VIENNA CONNECTION

This means nothing to me, Oh Vienna

Designer: Jakub Poczęty, Przemysław Rymer, Ignacy Trzewiczek, Jakub Łapot | **Publisher:** Portal Games

90m | **1-5** | **16+** | **£43**

It's 1977, the Cold War is at its height, and the CIA seems to have lost control of a few important assets (i.e. people) and it is your job to work out what's going on over there. As themes go, spying during the Cold War is one that's been so well worn in gaming it might be basically transparent by now. Like a one way mirror use for enhanced interrogations at the safe house.

Yet, here, Portal have put together a game that draws you deep into the theme by tightrope walking the line between devilishly interesting clues and jolly caricatures. So yes, characters will be smoking hundreds of cigarettes in a scene, downing flagons of whiskey, and doing 'spy stuff' like having terse conversations where one informant tries to walk away only to dramatically turn at the last minute and reveal important information. Frankly, it's great. And it doesn't take itself too seriously.

What is serious however is the puzzles, clues, and the presentation of the game. Yes, there is an Antares database, but this has been pared

WHAT'S IN THE BOX?
▶ 100 Files
▶ 72 Lead cards
▶ 8 Mission sheets
▶ 15 Wooden tokens
▶ 4 Mission envelopes
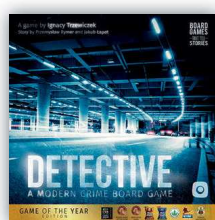
back compared to *Detective: Season One*. While that game was more or less several people sifting through information on their phones and tablets, here you have a very sparse code entry and recording retrieval system online. Instead, you have all the information you'd have retrieved from tapping a code in now presented as paper files in a huge wodge, wrapped in a "top secret' folder. And frankly, playing a game like this on paper after a year of playing a lot of games through a screen, was joyful. The only downside here is that there is some very strange punctuation in the game that isn't a stylistic choice, making reading to a group slightly frustrating.

The clues and the tone of *Vienna Connection* are almost perfect. You're encouraged to be paranoid from the start, and because following leads in

one direction will give you a certain kind of exposure, you're very careful about what risks you do want to take. For example – following a 'yellow' lead (police and organized crime) might give you exposure plus one, meaning you tick off one of the two available slots in the 'yellow' section. If this rolls over the amount available, then players have to mark off sections in the 'Man In Black' area – the eventual timer for when your final report has to be handed in.

The code entry section of the database is reserved for specific elements of a code you have discovered – key phrases that will unlock later story elements and potential outcomes from the final report.

You never know who you might be able to trust in this game, so as a group you'll be interrogating one another as to why anyone should be trusted at all. Or whether you should spend your slim resources on one operation or another – generating resources, leads, or even new 'assets' for later use.

The thrill in the game comes from little pieces of information from early scenes leaping back out at you later in a different context, and you as a team knitting together the truth. You'll not truly know if you have it right, but whatever you do decide will affect your future missions. Whatever your choices, you're going to be drawn deep into these missions, characters, and the hunt for clues – even if you thought you were going to see through the disguise at the start. ◆
CHRISTOPHER JOHN EGGETT

▌ WE SAY
Aside from a few dubious commas, this spy vs everyone thriller makes for massive evenings of entertainment. Ideal for enquiring minds able to get back together for the first time.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED DETECTIVE: A MODERN CRIME BOARD GAME
Using many of the same systems, but fleshed out into the world of paper – rather than just the online database – *Vienna Connection* is the true analogue *Detective* fix.