The Rise, Decline, and Dissolution of Cobrain

Article by Fred Horn

All across the globe, at any given time, individuals or groups are inventing games, and for the last 150 years this continues year after year after year. However, most of these games, or variants of well-known existing games, or the ones the inventor keeps only for him-or herself, never reach a publisher or the market.

But sometimes the inventor(s) think differently.
The story of
TANG • RED LINE • DINO-DUELL
three games published in the 1980s by a small Dutch manufacturer

Although everything happens in Holland (50 years later as they say), there are folks with bright ideas and that inner urge to show them off. This article recounts the adventures of two Dutch "game" guys who had some bright ideas and started a company to fulfill their expectations.

For me the story begins some thirty years ago when one of my colleagues, knowing of my interest in the subject, drew my attention to a small exhibition of games being held at a gallery located on one of the small streets between the canals in Amsterdam. Only four games were exhibited but two of them especially caught my attention due to their abstract design.

The first one: "STRAAT" was formed from plexiglass, and it turned out to be a two-player game with (for me) a completely new play mechanism based on the transparancy of the acrylic used for the board and game pieces. Two examples of this game, part of my former collection, are now in the Vlaams Spellenarchief.

This game was manufactured by a small studio in the "Jordaan," a well-known district in the center of Amsterdam. For many years doing research for this story, I could not find any trace of this studio at all—it had disappeared completely. However, I finally discovered the inventor, Fred Schuurhof, and published an article in the AGPC Quarterly Vol. 15 No. 3 (Fall 2013), about him and his game STRAAT.

The second game I set my eyes on was "TANG" and I wanted to learn more about this game and the people behind it—inventor Paul Velleman and publisher Jonathan Schouten. I found them in the town of Leiden; two cousins both interested in game play—two men with the bright idea of having invented the "best game in the world."

Then I lost track of them.

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A few years ago I stumbled upon the game Red Line which displayed very similar looking playing pieces to Tang. And the following year with the purchase of the game Dino-Duell I noticed once again the box stated the inventor to be Paul Velleman. I had to learn more about their games and the small firm Cobrain both cousins established for selling their games.

The rise and decline of Cobrain, and some look into the upcoming developments for Velleman, and his Yrrount Games.

My first contact with Jonathan Schouten and Paul Velleman was in 1980, and as of August 2011 I learned they were still living in the town of Leiden. Some visits to them revealed they had been partners in the former firm Cobrain, and gave the following story about Tang and its successors, and also what happened with their company.

Jonathan Schouten (born in Leiden) and Paul Velleman (from Utrecht) are second cousins. Paul’s grandfather and Jonathan’s grandmother were brother and sister. From an early age they both were interested in playing games, and at family gatherings they often played together.

When Paul went to Leiden to study law, the contact between the cousins was reinforced. Always deep in thought in inventing games, (according to Paul he has notebooks laden with game ideas), they had plenty to play, but one of them stood out as their favorite. Without any idea about the games’ world and not realizing what it meant to produce a game, the two decided to publish their favorite game.

Jonathan was working then (and still is, and now owns) his father’s packing firm (Schouten Verpakking). Having direct access to materials for making games—cardboard, paper, etc. and knowing other firms that could produce pieces or print things, they never thought of selling the game and decided to produce it themselves.

On June 25, 1981 they registered the name of their game, Tang as a trademark at the Dutch “Merkenbureau.” Nearly a year later on April 8, 1982 they founded the “Vennootschap onder Firma” (Dutch for a “Partnership Firm”) “Cobrain Denkspellen” - Holland. At the end of 1982, Tang was ready for the market.

It had been a busy time for both partners in the one-and-a-half years before that moment. They had to design the board and the playing pieces, write the rules, and provide the artwork for the accompanying booklet, as well as finding manufacturers who could produce what they wanted.

The pieces posed a problem because they were two-sided. As Paul relayed: “At first, we had the idea to make them out of plastic, but we both judged that as too ‘cheap’ looking, and not of that certain ‘magie’ we envisioned. Then we turned to wood, but using wood as a material was a costly affair, so we had to abandon that idea too.

In some strange way that was also due to the fact Jonathan did not know any woodworking factory in the neighborhood. Fortunatley he did business with a branch of the metal firm Metavo-Leiden located around the corner where “Schouten Verpakking” had its office, and they were willing and capable of producing the desired pieces. From flat aluminium plates, printed on both sides with a silk-screen process, and finally punching the square pieces out, they could produce exactly what we wanted.

