phone, dialed the number and handed me the phone. None of us was more surprised than me to find out that I was now talking to Mr. Harm van Veen, the inventor of TRANSET on the other end of the line!

He had no hesitation to be interviewed about his game, and said “No problem, I was welcome the next day.” On arriving at the Denijsstraat 201, Harm was fully prepared. In his small flat he had exhibited a large selection of all variants of his game and he also had prepared a huge map with information from his files.

Harm is a fragile little man who looks pretty vital for his age of then 87 years (in 2012). Especially for my visit, he had sorted out all information on his game and the living room in his small apartment was laden with a lot of different samples of TRANSET.

I was curious about Harm, and before the interview started about his game, I wanted to know more about the author himself.

Harm was born and raised in The Hague and came from a working-class family where his artistic intentions were at first not really appreciated. Although he took drawing lessons and followed a path to become a childrens' handicraft teacher, he did not obtain a diploma because of his inadequate former schooling. But that would not stop him from reaching his goal. He did enter into the academy and was rewarded with a simple certificate that allowed him to give drawing lessons. After some years of further study he achieved the “License for Handcraft” and became a teacher in that discipline at the Bezemstraat MULO, and thereafter, at the Dalton Lyceum located at the Aronskellweg in Den Haag from 1957 until 1969.

After his 12 years at the Dalton Lyceum, he changed jobs and taught adult education in the Doctor Kuijperstraat. Harm, long since retired, and as a result of the mental condition of his wife, had to leave the Julius Röntgenstraat for a room in the Wijnandselaers Centrum, the same building as the retirement home that provided nursing care for his wife. After her death, Harm moved to the Flat in the Denijsstraat.

Before his time at the Dalton, Harm was very interested in ceramics, and in fact he wrote a book about pottery which was later published.
The idea for the game of TRANSET was conceived while preparing his lessons for school. To get his pupils more involved, Harm developed a game that could be manufactured by the students themselves. After checking the rules with the math teacher, the game became an integral part of his lessons and a well-appreciated item for the students to show their skills at home. Harm is absolutely convinced you can still find his game, with pieces made out of broomsticks, in many households in The Hague.

Leaving the Dalton also meant a change in interest concerning his hobby—no more games. A new focus emerged: ‘Vliegeren’ (kite flying) and the making of ‘Vliegers’ (kites). As an associate to the “Stichting Nederlandse Vliegerpromotie” (Dutch Foundation for Kite-Promotion), Harm became deeply involved in his new interest. He presented me with his booklet “Luchttig Lijn trekken” with cartoons published in the magazine of the association: Vlieger.

Harm was also a member of the team that flew the largest kite in the world, at an event held in the seaside resort district of Scheveningen, but he missed the world-record for the smallest kite. A gentleman from Japan got a tinier one into the air!

Still, he was not satisfied with the “look” of the broomsticks, so given his artistic background, he looked for a more appropriate design for the game and its pieces. With the new design, came a new name: PENTA (shown at right).

Harm was still not content, because he wanted the pieces to look more human-like. He had dreamed up a complete story about the land of TRANSETië, related to his game, and he wanted a fair representation of its inhabitants. Thus from solid wooden blocks and his special saw, Harm created some stylized ‘human-like figures,’ (shown at right).

As stated before, TRANSET originated as a “side product” of Harms’ “Lessons in Handcraft.” But the game has gone through many development stages in design and name. The first prototype was named “Vlaggenspel” after the pawns which were different flags. But this was not what Harm had in mind so he changed to broomstick parts and the name to “KWINTA.”

Under this name he also provided an article on the game to the Magazine “Na Vijven” (After 5 o’clock) with new designs for the pawns (shown at right).

This article triggered Mr. A.J. Hardonk to make his own version, (shown below) you can find on www.odrogon.nl.

We learned that when Harm left the Dalton, his game was laid to rest. All of his interest and focus turned to “Vliegeren.” But after his retirement there was again time for TRANSET and he started to “play his game” as a kind of therapy during his volunteer work with residents of the “Wijndaelersch Centrum.”
The above photograph shows the wooden piece set I found, and the name of the game we now know is definitely TRANSET.

The game pictured below is the one I bought from Harm during my visit.

With this poem cited below, Harm begins his story about the special world he devised around his game. He tells about the Transsetiers, living in the North and the South with a desert in between (represented by the board), and the two Tribes identified by the light and dark colored pawns.

Each Tribe with its own different classes: 1) the upper class—the highest pawn—the PIAS; 2) the middle class—the PIKER; and 3) the lower class—the smallest pawn—the PINET.

Of course, everything is always better on the other side of the desert so the people of the two Tribes try to reach the other side. The game ‘tells’ the story of this migration. Harm typifies TRANSET as a kind of mental “ping-pong” (table-tennis).

There is much more to tell about Harm and his game and the fairy tale about the TRANSETIERS. And still I haven’t relayed anything about the book Harm started to write concerning his game; and the different ways to register your games and.............

This is all written down in the Dutch version of Harms’ game story. It’s fun!

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TRANSET

At first, shown above, Harm left parts of the figures unpainted, and at the bottom there is a suggestion of “legs.” But this took a lot of work and so after making a few sets he opted to completely paint his figures and made the bottom side flat. So I believe the version I found is a rarity, and one of the first games Harms crafted for his new venture.