The board and the booklet, along with the rules, were printed by Drukkerij Jansen, a short distance away at the ‘Aalmarkt.’ The box and other packing materials needed were produced “in-house” at Schouten Verpakking. With all the components available, the partners only had to fill up the boxes.

Because the pieces were flat, there wasn’t a need for a large box so they used a small plastic transparent container which allowed them to place the pieces on the bottom of the box in such a configuration that the image of two sword-fighting warriors were recognizable (See image above).

They separated the three layers of aluminium tiles with small ridged grease-proof paper, normally used in Holland by butchers when stacking sliced cold meat, put in the folded board, and on top the small booklet containing the rules.

They were now ready to sell their game.
For fl. 15, (fifteen Dutch Guilders) one could buy TANG. I purchased the game (the first edition, 1982) at the gallery, and afterwards another one (the second edition, 1983) in Magazijn de Bijenkorf, a large department store in Amsterdam.

A lot of publicity was generated by the partners and their presence at two large game gatherings in the RAI in Amsterdam ("SPEELGOED 83" and "SPEELGOED 84") proved to be a great success and even got them more publicity.

Though the game sold well, there was a slight problem with the folded board. Some buyers found play difficult. They couldn’t get the board flattened in such a way that the light-weight aluminum tiles stayed on the board. Jonathan told me when customers complained he shipped them a non-folded board in a cardboard cylinder by post, which of course was expensive. But in the end they sold nearly 2000 games; only a few still remain in stock.

RED LINE—het nieuwe gezelschapsspel voor...iedereen
Translation: The new board game for...everyone

Their sales resulted, for a large part, to the fact the partners traveled to all kinds of places throughout Holland to demonstrate their game. They visited schools and game clubs and attended markets. They grabbed every opportunity to present the game to a more or less interested public.

Jonathan and Paul noticed that when younger children were playing the game they were more interested in the tiles than in the game. The children managed their own game by using the tiles in a kind of ‘domino-way’ of playing. In the meantime, TANG sold very well, so the two partners decided to bring out their next game, based on the idea that players have to connect tiles (like in Dominos).

Paul worked out a concept with only one-sided tiles. They called the game RED LINE, an easy choice because of the game’s goal, to make a continuous Red Line! On May 5, 1986 the name was registered at the “Merkenbureau” and the game entered the market in June 1988 with a selling price of fl. 12, (twelve Dutch Guilders). This time the men only had to deal with Jansen, the printing firm. Paul had made the lid cover design himself.

The game was completely constructed of printed cardboard with the tiles pressed out. As it turned out the game was not very successful, although Jonathan and Paul again traveled the country to demonstrate the game. Presenting themselves and their game(s) at the “Spelenspektakel Eindhoven” and the “Duosim-beuren,” again going to various schools and clubs did not give RED LINE the boost they had expected. Also the retail shops showed little interest in carrying the game. The result—it was nowhere to be sold.

Paul blamed himself for that result because then (and that did not change over the years), he thought the game was “too fabricated” and not really tested to the limit.

But all that didn’t stop their thinking about options for their next game.

Paul had developed an abstract game which he gave the ‘working title’ “FOUTJE BEDANKT!” which refers to the fact that one ‘miss’ normally led to losing the game. (FOUTJE BEDANKT! may be translated as ‘Small mistake, thank you!’).

In fact making an error was nearly fatal and Paul relayed “Jonathan was always making a similar error in his opening moves, so his loss was quick and easy! I named this loss of the game within three moves the "Jonathan-Foutje" (‘Jonathan’s-Miss!’).”

The game was played on a board with pieces in the shape of a square, a circle, and a triangle. In its original form it was intended to serve as part of a promotional campaign meant for the firm Realis. When this failed to materialize at the end of the 1980s, Paul and Jonathan decided to publish it under their own name Cobrain. >>
But the market for abstract games didn’t exist anymore so the decision was made to give the game a ‘theme.’ In the late ‘80s dinosaurs were the “in” thing, so why not change the squares, triangles, and circles into dinosaurs who would venture towards a river to take a bath? And as a game of challenge, the name for the game DINO-DUELL was as an easy choice.