In the early 1990s, Harm started some sort of production line and offered his TRANSET for sale. All of the pieces were handcrafted and of varying sizes because he used every second-hand wooden beam he could lay his hands on. He did this as well with the boards he manufactured and used all kinds of material—timber, hardboard, plastic, linoleum, even perspex or glass!

When a customer bought one of Harm’s games, he would get the set of wooden pieces and then would look himself for a matching board. He also got a handmade linen pouch to store his new purchase and a copy of the game rules. Harm believes he sold around 200 games, most at the “Spellenspektakel” in Eindhoven where he demonstrated his game for a couple of years.

The World of TRANSET

speel TRANSET, verrassend blijft het will u weien hoe dat gaat?
-nooit te vroeg maar steeds te laat-
mei van éen kleur vijf pionnen mag u zetten op uw beurt aan het eind hebt u gewonnen of—wat even vaak gebeurt-
het een partij verloren moet u horen wat u wint:
NIEUWE VRIENDEN door TRANSET want verrassend blijft het

play TRANSET, surprising it is you want to know how it goes?
—never too early but always too late-
with from one color five pawns you may move in your turn at the end you win
—or—what happens in the same number—
you lose a game listen to what you win:
NEW FRIENDS due to TRANSET because it is always surprising
**Game Rules (and Variants)**

**TRANSET** is played with only five Rules as Harm explains:

Numbers 1 and 5 are, in his opinion, kind of ‘agreements,’ and 2, 3, and 4 are rules on ‘how to move.

1) **START**

The light-colored pawns are placed on the North-side, and the dark-colored pawns are placed opposite, on the South-side. The PIA is placed in the middle, and the PINETs occupy the edges. The POKERs are situated in-between (see accompanying picture).

South (dark-color) begins play. Players then move alternately.

2) **MOVE**

   a) PINET—one square straight ahead
   b) PIQER—one square ahead, diagonally left or right
   c) PINET—one square straight ahead, or one square ahead diagonally left or right (combination of a and b)

A pawn can only be moved to an empty square.

3) **CAPTURE**

When the square to move to is occupied by an opponent’s pawn, this pawn is captured. The player ends his turn by replacing the captured pawn on the board upon an empty square of the opponent’s starting line.

4) **MOVE** with “SWAPPING”

   a) Straight ahead and back—Move two of your pawns, no matter which ones. One pawn moves one square straight ahead, the other pawn moves one square straight backwards, but only if the squares to move to are empty.
   b) Sideways left and right—Move two of your own pawns, no matter which ones. One pawn moves one square sideways to the left, the other pawn moves one square sideways to the right, but only if the squares to move to are empty.

5) **END**

   a) By an “End Move”—During his turn, when a player reaches the other side of the board with one of his pawns, play ends immediately and this player wins the game.
   b) By “Resignation”—When one player resigns, player ends and the opponent wins the game.
   c) By a “Draw”—When both players agree to a Draw there is no winner.

**VARIANTS**

All this was not enough for Harm, and he further developed some Variants based on the Rules for the ‘traditional’ game.

**PIASSEN**—his first variant, was invented as an introduction to ‘How to Play’ with the pawns. In this game, only the two PIA pawns are placed on the board facing each other; the rest of the board is empty!

This is really only for learning how to move. When analyzed, it turns out that the ‘light-colored’ side always wins.

**TRANSLUS**—in this variant, the game does not end when a player reaches the other side of the board with one of his pawns.

Rule 5—part a) changes for this variant:

5) **END**

   a) By making a 5th “End Move”—During his turn, when a player reaches the other side of the board with one of his pawns, this pawn is removed from the board. The player who gets all five of his pawns off the board during his turn wins the game.

**TRANSTRO**—a variant for 3 players

Players A, B, and C; Players alternate turns: A moves, then C moves, then B moves, and so forth. So in two consecutive moves a player ends up changing colors as well as the direction he’s playing.

The first player to make an “End Move” in his turn with his color of that turn, wins the game.

In the same way as **TRANSLUS** is played, another variant, **TRANSTROPLUS** can be played.

**TRANSTROE**—a variant for 4 players

Players A, B, C, and D; Players alternate turns: A, B, C, D, A, B, C, D, A, B, and so forth. Players do not change colors during their turns. A & C and B & D play as partners to either win or lose together.

And again, why not play another variant **TRANSTROEPLUS**?

**MULTITRANSET**—a variant for more than 4 players

All players sitting around the table use the same following of turns clockwise! A complete group of players can win when there is an even number of participants!

And, if this was not enough, still Harm suggested **MULTITRANSET**.

And for Harm it was still not enough! What if you introduced some kind of luck into the game?

On a six-sided die, put on its sides the 3 different ‘classes’ of pawns and the 3 different ways to move the pawns—MOVE, CAPTURE, and SWAPPING.

You now have the variant called **CHANCE**

In his turn a player first rolls the die.

The die will indicate which pawn to play. The Move is related to the particular pawn: Moving; Capturing or Swopping.

or

The die will indicate which Move to play. The pawn(s) to play is the players’ choice. If it is a non-feasible throw, the player rolls again until he can make a legal move. All rules for **TRANSET** also apply for **CHANCE**.

Harm ends it all with one of his beautiful sentences:

“He, who can play **CHANCE**, can, by not using the die, play **TRANSET**”