The game was intended to be introduced with a big presentation at “SPIEL 93” in Essen. But everything seemed to go wrong. Their booth was located far from the important positions in the halls; nobody showed any interest in their new game; and the price was too high, so there were essentially no customers stopping by to purchase a game. After this very disappointing event, and when both partners tried hard to sell the game in Holland during the next year with few results, they came to the conclusion the market had no interest in the game.

In 1996 Jonathan and Paul decided to ‘throw in the sponge’ and call it a day. They liquidated the company in 2000 due to a financial situation caused by the lack of any liquid assets.

Some pallets still exist in the storage depot of Schouten Verpakking laden with games and gathering dust. Almost the entire production of DINO-DUELL, some 900 boxes, and Red Line, near 800 boxes, are in storage. One of Jonathan’s friends has a stand at a “bazaar” (a weekly flea market in Beverwijk), and takes a few of these dusty games to sell. Occasionally he manages to move some. This brings a sad end to Cobrain, but not to the story of Paul’s games!

The cousins never stopped playing games and when Paul came up with a new invention he again wanted to “give it to the world!”

Jonathan has given up but Paul has since founded a new firm “Yirround Games.” He also found a new business partner, Ankie Visser, and “the game was on again.”

We enter into the early 1990s when Jonathan and Paul made this fatal (when looking back) decision to produce and market the game themselves. The game’s production was not an easy one and it was a race against the clock. At the last moment Jonathan provided the photo for the cover of the box, using a scene out of Africa with dinosaurs drawn in. Take a good look and you can see people walking in the bush!

ABREZZO is not a Cobrain game. Paul founded a new firm: “Yirround Games” to produce it with a new partner. But of course it has to be mentioned here as a direct successor in the range of the preceding three games which are all his inventions.

These days information about Abrezzo can easily be found at: www.abrezzo.nl or by searching on “Yirround Games.”

The game itself is a ‘Halmaderivate’ but with enough new features to make it interesting.

In 2011, Yirround Games presented their first game, ABREZZO.

The pieces have five different forms, along with different ways of "moving and jumping."

End of Story...

Back in 2012, Horn noted this abstract was originally made possible through the financial support of Stickling SPEL.

With this ‘abstract’ the story of Cobrain has been recorded for our descendants. Of course I am very indebted to both former partners of Cobrain, Jonathan Schouten and Paul Velleman, for making their time available and for sharing their recollections. Without them this story would have never been told.

To have given this lecture about the subject in München at “Board Game Studies 2012” was, with the article in SPEL, a way to widen the knowledge about ‘unknown’ games and the small firms that produced them. On the other hand there is still room for playing some of the games yourself. Abrezzo can be easily purchased through www.abrezzo.nl. And Jonathan still has stock of Red Line and Dino-Duell. If you want to buy copies, contact him via www.schoutenverpakking.nl.
The name TANG originated from the Dutch word 'tang' which means "tongs." It is used in the Dutch expression "Iemand in de tang nemen" — "to have someone where you want him"— exactly the goal of the game according to Paul.

The word TANG itself sounds very Chinese and the partners thought this word would give the public a perception of an old, original Asian thinking game.

When they found the Chinese character for TANG in the files of the printing firm Bril, they also learned that TANG means "resist" in Chinese, appropriate enough to use the character as a logo for the game!

Playing the game has some resemblance to PLOY, but both games have their own flavor. Each game piece has one or more hands, "pointers," which indicate the number of squares the piece can move. Pieces can also rotate and in that respect a piece with one "pointer" is turned over to make a 1/8 circle rotation. The "pointers" also have a function when pieces jump and when a player wants to immobilize an opponent's piece by 'blocking' all the "pointers" of a piece.

The goal of the game is to capture all of the opponent's pieces by taking or blocking.

Some new pieces with 2- and 3-pointers were introduced bringing the total of pieces (tiles) to 48, (4 for each color, blue and yellow).

As mentioned before, RED LINE originated from watching children playing with the pieces of TANG. The game is played as a table game, not a board game, but the tiles are in fact laid down according to an imaginary grid of squares.

The goal of the game is to be the last player able to lay down a tile from his or her hand.

A 2-player game, played with 12 dinosaurs for each player.

On the Spellenkaart (game card) you can see the initial layout positions of the Dinosaurs. Pieces move one square in any direction. Capture is made by moving a Dinosaur in a straight line to a square occupied by an opponent's Dinosaur, but one's own Dinosaur has to be in between, and all three involved pieces must be of a different kind.

The goal of the game is to get four of your Dinosaurs into the River.